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FROM DIFFICULTY TO DEXTERITY: USING TONGUE TWISTERS TO ENHANCE LEARNERS' CONFIDENCE IN ENGLISH SPEECH PRODUCTION

Sevda HUSEYNOVA

Baku Engineering University

Baku, Azerbaijan

Shuseynova@beu.edu.az

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<i>Article history:</i> <i>Received:2025-05-05</i> <i>Received in revised form:2025-05-15</i> <i>Accepted:2025-06-21</i> <i>Available online:2025-12-29</i>	<i>Tongue twisters have long been utilized as a playful but effective resource in language education. Despite their perceived complexity, recent research supports their value in second language (L2) pronunciation training. This study investigates the role of tongue twisters in enhancing English speech production and learner confidence. The problem addressed is the persistent difficulty EFL learners face in achieving fluent and accurate pronunciation, often due to limited exposure to targeted phonetic drills. The purpose of this research is to explore how tongue twisters can be used as a pedagogical strategy to improve articulation, fluency, and learner motivation. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of current literature, supported by practical insights from EFL classrooms and related experimental studies, this paper examines the efficacy of tongue twisters across multiple dimensions of language learning. Findings suggest that tongue twisters not only aid in isolating specific phonetic challenges but also contribute to greater learner autonomy and speech confidence, especially when used with varied practice schedules and communicative goals. The study concludes that tongue twisters represent a meaningful, engaging, and accessible method for developing oral skills in English language learners and recommends their broader implementation in pronunciation-focused instruction.</i>
<i>Keywords:</i> <i>Tongue twisters</i> <i>English pronunciation</i> <i>Speech fluency</i> <i>Language teaching strategies</i> <i>Phonetic awareness</i>	

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1. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is a critical component of communicative competence in second language (L2) acquisition, directly impacting a learner's intelligibility and confidence during interaction. Despite its acknowledged importance, pronunciation instruction remains underrepresented in many English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, often due to time constraints, a lack of teacher training, or the perception that pronunciation will improve naturally over time (Puspita et al., 2023; Kholisoh et al., 2021). When pronunciation is addressed, it is frequently limited to mechanical drills or isolated correction, with little emphasis on consistent and engaging practice. One traditional yet undervalued tool in pronunciation teaching is the tongue twister, phrases or sentences designed to challenge the speaker due to their phonetic complexity, frequent use of alliteration, and rapid repetition of specific sounds. Although often viewed as playful warm-up activities, tongue twisters possess substantial pedagogical potential. They not only provide

focused practice on problematic phonemes but also improve articulatory precision, rhythm, and fluency (Lutfiani, 2017; Revathy & Ravindran, 2016). Recent studies support their efficacy in addressing common phonetic challenges faced by EFL learners, including the articulation of aspirated sounds, consonant clusters, and minimal pairs (Kholisoh et al., 2021; Ryandini & Fitriyasari, 2023).

Beyond pronunciation, tongue twisters can foster learner motivation and reduce speech anxiety by introducing an element of humor and challenge into the learning process. Their repetitive and rhythmic nature makes them especially suitable for young learners and pre-service teachers alike, who benefit from confidence-building and fluency-oriented activities (Yuniar et al., 2021; Rasmadiani, 2022). Furthermore, incorporating tongue twisters into lessons through smart boards or recorded practice can enhance the learning experience by providing opportunities for feedback and reflective self-assessment (Huseynova, 2023).

This article explores how tongue twisters can be used not only to improve articulatory skills but also to build learners' self-assurance when speaking English. Drawing on recent research and classroom practices, the study examines how tongue twisters function as both diagnostic tools for identifying phonetic difficulties and as targeted, enjoyable exercises for building speech fluency. Emphasis is placed on integrating tongue twisters into communicative teaching approaches and exploring how technology and peer collaboration can further enhance their effectiveness.

2. THE PEDAGOGICAL VALUE OF TONGUE TWISTERS IN ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

Tongue twisters are linguistically rich instructional tools that offer targeted practice with phonemes, stress patterns, and prosodic features of English speech. Though traditionally associated with entertainment, their structured phonetic challenges make them particularly effective for classroom-based pronunciation training (Lutfiani, 2017; Revathy & Ravindran, 2016). Their value lies in their repetition of difficult sound sequences, which compel learners to focus on articulatory precision and phonetic contrasts, an essential skill for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners who often struggle with unfamiliar phonemes. Consider the classic tongue twister "She sells seashells by the seashore." This phrase repeatedly employs the /ʃ/ and /s/ phonemes, which are frequently confused by learners from language backgrounds that do not distinguish between these fricatives. Similarly, "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers" contrasts the aspirated /p/ and voiced /b/, helping learners fine-tune their awareness of voicing and plosive sounds. "Red lorry, yellow lorry" is a popular phrase used to strengthen control over liquid consonants /r/ and /l/, which are particularly challenging for native speakers of East Asian languages (Kholisoh et al., 2021). Finally, "How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?" combines multiple instances of /w/, intonation shifts, and complex rhythm, providing an advanced articulation task that fosters fluency and pitch control.

These examples illustrate the diagnostic utility of tongue twisters. They function as informal assessment tools that allow educators to identify common pronunciation issues among learners. When a student repeatedly misarticulates /r/ in "red lorry," for instance, this reveals a need for targeted instruction on rhotics. Teachers can then tailor subsequent drills or provide corrective feedback accordingly (Ischenko et al., 2023). As such, tongue twisters serve as both pedagogical instruments and formative assessment strategies, aligning with communicative and corrective approaches in language teaching.

Beyond diagnostics, tongue twisters promote the automatization of speech patterns through repetition. According to motor learning theory, repeated practice of fine motor skills, such as articulating difficult phonemes, leads to muscle memory and improved fluency (Lutfiani, 2017). Crucially, the type of practice matters. Studies suggest that varied and randomized practice, rather than fixed repetition of a single phrase, results in better long-term retention of pronunciation accuracy. Tongue twisters, when rotated and progressively made more difficult, provide this variety while maintaining focus on key articulation targets (Puspita et al., 2023).

Tongue twisters also enhance suprasegmental features of speech, including stress, rhythm, and intonation. For example, the alternating stress patterns in “Betty Botter bought some butter” help learners internalize English’s natural rhythmic tendencies. As English is a stress-timed language, mastering this rhythm is vital for natural-sounding speech, and tongue twisters provide concentrated practice with this timing (Ryandini & Fitriyasari, 2023). The musicality and playfulness of these phrases further promote the learner’s motivation, encouraging repeated practice without the monotony of traditional drills. Integrating tongue twisters with technology, such as speech recording tools, interactive smartboards, or pronunciation apps, can deepen their pedagogical impact. Learners can track their progress by comparing recordings over time, allowing for reflective pronunciation training and peer evaluation (Huseynova, 2023). This combination of kinesthetic, auditory, and visual feedback aligns with multimodal learning principles and is especially effective in pronunciation instruction (Bezliudna & Neizvestna, 2023).

In sum, tongue twisters serve multiple roles in the EFL classroom: they function as diagnostic tools, articulation drills, fluency builders, and motivational resources. Their adaptability across learner levels and their capacity to target both segmental and suprasegmental features make them indispensable for modern pronunciation pedagogy.

3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: TONGUE TWISTERS VS. OTHER PRONUNCIATION TECHNIQUES

Tongue twisters occupy a unique space among pronunciation teaching tools, offering benefits that distinguish them from more conventional techniques such as minimal pairs, songs or rhymes, and shadowing or drilling methods. While all these strategies contribute to phonological awareness and oral fluency, tongue twisters combine cognitive challenge with playful repetition, which can enhance learner motivation and long-term retention.

Minimal pairs, which involve practicing words that differ by only one sound (e.g., “ship” vs. “sheep” or “bit” vs. “beat”), are widely used to improve learners’ ability to discriminate between phonemes. This method is particularly effective for identifying specific pronunciation problems and raising awareness of L1 interference. However, minimal pair exercises often lack contextual or rhythmic flow, making them less engaging for sustained practice. In contrast, tongue twisters embed multiple sound contrasts within rhythmic and often humorous phrases, creating a more dynamic and challenging learning experience (Kholisoh et al., 2021). Unlike isolated word pairs, tongue twisters provide continuous speech practice, promoting fluency and coordination of articulatory movements.

Songs and rhymes are another common strategy in pronunciation pedagogy, especially in younger or beginner-level classrooms. These tools introduce rhythm, intonation, and connected speech patterns in a memorable and affective manner. According to Rasmadiani (2022), combining tongue twisters with musical elements can enhance phonetic awareness and lower learners’ affective filters by creating a relaxed atmosphere. However, while songs emphasize

melody and stress patterns, they may not always target difficult phonemes or consonant clusters directly. Tongue twisters, by contrast, are more phonetically dense and can be selected or adapted to address specific articulatory challenges, such as the contrast between /r/ and /l/ in “red lorry, yellow lorry,” or the affricate /tʃ/ in “how much wood would a woodchuck chuck.”

Shadowing and drilling methods are highly structured techniques that focus on repetition, imitation, and immediate correction. Shadowing involves listening to a model speaker and trying to replicate the speech in real time, which helps with prosody, timing, and overall fluency. Drilling focuses more on accuracy through teacher-led repetition and correction. While both methods are effective for precision and automatization, they can become monotonous and demotivating over time, especially in larger classes or with limited instructional variation. Tongue twisters, on the other hand, offer a balance of structure and creativity. Their inherent difficulty creates a game-like challenge that stimulates learners cognitively and emotionally, sustaining their interest through novelty and humor (Revathy & Ravindran, 2016; Puspita et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the memorability of tongue twisters stems from their rhythmic and alliterative nature. This repetition-with-variation supports deeper encoding of phonetic forms, aligning with principles of motor learning theory, which emphasize the value of varied, high-difficulty practice for long-term retention (Lutfiani, 2017). When used strategically, tongue twisters not only promote accurate pronunciation but also foster learner autonomy, as students can practice independently or collaboratively with minimal resources. While minimal pairs, songs, shadowing, and drills each play an important role in pronunciation instruction, tongue twisters offer a distinctive blend of engagement, challenge, and phonetic density. Their effectiveness is amplified when used in conjunction with other techniques, forming a comprehensive, learner-centered approach to spoken English development.

4. BUILDING CONFIDENCE THROUGH STRUCTURED DIFFICULTY

The initial challenge of tongue twisters can be transformed into a rewarding experience when learners observe measurable improvement over time. This progression contributes to the development of self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (1997) as the belief in one's capacity to organize and execute actions required to manage prospective situations. In the context of language learning, when students successfully articulate phrases that were once difficult, it fosters a sense of achievement and encourages persistence (Yuniar et al., 2021; Ryandini & Fitriyasari, 2023). Beyond their phonetic function, tongue twisters are perceived by learners as fun, dynamic, and emotionally engaging, making them excellent tools for affective learning. Emotional engagement is a well-established factor in second language acquisition, as positive feelings toward the learning process can enhance retention and lower resistance to practice (Revathy & Ravindran, 2016). Teachers frequently report that students are more willing to participate, especially in speaking activities, when tongue twisters are incorporated as warm-up tasks or pronunciation games (Rasmadiani, 2022; Prassista Rasmadiani, 2022).

Importantly, these playful linguistic drills can reduce language anxiety, a major barrier in oral communication (Puspita et al., 2023). Since many EFL learners experience fear of making mistakes in front of peers, the low-stakes and humorous nature of tongue twisters can lessen this tension. According to Huseynova (2023), tools that foster interaction and self-expression in a non-threatening setting are critical for building oral competence, particularly when dealing with performance-based language tasks. Additionally, the structure of tongue twisters, short,

rhythmic, and repetitive, lends itself to scaffolded instruction, where learners gradually build upon mastered skills to tackle more complex ones. This progression aligns with Lutfiani's (2017) findings that learners demonstrate more sustained improvement in pronunciation when engaged in cumulative, patterned oral practice. For instance, students may begin with simple consonant repetitions before advancing to tongue twisters with multiple clusters and stress shifts (Ischenko et al., 2023; Kholisoh et al., 2021).

Technology further supports this process. Tools like smart boards and speech recognition software enable real-time feedback, allowing learners to monitor their pronunciation and gain instant correction (Huseynova, 2023). Digital platforms that gamify tongue twister practice also increase learner autonomy and motivation, key components in fostering confidence and long-term language retention (Bezliudna & Neizvestna, 2023). In essence, tongue twisters act not only as pronunciation drills but as confidence-building frameworks that integrate fun, focus, and feedback. They serve both the cognitive and emotional domains of language acquisition, making them uniquely effective for helping learners gain fluency, reduce fear, and speak with greater assurance.

5. PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

Tongue twisters can be effectively integrated into EFL lessons in multiple engaging ways, fostering both phonetic awareness and learner motivation. As warm-up exercises, teachers can begin lessons by selecting two to three tongue twisters that align with the day's phonetic focus. This prepares learners' articulators and helps them tune into the specific sounds they will work on throughout the lesson. Research shows that using targeted tongue twisters not only enhances pronunciation but also increases phonetic attention by promoting the careful articulation of challenging sounds (Kholisoh et al., 2021; Ischenko et al., 2023). For instance, if the focus is on the production of the /ʃ/ and /s/ sounds, a tongue twister like "She sells seashells by the seashore" provides an opportunity for learners to isolate and improve these sounds in a focused, manageable context.

Moreover, tongue twisters serve as valuable articulation drills, both in group and individual practice, allowing learners to refine their pronunciation through repetition and structured exercises. When used in group settings, they can encourage peer interaction and collective learning, where students can compare their attempts and offer feedback to one another (Yuniar et al., 2021; Revathy & Ravindran, 2016). Individual practice also plays a significant role, allowing students to focus on their specific areas of difficulty, particularly when they have received targeted instruction on their problematic phonemes (Lutfiani, 2017). This kind of personalized, yet structured, practice helps students develop confidence in their pronunciation skills and their ability to self-correct over time (Ryandini & Fitriyasari, 2023). To encourage reflective learning, teachers can record students' attempts and replay them during class for peer feedback and self-assessment. This approach enhances students' awareness of their pronunciation strengths and areas for improvement, contributing to the development of metacognitive skills in language learning. Listening to their own speech, students can evaluate their progress, identify errors, and adjust their production accordingly (Puspita et al., 2023). This kind of self-regulation, coupled with feedback from peers, reinforces autonomous learning, a crucial component for improving spoken fluency (Huseynova, 2023).

Additionally, games and timed competitions based on tongue twister performance can significantly boost learner motivation and make pronunciation practice a dynamic and enjoyable

activity. Studies highlight that incorporating playful, competitive elements into language practice increases engagement and provides a sense of achievement when learners overcome the challenges posed by difficult tongue twisters (Revathy & Ravindran, 2016; Rasmadiani, 2022). This not only supports the development of oral fluency but also fosters a supportive learning environment where students can celebrate their successes together (Lutfiani, 2017).

Finally, research indicates that learners benefit more from focusing on the external result of their speech, such as how accurately their pronunciation matches native-like models, rather than obsessing over internal processes like tongue or lip placement (Huseynova, 2023). Teachers should encourage learners to listen critically to their own production and compare it with the target pronunciation. For example, when practicing "She sells seashells," students should aim to assess whether their articulation is clear and sounds native-like, rather than becoming overly focused on the precise positioning of their articulators. This external focus of attention has been shown to improve pronunciation outcomes and learner motivation, as it emphasizes practical language use rather than form (Huseynova, 2015; Ryandini & Fitriyasari, 2023).

6. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

While tongue twisters offer substantial benefits in pronunciation instruction, their use is not without challenges. For some learners, especially those at lower proficiency levels or with speech-related difficulties, the complexity and speed demands of tongue twisters can lead to frustration rather than improvement. Rapid sequences of difficult phonemes may overwhelm learners, particularly if they struggle with articulatory coordination, auditory discrimination, or speech confidence. One common issue is discouragement caused by initial failure. Because tongue twisters are intentionally designed to be difficult, learners may perceive them as unattainable, especially if they are asked to repeat them at native-like speeds too early. This can diminish motivation and reinforce feelings of inadequacy in oral performance. Additionally, students with physical speech impairments or motor coordination challenges may find it hard to perform repetitive articulatory movements, which could lead to disengagement if not properly addressed.

Another limitation involves pedagogical overuse or inappropriate application. If tongue twisters are treated solely as entertainment or warm-up activities, their full instructional value may not be realized. Conversely, if presented without clear goals or scaffolded support, they risk becoming intimidating tasks disconnected from real communication needs. In some cases, learners may focus too much on speed and rhythm, sacrificing clarity and phonemic accuracy—defeating the purpose of pronunciation improvement.

To address these challenges, several practical solutions can be implemented:

1. Scaffolding is essential. Teachers should begin with simpler tongue twisters that target fewer phonemes and gradually increase complexity. Introducing each tongue twister slowly, first in segments, then as a whole, can make them more accessible. Visual aids like phonetic transcriptions or color-coded phonemes can also help learners identify sound patterns more clearly.
2. Differentiated practice ensures that tongue twister tasks are adapted to learner proficiency. For instance, advanced students can work on increasing speed and fluency, while beginners focus on articulating each sound slowly and accurately. Pair or group work allows peer modeling and collaborative feedback, which can reduce anxiety and foster mutual support.

3. Audio modeling is another effective strategy. Providing clear, slow recordings of each tongue twister allows learners to shadow and internalize the correct rhythm, intonation, and articulation before attempting faster repetition. Teachers can also record students' attempts and guide them in reflective listening sessions, encouraging self-assessment and gradual improvement.

4. Integrating positive reinforcement and gamified elements, such as timed challenges, performance rankings, or class competitions, can transform tongue twister practice into a motivational experience rather than a stressful task.

In summary, while tongue twisters are a valuable pedagogical tool, their implementation requires thoughtful adaptation to learner needs. By anticipating potential barriers and incorporating scaffolding, modeling, and differentiated instruction, educators can mitigate these challenges and ensure that tongue twisters enhance rather than hinder pronunciation development.

7. CONCLUSION

Tongue twisters, though often overlooked in formal instruction, offer a rich and multifaceted approach to developing pronunciation and speech fluency in EFL learners. Their linguistic complexity, ranging from minimal pairs and consonant clusters to rhythm and intonation, makes them highly effective tools for refining articulation and fostering greater phonological awareness. Beyond their phonetic value, tongue twisters provide an engaging, low-anxiety platform for practice, allowing learners to experiment with language in a safe and playful environment. As learners progress from initial struggle to mastery, they experience tangible gains not only in pronunciation accuracy and fluency but also in self-confidence and communicative competence.

Through structured repetition, scaffolded difficulty, and meaningful classroom integration, tongue twisters serve as both diagnostic and developmental tools. They encourage reflective learning, promote autonomous correction, and build a foundation for clearer, more confident speech. When supported by multimedia tools, peer feedback, and gamified activities, tongue twisters become even more powerful, bridging the gap between mechanical practice and real-world language use. By incorporating them regularly and purposefully into ESL instruction, educators can revitalize pronunciation training, transforming it from a passive or overlooked component into a dynamic, enjoyable, and impactful element of language learning.

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