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AN EXPLORATORY PHONETIC CASE STUDY OF THE /l/–/r/ CONTRAST IN THE ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION OF TWO MALAYSIAN CHINESE TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory case study examines the production of the English /l/ and /r/ sounds by two Malaysian Chinese teachers, focusing on pronunciation accuracy, substitution patterns, and variation across word positions. Data were collected through recorded word-list readings and analysed using auditory phonetic transcription based on the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The results indicate variation in the production of /l/ and /r/ across initial, medial, and final word positions. The /l/ sound was less accurately produced in the final position, whereas /r/ showed its highest accuracy initially and lower accuracy in the medial and final positions. The analysis also identified /l/ → /r/ substitutions in the initial and medial positions and /r/ → /l/ substitutions in the medial position. Although these patterns may be discussed in relation to cross-linguistic influence, the study does not establish L1 interference as their direct cause. The findings offer preliminary, participant-specific insights into the /l/–/r/ contrast and suggest the potential value of pronunciation awareness and targeted segmental pronunciation training.

Keywords: Pronunciation, /l/–/r/ contrast, Malaysian Chinese teachers, phoneme position.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a dynamic system shaped by globalization, cultural exchange, and technological development, adapting in content and style across contexts (Bahmanova, 2025; Uktamovna & Shahrizoda, 2025). This adaptability extends to phonetics and phonology, where multilingual exposure often results in phonological borrowing, accent variation, and non-native phoneme adoption. Over time, these influences may stabilise

into regional accents, while interference from local languages may cause consonant omissions or substitutions, highlighting the relevance of phonological variation in second-language pronunciation.

Pronunciation is vital in oral communication (Prahaladaiah & Thomas, 2024), yet it remains underemphasised compared to grammar and vocabulary in many English curricula (Zeena, 2024). Non-native speakers often face challenges due to limited early exposure (Ndububa, 2025) and the complex phonological structure of English (Salsabila et al., 2025). The /l/–/r/ contrast is particularly relevant in research on Chinese-background speakers, since the realisation of these sounds may differ across Chinese language varieties. Consequently, substitution errors involving these sounds have been reported in previous studies.

Malaysian Chinese speakers use multiple languages such as Malay, Mandarin, and Hokkien, and their linguistic backgrounds may provide relevant context for examining English pronunciation. Learners may draw on previously acquired linguistic patterns when producing sounds in a second language, which can result in differences in pronunciation (Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021; Niu et al., 2023). However, such cross-linguistic influence should not be assumed to be the direct cause of pronunciation patterns without specific evidence. As teachers may use English in professional and educational contexts, examining their pronunciation can provide a localized account of specific segmental features.

Although prior studies have highlighted pronunciation difficulties among Chinese learners of English, limited attention has been paid to Malaysian Chinese teachers, particularly non-English specialists. English, Malaysia's widely used additional language, is essential for communication in a multicultural society, yet pronunciation patterns among teachers from diverse linguistic backgrounds remain an area requiring further investigation. Fang (2022) noted that Chinese learners in Malaysia often substitute English sounds with the closest equivalents in their L1, while Rethinasamy et al. (2022) specifically reported difficulties involving the English /l/ and /r/ sounds among Malaysian Chinese learners. While learner errors are well documented, little is known about how similar pronunciation patterns may be observed among Malaysian Chinese teachers who are not English-language specialists.

This study addresses the gap by analysing the /l/–/r/ contrast in the speech of two Malaysian Chinese teachers. It focuses on pronunciation accuracy, substitution patterns, and the relationship between phoneme position and the reported pronunciation outcomes. As an exploratory study involving only two participants, the findings are intended to provide participant-specific observations rather than generalisations about Malaysian Chinese teachers as a population. Although the participants' linguistic backgrounds are considered as contextual factors, the study does not directly test L1 interference. The findings may therefore provide preliminary observations for future research involving larger samples and more rigorous phonetic analysis.

Research Objectives

This study seeks to investigate specific aspects of English pronunciation among two Malaysian Chinese teachers**,** and the objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the accuracy of English /l/ and /r/ pronunciation among the two Malaysian Chinese teachers.
2. To identify substitution patterns, if any, in the production of /l/ and /r/ sounds.
3. To investigate how pronunciation accuracy varies across phoneme positions (initial, medial, and final).

Research Questions

The study aims to explore the pronunciation patterns of two Malaysian Chinese teachers**,** with particular focus on the /l/ and /r/ sounds. The following questions guide the research:

1. How accurately do the two Malaysian Chinese teachers pronounce the English /l/ and /r/ sounds?
2. What substitution patterns, if any, are observed in their pronunciation of the /l/ and /r/ sounds?
3. How does pronunciation accuracy vary across phoneme positions (initial, medial, and final)?

Significance of the Study

The study explores theoretical, pedagogical, and practical implications within the context of English language teaching in Malaysia. Examining how two Malaysian Chinese teachers pronounce the English /l/ and /r/ phonemes provides localized observations that may contribute to discussions of second-language phonology and pronunciation pedagogy.

Theoretical Significance

The study provides a small-scale phonetic account of English /l/ and /r/ production among two Malaysian Chinese teachers with Chinese linguistic backgrounds. It contributes to the field of second language acquisition as well as phonetics and phonology by documenting participant-specific pronunciation patterns and variations across phoneme positions. These observations may add to existing literature on cross-linguistic influence and L2 pronunciation, particularly research concerning the /l/–/r/ contrast among Chinese-background speakers. However, the present study does not directly test L1 interference and therefore does not establish it as the cause of the observed pronunciation patterns.

Pedagogical Significance

From a pedagogical perspective, this study's findings highlight the potential value of pronunciation awareness in L2 use in educational contexts. Identifying pronunciation and substitution patterns observed among the two participants can inform future development of focused instructional activities. Therefore, emphasis on phoneme discrimination and production techniques may be considered in pronunciation practice involving the /l/ and /r/ contrast, particularly across different phoneme positions. However, the pedagogical implications should be interpreted as preliminary rather than as evidence of an established intervention effect.

Practical Significance

The insights gained from this study may inform the development of targeted pronunciation activities for non-native speakers of English in Malaysia, particularly individuals with Chinese linguistic backgrounds. Rather than proposing a specialised module based on the present sample alone, the findings may serve as preliminary input for future pronunciation training and professional development initiatives. Larger studies would be needed to determine whether such activities are appropriate for broader groups of teachers.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the segmental pronunciation of two English phonemes, the /l/ and /r/ sounds, among two Malaysian Chinese teachers. Specifically, it investigates how these phonemes are articulated in different positions within words, including the initial, medial, and final positions. The study aims to examine pronunciation accuracy and identify substitution patterns, if any. The scope is deliberately narrow to allow for an in-depth phonetic analysis of a well-documented area of difficulty for Chinese-background speakers learning English as a second language.

The participants in this study consist of two Malaysian Chinese teachers with different lengths of teaching experience, whose linguistic backgrounds include Hokkien and Mandarin. They were selected as non-English-subject teachers with experience using multiple languages in their educational contexts. This demographic focus allows the study to examine participant-specific English pronunciation patterns in relation to their linguistic backgrounds, without assuming a direct causal influence of L1 phonological systems on the observed pronunciation patterns.

This study uses a manual transcription method based on the researchers' auditory analysis, which is limited to the production of /l/ and /r/ sounds. The scope does not extend to other pronunciation features such as vowel quality, intonation, stress patterns, or suprasegmental elements. These exclusions are intentional, aiming to maintain a focused and manageable scope within the constraints of a small-scale project. Moreover, the study findings are not intended to be generalised to Malaysian Chinese teachers as a population, but rather to document participant-specific pronunciation patterns and provide directions for future research involving larger samples and more comprehensive phonetic analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although English is recognised as a global language, many teachers from various disciplines still face significant challenges, particularly in speaking proficiency (Baisa et al., 2024; Hiasa, 2025). Hamzah et al. (2017) focused on English teachers in Malaysia. Their findings suggest that even trained language educators may overlook pronunciation instruction. This implies that non-English subject teachers may face pronunciation-related challenges due to a lack of structured phonetic training, as their academic background often prioritises subject content over language development (Siripol & Wilang, 2024). For Chinese-background speakers, the /l/–/r/ contrast has received particular attention because the realisation of these sounds may differ across Chinese language varieties (Niu et al., 2023). This chapter reviews these concerns by drawing on relevant literature that forms the theoretical foundation of this study.

Chinese Speakers' First Language in Malaysia

The Chinese population in Malaysia is linguistically diverse, comprising various dialectal groups such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, and Hakka. Mandarin is the dominant language in formal education, particularly in Chinese vernacular schools, while dialects like Hokkien remain prevalent in home and community settings (Ting & Teng, 2021). Due to this dual exposure, many Malaysian Chinese speakers grow up bilingually or trilingually, using Mandarin in formal domains and Hokkien or other dialects in informal interactions.

This study focuses on Mandarin and Hokkien as the participants' primary L1 backgrounds. Table 1 summarises relevant phonological characteristics of both languages that provide contextual information for examining English /l/ and /r/ pronunciation.

Table 1

Chinese Languages in Malaysia

Language	Description
Mandarin	• The /l/–/r/ contrast differs from the English phonemic contrast and may result in different realisations in English pronunciation (Niu et al., 2023). • Mandarin is a tonal language with limited consonant clusters and no final voiced stops, which may affect English segment timing and syllable structure. • Relevant Mandarin consonants should be presented using their specific IPA symbols to clarify their phonetic relationship with English /l/ and /r/. • /r/ is typically described in terms of its specific Mandarin phonetic realisation rather than being treated as equivalent to English /r/ (Wang, 2024). • It contains consonantal realisations that differ from English /r/ and should therefore be described using the relevant IPA symbols (Hamzah et al., 2017).
Hokkien	• Tends to be syllable-timed and tone-driven, which affects stress and intonation when speaking English. • Minimal consonantal contrasts; lacks sounds like /v/, /z/, or voiced th /ð/, which may lead to substitutions or omissions.

English as a Second Language in Malaysia

English, recognised as a global lingua franca, holds significant value in education systems worldwide, particularly in post-colonial nations like Malaysia (Abdullah & Raja Abdullah, 2025). Within Malaysia's multilingual education framework, English is officially designated as the second language and is taught as a compulsory subject across all levels of schooling (Sahib, 2021). However, balancing national identity with global linguistic demands remains a key policy challenge (Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021).

Although Malaysian students often receive structured instruction in English, including grammar and writing, many still face difficulty speaking fluently (Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021). This highlights the relevance of pronunciation and oral communication in English language learning, particularly in multilingual educational contexts.

Malaysian Standard English reflects British pronunciation norms in official and academic contexts. Yet, increased exposure to American English in popular media and digital environments creates a blended pronunciation spectrum among Malaysian speakers. Such variation is relevant to the present study because differences in English pronunciation models may provide additional contextual considerations when examining the production of /l/ and /r/ (Gulnazir & Salehuddin, 2023).

The Importance of Speaking English

In today's globalised world, speaking proficiency is a key indicator of overall English language competence (Zega, 2025). Unlike receptive skills such as reading and listening, speaking requires real-time processing, interactional awareness, and confident articulation of ideas. For non-native speakers, especially in multilingual nations like Malaysia, oral proficiency is essential for academic achievement and effective participation in international and professional domains (Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021).

In Malaysian classrooms, where English is the second language, oral communication remains among the most challenging. Learners may demonstrate competence in grammar and writing yet struggle with

spontaneous speech due to anxiety, pronunciation difficulties, or limited exposure to authentic speaking contexts (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). These considerations highlight the relevance of pronunciation as one component of spoken English, particularly when examining specific segmental contrasts such as /l/ and /r/.

Therefore, pronunciation as a crucial speaking component deserves more attention in teacher training and classroom practice. Mispronunciations, especially in segmental contrasts like /l/ and /r/, can affect intelligibility and contribute to communication difficulties. Pronunciation awareness and appropriate production practice may therefore be relevant components of English language teaching (Purnama et al., 2023).

British English Pronunciation

Standard British English is commonly adopted as the pronunciation model in the Malaysian English language education system due to the nation's colonial legacy. This influence is still visible in schools and official domains, where British norms, particularly Received Pronunciation (RP), are often regarded as the preferred standard (Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021).

However, Malaysian speakers are also exposed to multiple varieties of English, including American and localised Malaysian English. Gulnazir and Salehuddin (2023) highlighted this variation through corpus analysis, noting that mixed pronunciation models arose from exposure to different Englishes. Such variation provides contextual background for examining pronunciation patterns in Malaysian English rather than establishing a single pronunciation model as the sole reference point.

While using British English as a benchmark may help ensure consistency in instruction, pronunciation research should also consider intelligibility and the communicative context of English use (Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021). For the present study, the focus is specifically on the production of the /l/ and /r/ contrast rather than on evaluating adherence to a particular national or native-speaker variety of English.

Malaysian English

Malaysian English is a linguistically rich and dynamic variety shaped by the country's multilingual context. According to Kashinathan and Abdul Aziz (2021), it encompasses a range of dialects influenced by the various languages spoken in Malaysia. The variation in Malaysian English is closely tied to speakers' educational backgrounds and linguistic environments. Drawing upon classifications by David et al. (2017, as cited in Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021), three levels of Malaysian English have been identified based on educational attainment and language exposure: highly educated, moderately educated, and lowly educated Malaysian English.

Highly educated Malaysian English is typically associated with individuals who have received their university education through English, resulting in greater fluency and adherence to standard forms. Moderately educated Malaysian English refers to those currently pursuing tertiary studies with English as a medium of instruction, often exhibiting some degree of fluency but with noticeable influence from local linguistic patterns. In contrast, lowly educated Malaysian English is spoken by individuals whose education is primarily in languages such as Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin, Tamil, or other local vernaculars. For this group, English is usually studied only as a subject in school, and its usage outside the classroom is often limited (Jassem, 2014, as cited in Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021).

In terms of pronunciation, Malaysian English speakers display varied accent preferences. While many lean towards British English due to its institutional status and presence in the national curriculum, others adopt

features from American English, particularly the rhotic /r/ sound. However, it is essential to note that rhoticity is not unique to American English, as it is also found in several regional varieties of British English (Trudgill, 1999, as cited in Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021). These variations provide a broader linguistic context for examining the production of /l/ and /r/ among Malaysian Chinese speakers without assuming that a particular English variety is responsible for the observed pronunciation patterns.

Malaysian Chinese Teacher

Malaysian Chinese teachers form an important population for examining English pronunciation within Malaysia's multilingual educational context. Their linguistic backgrounds may include Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, and other languages or dialects, which provide relevant contextual factors when examining English pronunciation (Hamzah et al., 2017).

Recent research indicates that pronunciation difficulties among Malaysian Chinese learners, especially in producing /l/ and /r/ sounds, are associated with their early educational background. Learners who received primary and secondary education in Chinese-medium schools demonstrate more frequent mispronunciations, especially in medial and final positions of words (Rethinasamy et al., 2022). These findings provide relevant background for examining whether similar pronunciation patterns are observed among Malaysian Chinese teachers. However, such patterns should not automatically be attributed to L1 interference without direct evidence of the relationship between the participants' L1 phonological systems and their English production.

Although teaching experience is often perceived as a marker of instructional quality, it does not inherently translate into better classroom performance. Teaching effectiveness is not consistently correlated with years of service; it depends on access to sustained professional development (Awang & Shaari, 2021; Graham et al., 2020). This is especially relevant for Malaysian Chinese teachers because opportunities for targeted pronunciation training may vary according to their professional and educational backgrounds. According to Awang & Shaari (2021), early-career teachers in Malaysia may require structured mentoring, focused pronunciation support, and professional guidance to manage multilingual classroom contexts confidently.

For the present study, the relevance of Malaysian Chinese teachers lies in their linguistic and professional context rather than in assumptions about their pronunciation competence. Examining two teachers provides a small-scale opportunity to document participant-specific patterns in the production of /l/ and /r/.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory: L1 Interference Theory

L1 Interference, also known as negative transfer, refers to the influence of a speaker's native language on the acquisition of a second language, particularly when L1 and L2 differ in phonological, grammatical, or syntactic structures. This interference is often subconscious and may cause learners to apply familiar sound patterns from their L1 when speaking in L2. According to Selinker (1972), learners create an "interlanguage" system that blends features of both L1 and L2, which may result in persistent pronunciation errors, especially in sounds that do not exist in their native phonological inventory (Han, 2004).

In the case of Chinese speakers in Malaysia, the /l/ and /r/ contrast has been identified as a relevant area of pronunciation difficulty. Mandarin, for example, has phonological characteristics that differ from the English /l/–/r/ contrast, which may contribute to differences in pronunciation when Chinese-background speakers produce these English sounds (Niu et al., 2023; Wang, 2024). Similarly, dialects like Hokkien exhibit phonological characteristics that differ from English, which may provide relevant contextual factors when examining English pronunciation.

The L1 Interference perspective therefore provides a theoretical framework for interpreting possible cross-linguistic influences on L2 pronunciation. However, the present study does not directly test L1 interference or establish it as the cause of the participants' pronunciation patterns. Instead, the theory is used to provide a contextual framework for discussing possible relationships between participants' linguistic backgrounds and their production of English /l/ and /r/.

Previous Studies

Numerous studies have explored pronunciation challenges second language (L2) learners face, particularly those from Chinese-speaking backgrounds. Previous research has identified difficulties involving the /l/–/r/ contrast among Chinese-background speakers, although the specific realisation of these sounds varies across language varieties (Niu et al., 2023; Wang, 2024). These findings provide a relevant basis for examining the production of /l/ and /r/ among Malaysian Chinese speakers.

Ting and Teng (2021) examined the linguistic vitality of Hokkien among Chinese teenagers in Penang, Malaysia. They highlighted that dialects like Hokkien remain profoundly influential in everyday speech despite Mandarin's dominance in formal education. This linguistic context is relevant when considering the diverse language backgrounds of Malaysian Chinese speakers. Similarly, Hamzah et al. (2017) investigated pronunciation features of Malaysian Chinese speakers. They found pronunciation differences involving /l/ and /r/ sounds, especially in medial positions, indicating that phoneme position may be relevant when examining the production of these sounds.

In a comparative study on Chinese learners of English, Zhang and Yin (2023) discovered that participants exhibited better control over /r/ in initial positions, but often omitted or substituted it in final syllables. These findings suggest that phoneme position may be an important variable in the analysis of English /r/ pronunciation.

While many of these studies focus on student learners, limited research has examined Malaysian Chinese teachers who do not specialise in English. This represents a localized research gap, particularly regarding the production of the /l/–/r/ contrast across different phoneme positions. The current study addresses this gap by analysing the /l/ and /r/ contrast among two Malaysian Chinese teachers who do not specialise in English, considering /l/ and /r/ phoneme position and presenting visual data to enhance the description of participant-specific pronunciation patterns. Given the small sample size, the study is exploratory and does not seek to generalise its findings to Malaysian Chinese teachers as a population.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

This study involved two Malaysian Chinese teachers as participants in an exploratory case study, who were purposively selected based on their language background and teaching experience. The first participant teaches in a primary school, while the second teaches at a polytechnic institution. Both participants are female, with 10 and 15 years of teaching experience, respectively. Their language backgrounds include Malay, Mandarin, English, and Hokkien. Hokkien is their first language, while Mandarin is the primary medium of instruction during their schooling years.

Neither participant is an English teacher; one teaches Early Intervention (Autism), and the other teaches Tourism Management. Both subjects are taught using a mix of Malay, Mandarin, and English. The participants were selected because they shared specific linguistic and professional characteristics relevant

to the research focus, namely being Malaysian Chinese teachers who were not English subject specialists and who had Mandarin and Hokkien linguistic backgrounds. Their different educational settings also provided contextual variation for examining the production of /l/ and /r/.

The use of two participants was consistent with the exploratory and in-depth nature of the study, which focused on participant-specific phonetic observations rather than population-level generalisation. The rationale for the small sample is informed by the concept of information power proposed by Malterud et al. (2016), which suggests that a smaller sample may be appropriate when participants possess characteristics that are highly specific to the research aim and can provide detailed information relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Accordingly, the two participants were treated as individual cases for detailed phonetic examination, and the findings are interpreted as preliminary observations rather than as representative of Malaysian Chinese teachers as a population.

Purposive sampling was employed to deliberately select participants who possessed characteristics directly relevant to the research objectives (Etikan, 2016). This sampling approach was appropriate because the study required participants with specific linguistic and professional characteristics rather than a statistically representative sample. In this study, purposive sampling supported the selection of information-rich participants whose backgrounds were closely aligned with the focus on English /l/ and /r/ production.

Research Instruments

The primary research instrument was a word list designed to test the pronunciation of the /l/ and /r/ phonemes in three phonetic positions: initial, medial, and final. The list consisted of 60 target words containing either /l/ or /r/ in various positions and 20 filler words to reduce predictability and maintain participant engagement. The 80 words were presented in random order via slideshow to minimise positional bias and reduce anticipation effects, as recommended in pronunciation elicitation studies (Munro, 2008).

Participants were instructed to read 20 randomly arranged words at a time, after which a brief break was given before proceeding to the following 20 words. This pattern continued until all 80 words were read, and the entire round was repeated three times. These structured breaks and repeated rounds were designed to reduce fatigue, minimise the likelihood of self-correction, and support consistency in the elicited pronunciation data. Repetition in controlled intervals helps discourage participants from becoming overly self-conscious or altering their natural pronunciation (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Trofimovich, 2011). The word list was constructed using vocabulary familiar to Malaysian learners, ensuring cultural and linguistic relevance while maintaining the integrity of the phonetic focus.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a recorded Google Meet session in which participants were instructed to read aloud the word list displayed on the slides. Each participant was given clear instructions and ample time to pronounce the words as naturally as possible. A consent form was distributed and signed before the session to ensure ethical compliance and participant agreement. The recordings were used as the primary source for phonetic analysis. The recordings were reviewed for the quality and clarity of the audio before transcription. Any item that were unclear or difficult to identify auditorily were noted during the analysis.

Data Analysis

The audio recordings were analysed using auditory phonetic transcription, guided by the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Symbols were rendered using Doulos SIL, IPA Kiel, and IPA LS Uni fonts to

ensure clarity and consistency in the phonetic representation. Phonetic transcription using the IPA is a standard method in pronunciation research for capturing segmental variation (Beňuš, 2021). The researcher transcribed each word manually to identify pronunciation outcomes for the target /l/ and /r/ phonemes.

The original five-point evaluation scale was used as an assessment aid during the auditory evaluation. For the quantitative analysis, the recorded productions were subsequently classified into two categories: correct and incorrect. A production was classified as correct when the researcher judged that the target /l/ or /r/ phoneme was produced in accordance with the intended target, whereas a production was classified as incorrect when the target phoneme was replaced by another sound or was otherwise realised differently from the intended target. Thus, the five-point evaluation scale was not treated as a five-level outcome measure in the statistical analysis.

Pronunciation errors were categorised into two main dimensions:

- Phoneme position: whether the /l/ or /r/ sound appeared within a word's initial, medial, or final position.
- Substitution patterns: instances where /l/ was realised as /r/, or /r/ was realised as /l/, and any other unexpected phoneme replacements.

For reporting the results, raw item counts were considered alongside percentages because the study involved only two participants. Percentages were therefore interpreted descriptively and were not treated as estimates of pronunciation patterns among Malaysian Chinese teachers generally. The qualitative observations from the sessions were also noted to supplement the quantitative findings and provide additional descriptive information about the participants' pronunciation patterns.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings and discussion of an exploratory phonetic analysis of the production of the /l/ and /r/ sounds by two Malaysian Chinese teachers. It focuses on three aspects of the analysis pronunciation accuracy, substitution patterns, and variation in accuracy across word positions.

Accuracy of Pronunciation

Figure 1

The Frequency and Percentage of Correct Pronunciations of the English Phonemes /l/ and /r/ among the Two Malaysian Chinese Teachers across Three-word Positions

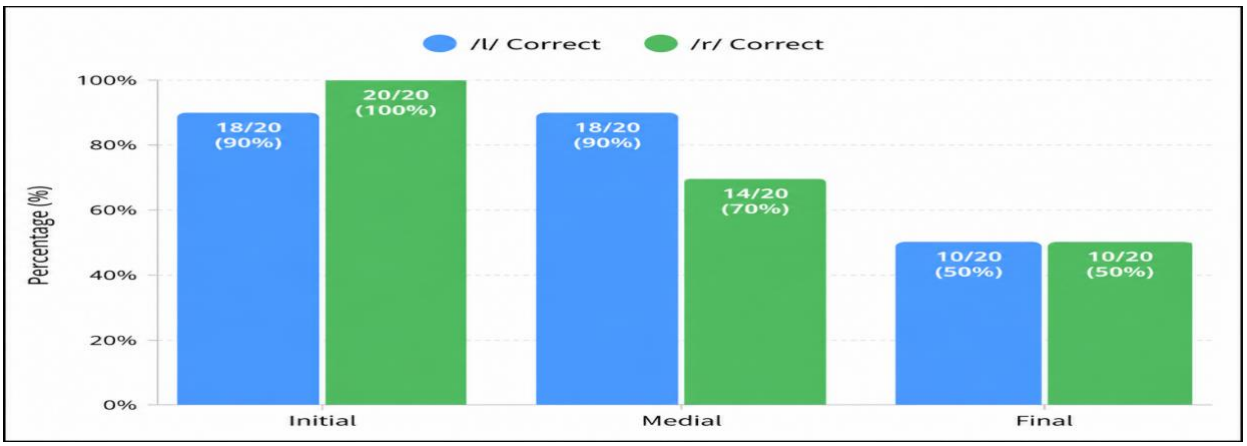


Figure 1 compares the percentage of correct pronunciations of the English phonemes /l/ and /r/ across initial, medial, and final word positions. For /l/, correct pronunciation was recorded at 90% in both the initial and medial positions, decreasing to 50% in the final position. For /r/, correct pronunciation was observed at 100% in the initial position, 70% in the medial position, and 50% in the final position. In raw frequencies, /l/ was correctly produced in 18 of 20 items in both the initial and medial positions, while 10 of 20 items were correct in the final position. For /r/, 20 of 20 items were correct in the initial position, compared with 14 of 20 in the medial position and 10 of 20 in the final position.

Taken together, the results indicate differences in pronunciation across word positions. The relatively lower accuracy of final /l/ was accompanied by instances of /l/ deletion in some final-position words. This observation may be considered in relation to previous discussions of cross-linguistic influence, including Wang (2024) and Zeena (2024), who highlighted that L2 learners may perceive and produce L2 phonemes in relation to phonological categories available in their L1. Nevertheless, the present data do not establish that the observed /l/ deletion resulted from L1 interference.

Substitution Patterns

Table 1

Frequency and Percentage of Substitution Patterns for /l/ and /r/ across Word Positions

Target phoneme	Word position	Substitution pattern	Frequency	Percentage
/l/	Initial	/l/ → /r/	2/20	10%
/l/	Medial	/l/ → /r/	2/20	10%
/r/	Initial	/r/ → /l/	0/20	0%
/r/	Medial	/r/ → /l/	6/20	30%

For /r/, the highest accuracy was observed in the initial position (100%), followed by the medial position (70%) and final position (50%). Some final /r/ productions also showed variation in rhoticity. These observations cannot, however, be linked directly to exposure to American English because the study did not measure the participants' exposure to different English varieties. The findings therefore provide a descriptive account of the pronunciation patterns observed in the two participants rather than evidence of the factors underlying these patterns Table 1 presents the substitution patterns observed in the production of /l/ and /r/ across the initial and medial word positions. For /l/, substitution of /l/ with /r/ occurred in 2 out of 20 items (10%) in both the initial and medial positions. For /r/, no substitution with /l/ was observed in the initial position, whereas 6 out of 20 items (30%) in the medial position involved /r/ being realised as /l/. The substitutions therefore varied according to both the target phoneme and word position. For example, the target word pirate /paɪ.rət/ was produced as /paɪ.lət/, representing an /r/ → /l/ substitution in the medial position. Similarly, two initial /l/ items and two medial /l/ items were realised as /r/. The occurrence of these substitutions indicates that the two participants did not show a single consistent direction of substitution across all word positions.

The occurrence of /r/ → /l/ substitution in the medial position can be considered in relation to previous research suggesting that second-language learners may produce L2 sounds in relation to phonological categories available in their existing linguistic repertoires (Wang, 2024; Zeena, 2024). Such an interpretation is possible, but it remains tentative because the present study did not directly compare the participants' L1 phonological systems with their English productions. The data also show that substitution occurred in both directions: /r/ → /l/ in the medial position and /l/ → /r/ in the initial and medial positions.

This variation suggests that the pronunciation patterns were not uniform across the two target phonemes. However, the available data are insufficient to establish L1 interference as the direct cause of these substitutions.

Overall, the substitution findings are best understood as participant-specific observations within this exploratory case study rather than as a general pattern among Malaysian Chinese teachers.

Variation in Pronunciation Accuracy across Word Positions

Table 2

Frequency and Percentage of Correct Pronunciations of /l/ and /r/ across Word Positions

Target phoneme	Word position	Correct pronunciation	Percentage
/l/	Initial	18/20	90%
/l/	Medial	18/20	90%
/l/	Final	10/20	50%
/r/	Initial	20/20	100%

Table 2 shows how the pronunciation outcomes varied according to word position. For /l/, correct pronunciation was recorded in 18 out of 20 items (90%) in both the initial and medial positions, whereas accuracy decreased to 10 out of 20 items (50%) in the final position. For /r/, correct pronunciation was observed in all 20 items (100%) in the initial position, followed by 14 out of 20 items (70%) in the medial position and 10 out of 20 items (50%) in the final position.

A similar pattern can therefore be seen for both target sounds: accuracy was highest in the initial position and lowest in the final position. The difference was more pronounced for /l/, which remained at 90% in the initial and medial positions before decreasing to 50% in the final position. For /r/, accuracy declined from 100% initially to 70% medially and 50% finally.

The lower accuracy observed in the final position, particularly for /l/, is consistent with previous discussions in phonetics and second-language acquisition suggesting that consonant production in syllable-final positions may present greater challenges for some L2 speakers (Wang, 2024; Zeena, 2024). This provides a possible point of comparison with previous research, although the present study did not directly investigate the phonological factors responsible for the pattern.

The results should also be interpreted in light of the small number of observations in each category. For example, a difference of only two items represents a 10-percentage-point change within a 20-item category. The percentages therefore describe the observed productions rather than representing population-level estimates. As no inferential statistical analysis was conducted, the results do not establish a statistically significant effect of word position.

Implication of the Study

The findings of this study have potential pedagogical implications for Malaysian Chinese teachers, particularly in the context of English language use and teaching in multilingual environments such as Malaysia. Although the study involved only two Malaysian Chinese teachers, the observed variation in the production of /l/ and /r/ highlights the potential value of pronunciation awareness among teachers who use English in their professional and classroom contexts. As teachers may serve as linguistic models for their students, greater attention to the accurate production of English segmental sounds may be relevant to the

development of teachers' pronunciation awareness. However, the present study did not examine students' pronunciation development or pronunciation fossilization and therefore does not establish a direct relationship between teachers' pronunciation and students' speech patterns.

For Malaysian Chinese teachers, the findings also highlight the potential importance of incorporating segmental pronunciation training into teacher education and professional development programmes, particularly for in-service teachers. Greater exposure to phonetic knowledge may help Malaysian Chinese teachers develop awareness of contrastive English sound patterns such as /l/ and /r/, as well as other English sound contrasts that may differ from those available in their L1. Tian, Li, Chen, and Liu (2025) identified several factors associated with pronunciation fossilization, including negative transfer, emotional factors, social and cultural influences, and ineffective learning strategies. Although pronunciation fossilization was not examined in the present study, these factors provide a relevant background for considering the role of pronunciation awareness and instructional support.

Priya and Kumar (2020) suggested that changes in pronunciation may involve greater awareness of the components of speech sounds, including syllables, tone, stress, and intonation. In addition, phonological awareness has been identified as an important literacy-related skill that may influence learning development (Prabhu et al., 2024). In the context of Malaysian Chinese teachers, such awareness may be particularly relevant when working with English sound contrasts that are not represented in the same way within their existing phonological systems.

Accordingly, professional development programmes for Malaysian Chinese teachers could incorporate practical pronunciation activities, such as auditory discrimination exercises, self-recording with phonetic feedback, and familiarisation with the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). These activities may help teachers develop greater awareness of their own pronunciation and recognise differences between target English sounds and their existing phonological representations. Such training could be particularly relevant to the /l/–/r/ contrast examined in the present study, while also being applicable to other English pronunciation contrasts that may present difficulties.

Nevertheless, these implications should be interpreted cautiously because the present study involved only two Malaysian Chinese teachers and did not evaluate the effectiveness of pronunciation training or professional development interventions. Therefore, the findings should be viewed as preliminary pedagogical considerations for Malaysian Chinese teachers rather than evidence that the proposed approaches will necessarily improve their pronunciation.

Limitations of the Study

This study, while providing preliminary insights into the production of the /l/–/r/ contrast, acknowledges several limitations that may influence the generalisability and scope of its findings.

Limited Participant Scope

The study focused exclusively on two Malaysian Chinese teachers, with Hokkien and Mandarin identified as their first languages. This participant scope allowed for an exploratory examination of the participants' production of the target phonemes but limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other Malaysian Chinese teachers or teachers from different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Teachers with different L1 backgrounds may demonstrate different phonological patterns or pronunciation challenges. Therefore, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of all non-native English-speaking teachers in Malaysia.

Manual Transcription and Subjectivity

The phonetic analysis relied on manual auditory transcription conducted by the researcher, without independent inter-rater verification or acoustic analysis. Although careful attention was given to the transcription process, manual auditory transcription may involve a degree of subjectivity, particularly in borderline cases involving substitution, deletion, or weak articulation. The absence of a second trained transcriber and acoustic validation may therefore have affected the consistency and objectivity of the pronunciation classifications. Future studies should consider involving an independent transcriber and reporting inter-rater agreement, as well as incorporating acoustic measures where appropriate.

Small Sample Size and Exploratory Case Study Design

The study involved only two participants, which substantially limits statistical generalisation. The study was designed as an exploratory case study, and the findings are therefore context-specific and participant-specific. Accordingly, the observed pronunciation patterns should not be interpreted as representative of Malaysian Chinese teachers as a broader population. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples to determine whether similar patterns can be observed across Malaysian Chinese teachers with different linguistic backgrounds and levels of English exposure.

Limited Phonetic Scope – Focus Only on /l/ and /r/

The study concentrated specifically on the /l/–/r/ contrast and did not provide a comprehensive analysis of other aspects of English pronunciation. Other pronunciation features, such as vowel variation, rhoticity, and diphthong production, were not examined systematically and therefore fall outside the scope of the present analysis. Future research could expand the phonetic scope to include a broader range of segmental and suprasegmental features, thereby providing a more comprehensive account of pronunciation patterns among Malaysian Chinese teachers.

Recommendation

In light of the limitations identified in this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the scope, reliability, and methodological rigour of future research on non-native English pronunciation, particularly concerning the /l/–/r/ contrast.

Broaden Participant Demographics

Since this study involved only two Malaysian Chinese teachers, future studies should include a larger and more diverse group of participants from different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. This would allow for comparative analysis of how different first-language backgrounds may be associated with the pronunciation of English phonemes. In addition, including participants from different regions, teaching levels, and professional backgrounds could enhance the transferability of the findings to a broader population of non-native English-speaking educators in Malaysia.

Incorporate Acoustic Analysis and Inter-Rater Reliability

To reduce subjectivity and improve the precision of phonetic transcription, future research should incorporate acoustic analysis software and objective acoustic measures, where appropriate. Such analysis could provide additional evidence regarding relevant sound features and complement auditory transcription. In addition, future studies should involve at least one additional trained transcriber and report an appropriate measure of inter-rater agreement, such as percentage agreement or Cohen’s kappa, to improve the consistency and credibility of pronunciation classification and transcription.

Increase Sample Size and Consider Mixed-Method Approaches

To strengthen the generalisability and analytical robustness of the findings, future studies should involve a larger number of participants from different regions, teaching levels, linguistic backgrounds, and levels of teaching experience. A larger sample would allow for more systematic comparison of pronunciation patterns and, where appropriate, the application of inferential statistical analysis. In addition, a mixed-method approach combining quantitative pronunciation data with qualitative interviews could provide deeper insights into factors associated with pronunciation production, such as awareness of L1–L2 phonological differences, attitudes towards English accents, previous pronunciation training, and teachers' experiences with English language use.

Clarify Scoring and Pronunciation Classification Procedures

Future studies should provide a clearly defined procedure for converting pronunciation ratings into correct and incorrect classifications. The criteria or cut-off point used to determine pronunciation accuracy should be explicitly reported to improve transparency and reproducibility. In addition, researchers should report raw frequencies alongside percentages for each pronunciation category so that the findings can be interpreted appropriately, particularly when working with small samples.

Expand the Phonetic and Prosodic Scope

While the present study focused specifically on the /l/–/r/ contrast, future research could examine a broader range of segmental and suprasegmental features, including vowel production, consonant contrasts, stress, rhythm, and intonation. A broader phonetic scope would provide a more comprehensive account of pronunciation patterns among Malaysian Chinese teachers and could contribute to the development of more targeted and context-sensitive pronunciation training resources.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this exploratory study show variation in the production of the English /l/ and /r/ phonemes among the two Malaysian Chinese teachers across different word positions. The production of /l/ was less accurate in the final position, while /r/ showed the highest accuracy in the initial position and lower accuracy in the medial and final positions. The study also identified both /l/ → /r/ and /r/ → /l/ substitution patterns, particularly in the initial and medial positions. These findings indicate that the production of the target phonemes varied according to the target sound and word position. Overall, the findings provide preliminary, participant-specific insights into the production of the /l/–/r/ contrast among Malaysian Chinese teachers. Although the observed patterns may be considered in relation to previous discussions of cross-linguistic influence, the present study does not establish L1 interference as the direct cause of the observed pronunciation patterns. The findings highlight the potential value of greater pronunciation awareness and targeted segmental pronunciation training for Malaysian Chinese teachers. The recommendations for larger and more diverse samples, independent transcription with inter-rater reliability, acoustic analysis, and clearer pronunciation classification procedures should also be given due consideration in future research to further examine the patterns identified in this exploratory study.

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