Journal of ELT and Education
p-ISSN: 2618-1290, e-ISSN: 2663-1482, Volume 7, Issue 4, Page: 76-84
Published by, Center for Academic Research and Development (CARD)

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14253955

Realities of phoneme practices at the semi-urban primary schools in Dhaka district

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[**Citation:** Parvin, F., & Reza, M. M. (2024). Realities of phoneme practices at the semi-urban primary schools in Dhaka district. *Journal of ELT and Education*, *7*(4), 76-84.]

Abstract: This study intended to investigate how English phonemes are being taught and learnt by the teachers and students respectively at the primary level education in semi-urban area of Bangladesh. For this research, 45 students and 6 teachers purposively selected from three schools at semi-urban area in Dhaka district. Two sets of questionnaire were used to collect data from students and teachers of the semi-urban areas to explore their thinking or valuable opinions regarding the importance of learning and teaching English phonemes. Besides, three English classes (purposively taken) have been observed to shed light on the problems associated with teaching and learning English phonemes in the classroom faced by both the teachers and students. The findings have uncovered that both the teachers and students encounter many difficulties to teach and learn English phonemes respectively in their classroom. The study also concluded with some pedagogical suggestions to overcome those limitations.

Keywords: English phonemes, pronunciation, teaching, learning, primary level education

Introduction

The understanding of English sounds/phonemes is essential for the English language learners, specially the non-native speakers. Learning a language accurately needs to attain four skills-listening, speaking, reading and writing. Non-native speakers must know the intelligible pronunciation of words so that the listeners can comprehend the speakers. According to Morely (1991), intelligible pronunciation is a core part of communicative competence and without having perfect pronunciation skills learners fail to communicative effectively. Underhill (2010) mentions that teaching pronunciation and development of interesting teaching materials in this area is often neglected. He recommended that teachers should do their best to integrate its practice in most of the lessons imparted for learners. Most of the teachers are unaware of the importance of pronunciation. Harmer (2001) states that many teachers do not pay enough attention to English pronunciation. In Bangladesh, students of primary level face a lot of problems in making correct pronunciation as well as understanding the accents of teachers who come from different parts of the country. Because of social and geographical limitations, teachers even make wrong pronunciations and that is why students do not know the correct pronunciation. In the 'English for Today', the text book for Class-V in the traditional Bengali medium and English version curriculum, writers have included different vowel and consonant sounds with a view to introducing the art of correct pronunciation. However, teachers use their own ways to teach the chapters, exercises, questions and answers but unfortunately the sound part is overlooked. Maniruzzaman (2008) states that pronunciation hardly receives sufficient importance in teaching as

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well as learning English at the primary, secondary and tertiary level in Bangladesh. That is, why the present researchers consider that a study is needed to determine the significance of teaching phonemes in an EFL country like Bangladesh, especially at the primary level.

The purpose of this study was to take account of the extent to which English pronunciation is taught, and what types of problems teachers and learners face at primary level in the semi-urban area of Dhaka district while teaching and learning of pronunciation take place at classroom situation in reality. The study also measures the strengths and weaknesses of both the teachers and learners and attempts to recommend necessary action plan for its development.

The general objective of the research was to empirically investigate the overall teaching and learning processes of English Phonemes in classroom situations at Primary Level, specifically class V in semi-urban areas of Bangladesh. The specific objectives of the study were (i) to discuss the nature and importance of the phonemes theoretically and its relevant teaching techniques, (ii) to evaluate the English syllabus of class v and analyze the contents relating phonemes, and (iii) to investigate the constraints of teaching and learning English Phonemes at classroom situations.

Literature Review

Pronunciation plays pivotal role in communication. Effective pronunciation requires mutually intelligible pronunciation (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). Pronunciation is important for both listening and speaking. To acquire good pronunciation one must have some basic knowledge of sound system. Learning pronunciation of a foreign/second language requires proper understanding of the phonetic system of that language. According to Gimson (1989), the phonetic elements for English may conveniently be divided into two categories: the segmental elements (the vowel and the consonant sounds) and the prosodic elements (accentuation and intonation). In any language there are a small number of regularly used sounds (vowels and consonants) which are known as phonemes. For example, the vowels in the English words ‘tin’ and ‘ten’ are different phonemes and so are the consonants at the beginning of the words ‘bad’ and ‘sad’. So, a phoneme is the smallest functional unit of the system of sounds of a language. Segmentally English has 44 phonemes. Each sound is known as IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) phonemes. Out of 44 phonemes, 20 are vowels and 24 are consonants. 20 vowels are divided again into 12 pure vowels or monophthongs and 8 diphthongs (combinations of two vowels).

Gilakjani (2012) pondered that understandable pronunciation is one of the basic requirements of learners’ competence and also an important feature of language instruction. It cannot be denied that pronunciation is an inseparable part of language and it must be prioritized while learning English. In teaching pronunciation, the main goal is not acquiring a native-like pronunciation but it is to be comfortably intelligible, and this means that people understand what you are saying at the first time.

Khan (2007) mentioned that the intelligibility of the spoken language highly depends on pronunciation. Gilakjani (2011) focused on the point that English has some sub-skills among which pronunciation is the most important. Despite the fact that pronunciation is an integral component of communicative competence, this subskill has always been neglected in Bangladesh (Maniruzzaman, 2008; Khan, 2007; Hoque, 2010, Howlader, 2010). Maniruzzaman (2008) added that English pronunciation hardly receives any significance at different education levels in Bangladesh.

Regarding to this thesis, the decision to focus on primary level learners is based on two reasons. Firstly, it is commonly accepted that age is a factor that affects the learning of pronunciation; in fact, children up to 12 years of age seem to have a higher sensitivity to phonetic detail in speech than older learners, and therefore are presumably better at imitating what they hear (Slattery & Willis, 2001). Secondly, as Nixon and Tomlinson (2005, p. 9) claim, “it is much easier to teach and correct pronunciation at an early stage in the learner’s development than it is to correct time-compounded pronunciation errors at a later one”. These two points suggest that phonetic training for primary school teachers is very important; in fact, “it is vital that children receive a good model of pronunciation from the very beginning of their foreign language experience” (Dawes & Iavarone, 2013, p. 82).

Teaching pronunciation is being neglected at every level of education in Bangladesh (Moniruzzaman, 2008). In term of English language teaching (ELT) in Bangladesh among the four skills, listening and speaking skills have always been neglected and as a result pronunciation is also being neglected (Tahereen, 2015). Howlader (2010) argued that pronunciation is also neglected in the syllabus, materials and classroom activities. Sadia (2015) stated that teachers do not give emphasize on pronunciation skill. The teachers have little idea of different approaches to teach pronunciation. Besides, they do not get enough time to work on students' pronunciation problems.

English is a compulsory subject at the primary level of education in Bangladesh. The objective of teaching English at primary level is to enable students to understand simple commands, instructions and requests in English and carry them out (Hossain et al., 2015). However, at primary level, the speaking and listening skills of English have never been given the focus to be taught and tested (Tahereen, 2015). In term of English Language Teaching (ELT) at primary level little or no room is given to pronunciation as oral skills are not being tested (Sultana, 2013). Khan (2007) mentions 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. So, this study attempted to observe to what extent the pronunciation practice is neglected and what existing status of pronunciation (strengths and weaknesses) remains among students and teachers. However, it is surprisingly true that pronunciation carries an important link to communication through listening and speaking (Gilbert, 1984). People cannot ignore the importance of learning pronunciation as the receptive (listening) and productive (speaking) skills which heavily depend on intelligible pronunciation. So the study investigates how the ignoring of pronunciation affects the children as beginners.

In the planning and execution of English teaching in Bangladesh, pronunciation is rarely focused (Akter, 2005). In this connection Amanullah (2007) rightly maintains that teaching pronunciation is not only neglected but also totally absent in the teaching and learning English in our country. Amin (2004) emphatically puts forward that pronunciation practices are completely neglected even by the English teachers at every level in Bangladesh.

Several studies have been done on English pronunciation at different levels' students of Bangladesh. But there is hardly any study found on teaching and learning English phonemes at the primary level. So, this study intended to shed light on the present state of teaching and learning phonemes at the semi-urban primary schools in the Dhaka district of Bangladesh. It also tried to unveil the problems encountered by the students.

Methodology

Sampling and Participants

To investigate the process of teaching and learning English phonemes to the students of primary level, this study has been employed a mixed method (both qualitative and quantitative) in designing the research. The study has been carried out among 45 students of class 5 and they have been selected using random sampling technique for the purpose. The subjects included in this study were selected from 3 primary schools in semi-urban area in Dhaka. The study also incorporated 6 teachers. Teachers were selected using random sampling techniques.

Data Collection and Analysis Process

This research has been conducted on the basis of primary and secondary data. For this the primary data sources were: questionnaire survey and classroom observation. To obtain the previous and latest information regarding this study, the researchers used books, journals, articles and related websites as secondary source. The researchers designed two sets of questionnaires both for the students and teachers to collect quantitative data. Each questionnaire comprises fifteen items presented in the question format (wh- and yes/no questions) and accompanied by alternatives answers. Students were provided the questionnaire during their class periods. Necessary information for completing the questionnaire was provided in Bangla to facilitate a better communication. Teachers' questionnaire was given to them when they were free in their room. There was apparently no time restriction to

respond to the items in the questionnaire; however, it was expected that they should finish within twenty minutes. Teachers and students were requested to give the answer carefully. Researchers also observed three English classes considering the following factors- the number of students, size and condition of classrooms, medium of instructions, method of teaching, class room activities, teaching of the basic language skills, pronunciation, lesson aids etc. To analyze the data for this mixed-method study, triangulation approach was used. According to Bryman (2010) triangulation refers to the use of more than one approach to the investigation of a research question in order to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. Collected data are presented in texts, figures, charts and graphs.

Findings and Discussion

Reports of the Survey on Teachers

Having Knowledge on Correct English Pronunciation

In regard to the answer to the first question, having a correct English pronunciation is deemed as a vital factor for teaching English at the level of primary education by all the teachers.

Learning English Phonemes

The second question receives a positive response from the all teachers. They hold the opinion that knowing how to pronounce the English words in the correct manner is a fundamental requirement for successful communication.

Effectiveness of Present Syllabus

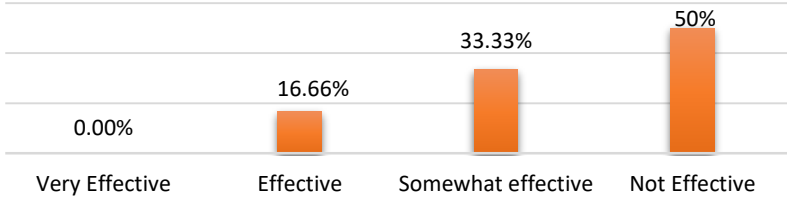


Fig 1. Effectiveness of present syllabus

According to the bar chart shown above, 50% teachers do not consider the present syllabus effective in teaching English phonemes. However, 33.33% teachers view it to be somewhat effective. The present syllabus is found effective by 16.66% teachers and there is no response for very effective.

Teaching English Phonemes

All the teachers claim to teach their students how to recognize the English phonemes by following the text books.

Teaching Material

There is a 100% response to this question as all the teachers confirm that in order to teach English phonemes/sounds, they use the text book as the sole teaching material.

Problem Faced by the Teacher

While teaching English pronunciation all the teachers have faced some problems such as interruption of L1, lack of listening input, lack of students' motivation, and shyness of students.

Emphasize on English Phonemes

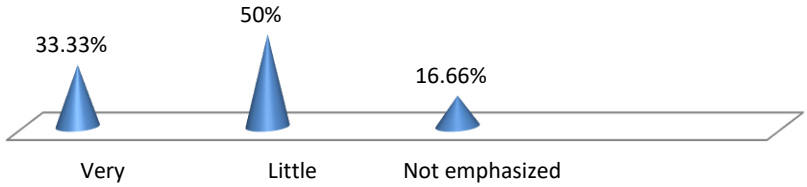


Fig 2. Emphasize on English phonemes

According to the response from the participants, 33.33%teachers state that they put emphasis on the usage of English phonemes in their classes. 50% of them give little emphasis and lastly, only 16.66% say that they do not give any emphasis on teaching English phonemes

Classroom Activities

In response to the question as to what classroom activities are followed to teach English phonemes, 33% teachers say that they prefer to give activities that focus on improving reading and speaking compared to the 66.66% who only give the reading activities. It is notable that here no listening activities have done in the classroom.

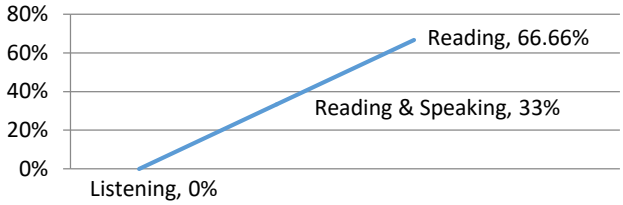


Fig 3. Steps taken to improve English pronunciation

Complex Relationship between Spelling and Pronunciation

All teachers say yes, students face difficulties with complex relationship between spelling and pronunciation. Examples like: enough, cough, talk, often, listen.

Students' Average Level of Performance

50% teachers say their students display a good level of classroom performance. 33.33% find it to be acceptable while 16.66%believe it to be poor. It has been clearly shown from the above chart that among all the respondents no one put their response on excellent and very poor about the students' average level of performance.

Text Book

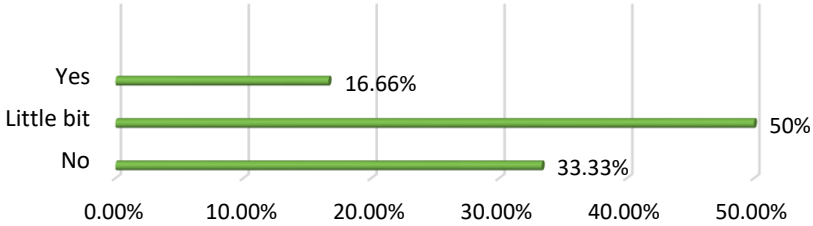


Fig 4. Text Book

A major portion of 50% among the teachers believes that the text book is little bit sufficient for teaching English phonemes. And 33.33% teachers disagree with this view. Only 16.66% claim that they find it to be totally adequate.

Teaching Instruction

It is found that teachers receive little instruction from NCTB concerning the part that deals with identifying sounds.

Encouragement of Learning

All the teachers confirm that they always encourage their students to learn English phonemes.

Training

Regarding the answer to this question, all the teachers have a negative response as they say that they do not get any sort of training on pronunciation.

Needs of Training

All the teachers consider it as absolutely essential to do the training on English sounds.

Reports of the Survey on Students

Knowledge about Learning English Phonemes

44% students know how to learn English phonemes but 56% do not have any idea about it.

Importance of Learning English Phonemes

51.11% respondents opine that learning English phonemes is important for communicating in a more efficient way. 44.44% say to get better job. And remaining 4% make no comments.

Opportunities of Learning English Phonemes

88% students' response is that they don't have any opportunities for learning English Phonemes in the classroom. Others say they watch cartoon, read story book, English movie.

Usage of English Language in Teachers' Lecture

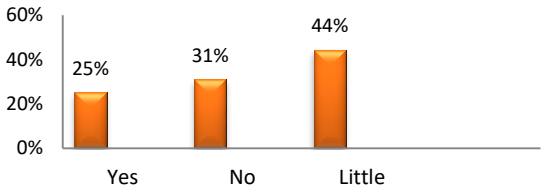


Fig 5. Usage of English language in teachers' lecture

44% students say that their teacher uses little English when delivering their lectures. 31% give a negative reply in contrast to the meager portion of 25% who affirmatively responded to the question.

Understanding Teachers' Pronunciation

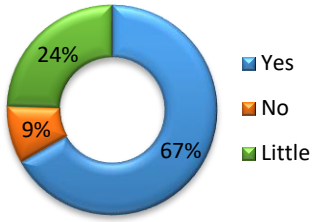


Fig 6. Comprehensibility of teachers' pronunciation

The above pie chart reveals that 67% students say yes, 9% students say no and 24% students say little regarding to understand the teacher's pronunciation.

Emphasis Given on English Pronunciation

While teaching English teachers give emphasis on pronunciation or not in answer to the question only 38% students say yes, 29% say no, 31% say little and 2% students make no comments.

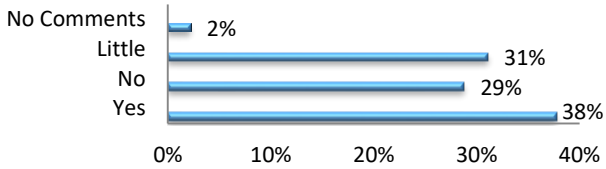


Fig 7. Emphasis Given on English Pronunciation

Follow the Text Book

Among all the respondents, 38% students consent that their teachers follow the text book to teach English sound, 22% say no, 40% say little.

Familiarity with Stress Syllable and Intonation

Only 22% students say that they are familiar with the stressed syllable and intonation, 47% students are completely unknown of that and 31% students have little knowledge on it.

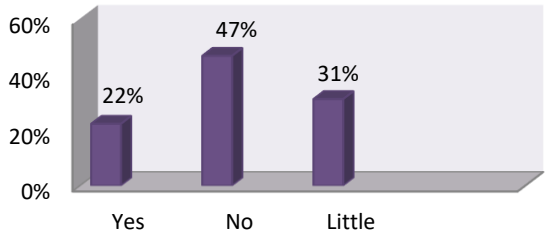


Fig 8. Familiarity with stress syllable and intonation

Classroom Activities

67% students claim they do not have any classroom activity on English Pronunciation. Only 11% students say yes, they do some activities on pronunciation and 22% students say little.

Use of Language in Class

All the students say that they use both Bengali and English languages in their English class.

Difficulties in Pronunciation

18% students find pronunciation difficulties in most of the words they encounter at their academic level. 60% students have problem with some words and 22% students find it easy to pronounce all the words of English in their academic level.

Enjoying English Class

Among all the students, 40% say that they enjoy their English class, 24% say little and 36% say they do not enjoy the class.

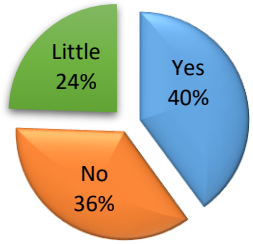


Fig 9. Steps taken to improve English pronunciation

Steps Taken to Improve English Pronunciation

The chart below has shown 29% students watch cartoon in English regularly, read story books and practice speaking with their friends to improve their English pronunciation. 33% students try little to develop their pronunciation. However, 27% students do not know how to improve their English pronunciation. And 11% students make no comment.

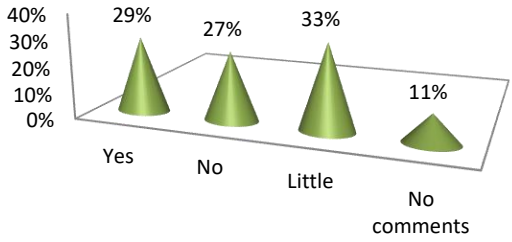


Fig 10. Steps taken to improve English pronunciation

Problems in Learning English Pronunciation

90% students face the same problems regarding pronunciation. These are: they can't pronounce long words easily, sometimes they find there is no relation between spelling and pronunciation.

Expectation from Their Subject Teacher

Students feel if their teachers take video class, it would be easier for them to follow the language. Teachers can take extra class on pronunciation and can give more exercise based on it. Language lab can be set up in their school for practice.

Classroom Observation Report

The researchers observed three English classes from three schools of semi-urban areas in Dhaka district to get the real scenario of teaching and learning of English Phonemes at the primary level education in Bangladesh. The key findings of classroom observation are as follows:

- Classroom environment is not suitable for the language teacher to teach English phonemes as the size of a class is big. The class size is too large according to the number of students (45-50) which is not standard for language class. Moreover. a chaotic environment exists inside the classroom.
- There is no multi-media or projector in the class. Teacher use the blackboard/whiteboard.
- Most of the time both teacher and students use Bangla in their class room.
- Students feel shy to speak in English and teachers do not force them to speak up with English.
- There is no listening-speaking based class. Teachers prefer to give only reading activities to the students.
- Teachers make the correction of the pronunciation if students do any wrong pronunciation while they read something from the text.
- Teachers do not provide any IPA chart in the classroom and students a**r**e unfamiliar with this term.
- As a teaching material teachers only use the textbook. They only put emphasis on reading and writing skills and ignore listening and speaking as there are no questions set from this part.
- Classes are mainly teacher oriented. They focus only to prepare their students for the exam.
- Grammar-translation method has been used.
- Due to lack of motivation and seriousness students' pronunciation is not up to the standard.
- A teacher has a class period of only 50 minutes to teach a class and due to time constraint its quite impossible to correct the errors of the students' pronunciation.
- The interruption of L1 is the main reason of the students' poor pronunciation.
- As there is no question is set for the exam on pronunciation teachers do not give importance on that part rather they pay more attention to complete the syllabus.

Recommendations

The study was an attempt of sketching out a picture of teaching and learning English Phonemes at the primary level students in semi-urban area and the problems that the teachers and students face and finding out its solutions. On the basis of the findings, the following recommendations can be made:

- If English phonemes are introduced in primary education, learners will get the knowledge of sounds and it will help them to pronounce the English words easily.
- Training facilities should be increased for the teachers.
- Education ministry should give priority in facilitating English Language teaching in rural area.
- Teacher supervision and monitoring in the English classroom should be increased.
- Class size should be favorable.
- Teaching materials on pronunciation should be available for the teachers in rural areas.
- Teachers must be friendly and encouraging. They should try to remove the marks of local accent of the students and developing native-like pronunciation.
- Teacher must have well planned lesson and remove the fear of English from the students.
- Communicative approach should be followed. Both teachers and student must use English in the classroom ignoring the fear of mistakes.
- Teachers should help the students in order to acquire acceptable accent of the target language.
- The pronunciation of the teacher should be a good model to the students, otherwise; students will imitate bad pronunciation and lead (making mistake).
- Teacher should encourage the learners to work and speak with each other to improve their pronunciation.
- Computer assisted learning should be encouraged to promote learners' pronunciation.
- English syllabus must concentrate on English songs to improve learners' pronunciation performance.

Conclusion

Correct pronunciation is considered an essential part of language fluency. Learning a language needs to know the sound system of that particular language. If English phonemes are introduced in early education, learners will get the knowledge of sounds and it will be easy for them to pronounce the English words. The present text book of English language ignores the sound parts though there are some activities on it. In Bangladesh where the students learn English compulsorily for twelve years, nowhere in this long curricula are anything which focuses on pronunciation. The public examinations are completely devoid of any mechanism to test the candidates' ability to speak the language or comprehend spoken English. In consequence, English learners in Bangladesh are unbelievably negligent towards pronunciation accuracy. However, further research can be conducted at the secondary or higher education levels regarding the teachers' and learners' needs in teaching and learning English phonemes in the language classroom.

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