

## **Pronunciation Research in the Malaysian Context: A Systematic Review**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents the current evidence with regard to English pronunciation teaching and learning in the Malaysian context. A systematic literature review (SLR) of empirical studies was conducted with a focus on examining the degree to which pronunciation research is conducted in the context of English as a second language (ESL) in Malaysia. Results showed that teachers' and learners' beliefs are critical factors that may improve or impede the pronunciation instruction of the target language. In addition, there are also some criteria that need to be considered in order to ensure the effectiveness of pronunciation teaching for ESL learners. The issue of whether or not Received Pronunciation (RP) can be adopted as the pronunciation model in the Malaysian education system should also be addressed appropriately. These results are significant because they call for a reevaluation of pronunciation instruction in Malaysia. Finally, the findings of this SLR uncovered one of the real challenges in English language teaching, which is to bridge the gap between theory and practice, given the disconnection between research-based models and the actual practices in the ESL classroom.

*Keywords:* Pronunciation, English, ESL, ELT, second language acquisition, Malaysia

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

English is often deemed as the universal language throughout the world [8]. Given the diversities of English language learning and teaching around the world, confusion may occur among teachers and learners alike with regard to the variety of pronunciation models used in the classroom [19]. Pronunciation among L2 learners of English is viewed as an important aspect as there are constant issues pertaining to the interference of a first language (L1) in the teaching of a second language (L2); these issues have been raised and controversially debated for many years among linguists and educationists (e.g., [12]). For example, it was claimed in [8] that similarities in the structure between an L1 and an L2 would make it easier for the speaker to have a native-like pronunciation. However, it is not the case if there are differences of the overall structure between both languages; in this situation, a native-like pronunciation seems unlikely due to the differences of sound patterns and structures of both L1 and L2.

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It has been established around the world that L2 learners may have difficulties in differentiating between two distinct sounds in different languages (e.g., English and Farsi [12]). The lack of awareness in the sound system of English will most likely hinder the ability among L2 learners to attain correct English pronunciation that in turn affects communication [12] [26]. Insufficient practice and language instruction for both oral and aural skills in the target language also make it difficult for these learners to grasp accurate and intelligible utterances in English [12]. In a recent study conducted in Bangladesh [10], both teachers and students at a tertiary level faced difficulty throughout the teaching and learning process. The fact that some sounds of English are non-existent in the native language poses difficulties for the students to identify similar sounds in their L1 to be substituted in English [26].

In the Malaysian context, English is used as an L2 not only in the education system but also in daily lives, giving rise to the complexities of English language teaching at many levels in the society. As Malaysia consists of a multi-racial society (i.e., Malays, Chinese, Indians, etc.) with a diverse linguistic background, the notion of speaking like an English native speaker seems too far-fetched. Factors such as the attitude of learners towards an L2 and the influence from an L1 should be taken into consideration [8]. This paper will address some of these issues through a synthesis of evidence from a number of empirical studies conducted in Malaysia.

## **2.0 THE REVIEW METHOD**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In the current study of SLR, we aim to provide ample explanation on the issues pertaining to pronunciation research in the Malaysian context. We took into account empirical studies that investigated (1) pronunciation teaching in the Malaysian context and (2) the perception and belief of educators and learners alike in the teaching and learning process of English pronunciation. Due to lack of studies, we also considered some conceptual papers in order to support our findings.

### **2.2 Research Questions**

The main research question and sub-questions of this study are listed below.

#### **Main Question**

What evidence is there to show the extent to which pronunciation research is conducted in the Malaysian context?

#### **Sub-question 1**

What are the teachers' and students' perceptions on the teaching of English pronunciation for ESL learners?

#### **Sub-question 2**

What are the criteria used to measure the effectiveness of pronunciation teaching for ESL learners in the Malaysian context?

#### **Sub-question 3**

How is the issue of RP being addressed in Malaysia?

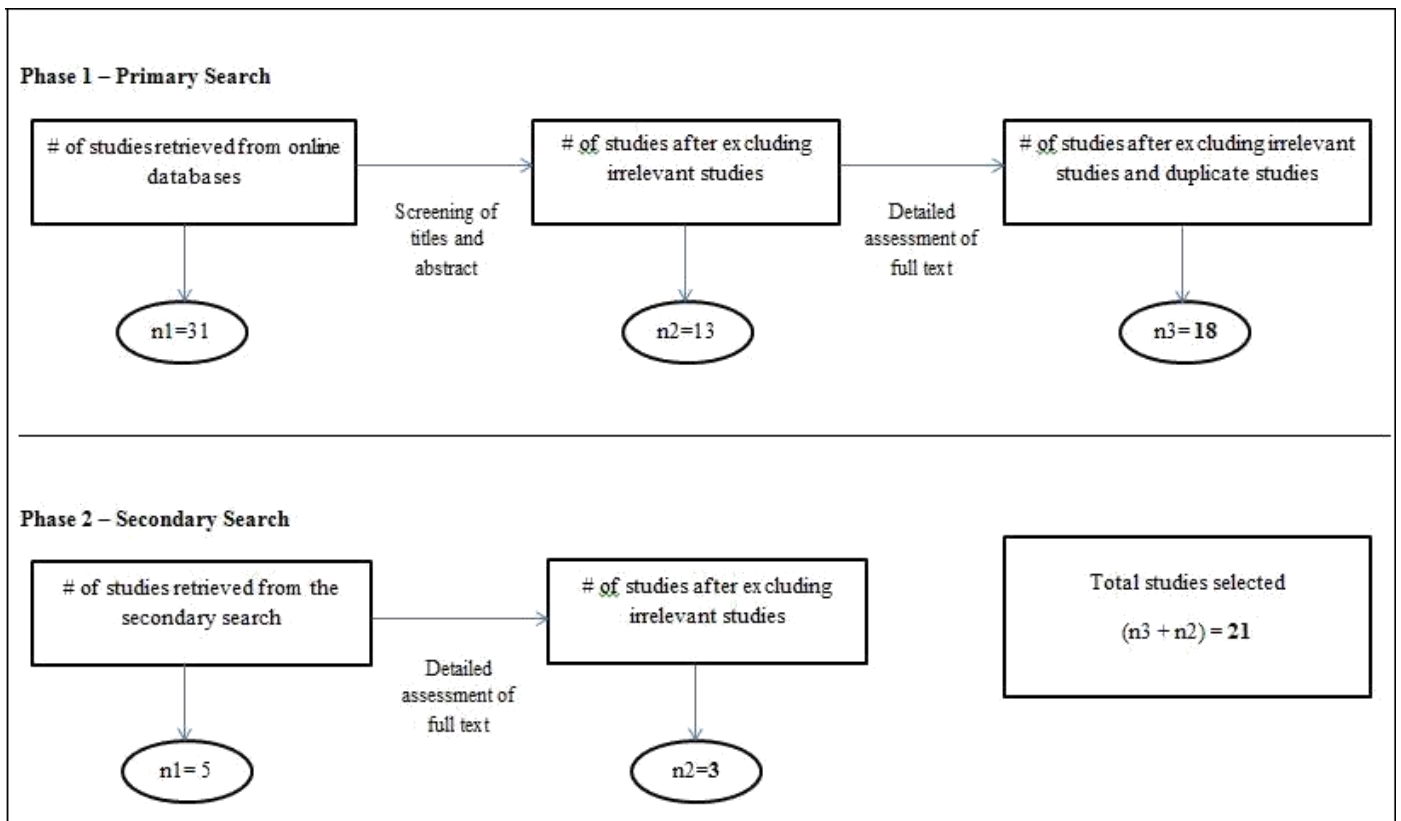
Table 1 below specifies the *Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcomes and Context (PICOC)* structure of the research questions, following the recommendation from [27].

**Table 1** Summary of PICOC

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| <b>Population</b>   | Malaysian learners of English  |
| <b>Intervention</b> | Pronunciation  |
| <b>Comparison</b>   | Teaching methodologies   |
| <b>Outcomes</b>     | Trends of pronunciation teaching in Malaysia   |
| <b>Context</b>      | Review(s) of any empirical and conceptual studies of pronunciation teaching in the Malaysian context. No restrictions on the type of studies (e.g., case study) apply. |

### 2.3 Identification of Relevant Literature

In this section, we will elaborate explicitly on the selection of relevant literature works that were used throughout the study. At the initial stage of the SLR, we developed a framework in order to identify appropriate and relevant studies that could be employed in the review. This is to ensure that the process of extracting relevant data adhered to the issues discussed in this study. Figure 1 shows the process of identifying literature works.



**Figure 1** Identifying relevant literature

There were two phases of the search in identifying notable studies for analyses: Phase 1 and Phase 2. Phase 1 was the initial stage or primary search of the two phases. During this stage, numerous studies related generally with pronunciation were retrieved from various trusted online databases. Referring to Figure 1, 'n' refers to the number of studies collected. The next stage was the screening of titles and abstract in which we narrowed down the scope of study. As for this study, we focused mainly on the issues pertaining to pronunciation in the Malaysian context. Irrelevant or non-contextual studies were omitted. In the last stage of the phase, the detailed assessment of the full text ensured that duplicate studies of the same context were omitted as well. The value of 'n3' in this phase was the final number of studies used in the study. During this preliminary search phase, we retrieved quite a number of studies on pronunciation but they were reduced at the end of the phase for further assessments.

Phase 2 dealt with the secondary search for relevant literature. This search focused on tangible elements in order to illustrate vividly the issues raised before being synthesized in the study. We retrieved literature works from various online databases to avoid biasness in the review. Literature works were retrieved from six online databases: EBSCOHost, JSTOR, ProQuest, SAGE Journals, Emerald and Wiley Online Library.

#### **2.4 Selection of Studies**

In the selection of studies, we aimed to include both empirical and conceptual studies associated with pronunciation research in the Malaysian context. Conceptual studies were taken into consideration due to the dire state of studies being conducted in this particular field of research. The literature works selected covered the studies published within the period of 1995 to 2014. The detailed inclusion criteria consisted of 1) studies that investigated the perception of teachers and/or students on the process of pronunciation teaching and/or learning and 2) studies that measured the effectiveness of pronunciation teaching for ESL learners in the Malaysian context and 3) studies that investigated the issue of RP addressed in Malaysia and its effect towards pronunciation modelling. Papers presenting claims with no supporting evidence were excluded.

#### **2.5 Data Extraction and Study Quality Assessment**

In order to facilitate the data extraction process and to ensure the validity of this study, a form was designed as a checklist to gather appropriate evidence related to the research questions mentioned earlier. Furthermore, by using the data extraction form, the quality of primary studies was strictly controlled. In designing the form, we adapted the framework from [27]. The form consisted of seven main aspects that formed the study quality checklist (see Table 2). In order to measure both quantitative and qualitative studies, the ratio of answer for each question determined the quality of the study: Yes = 1 point, No = 0 point and Neutral = 0.5 point. As a result, the quality score accumulated in total of between 0 (very poor) to 7 (very good).

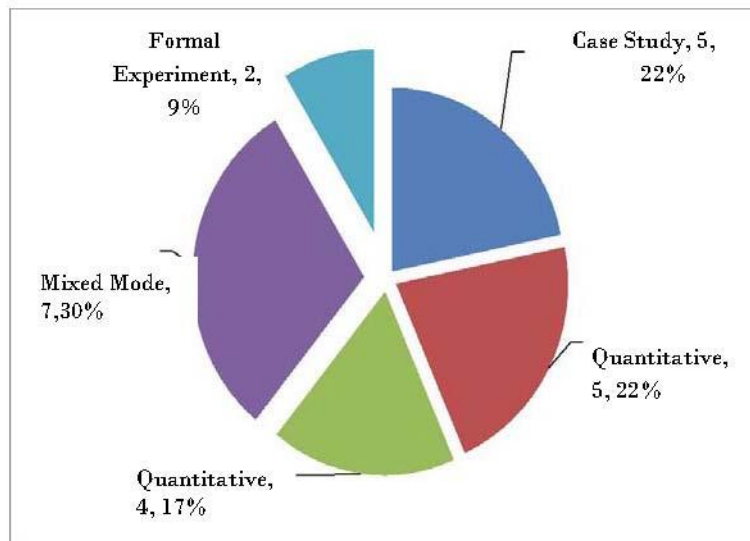
**Table 2** Study quality checklist

| Item   | Answer           |
|--|------------------|
| Was the article referred?  | Yes/ No          |
| Were the aim(s) of the study clearly stated?   | Yes/ No/ Neutral |
| Were the participants adequately described? (i.e., race of students, years of teaching experience, etc.)           | Yes/ No/ Neutral |
| Were the data collection carried out well? (i.e., how study settings may influence data, discussion of procedures) | Yes/ No/ Neutral |
| Were potential confounders adequately controlled in the analysis?  | Yes/ No/ Neutral |
| Were the approach and analysis well conveyed? (i.e., rationale of the method used)                                 | Yes/ No/ Neutral |
| Were the findings credible? (i.e., the findings and methods used were well explained and could be trusted)         | Yes/ No/ Neutral |

### 3.0 RESULTS

#### 3.1 Introduction

In this section, we present the synthesis of evidence that was retrieved from the literature search and data extraction. As mentioned earlier, at the initial Phase 1 of the search, we identified 31 studies consisting of empirical and conceptual works. At the end of the process, only 18 studies were deemed appropriate for review. As for Phase 2, only 3 out of 5 studies were suitable for review. The detailed assessment of the studies retrieved including inclusion criteria were mentioned earlier in this paper. Aspects such as duplicate study, irrelevant study and insufficient abstracts were also taken into consideration.



**Figure 2** Studies by research approach

From the search, we managed to identify patterns of research approach that was used by the studies retrieved. Referring to Figure 2, the most popular research approach implemented in the studies was the mixed-mode method (30 %). The least was the formal experiment (9 %). Table 3 below shows the quality scores of the retrieved literature works in this study. Tabulated scores in the table were retrieved from the study quality checklist (see Table 2) for each study. Most of the studies achieved above average quality: 7 studies (33.33%) and 10 studies (47.62%) were deemed very good and good, respectively. Only 4 studies (19.05%) obtained fair scores. No studies were attained as very poor and poor.

**Table 3** Quality scores

| Quality Scale     | Very Poor | Poor     | Fair     | Good      | Very Good | Total |
|-------------------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-------|
|                   | (<2)      | (2 – <3) | (3 – <5) | (5 – <=6) | (>6)      |       |
| Number of studies | 0         | 0        | 4        | 10        | 7         | 21    |
| Percentage (%)    | 0%        | 0%       | 19.05%   | 47.62%    | 33.33%    | 100%  |

The following section will address the results for the SLR's main research question and three sub-questions.

### 3.2 Main Research Question

**Main Question: What evidence is there to show the extent to which pronunciation research is conducted in the Malaysian context?**

The SLR identified 21 studies in the Malaysian context in various education settings, i.e., primary, secondary and tertiary education. These studies investigated one of the following issues: (1) the perception of pronunciation; (2) discourse analysis; (3) pronunciation model; (4) courseware used; (5) and pronunciation teaching.

Referring to Table 4 below, the most investigated factor in pronunciation studies was discourse analysis with a total of 6 studies (28.57%), in which five studies showed significant positive effects and one study a mixed effect. Courseware was the least investigated factor in pronunciation studies with merely three studies (14.29%), in which two studies showed significant positive effects while one study a mixed effect.

**Table 4** List of factors investigated in the pronunciation studies

| No | Factor                 | Total Studies | Significant positive effect | Significant negative effect | No significant effect | Mixed effect |
|----|------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| 1  | Perception             | 4             | S1, S12, S13                | S10                         | -                     | -            |
| 2  | Discourse analysis     | 6             | S6, S8, S9, S11, S14        | -                           | -                     | S19          |
| 3  | Pronunciation model    | 4             | S3, S5, S7, S18             | -                           | -                     | -            |
| 4  | Courseware             | 3             | S16, S20                    | -                           | -                     | S21          |
| 5  | Pronunciation teaching | 4             | S4, S15, S17                | -                           | -                     | S2           |

The main goal of SLR was to comprehend how the factors listed above affect the process of pronunciation teaching and learning for ESL learners in the Malaysian context. The following sub-questions will highlight some of the issues mentioned in the studies retrieved in the SLR.

### **3.3 Sub-question 1 – What are the teachers’ and students’ perceptions on the teaching of English pronunciation for ESL learners?**

The perception of teachers towards formal pronunciation teaching plays a vital role in garnering students’ interest in learning pronunciation. In [16], one of teachers claimed that formal instruction is only beneficial for students and teachers if they are more welcoming towards the idea of learning pronunciation on its own. Teachers’ personal beliefs may affect the process of teaching pronunciation itself despite students’ eagerness to learn the correct model of pronunciation [1]. It was also reported in [16] that one female teacher feels pressured to teach the standard model of pronunciation on its own as she is a non-native speaker (NNS) of English; she prefers to use the localized pronunciation and rejects the British English model of pronunciation.

As Malaysia comprises different ethnicities, the interference of mother tongue is inevitable. Faced with these circumstances, students tend to “shut down” and avoid learning the correct model of English pronunciation [1]. As learning of the language is essential, engaging with the language by using the language outside the classroom is vital as a form of exposure in promoting better English pronunciation. Despite the awareness, students tend to limit the use of English outside the classroom due to their perceived inability in acquiring native-like pronunciation, thus making them to feel demotivated [1].

Nevertheless, there are still students who are interested in learning English pronunciation accurately, as reported in [14]. In addition, the findings from [17] illustrate explicitly the students’ perception on varieties of English; 17.65% of the students, being the highest percentage, prefer using British English because they are more familiar with the language patterns rather than the other varieties of pronunciation models (e.g., American English).

### **3.4 Sub-question 2 – What are the criteria used to measure the effectiveness of pronunciation teaching for ESL learners in the Malaysian context?**

The effectiveness of pronunciation teaching was measured using various factors, which can be organized in three main components: (1) pronunciation model, (2) teaching efficiency among instructors, and (3) approaches in teaching pronunciation. We will address each component accordingly.

First, in Malaysia alone, there are several variants of pronunciation model. The renowned ones are Malaysian English, British English and American English [5]. Of the three, Malaysian English and British English are used more frequently. As Malaysia consists of diverse ethnics with different language backgrounds, the sound patterns of L1 differ all together from those of English in terms of phonology and discourse [5]. Also, as the standard of pronunciation models in the Malaysian ESL classroom may change from time to time, a student’s communication skills may be at stake [4]. In the long run, this circumstance may undermine the student’s level of self-esteem and motivation in learning English [5]. A study conducted in [2] involving 50 students from a secondary school produced significant findings; most participants feel that it is important to speak English with correct pronunciation. In the same study, all students claimed that they never change their accent or switch accents when speaking in English. Those who change their accent indicate that they do so according to whether they are speaking to their peers, teachers, or someone that they have just met. A total of 28 students from the Form 3 class and 5 students from the Form 5 class feel that conversing in a different accent makes them feel that they are “better” in English as they sound different from their peers [2]. It appears that the preference in using specific pronunciation models relies heavily on learners’ perception and belief.

Second, teachers’ efficiency in teaching plays a vital role in the implementation of certain pronunciation models in the classroom. Furthermore, the perception and beliefs of teachers leave a huge impact in ensuring the efficiency of pronunciation teaching. Findings from [2] on the perception of two teachers towards pronunciation teaching indicate that

teachers hardly ever dedicate an entire lesson to the teaching and learning of English pronunciation. Reports in [2] [19] [16] also point out that the teaching and learning of pronunciation is not a priority in the English classroom although some learners are generally unhappy with their English pronunciation and they personally feel it is important to formally learn English pronunciation in the classroom. Nonetheless, not much has been done to address this matter. That is to say, not much time or effort has been taken as teachers are more focused on other important aspects of the language (e.g., grammar, reading, writing). In order to improve the efficiency of teaching, teachers should cast aside personal beliefs and perception in order to be more supportive towards the teaching of pronunciation.

Finally, the approaches for teaching English pronunciation may differ because they are numerous aspects in the sound patterns such as stress and intonation [9]. Therefore, teachers need to be more attentive towards students' needs in learning pronunciation by engaging them with interactive activities or courseware that can assist both teachers and students throughout the teaching and learning process [3] [15] [24] [25]. Likewise, students must also be autonomous in learning by taking charge of the learning process. There are many instances in which teachers and students can initiate activities that promote the use of correct English pronunciation such as pronunciation games using syllabic words [9], the use of courseware such as Tell Me More [15] [24] [25] and drilling exercises [2].

### 3.5 Sub-question 3 – How is the issue of RP being addressed in Malaysia?

The lack of emphasis and focus on the pronunciation development is being highlighted in [1]; it was claimed that the lack of interest in L2 research is evident as not much study is being conducted. In many cases, the pronunciation aspect is treated as not entirely important unlike other skills, i.e., reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. It is often regarded with little importance where fluency is the main concern rather than accuracy.

In the current synthesis of evidence, the emphasis is that teachers should function as role models, i.e., they must be proficient in not only reading and writing in English but also in using RP correctly [11]. Some claim that RP or Malaysian English may degrade the standard of English in Malaysia [e.g., 22], but both are widely received rather than the rest of the models. As Malaysians are exposed to both RP and Malaysian English, a speaker can use both models interchangeably. The sound patterns of L1, e.g., vowels and diphthongs, may differ either tremendously or little with those of RP [18]. Therefore, L2 learners need guidance from teachers in order to either find a similar sound pattern or even create a new sound in order to produce more intelligible pronunciation in English.

## 4.0 DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Prospects and Challenges

In this paper, we have presented some evidence regarding the pronunciation research in the Malaysian context. In doing so, we have identified some prospects and challenges in executing the pronunciation models into the education system. In the next sub-sections, we will highlight the prospects of practicing pronunciation pedagogy in the Malaysian education system. We will also discuss the challenges, drawbacks and difficulties that may likely be encountered during the implementation of any pronunciation models.

#### *a) Prospects of the implementation of pronunciation models in the Malaysian education system*

The implementation of English pronunciation teaching as an aspect on its own similar to teaching grammar and reading comprehension is seen as a good effort to be implemented in the Malaysian education system. This effort is also in tandem with the exam-oriented system in Malaysia. For instance, students in secondary schools are required to sit for graded oral exams that are based on efficient elaboration on a given topic. The aspects that are taken into consideration during the oral exams are appropriate answers, the ability to converse fluently with correct pronunciation, speaking with sufficient



vocabulary related to the context given and the correct use of grammar [7] [18].

Furthermore, learners might need ample knowledge in order to identify and self-correct their mistakes when teachers are not available [18]. Thus, the implementation of teaching pronunciation in the classroom would be beneficial that may enable students to become autonomous learners. Teachers and learners need to work closely together to ensure that the teaching and learning process of pronunciation are well planned and executed.

#### *b) Challenges of the implementation of pronunciation models in the Malaysian education system*

It was discovered in [18] that the process of learning pronunciation is not done regularly in the classroom as teachers are more engaged with other English components (e.g., writing and literature) that are tested in examinations. Although many students excel in their studies, they strongly feel that pronunciation should be taught in the class and also incorporated into the education system. On the other hand, teachers feel that it is impossible to have a lesson that caters for pronunciation alone since most pronunciation-related activities are time consuming (e.g., role plays). Instead, teachers were found to be more attentive in covering other aspects of the language so that their students can obtain good grades in their examinations [18].

Another challenge faced by teachers during the teaching and learning of English pronunciation is that learners are not considered learning efficiently by only watching and listening to the speech diagram of articulation [1]. These learners need to fully comprehend the features of the sounds in order to produce them themselves. Sound imitation by learners may lead to the inability to fully understand its sound components (e.g., stress and intonation). Thus, learners may encounter difficulties when facing with identical sound features in their L1. That is, L2 learners tend to transfer the idea [1] by using their knowledge of L1 to suit the target language. This explicit method is beneficial if learners are knowledgeable of the sounds' limitation as some of the sound features of L1 and L2 are entirely different all together. Teachers themselves feel challenged in teaching proper English pronunciation as they themselves feel that their own pronunciation is not appropriate enough [18]. Some teachers tend to evade as much as possible in teaching pronunciation in the classroom because, as non-native speakers themselves, they lack in confidence to teach pronunciation in an explicit way.

## **4.2 Future Research**

This section deals with possible suggestions that could be implemented in the future to empower the process of teaching and learning English pronunciation among ESL learners in Malaysia. First, with regard to the implementation of sound drillings [3], learners need to have sufficient practice in the pronunciation and enunciation of English in the long run as it deals with real time communication use outside the classroom. Besides, the use of audio visual aids can actually engage learners in learning the correct English pronunciation [7] [24] [25]. Teachers can also use visual aids such as videos that show both graphic and audio information in assisting the learning process; this approach is not only interactive but also pleasing and enjoyable for learners, thus motivating them to be more attentive in the classroom.

Another method of improving pronunciation is by reading aloud [19][20]. To ensure optimum result, learners need to read aloud the words numerous times in order to obtain correct pronunciation and enunciation. To further enforce the teaching and learning of English pronunciation, the syllabus and curriculum needs to be redesigned [1] to cater the needs of learners. The curriculum and designed syllabus need to establish lessons that not only integrate pronunciation aspects but also serve for communicative goals. The use of authentic listening materials in the form of podcasts [21] can be introduced as one of the means to promote better pronunciation to expose learners on features such as co-articulation effects and grammatical structures more efficiently.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

The findings of this research proved that internal factors such as beliefs and perception have certain degree of influence in the pronunciation of English language. Apart from that, the differences between L1 and L2 are also an important factor that brought about pronunciation variation among the Malaysian English language teachers. Although pronunciation is often regarded as insignificant in English, teaching pronunciation in early stages may benefit learners of the language to acquire acceptable command of English. In order to implement the teaching and learning of the English pronunciation, the syllabus and curriculum needs to be redesigned [1] to cater the need of the learners in learning this neglected aspect.

Appropriate training for teachers on the proper methods and techniques in teaching correct English pronunciation should be taken into consideration as they are the backbone of the education system [1]. Coordinated approach is needed to execute the curriculum and syllabus that have been redesigned to meet the need of L2 learners in Malaysia. To ensure effectiveness of the system, additional materials and courseware for teachers [25][22] are always welcomed to guide and aid the teaching and learning process of pronunciation in the classroom.

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