



USES OF TONGUE TWISTERS FOR IMPROVING SPOKEN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Spoken English requires more than grammatical knowledge and vocabulary; it also depends on accurate pronunciation, speech fluency, articulation, rhythm, stress, intonation, and confidence. For many learners of English as a second or foreign language, difficulties in producing particular consonants, vowels, consonant clusters and connected-speech patterns affect the clarity and naturalness of their spoken communication. Tongue twisters are short, rhythmical and phonetically challenging expressions that can provide learners with intensive practice in producing difficult sounds. The present paper examines the pedagogical uses of tongue twisters for improving spoken English, with particular attention to pronunciation, articulation, fluency, phonemic awareness, stress, rhythm, intonation, listening discrimination and speaking confidence. The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive and literature-based methodology, drawing upon existing research on pronunciation instruction and tongue-twister-based language learning. Previous studies indicate that tongue twisters can provide a meaningful and enjoyable context for repeated pronunciation practice. A 2023 experimental study, for example, found that learners who practised target sounds through tongue twisters demonstrated greater pronunciation development than learners practising through authentic sentences. At the same time, research also suggests that tongue twisters should not be treated as a complete method of spoken-English instruction; rather, they are most effective when integrated with communicative activities, listening practice and contextual speaking tasks. The paper argues that appropriately selected and systematically practised tongue twisters can function as an effective supplementary technique for developing spoken English.

Keywords: Tongue Twisters, Spoken English, Pronunciation, Fluency, Articulation, Phonemic Awareness, Speaking Skills, EFL



1. Introduction

English has become an important language of education, employment, professional communication and international interaction. In contemporary educational contexts, the ability to communicate effectively in spoken English is increasingly valued alongside reading and writing competence. However, many learners who possess adequate knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary continue to experience difficulties when they speak. Their problems may include incorrect pronunciation, hesitation, inappropriate stress, weak articulation, lack of fluency, limited confidence and difficulty in maintaining the rhythm of natural English speech.

Pronunciation occupies an important position in spoken communication because speech must be sufficiently clear for listeners to understand the intended message. Pronunciation instruction therefore involves not only individual sounds but also larger features of speech such as word stress, sentence stress, rhythm and intonation. Research on tongue twisters has identified their potential to combine segmental pronunciation practice with suprasegmental features in a single classroom activity. Boye, for instance, argues that tongue twisters can be used to practise English phonemes, vowel length, word stress and intonation while simultaneously increasing learners' awareness of their pronunciation difficulties.

A tongue twister may be understood as a phrase or sentence deliberately constructed with similar, repeated or closely related sounds that make rapid and accurate pronunciation challenging. Common examples include:

- *She sells seashells by the seashore.*
- *Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.*
- *Red lorry, yellow lorry.*
- *A proper copper coffee pot.*
- *Thirty-three thirsty thieves thought thoroughly.*

The pedagogical value of these expressions does not lie simply in making learners speak rapidly. Their real value lies in directing learners' attention towards particular sounds and requiring repeated, controlled articulation. When a learner repeatedly encounters a difficult sound combination, the learner becomes more conscious of the position and movement of the



lips, tongue, teeth and vocal organs involved in speech production. The growing interest in tongue twisters as a pronunciation technique is supported by recent research. Tergujeff and Kuronen's 2023 study compared tongue-twister training with authentic-sentence training among 28 learners of Swedish as an additional language. Their findings indicated greater pronunciation development among learners who practised through tongue twisters, while the participants generally viewed the activity positively.

Consequently, tongue twisters deserve consideration not merely as recreational language games but as potentially useful pedagogical instruments within spoken-English instruction.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present paper has the following objectives:

1. To examine the concept and pedagogical significance of tongue twisters in English-language teaching.
2. To analyse the role of tongue twisters in improving English pronunciation.
3. To examine their contribution to speech fluency and articulation.
4. To explore their usefulness in developing phonemic awareness.
5. To examine how tongue twisters can support stress, rhythm and intonation.
6. To analyse their role in developing learners' confidence and motivation.
7. To suggest practical classroom procedures for using tongue twisters in spoken-English teaching.
8. To identify the limitations associated with the use of tongue twisters.

3. Significance of Tongue Twisters in Spoken English

3.1 Improving Pronunciation

The primary educational application of tongue twisters is pronunciation practice. Learners frequently experience difficulty with sounds that are absent from or differently realised in their first language. English consonants such as /θ/, /ð/, /r/, /l/, /w/, /v/, /z/ and particular consonant clusters can create difficulties for second-language learners.

A carefully selected tongue twister can provide concentrated practice with a particular sound.



For example:

Three thin thinkers thought thoroughly.

This sentence repeatedly exposes learners to the /θ/ sound. Instead of practising the sound in isolation only, learners encounter it in connected speech.

Research has provided empirical support for this approach. Sugiharto's 2022 study involving 35 university students reported an increase in mean pronunciation scores following tongue-twister instruction, with the post-test mean higher than the pre-test mean. Thus, tongue twisters can transform repetitive pronunciation practice into a more engaging activity.

3.2 Developing Articulation

Articulation refers to the physical production of speech sounds through coordinated movements of the speech organs. Tongue twisters require learners to coordinate these movements accurately and rapidly.

For instance:

Red lorry, yellow lorry.

★ The repeated alternation between /r/, /l/ and related vowel sequences requires careful movement of the tongue. Repeated practice can encourage learners to become more conscious of articulatory differences.

The activity can therefore be organised progressively:

Slow pronunciation → accurate pronunciation → rhythmic pronunciation → faster pronunciation → natural conversational production The teacher should emphasise accuracy before speed. Asking beginners to produce a tongue twister as rapidly as possible may reinforce inaccurate pronunciation.

3.3 Improving Speech Fluency

Fluency is not simply the ability to speak rapidly. It involves producing speech with appropriate continuity, rhythm and limited unnecessary hesitation. Tongue twisters provide an opportunity for controlled fluency practice because learners repeat the same linguistic material several times. As familiarity increases, cognitive attention can gradually shift away from individual words towards rhythm and overall speech production.



A useful classroom progression is:

Stage	Learner Activity	Main Focus
1	Listen to the teacher	Sound recognition
2	Repeat slowly	Accuracy
3	Repeat in groups	Articulation
4	Practise individually	Pronunciation
5	Increase speed gradually	Fluency
6	Perform without text	Recall and confidence
7	Use target sounds in conversation	Transfer

The final stage is particularly important because the ultimate objective is not successful tongue-twister performance but improved real-world communication.

4. Development of Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness involves recognising and distinguishing meaningful sound units. Learners may know the spelling of an English word but fail to recognise the difference between two sounds when speaking or listening.

Tongue twisters can highlight contrasts such as:

- /r/ and /l/
- /θ/ and /t/
- /ð/ and /d/
- /v/ and /w/
- /s/ and /ʃ/
- /b/ and /p/
- /f/ and /v/

For example:

Very well, Victor.

Repeated practice draws attention to the contrast between /v/ and /w/.

Similarly:

She sees shiny shoes.



This can be used to distinguish /s/ and /ʃ/.

The teacher can first ask learners to identify the target sounds and then practise their production.

5. Tongue Twisters and Stress, Rhythm and Intonation

Spoken English is characterised by more than individual consonants and vowels. Suprasegmental features—including stress, rhythm, intonation and connected speech—are central to comprehensible oral communication.

Boye's work specifically highlights the potential of tongue twisters to combine segmental and suprasegmental pronunciation practice.

Consider:

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.

The teacher can use this sentence to demonstrate:

- word stress,
- sentence rhythm,
- consonant repetition,
- linking,
- pitch movement,
- speech timing.

Instead of asking learners merely to repeat the sentence, the teacher can mark stressed syllables and encourage learners to reproduce the rhythm. This transforms the tongue twister from a pronunciation game into a structured phonological activity.

6. Building Speaking Confidence

Many learners hesitate to speak English because they fear making pronunciation mistakes. Tongue twisters can create a relatively low-stakes environment in which mistakes are expected and even become part of the activity.

The humorous character of tongue twisters can reduce the seriousness often associated with pronunciation correction. Research on adult EFL learners found generally positive attitudes towards tongue twisters, with 73.5% of respondents showing an overall positive attitude in the study reported by Prošić-Santovac.



The teacher can use:

- pair practice,
- group competitions,
- pronunciation challenges,
- recording activities,
- peer feedback,
- individual performance.

Such activities can encourage learners to speak repeatedly without experiencing the pressure of producing original sentences every time.

7. Motivation and Enjoyable Learning

Traditional pronunciation practice can sometimes become repetitive. Tongue twisters introduce an element of play and challenge.

Learners may attempt to:

1. pronounce the expression correctly;
2. repeat it several times;
3. increase their speed;
4. compete with classmates;
5. record their performance;
6. correct their own errors.

This combination of repetition and enjoyment can increase participation.

However, the teacher should ensure that entertainment does not replace learning objectives. The activity should always have a clearly identified pronunciation or speaking purpose.

8. Tongue Twisters as a Diagnostic Tool

One of the important but less frequently discussed uses of tongue twisters is diagnosis. When learners attempt a tongue twister, recurring pronunciation problems become noticeable. A teacher can identify difficulties with:

- individual phonemes,



- consonant clusters,
- vowel length,
- syllable stress,
- rhythm,
- intonation,
- articulation,
- speech rate.

Boye describes tongue twisters as potentially useful for raising learners' awareness of their own pronunciation problems and establishing measurable pronunciation goals. Thus, a teacher can use a short tongue-twister recording as an informal diagnostic activity before beginning a pronunciation unit.

9. Use of Tongue Twisters for Indian Learners of English

Tongue twisters can be particularly useful in Indian English-language classrooms because learners come from linguistically diverse backgrounds. English is frequently learned alongside one or more Indian languages, and differences between the phonological systems of the first language and English can influence pronunciation. For Indian learners, teachers can select tongue twisters according to the specific pronunciation problems observed in their classroom rather than applying the same list to every learner.

For example:

/θ/ practice

Thirty-three thirsty thinkers thought thoroughly.

/r/ and /l/ practice

Red lorry, yellow lorry.

/s/ and /ʃ/ practice

She sells shiny shoes.

/v/ and /w/ practice

Victor viewed the very wide window.



The objective should not be to imitate a particular native-speaker accent. The emphasis should instead be on intelligibility, clarity and effective communication.

10. Classroom Procedure for Using Tongue Twisters

A systematic procedure can make tongue-twister practice more effective.

Step 1: Identify the pronunciation target

The teacher selects a specific sound or pronunciation feature.

Step 2: Introduce the sound

The teacher demonstrates the sound and explains its articulation where necessary.

Step 3: Model the tongue twister

The teacher pronounces the expression slowly and naturally.

Step 4: Listening practice

Students listen carefully and identify the target sound.

Step 5: Slow repetition

Students repeat the expression slowly, concentrating on accuracy.

Step 6: Pair practice

Students practise with partners and provide simple corrective feedback.

Step 7: Speed development

Students gradually increase their speaking speed while maintaining intelligibility.

Step 8: Recording

Students record their pronunciation using a mobile phone or language-learning application.

Step 9: Self-evaluation

Students listen to their recording and identify pronunciation problems.

Step 10: Communicative transfer

The teacher introduces ordinary sentences or conversational tasks containing the same target sounds.

This last stage is essential. **Tongue-twister mastery should lead to communicative pronunciation practice.**



11. Tongue Twisters and Technology

Digital technology can extend tongue-twister practice beyond the classroom. Learners can record their speech, listen to their performance and compare successive recordings.

Teachers can also integrate:

- pronunciation applications,
- audio recordings,
- video assignments,
- speech-recognition tools,
- online pronunciation dictionaries,
- learning-management systems,
- peer-feedback platforms.

Recent classroom research has also examined phonetic tongue twisters alongside pronunciation technology such as ELSA Speak, reporting improvement in learners' pronunciation scores following the intervention. Technology therefore provides an opportunity to transform tongue twisters from a short classroom exercise into an ongoing pronunciation-learning activity.

12. Limitations of Tongue Twisters

Although tongue twisters have considerable pedagogical potential, they should not be regarded as a complete solution to spoken-English difficulties. First, excessive emphasis on speed can encourage inaccurate pronunciation. Second, learners may memorise a tongue twister without transferring the improved pronunciation to spontaneous speech. Third, some learners may find difficult tongue twisters frustrating rather than motivating. Research findings are also not completely uniform. Mu'in, Amrina and Amelia found no statistically significant difference between tongue-twister and repetition groups in pronunciation ability, although students perceived tongue-twister practice positively and associated it with pronunciation, fluency and motivation.

This suggests that tongue twisters should be viewed as a supplementary pronunciation technique, not as a substitute for broader speaking instruction.

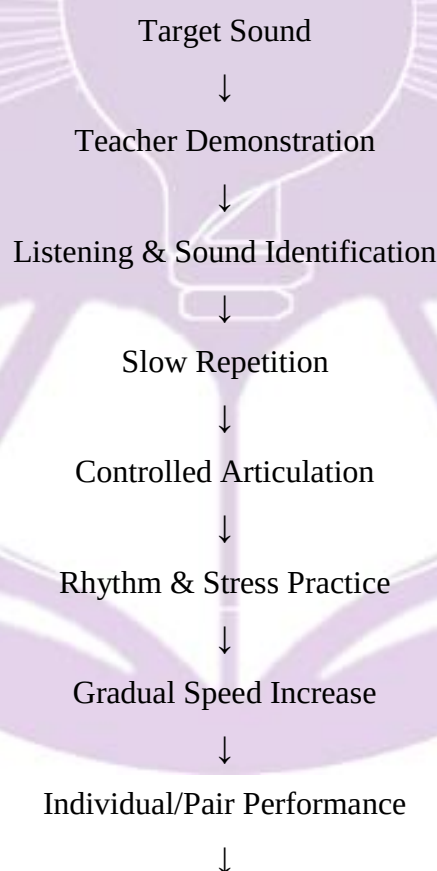


They should therefore be combined with:

- conversational practice,
- listening activities,
- role play,
- presentations,
- dialogues,
- pronunciation drills,
- vocabulary development,
- phonemic training,
- authentic communicative tasks.

13. Suggested Tongue-Twister Practice Model

A practical model for spoken-English classrooms can be represented as follows:





Self-Recording & Feedback



Conversational Application



Improved Spoken English

This model ensures that tongue twisters remain connected to the larger objective of communicative competence.

14. Discussion

The available literature indicates that tongue twisters have a meaningful place in pronunciation pedagogy. Their greatest strength is their ability to concentrate repeated practice on specific sounds while maintaining an engaging format. Boye's work demonstrates their usefulness for both segmental and suprasegmental pronunciation features, while Tergujeff and Kuronen provide experimental evidence that tongue-twister training can support pronunciation development.

At the same time, the evidence should be interpreted carefully. Different studies have used different learner populations, languages, instructional durations and assessment procedures. Consequently, it would be inappropriate to claim that tongue twisters automatically improve every aspect of spoken English. Their pedagogical value is strongest when they are target-oriented, graduated, repeated and followed by communicative transfer. A tongue twister should therefore be selected because it addresses a particular pronunciation need rather than merely because it is amusing or difficult. The teacher's role is also important. Effective use requires modelling, correction, feedback and appropriate pacing. Learners should first achieve intelligibility and accuracy and only then attempt increased speech rate.

15. Conclusion

Tongue twisters represent a simple but potentially powerful resource for improving spoken English. Their repetitive phonetic structure allows learners to practise difficult sounds, articulation, phonemic contrasts, stress, rhythm and intonation in a concentrated manner. They can also contribute to fluency, pronunciation awareness, motivation and speaking confidence.



The research reviewed in this paper suggests that tongue twisters have genuine pedagogical potential. Experimental evidence has reported positive pronunciation outcomes, while other studies have highlighted learners' positive perceptions and the usefulness of tongue twisters as supplementary pronunciation activities.

However, tongue twisters should not be isolated from communicative language teaching. Their effectiveness depends on appropriate selection, systematic practice and transfer to meaningful speech. The most effective approach is therefore to use tongue twisters as one component of a broader pronunciation and speaking programme. For English teachers, particularly those working in EFL contexts, tongue twisters offer an inexpensive, flexible and engaging way of converting pronunciation practice into active speaking practice. When used carefully, they can help learners move from sound awareness to accurate articulation, from controlled repetition to fluency, and ultimately from pronunciation practice to confident spoken communication.

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