

## ARTICLE

# Causes and Effects of Non-Rhoticity in Received Pronunciation: Implications for Saudi EFL Learners

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the phonological challenges posed by non-rhoticity in Received Pronunciation (RP) for Saudi learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), with a particular focus on how mother tongue interference and instructional limitations impact the perception and production of non-rhotic features such as linking /r/ and intrusive /r/. Drawing on a six-month qualitative investigation involving 100 Saudi secondary school students, the study employed longitudinal naturalistic observation to document recurring pronunciation patterns in real classroom contexts. The data were thematically analyzed using principles from applied phonology and second language acquisition research, revealing consistent misarticulations of RP-linked features, including difficulties with consonants such as /ð/, /θ/, /z/, and /k/. These pronunciation errors were primarily attributed to first language transfer from Arabic, insufficient exposure to authentic RP input, and a lack of explicit phonological instruction. The findings highlight a significant gap between learners' exposure to English and their ability to reproduce RP features intelligibly. While RP continues to be valorized in academic and professional domains, it remains largely unfamiliar to learners without targeted phonetic training. The study argues for instructional reforms that integrate RP-based pronunciation into EFL curricula through focused pedagogical strategies, teacher training, and increased access to multimodal input. The research contributes to ongoing debates on English as an International Language (EIL), offering empirical insights into how socio-phonetic variation intersects with learner intelligibility in non-native contexts.

**Keywords:** Non-Rhoticity; Received Pronunciation (RP); Saudi EFL Learners; Phonological Interference; English as an International Language (EIL)

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### ARTICLE INFO

Received: 27 April 2025 | Revised: 29 May 2025 | Accepted: 16 June 2025 | Published Online: 15 July 2025  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i7.9723>

### CITATION

Alghammas, A., 2025. Causes and Effects of Non-Rhoticity in Received Pronunciation: Implications for Saudi EFL Learners. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 7(7): 450–459. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i7.9723>

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# 1. Introduction

English pronunciation and intelligibility are central concerns for learners of English as a foreign language. In recent years, scholars have stressed that achieving intelligible speech, rather than native-like accent, should be a primary goal of pronunciation teaching <sup>[1]</sup>. In the Saudi EFL context, where exposure to natural English is limited, pronunciation difficulties compound this challenge. Teachers report that pronunciation remains marginalized in Saudi curricula, with instruction focused narrowly on segmental accuracy and only on errors that impede intelligibility <sup>[2]</sup>. Learners themselves often struggle to convey messages clearly; as Al-Rubaat and Alshammari note, most Saudi students “find it difficult to improve their phonetic and phonological productions due to the effect of their first language” <sup>[3]</sup>. In other words, Arabic L1 transfer, combined with limited class time and lack of immersive practice, contributes to the relatively poor intelligibility of many Saudi learners’ spoken English <sup>[3]</sup>. These issues underscore the need to examine specific phonological contrasts where English and Arabic differ, such as the treatment of word-final /r/, which is a hallmark of non-rhotic Received Pronunciation (RP).

Received Pronunciation (RP) is the historically prestigious British English accent often taught as a model in ELT. By definition, RP is non-rhotic <sup>[4]</sup>. In practical terms, this means that /r/ is pronounced only when a following vowel immediately follows, and it is dropped before consonants or pauses. For example, car is pronounced [kɑ:] without an /r/, and father and farther are pronounced identically [ˈfɑ:ðə] in RP <sup>[5]</sup>. In Standard Southern British English (including RP), “[r] is allowed... only when a vowel immediately follows” <sup>[4]</sup>. Thus, right, very, and for example all have their /r/ pronounced, but forty and far have no /r/ at the end. This historic loss of post-vocalic /r/, which occurred in the 18th century, led to several vowel mergers (e.g. START ~ PALM, NORTH ~ THOUGHT) that are unique to non-rhotic accents <sup>[4,5]</sup>.

Two connected-speech phenomena arise from RP’s non-rhoticity: linking /r/ and intrusive /r/ <sup>[6,7]</sup>. Linking /r/ occurs when a word ending in -r (pronounced only before a vowel) is followed by a vowel-initial word: the speaker inserts [r] to connect them. For example, “far away” is pro-

nounced [fa: rəˈweɪ], and “car engine” is [kɑ:ˈrɛndʒɪn] <sup>[6]</sup>. Intrusive /r/ goes a step further: an [r] is inserted even though no -r exists in the spelling, typically between two adjacent vowels. For instance, idea of it becomes [aɪˈdɪə rəv ɪt], and law and order becomes [lɔ: rən ˈɔ:də] <sup>[7]</sup>. In rhotic accents, such insertions do not occur. These features, while natural in RP, often perplex EFL learners, especially those whose L1 lacks such alternations.

Saudi learners, whose native Arabic is a fully rhotic language, face specific challenges in acquiring these RP features. Arabic retains /r/ in all phonological positions. As Hago observed in a study of Saudi secondary students, more than 75% mispronounced final /r/ in words like ever, frequently omitting the sound or altering it <sup>[8]</sup>. Learners may omit necessary linking /r/ (“I saw it” becomes [aɪ sɔ: ɪt]) or wrongly insert /r/ where RP would not. Such mispronunciations affect fluency and intelligibility. Furthermore, Saudi students often apply L1 rules, substituting or omitting unfamiliar sounds due to contrasting syllable structures and consonant inventories <sup>[3]</sup>.

These difficulties are best understood through contrastive analysis and interlanguage theory. The former predicts that phonological features absent in the learner’s L1, such as non-rhoticity, will pose challenges <sup>[3]</sup>. Interlanguage theory suggests that Saudi learners’ rhotic tendencies may fossilize without explicit intervention. Meanwhile, modern pronunciation teaching emphasizes intelligibility over native-like accuracy, advocating instruction that prioritizes listener comprehension <sup>[1]</sup>. Frameworks like Jenkins’s *Lingua Franca Core* help identify pronunciation features most essential to mutual intelligibility. If linking/intrusive /r/ is mishandled, communication breakdowns may occur, as listeners misinterpret word boundaries or intent.

Despite abundant research on Saudi EFL learners’ phonological errors, few studies focus on RP-specific features, especially non-rhoticity and its manifestations in connected speech. Previous research has examined general consonant errors <sup>[8]</sup> and pronunciation challenges in instructional contexts <sup>[2]</sup>, but no in-depth exploration of linking and intrusive /r/ among Saudi learners exists. This gap highlights the need to investigate how Saudi students respond to RP’s unique phonological system and how these responses shape their intelligibility.

Accordingly, the present study aims to examine the

causes and effects of non-rhoticity in RP among Saudi EFL learners. I will analyze how features like linking /r/ and intrusive /r/ are acquired or resisted, and how these impact both oral fluency and perceived intelligibility. The study applies theoretical frameworks from SLA, contrastive phonology, and intelligibility-based pedagogy to interpret learner performance and recommend pedagogical strategies tailored for Arabic-speaking learners of English.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The phenomenon of non-rhoticity in English, particularly in Received Pronunciation (RP), has drawn significant attention within phonological and applied linguistics research. While its diachronic evolution is well-documented<sup>[9]</sup>, the pedagogical and phonological implications of RP's non-rhotic features—particularly for learners whose first languages (L1s) are fully rhotic, such as Arabic—remain underexplored in empirical applied linguistics.

Non-rhoticity is typically characterized by the absence of the post-vocalic /r/ unless followed by a vowel, giving rise to processes like linking /r/ and intrusive /r/<sup>[10]</sup>. This distinction becomes a critical challenge for EFL learners from rhotic language backgrounds. Arabic, for instance, retains /r/ in all phonological environments, leading to interference when Saudi learners attempt to approximate RP pronunciation<sup>[11]</sup>. Studies show that many Saudi EFL learners produce word-final /r/ regardless of RP conventions, contributing to phonological inaccuracy and reduced intelligibility in connected speech<sup>[12]</sup>.

Pronunciation difficulties among Arabic-speaking learners have been linked not only to L1 transfer but also to a lack of explicit instruction in suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and linking<sup>[13]</sup>. Mahmoud and Bassiouney<sup>[14]</sup> observed that learners often default to spelling-based pronunciation, overlooking phonological patterns like intrusive /r/, particularly when no orthographic cue is present. This is exacerbated in Saudi classrooms where pronunciation is underemphasized<sup>[15]</sup> and the instructional focus often remains limited to segmental articulation and basic stress patterns<sup>[16]</sup>.

Furthermore, global scholarship has indicated that the absence of linking /r/ and inappropriate insertion of intrusive /r/ can hinder fluency and listener comprehension<sup>[17]</sup>.

Levis and Sonsaat<sup>[18]</sup> emphasize that English pronunciation instruction must go beyond segmentals to include features that promote fluid connected speech. Yet, most Saudi EFL curricula still rely heavily on outdated British textbooks or American-oriented materials that do not address RP-specific features in depth<sup>[19]</sup>.

The ongoing debate about which pronunciation features are essential for intelligibility in global English usage adds another layer of complexity. While Jenkins's *Lingua Franca Core* downplays the importance of native-like features such as intrusive /r/<sup>[20]</sup>, others argue that awareness of such features is essential for learners aiming for comprehensive aural/oral competence<sup>[21]</sup>. This is particularly relevant in academic and testing environments where RP-like input may still dominate listening materials, oral interviews, and standardized examinations<sup>[22]</sup>.

Moreover, exposure to multiple English varieties via media and instruction creates phonological ambiguity among Saudi learners. Alghamdi<sup>[23]</sup> found that while American English dominates instructional practice in Saudi Arabia, learners remain exposed to RP through examination systems, audio recordings, and international communicative contexts, producing a hybridized perception of standard pronunciation norms. This phonological duality results in inconsistent production and comprehension, particularly in suprasegmental domains like linking and intrusive /r/<sup>[24]</sup>.

Despite the global shift toward intelligibility-based pronunciation instruction, there remains a pressing need to understand how RP-specific features influence L2 phonological development, especially among learners from structurally divergent L1s like Arabic. The gap in current research lies in the lack of focused studies exploring the interaction between non-rhoticity and classroom pronunciation practices in EFL contexts like Saudi Arabia.

To analyze this dynamic, the present study draws upon two key theoretical perspectives: Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and Second Language Speech Learning (L2SL) Theory.

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, originally formulated by Lado<sup>[25]</sup>, posits that difficulties in L2 acquisition arise from differences between the L1 and L2 phonological systems. This framework predicts that Saudi EFL learners, whose L1 phonology favors rhoticity, will struggle

gle with RP's non-rhotic norms, particularly in suppressing final /r/ and handling phonological phenomena that lack direct Arabic equivalents <sup>[11,24]</sup>.

Complementing this is Flege's Second Language Speech Learning (L2SL) Theory, which suggests that L1 categories shape L2 perception and production. According to this model, if L2 sounds do not create sufficient perceptual contrast with existing L1 sounds, they may be misperceived or assimilated inaccurately <sup>[25]</sup>. For example, linking /r/ may be misheard as part of the root word, and intrusive /r/ may either be omitted or incorrectly generalized due to unfamiliarity.

Together, these theories provide a solid foundation for understanding how non-rhotic RP features interact with Arabic phonology and influence learner performance. They also justify the need for targeted instructional interventions that account for both linguistic structure and learner perception in RP-based pronunciation instruction. Given the interplay between L1 phonological transfer and perceptual limitations outlined above, there is a clear pedagogical imperative to design instructional interventions that address both structural differences and learners' phonemic awareness when teaching RP-based pronunciation. Accordingly, this study investigates two key questions:

- i) How do Saudi EFL learners perceive and produce RP-specific non-rhotic features such as linking /r/ and intrusive /r/?
- ii) What are the main phonological and pedagogical challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners in acquiring non-rhotic RP pronunciation?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, naturalistic observation design to investigate the phonological challenges Saudi EFL learners face when attempting to produce non-rhotic features of Received Pronunciation (RP), particularly linking /r/ and intrusive /r/. Naturalistic observation was selected as the most appropriate approach because it allows for the examination of learner behavior in real-world settings, enabling the researcher to observe language use in an authentic classroom context without manipulation or artificial tasks. This design ensured a high degree of ecologi-

cal validity, capturing learners' spontaneous speech rather than rehearsed or elicited utterances. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison <sup>[26]</sup> support the use of observational research in educational studies, arguing that it enables rich, context-sensitive descriptions of behavior that would be difficult to capture through experimental designs.

The study was interpretivist in orientation and exploratory in scope. Rather than testing a specific hypothesis, it aimed to build a grounded understanding of how learners produce or fail to produce RP features in natural communicative tasks. The design permitted detailed insights into recurring phonological patterns, learner awareness of RP features, and the pedagogical responses of instructors to such deviations.

#### 3.2. Participants

The study was conducted with 100 Saudi male secondary school students enrolled in Grade 11 EFL classes across four government schools in Qassim. The participants ranged in age from 15 to 17 years and were all native speakers of Arabic. They had received a minimum of six years of formal English instruction, following the national English curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that participants had sufficient English exposure and were being taught using standardized instructional materials by certified English teachers.

Only students with no known hearing or speech impairments were included. Informed consent was obtained from their parents or legal guardians, and verbal assent was secured from each student prior to their participation. The participant cohort comprised only Saudi learners, selected to align with the linguistic and educational context under investigation. While earlier exploratory stages of the research considered broader regional comparisons, the final study was deliberately limited to Saudi EFL students to maintain contextual specificity and analytical focus.

#### 3.3. Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected over six months during regularly scheduled English classes. The researcher attended two English periods per week per class and employed a non-participant observation strategy. This approach al-

lowed the researcher to document learner behavior without influencing it, while maintaining an ethical distance. Observations focused on naturally occurring speech during reading exercises, peer dialogues, teacher-led discussions, and oral presentations.

All observed sessions were audio-recorded after receiving the required administrative and parental permissions. Field notes were simultaneously taken using an observation protocol adapted from Basit <sup>[27]</sup>, designed to capture phonological phenomena, contextual variables, and learner reactions. Over the course of the study, 96 classroom sessions were documented, resulting in approximately 45 hours of recorded speech. The goal was not only to capture errors in pronunciation but also to observe how these errors were addressed—either through peer correction, teacher intervention, or learner self-monitoring.

### 3.4. Instruments and Coding

To facilitate consistent data analysis, a phonological observation checklist was developed based on established RP pronunciation benchmarks. The checklist included categories for identifying correct and incorrect usage of linking /r/, intrusive /r/, and general word-final /r/ suppression. All recorded speech was transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to ensure phonetic accuracy.

Two trained linguists independently coded the transcriptions to establish inter-coder reliability, which yielded a Cohen's kappa value of 0.86—indicating strong agreement. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and re-analysis. Coded instances were sorted into categories such as accurate non-rhotic production, rhotic transfer, linking /r/ omission or use, and over-application of intrusive /r/. These classifications enabled the identification of systematic pronunciation patterns among learners.

### 3.5. Methodological Rigor and Theoretical Contribution

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, a method well suited for examining learner speech in a classroom-based qualitative study. The analysis was informed by frameworks in applied phonology and second language acquisition. Specifically, I adopted the thematic analysis approach detailed by Citaku <sup>[28]</sup>, who demonstrat-

ed how themes related to L1 orthography and phonology influence English L2 pronunciation. This approach was chosen for its inductive rigor and its ability to uncover both phonological and pedagogical insights from classroom interactions.

The analysis began with repeated listening and transcription of the audio recordings to ensure data familiarization. Initial codes were generated to capture instances of mispronunciation and correct pronunciation of non-rhotic features. These codes were then grouped into thematic categories such as phonological transfer, accurate non-rhotic production, self-correction, and teacher feedback. These themes were refined through iterative comparison and cross-referenced with observation notes to ensure consistency. Thematic patterns were evaluated not only in terms of frequency but also in the context of classroom discourse and learner performance, resulting in a comprehensive interpretation of both learner errors and the instructional strategies employed.

## 4. Results and Findings

The findings of this study reveal a range of phonological challenges among Saudi EFL learners in producing non-rhotic features of Received Pronunciation (RP), particularly linking /r/, intrusive /r/, and the omission of post-vocalic /r/. In addition, consistent mispronunciations of English consonants and vowels were observed, influenced by mother-tongue interference, educational exposure, and the learners' sociolinguistic environment. This section presents these findings thematically, grounded in classroom observation, phonetic transcription, and participant background analysis.

### 4.1. Influence of Mother–Tongue Phonology

A recurring theme in the data was the strong influence of Arabic phonological rules on learners' production of English sounds. Nearly all learners (100%) reported using Arabic or regional vernaculars as their primary language at home. This linguistic environment limited their exposure to authentic English input and reinforced rhotic pronunciation habits. As a result, students tended to pronounce post-vocalic /r/ in words such as *car*, *near*, or *father*, despite RP conventions requiring omission in these



contexts.

The tendency to maintain rhotic pronunciation where RP would not pronounce /r/ was pervasive, and learners often overgeneralized /r/ insertion. For instance, during reading tasks, phrases like “the idea of it” were often pronounced as the idea[r] of it, regardless of whether the linking /r/ was phonologically appropriate. This finding confirms earlier studies showing that Arabic-speaking learners struggle with differentiating between phonemic and non-phonemic /r/ environments<sup>[29]</sup>. These learners’ natural tendency to pronounce /r/ in all positions conflicts with RP’s non-rhotic pattern, thus leading to systematic errors.

## 4.2. Mispronunciation of Consonants and Vowels

Several segmental phonemes were persistently mispronounced, including /ð/, /θ/, /z/, /k/, and various vowel sounds. These mispronunciations were confirmed across multiple classroom sessions and were most prominent in reading aloud activities. For instance, the voiced dental fricative /ð/ in this was often replaced with /d/, resulting in dis; similarly, /θ/ in think became /s/ or /tink/, depending on the learner.

These errors are consistent with findings from Alqarni and Dewaele<sup>[30]</sup>, who reported that consonant substitutions are common among Arabic-speaking EFL learners due to the absence of equivalent sounds in their L1 phonemic inventory. The mispronunciation of these consonants also interacts with the learners’ awareness of RP pronunciation rules; many students appeared unaware that these sounds are critical to intelligibility, particularly when paired with suprasegmental features like linking.

## 4.3. Linking /r/ and Intrusive /r/ Patterns

The study identified substantial variation in the learners’ use of linking /r/. Some learners applied it correctly in contexts such as *law and order* or *far away*, producing smooth, connected speech. However, this correct application was inconsistent and often dependent on whether learners had memorized the phrase or encountered it previously in scripted textbook dialogues. In more spontaneous speech tasks, learners either omitted the linking /r/ or inserted it inappropriately, often where a pause or a conso-

nant followed.

Intrusive /r/ was also misapplied. Many learners inserted /r/ between vowel-ending and vowel-beginning words even when no historical or phonological justification existed. Phrases like *India and China* were rendered as *India[r] and China*, and *go on* as *go[r] on*. These findings support previous research by Collins and Mees<sup>[31]</sup>, who observed that intrusive /r/ is particularly difficult for L2 learners to master because it lacks orthographic representation and contradicts learners’ L1-based speech expectations.

The observation data indicated that intrusive /r/ was more likely to be used when the first word ended in /ə/ or /ɑ:/, suggesting that learners were overgeneralizing from a few memorized cases. Without explicit instruction or corrective feedback, such patterns become fossilized and are transferred across speech contexts.

## 4.4. Educational and Environmental Exposure

The students’ educational background played a crucial role in their pronunciation accuracy. Most participants studied English as a subject only two hours per week during primary and secondary school, with minimal emphasis on speaking or pronunciation. Consequently, their exposure to authentic English speech—particularly RP—was limited. Many relied on rote memorization of textbook dialogues rather than interactive communication.

This aligns with findings by Khan<sup>[32]</sup>, who emphasized that traditional Saudi EFL classrooms do not prioritize phonetic or phonological awareness. In the current study, students rarely received corrective feedback specific to pronunciation. Teachers focused largely on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. As a result, phonological errors often went unaddressed unless they impeded overall intelligibility.

Moreover, the sociolinguistic environment further limited learners’ opportunities to hear and use RP. Most students had never traveled abroad or interacted regularly with native English speakers. Their aural input came primarily from Arabic-accented English teachers or dubbed media. This lack of immersive exposure reinforced L1-based pronunciation habits and inhibited phonological development (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1.** Factors Influencing Pronunciation Among Saudi EFL Learners.

Factors	Qualitative Description
Mother Tongue at Home	100% of students use Arabic or vernaculars at home, reinforcing rhotic pronunciation and L1 phonological transfer.
Educational Background	English was taught minimally—2 hours per week with little focus on speaking or pronunciation; instruction emphasized rote learning over phonetic awareness.
Environmental Exposure	Students had little to no real-world exposure to native RP speakers; most language use occurred in Arabic-dominant contexts.

## 5. Discussion and Implications

The present study investigated the phonological challenges associated with non-rhoticity in Received Pronunciation (RP) among Saudi EFL learners. Findings demonstrate that learners' pronunciation difficulties are deeply intertwined with socio-cultural, educational, and linguistic factors, especially those rooted in first language (L1) phonological interference, limited exposure to RP input, and the pedagogical orientation of EFL instruction in Saudi Arabia. These findings not only underscore the influence of structural linguistic differences between Arabic and English but also highlight the pedagogical consequences for curriculum design and classroom implementation.

In Saudi Arabia, English has evolved from being a symbolic subject to an essential skill in academic and professional domains. While it continues to be taught as a foreign language across secondary and tertiary education, the traditional perception of English as a non-utilitarian subject has shifted significantly in recent years. As Al-Ahdal <sup>[29]</sup> notes, a growing number of learners are motivated to acquire English for specific purposes—such as study abroad, participation in globalized professions, and engagement in interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue. This shift has prompted government and institutional stakeholders to invest in curriculum reforms that incorporate both British and American varieties of English <sup>[30]</sup>.

Nevertheless, these reforms often lack a focused strategy for addressing specific phonological features like non-rhoticity, which remain underexplored in both research and classroom practice. Despite the formal inclusion of RP as a model accent in many teaching materials, students' exposure to naturalistic examples of non-rhotic features—

such as linking /r/ and intrusive /r/—remains limited. This restricted exposure is exacerbated by the learners' sociolinguistic environment, where Arabic is the dominant medium of communication and English is primarily acquired in academic settings. As Al-Issa et al. <sup>[31]</sup> observed, although the Saudi educational system has improved in general, English instruction for EFL learners often lacks consistency and depth in pronunciation pedagogy.

A key finding from the current study is that Saudi learners frequently replace or omit non-rhotic /r/ sounds based on orthographic representations, a strategy driven by overreliance on written forms rather than auditory models. This is consistent with earlier findings by Kiritchenko et al. <sup>[32]</sup>, who argued that students' pronunciation habits often reflect the phonological systems of their native languages. In the case of Arabic-speaking learners, the absence of a comparable non-rhotic feature leads to phonemic substitutions or over-articulations of /r/, particularly in word-final or pre-consonantal positions.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are significant. English as an International Language (EIL) is increasingly seen as a dynamic, context-sensitive model of instruction, particularly suitable for multilingual societies like Saudi Arabia. As Elyas and Al-Ghamdi <sup>[33]</sup> emphasize, English in Saudi Arabia is not merely a tool for academic mobility but also a medium for religious, commercial, and diplomatic interactions. In such a context, intelligibility and cultural appropriateness in pronunciation are more important than rigid adherence to native speaker norms.

Consequently, the teaching of RP-based non-rhotic features should be reimagined through targeted interventions that combine explicit phonological instruction with perceptual training. Learners must be exposed to a variety of non-rhotic RP inputs—through audiovisual resources, interactive pronunciation software, and structured listening exercises—that help them recognize and produce context-specific /r/ realizations. Such interventions can also address widespread misconceptions about the necessity of pronouncing every graphemic /r/, which often results in hypercorrection or phonological errors. As Althobaiti <sup>[34]</sup> notes, effective implementation of EIL pedagogy in Saudi Arabia requires both teacher awareness and access to authentic materials that reflect the linguistic diversity of English usage worldwide.

Moreover, online repositories of EIL and RP speech samples have become increasingly accessible, enabling instructors to curate high-quality listening and speaking materials tailored to learners' proficiency levels. Baik and Shim<sup>[35]</sup> demonstrated that integrating internet-based audio content not only enhances engagement but also reinforces correct phonological forms in learners' productive skills. This is particularly crucial in teaching nuanced phenomena like linking and intrusive /r/, which are often underrepresented in traditional EFL textbooks.

In addition to curriculum and instructional strategies, the role of perception in pronunciation learning cannot be overstated. Learners' ability to perceive subtle phonetic contrasts plays a critical role in their capacity to reproduce them. Therefore, pronunciation instruction should include perceptual discrimination tasks—such as minimal pair training and form-focused listening—that help students identify when /r/ is pronounced and when it is not. These activities can be coupled with articulatory training to improve learners' ability to approximate RP speech patterns without undermining their own linguistic identity.

Lastly, the findings of this study call for an integrative pedagogical approach that aligns linguistic structure with learner perception and contextual needs<sup>[34,35]</sup>. Addressing the non-rhotic features of RP not only improves learners' intelligibility but also contributes to their sociolinguistic competence in global English communication. Through a combination of explicit instruction, authentic input, and perceptual reinforcement, educators can equip Saudi EFL learners with the tools to navigate diverse English-speaking environments confidently and competently.

## 6. Conclusions

This study investigated the causes and effects of non-rhoticity in the phonology of Received Pronunciation (RP), with a specific focus on Saudi EFL learners' perception and production of features such as linking /r/ and intrusive /r/. The findings reveal that these learners face notable challenges in acquiring non-rhotic features, largely due to first-language interference, limited exposure to native RP input, and insufficient phonological awareness.

Analysis showed that Saudi learners inconsistently produced /r/ in both obligatory and non-obligatory contexts, often overgeneralizing linking /r/ or omitting it when

required. This reflects a broader lack of familiarity with the rules governing connected speech in RP. These difficulties were compounded by structural factors including minimal exposure to spoken English in earlier education, lack of immersive environments, and a curriculum that often prioritizes grammar and vocabulary over pronunciation instruction.

The study also identified sociolinguistic factors shaping learner attitudes. While RP continues to hold prestige in academic and professional contexts, many students view it as inaccessible, reinforcing a passive approach to pronunciation learning. This underscores the need for pedagogical models that normalize RP features without elevating them as unattainable ideals.

To address these issues, targeted instructional interventions are essential. These should include explicit teaching of connected speech phenomena, individualized feedback, and integration of multimedia resources that reflect authentic RP usage. Teacher training programs must also incorporate phonological instruction to enable educators to model and teach non-rhotic features effectively.

While the study is qualitative in scope, its findings contribute to the broader understanding of how non-rhoticity is acquired and internalized in EFL contexts, particularly in regions where Arabic is the first language. Future research may benefit from phonetic analysis and cross-sectional comparisons to further validate and extend these insights.

Ultimately, the acquisition of RP-specific pronunciation among Saudi EFL learners remains a complex interplay of phonological, instructional, and sociocultural factors. A more nuanced and responsive pedagogical approach—grounded in both linguistic theory and learner realities—is essential to supporting learners' intelligibility and confidence in global English communication.

## Funding

The Researcher would like to thank the Deanship of Graduate Studies and Scientific Research at Qassim University for financial support (QU-APC- 2025).

## Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.



## Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

## Data Availability Statement

All data are available upon request.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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