|| Journal of ELT and Education || JEE-2(2), June-2019, Page: 19-25
ISSN (Print): 2618-1290, ISSN (Online): 2663-1482, ISSN-L: 2618-1290

Pronunciation Difficulties of the EFL Undergrads in Bangladesh: An Empirical Study

Md Mostafa Ali
Lecturer in English, B N College Dhaka
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka-1206
Email: m.ali.bncd@gmail.com

[**Citation:** Ali, M. M. (2019). Pronunciation Difficulties of the EFL Undergrads in Bangladesh: An Empirical Study. *Journal of ELT and Education*, *2*(2)**:** 19-25.]

RECORDS:

Received:
29.03.2019

Revised:
05.04.2019

Accepted:
30.05.2019

Published:
31.05.2019

Abstract

The study asserts the pronunciation difficulties in the English as Foreign Language (EFL) context of Bangladesh dealing with the existing practices of the EFL undergraduates. The paper also identifies and resolves the variety of quandaries and the limitations for achieving sound English pronunciation skills for which 40 EFL undergraduates and 10 EFL teachers were the key participants to conduct the study. The study predominantly focuses on the dilemmas of EFL reading and speaking in the classroom and the reasons of the failures of 'Standard English' pronunciation considering the perceptual viewpoints of the participants about standard articulation. The method of data collection of this qualitative study encompasses the credentials through direct interviews, observational studies and a questionnaire survey on EFL pronunciation in the classroom with the intention of shunning perplexity. The study finds out the practical reasons for mispronunciation such as dialectal influence, over-simplification, lack of confidence, scarcity of materials etc. Finally, some considerations are recommended to improve the pronunciation standard.

Keywords: *Standard pronunciation, scarcity of materials, dialectal influence, metrology of teachers, learning tactics*

1. Introduction

English has taken an important place in world education. But it is difficult to teach 'Standard' English articulation in the EFL classroom to the tertiary level students in a context like Bangladesh. Teachers also face numerous quandaries because of different dilemma in pronunciation in the language classrooms. They are to knob those students to maintain a standard in the classroom. Pronunciation is an integrated and integral part of second/foreign language learning since it directly affects learners' communicative aptitude as well as enactment (Maniruzzaman, 2008). Nevertheless, most of the EFL students do not have the proper sense of correct pronunciation. They are facing various quandaries in using English as a foreign language in the classroom for day to day purpose. One of the problems that the EFL learners usually face is mispronunciation while reading an English text or speaking in English. We read a language in order to be able to share information with others or realize the information provided there. But if we cannot use the phonological features used by the natives

of the language, the message will not probably be understood and communication may even break down. Such a situation is often found in Bangladesh as English is spoken here with an intonation correlated to the mother tongue. Pronunciation is mistreated inside the classrooms in our country. This exploitation again correlates the facts of listening and speaking skills. Pronunciation is hardly given little or no room in the syllabi and curricula even (Habib, 2012).

Reading skill problems can also partially be attributed to the verity that English is one of the most inexplicable languages to learn. The inattention toward pronunciation may point out the fact that many teachers think that pronunciation teaching is not needed and that non-native teachers cannot teach native like pronunciation. In addition, teachers have already many things to do and pronunciation teaching will only add quandaries to their teaching. Therefore, the study affirms to create awareness among the EFL undergraduates about the Standard English sound patterns.

2. Objectives

After successful completion of the study the students will be able–

a) To recognize their places of mistakes in pronunciation and avoid those henceforth.
b) To develop the students' performance of EFL reading or speaking in the classroom.
c) To identify the reasons of frailties for Standard English pronunciation
d) To find out possible solutions for developing sound EFL pronunciation skills.

3. Review of Literature

Standard pronunciation no doubt is one of the most significant and inevitable parts of teaching English in particular and any other languages in general (Hayati, 2008). Notwithstanding pronunciation hardly receives sufficient importance in teaching as well as learning English at any level in Bangladesh (Maniruzzaman, 2008). As a consequence, students get little opportunity to practice English pronunciation, and hence have problems with it. Varshney (1985) declared in his book that the pronunciation of a language varies every six miles because of geographical and cultural reasons. The standard of pronunciation of two speakers may vary on the basis of their standards of education and living. In Bangladesh, the pronunciation also receives influence from the dialects. A villager may speak different from a man from the city. He added that

> The pronunciation of English also may vary from one country to another and one geographical entity to others (p.117).

Researchers like Sutter & Purcell (1980), also cited in Maniruzzaman (2008) have cast doubt on the teaching ability of pronunciation on the ground that pronunciation teaching has little, if any, effect on students' pronunciation skills. To them, classroom teacher has no control for the accurate pronunciation in EFL context. Proponents of this belief argue that acquiring a native like pronunciation is impossible and even not required in the Bangladeshi EFL context. Pennington (1989) however, did not take such belief into consideration saying that formal training on pronunciation can make a difference.

English as an international language hardly require the learning of native like proficiency or their norms. At the tertiary level in both public and private universities in Bangladesh, the English departments offer courses in English language, ELT, literature, discourse analysis, business English, and so on. Among the courses, a course in English 'Phonetics and Phonology' including some theoretical aspects of segmental and supra-

segmental is offered. Besides, one or two courses in English speaking and listening are taught. But English pronunciation practice appears to have inadequate attention in both teaching and learning. It is always difficult to desire the sound pronunciation among the EFL undergraduates who are non-native speakers of English. Moreover, standards of pronunciations vary from country to country and even area to area in any English-speaking region also. Besides, Mamun (2016) finds out complications in speaking acceptably attributable to two fundamental causes -

> one resulting from the differences between the mother tongue and the target language and the other from the teaching process basically constituted of the syllabus, the teacher, the teaching method, material, equipment and testing.

4. Methodology

The study used descriptive approach with utilization of qualitative methods such as direct interviews, observational studies and a questionnaire with existing information and case studies in the related field. Direct interviews and a questionnaire having two segments of ten different inquiries were administered to complete the study. 40 EFL undergraduates and 10 EFL teachers from four universities participated in the study to provide the relevant information. The teacher-participants participated in the direct interviews and a focus group discussion (FGD). The first part of the questionnaire was served to the student-participants for the insights of their perceptions toward sound EFL pronunciation. The second part was to bring out their internal perception of standard pronunciation. The data for the research study were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected directly from the EFL undergraduates of different universities. It has been considered that direct interviews always jeopardize the naturalness of the language use. That is why the researcher had to depend on the clandestine interviews and questionnaire observation.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. Reasons of Mispronunciation: Findings from Interview

'What are the practical reasons for mispronunciation among the Bangladeshi EFL undergraduates?' The question was asked to all the 50 participants. Among the participants, there were 40 undergraduate students and 10 EFL teachers. The table-1 depicts the result collected from participants' reply. The participants had several options to choose. They were also allowed to choose more than one options. The opinions of the participants were collected through direct interviews. The following table reflects the results.

Table-1: Practical reasons of mispronunciation

Options	Students' Viewpoints	Teachers' Viewpoints
Feeling shy, nervous or hesitated	36 (90%)	9 (90%)
Lack of confidence	26 (65%)	7 (70%)
Influence of dialect	12 (30%)	6 (60%)
Individuality [Bangla is enough]	17 (45%)	0 (0%)
Scarcity of materials	22 (55%)	10 (100%)

From the above table, it is clearly understood that 90% teachers and students admit that the learners feel shy, nervous or hesitated while speaking English in Bangladesh. 65% students and 70% teachers admit that our EFL learners lack confidence to pronounce English words freely. 30% students and 60% teachers depict the problem of dialectal influence for

mispronunciation of words. Surprisingly in the present global context, 45% students give their opinions that one of the most influential quandaries in learning English pronunciation is ego problem or the individuality about using own mother-tongue.

Many of our learners think that we should only learn Bangla in a standard way. English is a subsidiary subject to many of them. And 55% students and all the teachers opine that we have scarcity of materials for learning pronunciation. Some teachers added that most of our learners do not feel interest to learn standard pronunciation because of this.

5.2. Results of questionnaire

A questionnaire survey was administered among the participants to be acknowledged in the relevant data. First part of the questionnaire having five statements was provided to 40 EFL undergraduates to have their habitual perceptions of the EFL undergraduates regarding standard pronunciation. Several research works have been conducted earlier on pronunciation problems. So, the researcher has focused on some indispensable points in regards of questionnaire. The students were randomly selected from three private universities and one public university English background. The result of the first segment of the questionnaire is listed below.

Table-2: Perceptions of the EFL undergraduates about standard pronunciation

SL	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Standard English accent is quite impossible in Bangladeshi EFL context.	2 (5%)	4 (10%)	4 (10%)	30 (75%)	0
2	Sound pronunciation should be tested in public exams.	4 (10%)	9 (22.5%)	0	20 (50%)	7 (17.5%)
3	My teachers emphasize on learning standard English pronunciation while teaching English in the EFL classes.	0	20 (50%)	8 (20%)	12 (30%)	0
4	Local Bengali accent is the hindrance for our mispronunciation	7	14 (35%)	0	10 (25%)	9 (22.5%)
5	'Standard English' accent is significant for a better career in Bangladesh.	2 (5%)	20 (50%)	0	10 (25%)	8 (20%)

Table-2 uncovers that surprisingly 15% students believe that the standard EFL pronunciation is not possible in Bangladesh but it is prospective that most of the participants (75%) believe that Standard English accent is possible. A majority of the participants do not want pronunciation testing in public the exams. Half of the participants admit that their teachers emphasize on learning Standard English pronunciation though from the direct talks, they admitted that most of their teachers do not usually take necessary steps for that. Moreover, they informed that the teachers do not use technological support or language lab for improving students' pronunciation. Almost half of the participants still do not find the local accent as a hindrance for the mispronunciation though a majority of them consider the local accent as an obstacle to learn sound pronunciation. Though, more than half of the participants consider Standard English accent is significant for a better career in Bangladesh, some (45%) participants did not agree on this point. From direct talks, they informed that

Standard English accent is not needed in all sectors for making a better career because in the Bangladeshi job fields, a passable idea of English is enough for most of the jobs.

A perceptual analysis was also made in the second part of the questionnaire to be concerned about the interest of the undergraduates to learn British or American accent. But the result come out was indeed phenomenal where all the 40 participants answered spontaneously with no coyness. The result as follows:

Table-3: Internal perceptions of the EFL undergraduates about 'sound pronunciation'

SL	Questions	Options	Answer
01.	Do you consider the British or American accent attractive for your pronunciation learning? If not, why?	Of course, I consider.	16 (40%)
		I don't like native English.	0
		I prefer successful communication to using native English accent.	24 (60%)
02.	Do you like the sub-continental English accent?	Comparatively	34 (85%)
		Not at all	06 (15%)
03.	Which one do you prefer: grammatically correct speaking or fluent speaking?	Grammatically correct	17 (42.5%)
		Fluent	23 (57.5%)
04.	Why do you 'particularly' learn 'Spoken English'?	To communicate only	20 (50%)
		To present yourself before public	09 (20%)
		For a better career	11 (30%)
05.	Are you personally involved in any language learning activities to achieve standard EFL pronunciation skills?	Yes, I am involved in Personalized web-based Learning	14 (35%)
		No. I don't have such scopes.	20 (50%)
		To some extent or institutionally	6 (15%)

Table-3 depicts some unavoidable facts. The majority of the EFL undergraduates do not consider the British or American accent attractive for pronunciation. Most of them (60%) prefer successful communication to using native English accent. But comparatively, they like the sub-continental English with flexible accent (85%) though they do not prefer grammatically correct speaking for their day to day communication in a satisfactory level (42.5%). And most of them learn spoken English only to communicate (50%) or for better career (30%). Half of the students (50%) are not involved in any activity to learn pronunciation. From direct talks on this point, they admitted that they use social media for entertainment or keeping contact with surroundings but they do not usually use any pronunciation learning websites or learning applications. The EFL undergraduates are not interested to learn sound pronunciation in a British or American Accent.

6. Considerations

From the direct interviews with the participants and the questionnaire's result of this perception study, some specific and important constraints were found. The scarcity of materials, lack of confidence, over-simplification, inner voice conflict, lack of vocabulary, dialectal influence and the differences between Bangla and English came out as the most frequently faced constraints for which there need some considerations.

6.1. Metrology of teachers

Most of the EFL teachers of our country forlornly aren't quite accustomed to modern ways of teaching English except few. For getting utmost success in standardization of pronunciation teachers' metrology should bring under consideration. Especially, the learners

of the remote areas and the undergraduates of the 'National University' affiliated colleges are not perceptually getting the privileges of proper training on language development according to their words. The EFL teachers of Bangladesh in some cases tend to be unwilling to teach pronunciation. Khan (2007) asserts that most of the EFL teachers of Bangladesh do not know what strategies are appropriate to teach pronunciation as a result they simply avoid teaching pronunciation. To diminish such problems and to ensure smooth and optimal learning, proper measures should be taken to reduce the causes to a substantial extent. So, to correct the learners, the government should train the teachers in linguistics, phonetics and phonology first by arranging mandatory training programs for the language teachers.

6.2. Useful Learning tactics

The student should be taught in the manner in which he/she can learn what he/she has to learn. Hence is the importance of choosing and employing the right teaching method encompassing relevant materials, proper teaching techniques and exciting classroom activities. According to Maniruzzaman (2015), each student has individual style, personality, needs, and so forth; it follows that a single teaching method might not be appropriate and adequate for all the students in the classroom. As a consequence, the recent tendency has been towards eclecticism, choosing materials, techniques and classroom activities from various sources. With a view to achieving the end, both controlled practice and communicative practice as being complementary can be exploited in the classroom. To conduct controlled practice in teaching the linguistic elements, such as phonemes, word formation, sentence construction, etc, activities can be organized rule wise and implemented in a process possessing different stages. Only usual practice cannot ensure the student's communicative ability, we should involve the student in some meaningful, purposive and communicative activities, such as role-play, pair work, group work, etc to make learning interesting and motivating.

Tahereen (2015) depicted that 'read aloud' is a very common and easy strategy for both the learners and teachers to follow in class in order to develop intelligible pronunciation. A selected piece of writing which includes the difficult sounds for Bangla learners can be used in the class as a material. Students can read them aloud in front of the teachers. In this way, both teachers and students will be able to identify their limitations in pronunciation. Here, teachers can use some signs for showing the right direction of pronunciation while the student will be reading.

'Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)' can be utilized for encouraging autonomous learning. In this way, learners will be able to find out their own errors and mistakes, and check the segmental and supra segmental graphic representations. Teachers can use this method for showing the visual image of the sounds and symbols which can be very motivating. Maniruzzaman (2008) also agreed on this point. Teachers can also suggest pronunciation checking software which students can use inside and outside the classroom where computers and internet are available.

7. Conclusion

Though few courses related to English pronunciation are offered at the tertiary level in the English departments at the universities in Bangladesh, students get little opportunity to practice English pronunciation, and hence have problems with it. Therefore, the current study has reviewed the extent to which English pronunciation is taught and while learning pronunciation what types of problems learners encounter at the undergraduate and graduate levels in Bangladesh. To be certain, pronunciation should be considered an important element of EFL classroom instruction in Bangladesh context. It has been significantly noted above that

pronunciation is implicated in critical elements of communication such as speech intelligibility. Additionally, sound pronunciation is critical for students necessitating to pass standardized English tests such as the TOEFL and IELTS for entrance into colleges and universities in English-speaking countries, or when interviewed by entities such as the Foreign Service Institute which assesses not only a individual's grammar and vocabulary but also understanding, fluency and accent in verbal interviews. The educational system of Bangladesh is now progressing, but the teachers, the administration and education board tend to ignore some factors. They talk about real communication. But our speaking skill is neglected by our higher authority in the syllabus of all classes. There is no testing process where students have prospects to test their speaking ability and the ability of using standard accent. Even, they do not have any opportunity to practice speaking skill excluding few English medium schools. So, there is discrimination between English medium schools with Bangla medium schools. An English medium student can fluently speak as if he or she were a native speaker at the tertiary level whereas a Bangla medium student sometimes cannot produce a single word with the correct elocution after passing long twelve years of educational life. If sound pronunciation was introduced in primary schooling, our EFL students would acquire the facts of proper English accents and it would be relaxed for them to enunciate. So, this study urges the teachers and the authorities to appreciate the learning of sound EFL pronunciation skills through teaching Standard English at the early stage of education in Bangladesh.

References

Habib, R. B. (2012). English Pronunciation in Policy and Practice at College Level in Bangladesh. *MA Thesis*, Department of English, East West University.

Hayati, A. M. (2008). Teaching ESP in Iran: Problems and suggestions. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, Sage Publications, *7*(2), 167-183.

Khan, H. R. (2007). Problems of Oral Communication in English among Bangladeshi Students. *EWU Journal*, *1*:1-18.

Mahbub-ul-Alam, A., Damunupola, E. S. K. & Khan, M. E. I. (2016). Psycho-Social Quandaries of Young EFL Speakers in Bangladesh. *ASA University Review*, *10*(1), 95-108.

Mamun, M. (2016). English correct pronunciations: Problems and solutions. *The Daily Asian Age*, 15 November, 2016, p-6.

Maniruzzaman, M. (2008). Teaching EFL pronunciation: Why? What? And How? Munich, Germany: Grin Publishing.

Maniruzzaman, M. (2015). English Linguistic Problems of Bengali Speaking Learners. Web. Accessed on November 10, 2017. Retrieved from: http://www.streetdirectory.com

Pennington, M. (1989). Teaching pronunciation from the Top Down. *RELC Journal*, *20*(1), 21-38.

Roach, P. (2000). *English phonetics and phonology*. Cambridge: CU Press.

Tahereen, T. (2015). Challenges in Teaching Pronunciation at Tertiary Level in Bangladesh. *ELTS*, *3*(IJ-1), 09-20.

Varshney, L. R. (1985). *An Introductory Textbook of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Student Store: Bareilly, India.