Enhancing EFL speaking and pronunciation skills: Using explicit formal instruction in a Kurdish university

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This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of *explicit formal instruction* (EFI) on speaking and pronunciation skills among a Kurdish university's first-year EFL students. The researcher was teaching a communications unit, where the focus was on speaking skills and pronunciation: speech rate (words per minute), fluency (number of pauses and fillers), and accuracy (sound production, accurate word pronunciation, grammar, and sentence structure). During two semesters (24 weeks) learners received EFI and *explicit pronunciation training* (EPT). The data were collected through video recordings at two points in time: at the beginning of the course and the end of it and an interview. The results revealed that EFI and EPT had significant effects on learners' speech rate and fluency improvement, whereas their accuracy was affected but not as much as speech rate and fluency. This study offers several pedagogical and theoretical implications.

Introduction

In today's globalised world, English has emerged as the lingua franca of academia, business, and cross-cultural communication. That is, it has become a bridge of communication between those who speak different languages (Bacha et al., 2021; Jenkins et al., 2011; Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022; Seidlhofer, 2005, 2020; Si, 2019). Proficiency in English as a foreign language (EFL) is crucial for university learners, as it equips them with the necessary tools to succeed in their academic pursuits and professional endeavours, especially when they are majoring in the English language (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). While all four language skills — reading, writing, listening, and speaking — are essential, the ability to communicate effectively through spoken language is often considered paramount, and it leads to successful communication (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). However, many first-year EFL university learners face challenges in developing their speaking and pronunciation skills due to a lack of formal instruction and limited exposure to native speakers.

Speaking and pronunciation skills play a pivotal role in effective communication. They enable individuals to convey their thoughts, ideas, and opinions fluently and accurately. The ability to express oneself confidently and eloquently in spoken English is essential in academic settings, as learners are required to participate in classroom discussions, give presentations, and engage in debates (Boonkit, 2010; Nazara, 2011). Moreover, in professional contexts, strong speaking and pronunciation skills are vital for successful interviews, group discussions, collaborative projects, and above all successful communication (Brown, 2014; Levis, 2018; Levis & McCrocklin, 2018; Ulla, 2018).

In their first year of university, EFL learners face several challenges in L2 speaking skills and pronunciation, and this can be due to the influence of the learners' first language on their pronunciation. Phonological differences between the first language and English can

pose challenges in acquiring correct pronunciation. Learners may struggle with unfamiliar English sounds, stress patterns, intonation, and rhythm, affecting their overall speaking proficiency (Flege & MacKay, 2004). These challenges are very prevalent in the EFL context due to the lack of effective methods of teaching and instructional approaches. In this regard, in the Kurdish EFL context, the L2 teaching and learning issues have been investigated to the least (Mahmood, 2022), especially issues in speaking skills and pronunciation. Therefore, the current research is an attempt to fill this gap and invite other researchers to investigate other L2 issues in the Kurdish context. In Kurdistan, EFL learners study English for four years to obtain their bachelor degrees while receiving formal instruction on various courses, yet, to the researcher's knowledge, no study has investigated the effectiveness of formal instruction on speaking skills and pronunciation. To address these issues, the current study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent does EFI (explicit formal instruction) improve the speaking skills and pronunciation of EFL learners at the university level?
2. To what extent does EFI on speaking skills impact the fluency of EFL learners at the university level?
3. To what extent does EFI on speaking skills impact the accuracy of EFL learners at the university level?

Literature review

Theoretical framework

Two of the complex and main components of an L2 are speaking skills and pronunciation (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996; Jafari et al., 2021; Nguyen & Hung, 2021; Zhang & Yuan, 2020). In this review I propose that two theories can help provide a theoretical framework for understanding speaking skills and pronunciation learning and improvement, and these theories are Long (1996), the *interaction hypothesis* (IH), and the *sociocultural theory* (SCT) (Lantolf, 2011; Lantolf et al., 2015; Vygotsky, 1978, 1981). By integrating these two theories, the framework explores the importance of social interaction and cultural context in language acquisition and pronunciation development. This approach offers valuable insights into the role of meaningful interaction, negotiation of meaning, and sociocultural factors in promoting effective speaking skills and accurate pronunciation. From the IH perspective, speaking is seen as a communication tool, and from this interaction, learners receive more authentic input which might lead to speaking improvement. Similarly, from the SCT viewpoint, its key components are crucial in L2 speaking and pronunciation development. For instance, in SCT, the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) refers to the gap between a learner's current abilities and their potential level of development with the guidance of a *more knowledgeable other* (MKO). Vygotsky emphasised that optimal learning occurs when individuals engage in activities just beyond their current abilities, with the support of an MKO, who can be a teacher, peer, or someone knowledgeable in the domain, whereas *mediation* refers to how individuals interact with their environment through cultural tools and social interactions. It involves using external tools or assistance to facilitate thinking and problem-solving. These external tools gradually become

internalised, leading to the development of internal mental processes. Finally, *scaffolding* is a teaching strategy or supportive framework provided by an MKO to facilitate the acquisition of new skills or knowledge.

Pronunciation from a theoretical viewpoint

From a hesitant perspective, pronunciation has been viewed from two perspectives. One perspective on pronunciation, known as the narrow view, focuses solely on the accurate production of individual sounds in the correct order (Morley, 1991; Yenkimaleki et al., 2022). This entails learning the correct pronunciation of vowels and consonants. In contrast, the broad view of pronunciation considers it an integral part of communicative competence (Yenkimaleki et al., 2022). According to this perspective, pronunciation encompasses not only the accurate articulation of vowels and consonants but also the use of suprasegmental features such as word and sentence stress, intonation, and even non-verbal elements like facial expressions and hand gestures.

Several researchers (Alghazo et al., 2023; Chau et al., 2022; Gordon, 2023; Pennington & Richards, 1986) proposed a broader perspective on pronunciation instruction, challenging the traditional view that focused solely on the production of individual phonemes. According to their approach, pronunciation should be taught considering three main aspects: segmental features (the phonetic characteristics of individual phonemes), voice-setting features (the overall characteristics of speech, such as voice quality), and prosodic features (related to stress and intonation). They argued that the absence of any of these features can lead to a foreign accent among second language (L2) speakers. In their view, pronunciation goes beyond phoneme articulation and is considered one of the key components of conversational fluency.

Although previous studies have yielded inconclusive findings regarding the specific features of L2 pronunciation that should be prioritised in instructional settings, Pennington and Richards (1986) emphasised the need for further research in the field of L2 pronunciation instruction. The lack of consensus among researchers highlights the importance of conducting additional studies to clarify instructional priorities and provide guidance for L2 teachers.

The importance of pronunciation

The importance of pronunciation as a vital skill in acquiring a second language (L2) has been widely recognised by L2 educators and researchers, with no documented evidence questioning its significance in L2 learning. According to Brown (2014), it involves teaching learners how to produce the sounds of a language. However, pronunciation instruction is more practical and involves using knowledge of phonetics and phonology to identify potential challenges that learners might encounter and creating activities that focus on sound production for both in-class and out-of-class practice. The objective of these activities is to assist learners in developing an acceptable and understandable accent in the language. Stevick (1978) emphasised the role of pronunciation by stating that it is the primary means through which we bring attention to our language use when

communicating with others. Szpyra-Kozłowska (2014) stated that "pronunciation is an important component of language without which no efficient oral communication is possible" (p.2).

Similarly, O'Brien (2004) stated that the "pronunciation aspect of speech is perhaps the most important for our learners' success when they communicate with native speakers" (p.1). Similarly, Fraser (2010) has also emphasized the importance of pronunciation and indicated that pronunciation has been reported to be the most difficult L2 skill among many adult ESL/EFL learners. In the relationship between pronunciation and communication Pennington and Richards (1986) stated that:

> ... it is artificial to divorce pronunciation from communication and other aspects of
> language use, for sounds are a fundamental part of the process by which we
> communicate and comprehend lexical, grammatical and sociolinguistic meaning (p. 208).

Two aspects of pronunciation: Segmentals and suprasegmentals

Previous studies have shown that L2 teachers have taught both segments and suprasegmentals in their classes. Based on previous findings, there is no concrete evidence that shows which aspect (i.e., segmental, or suprasegmental features) is more important to be taught. According to Levis (2005), the significance of pronunciation in L2 teaching has been based on ideology and intuition rather than research. In other words, L2 teachers have traditionally relied on their intuitive understanding to identify which pronunciation features pose challenges for learners and have a substantial impact on their language acquisition. Based on this intuition, teachers have chosen to focus on teaching those specific features.

Several researchers have investigated both aspects of pronunciation. In this regard, Levis and McCrocklin (2018) and Lee et al. (2015) stated that the essence of teaching and learning pronunciation is segmentals, that is, vowels and consonants. Whereas Kang et al. (2010) stated that the core of the production of intelligible L2 speech is suprasegmentals. For Zielinski (2006) both segmentals and suprasegmentals are crucial to intelligibility. Levis (2005) believed that L2 teachers must change their teaching pronunciation direction more towards the intelligibility principle rather than the nativeness principle. Therefore, researchers have focused more on intelligibility, comprehensibility, and fluency. In the current study, the focus is on speech rate, fluency, and accuracy.

Pronunciation instruction

For several decades, and still, the role of instruction has been a topic of debate among experts regarding the role of instruction in language teaching. Some researchers and experts (e.g., Krashen, 1982) believed that learners can learn an L2 based on the amount of the target language exposure, and instruction has a limited influence on learning a new language. However, recent research in second language acquisition (SLA) has provided compelling evidence that instruction can indeed have a positive impact on learning. Studies conducted by Lee et al. (2015) and Chau et al. (2022), among others, have

demonstrated this effect, highlighting the value of instruction in language acquisition. Several researchers (e.g., Loewen & Sato, 2018; Nassaji, 2016) found that instruction plays a crucial role in teaching and improving L2 learners' speaking and pronunciation skills. Similarly, Saito and Plonsky (2019) discovered that teaching pronunciation in a classroom setting is successful, even when working with adult learners. The study demonstrated the efficacy of pronunciation instruction in improving adults' pronunciation skills. These findings support the notion that focused pronunciation instruction can yield positive results, even when targeting adult language learners, within a twelve-week timeframe. In the same vein, in a study by Couper (2006), the impact of explicit instruction on the enhancement of learners' pronunciation was examined over a two-week instructional period. The research focused on high-intermediate level English learners who were immigrants in New Zealand. The findings indicated that the learners who received explicit instruction exhibited significant improvement in terms of their phonological competence when compared to those who did not receive such instruction.

In this study, explicit instruction is defined as "comprising presentation of rules or instructions directly asking learners to attend to particular forms (i.e., explicit deduction or explicit induction)" (Goo et al., 2015, p. 444). Furthermore, an L2 instructional approach was deemed explicit if it included either a clear explanation of rules as part of the instruction (in this case, explicit refers to deductive and metalinguistic aspects), or if learners were directly instructed to focus on specific language forms and encouraged to make metalinguistic generalisations independently (in this case, explicit refers to explicit induction) (Norris & Ortega, 2000).

In terms of explicit pronunciation training, the same definition has been applied as explicit instruction where the teacher provides the learners with an explicit explanation of pronunciation aspects such as showing how and when (-ed) past is pronounced as /t/ sound such as in "stopped", as /d/ sound as such in "cried", and /ɪd/ such as in "wanted". The same method for intonation and stress patterns was followed by the teacher.

Based on the reviewed literature, the topic of the effectiveness of pronunciation instruction has not been resolved, especially in EFL contexts. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate this issue as it adds important findings theoretically and pedagogically to the area of teaching a second language.

Method

Context

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the English language has been one of the core classes from primary school levels to university levels since 1990 (Sofi-Karim, 2015). There are several universities where learners study English to obtain their bachelors, masters, and even PhD degrees. For the current study, the context was the English Department at the College of Education at Salahaddin University. In this Department, learners study the English language for four consecutive years to gain their bachelor degree, and they will be

prepared to be English language teachers at local public or private schools. Learners take various core and elective courses during these four years, and communication/conversation is one of the essential courses in the first and second academic years.

Participants

The study included 20 Kurdish EFL learners who were enrolled in the English department at a university during the academic year 2021-2022, and their ages ranged between 18 to 25 years old. Participants were selected based on their willingness to participate and their commitment to completing the entire two-semester course. After the objectives of the study were explained to the participants, they gave their consent to participate in the study. The participants' proficiency levels varied, and this was expected because they studied English as any other subject at school with the least focus on learning how to communicate in English. The main purpose for selecting 20 participants was to have an ideal number of learners in one class.

Course description

The participants undertook a two-semester course focused on speaking and pronunciation skills. The course spanned a total of 24 weeks and incorporated formal and explicit instruction. Although learners take more than one core course such as grammar, IT, and Kurdish studies, speaking English is not very focused upon in these classes, rather they are more teacher-centred not student-centred classrooms. Therefore, learners have more speaking opportunities during the speaking course in which each class lasts for two hours.

The teacher (i.e., the researcher as well) used "*Practice makes perfect: English conversation*" by Jean Yates as the main textbook (Yates, 2020). The instructional methods included interactive classroom activities, individual and group speaking exercises, pronunciation drills, and regular feedback sessions. Textbooks, audiovisual resources, and supplementary materials were utilised to target specific aspects of speaking and pronunciation.

Instructional intervention

During two academic semesters (i.e., 24 weeks), the participants received EFI on improving speaking skills and pronunciation, that is, fluency and accuracy. For instance, the first unit of the book is about "introducing yourself and others", and it is written in a conversational style between two speakers. The participants read the conversation in pairs and explained the unfamiliar words, phrases, and sentences in pairs. After that, the teacher explained the difficulties that the learners faced in terms of using the number of "fillers", "pauses" "intonation" and "stress patterns" by the learners, the inaccurate sound articulation, and the accurate word pronunciation, correct usage of grammar such as subject-verb agreement, and sentence structure (i.e., word order). The participants were explicitly trained on how to use "pauses", "intonation" and "stress patterns" for the words, phrases, and sentences. At the end of class, the learners were given 15 minutes to practice speaking based on what they had learned from the conversation they read and

from the teacher's comments and feedback. Table 1 illustrates how the teacher provided explicit instruction.

Table 1: Examples of using explicit instruction in the class

Aspect of language use	Student behaviours	Teacher explicit instruction
Fillers (e.g., um, er, ah, eh)	Excessive use of fillers	The teacher explicitly informed learners to reduce the use of excessive fillers.
Stress pattern	Mistakes in stress pattern	The teacher provided explicit feedback and corrections on stress pattern errors.
Word order	Mistakes in word order	The teacher explicitly corrected and provided feedback on errors related to word order.
Intonation	Errors in intonation	The teacher gave explicit explanations on how to use the correct intonation for each phrase or sentence.

In terms of changes in pronunciation instruction, during each class, the teacher carefully listened to the learners and took notes of the learners' errors in sound production, intonation, and stress patterns. After the learners completed the class activities, the teacher explicitly explained each error with the correct forms for each error to make sure the learners received them correctly.

Data collection

Data on learners' speaking and pronunciation abilities were collected through two video recordings. The first recording, conducted at the commencement of the course, served as a baseline assessment of their speech rate, fluency, and accuracy. These initial recordings, each lasting between five to ten minutes (mean duration = 7 minutes, standard deviation = 2.3), were made on the first day of the semester. Following a warm welcome from the teacher and congratulatory remarks on their admission to the English Department, participants responded to several questions (refer to Appendix A). These questions aimed to capture their initial perceptions and expectations as they embarked on the course.

After twenty-four weeks of formal instruction, a second round of video recordings (i.e., 10 to 15 minutes) was carried out after the two-semester program. The learners were asked to address a separate set of questions (refer to Appendix B), providing insights into their progress and development in terms of speech rate, fluency, and accuracy.

It is important to note that the videos were made available to individual learners upon request, potentially aiding in their revision efforts and their inclusion in personal e-portfolios. Additionally, after the second video recording, learners participated in interviews to discuss the advantages of explicit pronunciation instruction (EPI) and explicit pronunciation training. These interviews were audio-recorded (see Appendix C for the questions).

Table 2: Durations, means and standard deviations for the two video recordings

Video recording	Duration (mins)	Mean duration (mins)	SD (mins)
Beginning of course	5 to 10	7	2.3
End of two-semester program	10 to 15	9	1.7

Coding and data analysis

After the process of data collection, the video recordings and the recorded interview were transcribed verbatim, and the qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis involved several steps, including familiarisation with the data, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Codes were generated to identify key concepts, patterns, and recurring themes within the participants' narratives. The identified themes were then organised and interpreted to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences, perceptions, and plans related to the course. After coding was completed, the data was prepared to be further analysed using *Jamovi* 2.3.28. Finally, the data were analysed descriptively and inferentially. For the descriptive analysis, the researcher calculated the number of words per minute, pauses, fillers, and intonation patterns. Whereas, for accuracy, the researcher focused on the accurate production of sounds, prefixes, and suffixes such as -ed past and -es plurals, accurate word pronunciation, and grammar such as subject-verb agreement and word order.

Speech rate, fluency, and accuracy were systematically coded and evaluated using specific criteria.

- *Speech rate*
  Determined by calculating the number of words spoken per minute by the participants.
- *Fluency*
  Assessed by coding and scoring various aspects of speech, including the presence of pauses, fillers, and intonation patterns.
- *Accuracy*
  Measured by evaluating the correctness of sound production, intonation, and stress patterns, including the accurate use of prefixes and suffixes (e.g., -ed past and -es plurals), precise word pronunciation, and adherence to grammatical rules such as subject-verb agreement and word order.

For each of these dimensions, numerical values ranging from 1 (indicating the least accuracy) to 5 (representing the most accurate) were assigned. These coded values were then entered into the statistical software, *Jamovi* 2.3.28, for further analysis and interpretation. This is an excerpt from a participant's first video recording:

> Uhm, well, you know, like, I, uh, really, uh, got, like, interested, uhm, because, like, I, uh, have a, uh, friend, who, um, from, uh, America, and, uh, she's, uh, like, super, uh, nice, and, uh, I, uh, wanted, uhm, to, like, talk, uh, with, uh, her, you know?

[*Transcription:* əm, wɛl, ju no, laɪk, aɪ, əm, rɪali, ɡɑt, laɪk, ˈɪntrəstɪd, əm, bɪˈkoz, laɪk, aɪ, ˈhæv ə, əm, frend, hu, əm, from, əˈmɛrɪkə, ənd, əm, ʃiːz, ˈlaɪk, ˈsupər, əm, naɪs, ənd, əm, aɪ, əm, ˈwɑntɪd, əm, laɪk, tɔk, əm, wɪð, əm, jʊ, no?]

Data analysis and results

The purpose of this section is to analyse and present the results of the statistical tests to answer the research questions, that is, the effects of formal pronunciation instruction on learners' speaking and pronunciation development. For this purpose, descriptive and inferential statistical tests were run using *Jamovi* 2.3.28.

Descriptive and inferential analysis: Speech rate

Table 3: Descriptive analysis: Speech rate (words per minute)

Descriptive	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE
Speech rate (Initial)	20	120	120	7.42	1.66
Speech rate (Final)	20	132	135	8.75	1.96

Table 3 illustrates the descriptive statistical results of the effects of formal instruction on Kurdish EFL learners' speech rate at two points in time: at the beginning of the semester and the end. Based on the analysed data, the learners' speech rate improved after receiving FI, and this is based on the mean value in speech rate, Initial 120 words per minute (SD = 7.42), compared with Final 132 (SD = 8.75). To evaluate the size of the effect, a paired samples t-test was conducted to determine whether the improvement was statistically significant between the two time periods (Table 4).

Table 4: Inferential analysis: Speech rate

Paired samples t-test						95% conf. interval	
Student's	statistic	df	p	Cohen's	Effect size	Lower	Upper
t	-17.9	19	< .001	d	-4.01	-5.34	-2.67

Note. H_a μ Measure 1 - Measure 2 ≠ 0

The paired t-test results revealed that Kurdish EFL learners' speech rate was significantly improved after receiving formal speaking and pronunciation instruction from Initial recording (*M* = 120, *SD* = 7.42) to Final recording (*M* = 132, *SD* = 8.75), *t*(19.0) =-17.9, *p*=.001, *p* < .001, Cohen's d = -4.01 [95% CI=-5.34, -2.67]. Furthermore, Cohen's d was calculated to measure the effect size of the improvement in speech rate. The obtained Cohen's d value of -4.01 suggests a large effect size. This indicates that formal instruction had a substantial impact on the learners' speech rate. In summary, the results demonstrate that formal speaking and pronunciation instruction had a significant positive effect on the speech rate of Kurdish ELF learners, as evidenced by the improved performance between Initial and Final recordings.

Descriptive and inferential analysis: Fluency

The second aim of the study is to investigate the effects of FI on learners' fluency. To determine the effects, descriptive and inferential statistical tests were conducted. Table 5 illustrates the descriptive results.

Table 4: Descriptive analysis: Fluency

Descriptive	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE
Fluency (Initial)	20	0.907	0.900	0.0294	0.00656
Speech rate (Final)	20	0.932	0.930	0.0284	0.00636

The results indicate that the participants' fluency abilities were also improved if compared from the Initial Recording ($M = 0.907$, $SD = 0.0294$) to Test 2 ($M = 0.932$, $SD = 0.0284$). To show the effect size of the FI, a paired samples t-test was run to determine whether the improvement was statistically significant or not between the two time periods.

Table 5: Inferential analysis: Fluency

Paired samples t-test						95% conf. interval	
Student's	statistic	df	p	Cohen's	Effect size	Lower	Upper
t	-21.8	19	< .001	d	-4.87	-6.47	-3.27

Note. H_a μ Measure 1 - Measure 2 ≠ 0

The paired t-test showed that Kurdish EFL learners performed significantly higher in terms of their fluency after receiving formal speaking and pronunciation instruction from the Initial recording ($M = 0.907$, $SD = 0.0294$) to the Final recording ($M = 0.932$, $SD = 0.0284$), $t(19.0) = -21.8$, $p = .001$, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = -4.87 [95% CI=-4.87, -3.27]. Based on the statistical values, it can be affirmed that there was a significant improvement in fluency performance. Furthermore, Cohen's d was calculated to estimate the effect size of the improvement in fluency. The obtained Cohen's d value of -4.87 suggests a large effect size. This indicates that formal instruction had a substantial impact on the learners' fluency. Overall, the results demonstrate that formal speaking and pronunciation instruction had a significant positive effect on the fluency of Kurdish EFL learners. The learners showed a considerable improvement in fluency from the Initial Recording to the Final Recording because of the instruction.

Descriptive and inferential analysis: Accuracy

The final aim of the current study was to investigate the effectiveness of FI on learner accuracy. Tables 7 and 8 illustrate the descriptive and inferential statistical analysis of the data.

The results revealed that Kurdish EFL learners' fluency has improved slightly from the Initial recording ($M = 0.686$, $SD = 0.0493$) to the Final recording ($M = 0.664$, $SD =$

0.0587). To determine whether the observed differences in means and SD are statistically significant, a paired samples t-test was run as shown in Table 8.

Table 6: Descriptive analysis: Accuracy

Descriptive	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE
Accuracy (Initial)	20	0.686	0.700	0.0493	0.0110
Accuracy (Final)	20	0.664	0.675	0.0587	0.0131

Table 7: Inferential analysis: Accuracy

Paired samples t-test						95% conf. interval	
Student's	statistic	df	p	Cohen's	Effect size	Lower	Upper
t	3.68	19	< .002	d	0.824	0.306	1.33

Note. H_a μ Measure 1 - Measure 2 ≠ 0

Based on the analysed data, the statistical analysis reveals that there is a significant difference between the initial and final measurements, Initial recording (*M* = 0.686, *SD* = 0.0493) to Final recording (*M* = 0.664, *SD* = 0.0587), *t*(19.0) =3.68, *p* =.002, *p* < .001, Cohen's d = 0.824 [95% CI= 0.306, 2.33]. Furthermore, the effect size, calculated using Cohen's d, indicates a moderate degree of difference between the initial and final measurements (*d* = 0.824). It can be inferred that FI was more effective on Kurdish EFL learners' speech rate and fluency than their accuracy.

The interview findings

After the video recording at the end of the academic year (i.e., end of the semester), the learners were interviewed and asked several questions (see Appendix C). Responses were audio-recorded. After transcribing the learners' responses, the researcher analysed and recorded them based on each target feature (i.e., speech rate, fluency, and accuracy). Table 9 shows the participants' responses after the analysis of the interview. Each participant's responses were coded, analysed, and categorized based on the target features.

Table 8: The participants' interview responses

Student ID	Speech rate (words/min.)	Fluency (fillers, pauses)	Accuracy (sound production, accurate word pronunciation, grammar, and sentence structure)
S1	Increased speech rate	Reduced use of fillers and pauses	Improved sound production, accurate word pronunciation, enhanced grammar, coherent sentences
S2	Improved speed of delivery	Minimal use of fillers, fewer pauses	Clearer sound production, accurate word pronunciation, improved grammar, structured sentences
S3	Enhanced speech rate	More fluent speech with fewer fillers and pauses	Improved sound production, precise word pronunciation, enhanced grammar, coherent sentences

S4	Faster speech delivery	Reduced reliance on fillers and shorter pauses	Clearer sound production, accurate word pronunciation, improved grammar, well-formed sentences
S5	Improved pace of speaking	Enhanced fluency with minimal fillers and pauses	Accurate sound production, precise word pronunciation, improved grammar, cohesive sentences
S6	Increased words per minute	Smooth and continuous speech without many pauses	Clear sound production, accurate word pronunciation, refined grammar, coherent sentence structure
S7	Enhanced speech rate	Fewer fillers and pauses	Accurate sound production, precise word pronunciation, improved grammar, well-structured sentences
S8	Improved speed and fluency	Reduced use of fillers and pauses	Clearer sound production, accurate word pronunciation, refined grammar, coherent sentences
S9	Faster and more fluent speech	Minimal fillers and pauses	Enhanced sound production, precise word pronunciation, improved grammar, well-constructed sentences
S10	Increased speech rate	Fluent speech with few fillers and pauses	Accurate sound production, accurate word pronunciation, enhanced grammar, coherent sentences
S11	Improved pace and fluency	Reduced fillers and pauses	Clear sound production, accurate word pronunciation, refined grammar, well-formed sentences
S12	Enhanced speed and fluency	More fluid speech with minimal fillers and pauses	Improved sound production, precise word pronunciation, improved grammar, cohesive sentences
S13	Increased words per minute	Smooth speech flow with reduced fillers and pauses	Clear sound production, accurate word pronunciation, refined grammar, coherent sentences
S14	Improved speech rate	Minimal use of fillers and pauses	Enhanced sound production, accurate word pronunciation, improved grammar, well-structured sentences
S15	Faster and more fluent speech	Fewer filters and shorter pauses	Accurate sound production, precise word pronunciation, improved grammar, coherent sentences
S16	The enhanced pace of speaking	Fluent speech flow with minimal fillers and pauses	Clear sound production, accurate word pronunciation, refined grammar, well-formed sentences
S17	Increased speech rate	Reduced reliance on fillers and pauses	Improved sound production, precise word pronunciation, enhanced grammar, cohesive sentences
S18	Improved speed and fluency	Minimal use of fillers, smoother speech	Clear sound production, accurate word pronunciation, improved grammar, structured sentences
St19	Enhanced speech rate	Fluent speech flow with minimal fillers and pauses	Enhanced sound production, accurate word pronunciation, improved grammar, coherent sentences

| S20 | Faster and more fluent speech | Few fillers and pauses | Accurate sound production, precise word pronunciation, refined grammar, well-structured sentences |

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the impact of EFI and EPT on the speech rate, fluency, and accuracy of Kurdish EFL learners over two semesters (i.e., one academic year). The findings revealed significant improvements in speech rate and fluency, but less improvement in accuracy.

The findings of the current study align with previous studies highlighting the effectiveness of explicit instruction in enhancing speaking skills (Keshavarz & Taherian, 2018; Namaziandost et al., 2020; Pardede, 2018; Zhang & Yuan, 2020). The participant's ability to produce a higher number of words per minute may indicate increased confidence and proficiency in spoken English. This improvement could be attributed to the specific instruction targeting speaking skills and the opportunities provided for learners to practise and receive feedback. Therefore, this finding can be interpreted based on the interaction hypothesis, that is, According to IH, language learning involves an interaction between innate language acquisition abilities and explicit learning mechanisms. Formal instruction provides learners with explicit knowledge about the language, which can be utilised to enhance their speaking skills.

Furthermore, the second research question targeted the effects of EFI on learners' fluency. The significant improvement in fluency is consistent with the findings of previous research emphasising the positive impact of formal instruction on fluency development (Derakhshan et al., 2016; Pardede, 2018; Shahini & Shahamirian, 2017; Thomson, 2015). The explicit instruction on pronunciation and speaking skills likely contributed to the participant's ability to communicate more smoothly and express their thoughts more coherently. The everyday speaking practices in the class might have been very useful for building more speaking confidence and fluency control. In other words, the incorporation of structured speaking activities and practice opportunities may have enhanced their fluency by promoting automaticity and reducing linguistic hesitations.

The third research question was to investigate the effectiveness of EFI on learners' accuracy. Previous studies (Keshavarz & Taherian, 2018; Namaziandost et al., 2020; Pardede, 2018; Tabandeh et al., 2018) have revealed that instruction can positively influence accuracy, and results in the current study align with previous findings, but the degree of the effectiveness of FL on learners' accuracy was not that high compared to their speech rate and fluency. Several reasons could be discussed and inferred. For example, accuracy encompasses the precise production of second language (L2) sounds, phonological and morphological aspects, suprasegmental features like intonation and stress, and even grammatical features. Therefore, one interpretation could be that to attain a higher level of accuracy, learners need to be exposed to more controlled L2 features. This includes focusing on specific aspects of the L2, such as segmental features, suprasegmental features, or grammatical features. Finally, EFI on speaking skills and

pronunciation can be understood in SCT, and this theory provides us with a better understanding of the effectiveness of EFI in which it contains the key components of SCT such as zone of proximal development and scaffolding from the teacher to the learners and between learners and their peers. Over time, these external tools are internalised, resulting in the formation of internal cognitive processes.

Based on the interview, learners stated that their pronunciation has improved, and this made them feel more relaxed and confident while speaking. This finding aligns with the results in a recent study by Vu (2023) who found that (81%) of the participants believed that making fewer errors while speaking raises their confidence, and this leads to English-speaking skills improvement. For example, student 19 stated:

> I believe that when teachers provide clear instructions on sound production, how to pronounce a word accurately, or how to produce the "-ed" pronunciation accurately, it helps me improve my pronunciation.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the impact of formal and explicit instruction on the speech rate, fluency, and accuracy of Kurdish EFL learners. The findings indicated significant improvements in speech rate and fluency, while the improvement in accuracy was comparatively less pronounced. Consistent with previous research, the results supported the effectiveness of explicit instruction in enhancing speaking skills. The participants' increased word production per minute reflected improved confidence and proficiency in spoken English, likely attributed to targeted instruction and ample practice opportunities with feedback. The study also demonstrated the positive impact of EFI on fluency development. The EPT and speaking skills, along with the regular speaking practice, contributed to participants' ability to communicate more smoothly and coherently. Therefore, EFI and EPT in class can be used as effective strategies to promote automaticity and reduce linguistic hesitations.

Theoretical, pedagogical implications and limitations

The present study makes a crucial contribution to the field by investigating the impact of EFI and EPT on the speech rate, fluency, and accuracy of Kurdish EFL learners over an extended period of two semesters. This longitudinal approach sets it apart from previous studies that often focus on short-term interventions or single instructional techniques.

The findings of the study reveal significant improvements in speech rate and fluency, supporting the effectiveness of explicit instruction in enhancing speaking skills. This finding is consistent with previous research that has emphasised the positive impact of explicit instruction on speaking abilities. However, the study also highlights that the improvement in accuracy was not as pronounced compared to speech rate and fluency. This finding adds a nuanced perspective to the existing literature, as it underscores the complexity and multi-faceted nature of accuracy in second language production.

One unique aspect of this study is the specific focus on Kurdish EFL learners. While research on explicit instruction and pronunciation training exists, studies specifically targeting Kurdish learners are scarce. Therefore, this study fills an important gap by examining the effects of explicit instruction on the speaking skills of Kurdish EFL learners, providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of instructional techniques within this specific learner population.

Furthermore, the incorporation of structured speaking activities and practice opportunities in the classroom setting, along with explicit pronunciation training, is another distinctive aspect of this study. By examining the impact of these combined instructional approaches, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of the potential benefits of integrating explicit instruction and pronunciation training in enhancing speech rate, fluency, and accuracy.

The theoretical framework employed in this study, such as the interaction hypothesis and sociocultural theory, also adds to its uniqueness. The application of these theoretical perspectives provides a deeper understanding of the underlying processes involved in language learning, and how explicit instruction and pronunciation training can facilitate the development of speaking skills. This integration of theory and practice contributes to the richness of the study and its relevance to the field.

Overall, this study is crucial and unique due to its longitudinal design, focus on Kurdish EFL learners, incorporation of structured speaking activities and explicit pronunciation training, and the application of theoretical frameworks. By highlighting significant improvements in speech rate and fluency while shedding light on the complexities of accuracy, this research expands our knowledge and provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of explicit instruction and pronunciation training for Kurdish EFL learners.

The study has some limitations such as the small sample size of the participants, data collection based mainly on video recording, and interview by one person (i.e., the researcher), yet limiting to 20 participants can be thought of as an ideal number when it comes to teaching speaking and pronunciation. As this study did not focus on one specific aspect of speaking skills and pronunciation, future studies could be conducted with more tightly controlled L2 features, to focus more intensely on an individual aspect of the L2.

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Appendices

The learners were asked several questions at the beginning and the end of the academic year. The following questions were asked.

Appendix A: The Initial Recording (beginning of the academic year)

1. What motivated you to learn English? Share a personal story or experience that sparked your interest.
2. Describe a typical day in your life. What activities do you usually engage in, and how do you feel about them?
3. Discuss an important goal or aspiration you have for this academic year. What steps will you take to achieve it?
4. Talk about a challenging situation you faced recently and how you managed to overcome it.

Appendix B: The Final Recording (end of the academic year)

1. Reflect on your English language learning journey throughout this academic year. What achievements or improvements are you proud of?
2. Discuss a project or assignment that you found particularly challenging. How did you approach it, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Describe an event or activity from the past year that had a significant impact on you. How did it influence your personal growth?
4. Talk about a book or article you read in English that made a lasting impression on you. What were the key takeaways or insights?

Appendix C: Audio recorded interview (after second video recording)

The researcher interviewed learners about the extent to which EFI (explicit formal instruction) and EPT (explicit pronunciation training) helped them improve their speech rate, fluency, and accuracy:

1. How do you feel EFI (e.g., grammar lessons, pronunciation and speaking skills) has contributed to your overall speaking skills? In what specific ways has it helped you improve your speech rate, fluency, and accuracy?
2. Can you share any instances where EFI has directly impacted your ability to speak more fluently and accurately?
3. How has EPT (e.g., focusing on phonetics, and pronunciation drills) influenced your speech rate, fluency, and accuracy? Can you provide examples of how this training has improved your pronunciation?
4. Reflecting on your progress throughout the academic year, to what extent do you attribute your improvement in speech rate, fluency, and accuracy to EFI and explicit pronunciation training?

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