

Teaching Pronunciation at Tertiary Level in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Pronunciation is the way to give a word an oral or aural shape which is measured as one of the most significant skills of language. For non-native speakers, English pronunciation is considered one of the most tough problems. At the same time, in Bangladesh, teaching English pronunciation is measured one of the most difficult parts of ELT. This paper focuses on the challenges confronted by English teachers at the tertiary level to teach pronunciation. This research also tries to focus on the teaching strategies for teaching pronunciation. For collecting data, a survey was conducted and a set of questionnaires was used for teachers. In this survey, 22 English language and literature teachers from various universities took part. Finally, some contextual solutions have been suggested to solve problems of teaching pronunciation in the EFL classroom.

Keywords: *Pronunciation, tertiary level teaching challenges, teaching strategies.*

Introduction

The English language is known as a global lingua franca which is growing into gradually significant all over the world (Panggabean, 2015). Pronunciation is considered as a fundamental component of communicative ability. Moreover, successful communication takes place only through correct pronunciation (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Besides, for second language learning, pronunciation is measured as an integrated and integral element (Maniruzzaman, 2008). One of the elementary requirements of learners' competence is intelligible pronunciation that is also considered one of the most

significant characteristics of language instruction. Fraser (2000) mentions that "With good pronunciation, a speaker is intelligible despite other errors; with poor pronunciation, understanding a speaker will be very difficult, despite accuracy in other areas" (p. 7). In Bangladesh, English stands as a second language; thus, it is not expected that native-like speaking will be achieved by a non-native speaker. Still, non-native speakers of Bangladesh should be looked forward to produce comprehensible pronunciation (Howlader, 2011). However, most of the tertiary EFL learners do not have the proper sense of pronouncing English correctly. Thus, for English teachers, teaching correct pronunciation is also problematic.

Problem Statement

In communicative language teaching, all four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening are equally important. Among the four skills of the English language, speaking is the most neglected one in Bangladesh and inside and outside the classroom in Bangladesh this is a less practised. In this regard Tehreen (2015) argued:

At primary (class 1-5), secondary (class 6-10) and higher secondary level (class 11-12), speaking and listening have never been the focus to be taught and tested. Therefore, emphasis on pronunciation never comes explicitly or implicitly at these levels. Consequently, teachers at the tertiary level find it challenging while dealing with these students who have no experience in practising speaking and listening (p. 9).

Literature Review

The Importance of Teaching English Pronunciation

Pronunciation plays a significant role in ELT in Bangladesh. In this regard, Howlader (2011) says “Foreign learners studying in English-speaking countries, international businesspeople, diplomats, immigrants, tourist guides, and EFL/ESL teachers teaching in different countries need a high level of intelligible pronunciation” (p. 274). In the current digital world, one must perform a lot of presentations with intelligibility of pronunciation to deliver the message correctly (Ahasan, 2016). People are often judged by the way they speak, thus, learners with poor pronunciation skill could be measured as incompetent, uneducated, or lacking in

knowledge. Besides, good language skills can be masked by poor pronunciation, learners can be condemned to less than their deserved social, academic, and work development (Barman & Basu,2013).

English has an internationally accepted standard form of pronunciation which is traditionally called the King’s or Queen’s English or BBC English that is also referred to as RP (Received Pronunciation). Australian or US standard English may be slightly different (Barman & Basu,2013). Nonetheless, apart from Australia and the USA, English is now prominently used in many other countries of the world. At present, English consists of an unlimited number of accents or varieties. Although, some specific models of pronunciation were recommended by many linguists in the past, at present, comprehensibility and intelligibility are given much focus rather than “perfect pronunciation”. As a matter of fact, the near-native pronunciation is nearly unachievable for many ESL learners in the world (Tehreen,2015).

Challenges of Teaching Pronunciation

Teaching reading, writing, listening, and to some extent, general oral skills are more comfortable to teachers but in the case of teaching pronunciation, the elementary knowledge of articulatory phonetics are lacked by them (Maniruzzaman,2008). According to Harmer (2001), to the importance of English pronunciation much attention is not paid by many teachers. Instead of emphasizing teaching pronunciation, they pay more attention to teaching vocabulary and grammar. In teaching pronunciation in Bangladesh, teachers face a lot of challenges. Some of them have been discussed in the following points.

Interference of Native Language

According to Mostafa (2010), in pronouncing certain phonemes of English, it is very natural to face problems for Bangladeshi learners. The reason is Bangla is a syllable-timed language, on the other hand, English is a stressed-timed language. It has been identified that; finding two languages with identical sound patterns is very occasional. Thus, it is very tough to teach students the sound patterns of the target language(L2) by the teachers of foreign languages. As a matter of fact, each language possesses its own characteristics and interrelated mouth positions. In the case of pronouncing L2, students attempt to produce the sound keeping their mouths formed and their tongues positioned like similar sounds in their native language. In English, length distinguishes vowel sounds of /i: i, ə: ə, u: u/. Bengali speakers do not distinguish between long and short vowels. For instance, Bengali speakers pronounce /ful / and /fu: l/ in the same way. On the other hand, if the sound patterns have similarities with the L2, pronunciation gets easier (Barman & Basu, 2013).

For Bengali speakers, pronouncing different sounds of the English language is problematic. For example, there is no equivalent of the Bengali /o/ sound in English. Thus, the English diphthong /əʊ/ is usually pronounced by the Bengali speakers as Bengali /o/ (Kabir et al., 2011).

In the Bengali language, there are eighteen diphthongs which are shorter than eight English diphthongs. Thus, Bangladeshi learners cannot utter English diphthongs with proper length.

Interference of Dialects

Interference of dialects also creates barriers to pronunciation learning. In Bangladesh, by non-native English speakers, various local dialects with different pronunciations and intonation are used. For the interference of local pronunciation, Bengali speakers from diverse local backgrounds pronounce words with dialects. For example, the people of Barisal often make mistakes in pronouncing words beginning with ‘B’ and ‘V’, both in English and Bengali. For Example: They pronounce ‘bery good’ instead of ‘very good’. Again, In the Noakhali dialect, a fricative sound like English /f/ substitutes the bilabial plosive /p/. For example, They pronounce ‘fious’ instead of ‘pious’, ‘fure’ instead of ‘pure’. At the same time, in Chittagong and Sylhet the unvoiced velar aspirated plosive /kh/ is pronounced as a fricative sound. (Hoque,2010). For example, they pronounce ‘khite’ instead of pronouncing ‘kite’, ‘khidney’ instead of ‘kidney’ and so on.

Hearing Problem

Listening and speaking are interrelated. A good listener is a good speaker. If the listeners cannot hear English well, they do not understand it easily, and they are cut off from conversation. Thus, they cannot pronounce some sounds in English. For instance, there is no equivalent of /o/ in English. Therefore, Bengali speakers generally pronounce Bengali/o/ in the place of English Diphthong/ (Hasan, 1997).

Overlooking the Significance of Incorporating Teaching Pronunciation by the Curriculum / Syllabus Designer

The curriculum/ syllabus designer has knowingly or unconsciously overlooked the

exclusion of EFL pronunciation from the curriculum/ syllabus. Thus, the curriculum or syllabus designer's qualifications, expertise, and integrity could be questioned (Maniruzzaman, 2008). The correlated sub-skills of pronunciation: listening skill and speaking skill get very little importance in the syllabus and curriculum which is the major cause behind the challenge of teaching pronunciation (Howlader, 2011). Thus, in the education system of Bangladesh speaking, listening, and pronunciation are always getting ignored in the education system of Bangladesh (Haque & Baki, 2012).

Fossilization

While teaching pronunciation, some teachers face the problem of fossilization. Fossilization occurs when learners' progress is stuck at a point, and it becomes difficult to make further progress. In this case, Tehreen (2015) states that the influence of local accents affects learners' English pronunciation. As a result, learners develop wrong pronunciation practice for a long time. For example, students pronounce finger as /finjər/ not /finggər/ even after knowing that /finjər/ is wrong. It is very difficult for them to change their habit (Grandyna, 2018).

Lack of Teacher Training

Most of the time, EFL/ESL teachers are inadequately trained in teaching pronunciation pedagogy which reduces their confidence. According to Derwing and Munro (2015, p. 390) "teachers may develop some teaching strategies that actually have little or no value or that may be counterproductive". In the case of teaching EFL pronunciation, most teachers do not know appropriate strategies and techniques to meet specific problems.

According to Baker (2011), in order to become resourceful pronunciation instructors a single pronunciation training course may have a great impact that enhances teachers' knowledge and self-confidence.

Age Factor

According to Lenneberg's (1967), (as cited in Habib 2011). after the critical period hypothesis (CPH) which is up to the age of 12, attaining total mastery of a second language gets difficult, specifically pronunciation. Second learners start to lose their capability to attain native-like pronunciation after puberty (Barman & Basu, 2013). According to Lenneberg's (1967), (as cited in Habib 2011), Critical Period Hypothesis, adults are not capable to attain native-like fluency. This hypothesis is strengthened by the Communicative Language Teaching methodology. Therefore, the age factor becomes a very challenging task for the teachers to teach pronunciation.

Strategies to Solve Pronunciation Problems

Reading Aloud

Reading aloud is an easy and common strategy for EFL learners to identify mistakes in pronunciation and develop intelligible pronunciation. A writing piece including tough sounds for Bengali learners is a good source as material (Ali, 2019). Teachers can ask the students to focus on stress, timing, and intonation. Teachers may give students different genres like, speeches, poems, plays, or dialogues for practicing pronunciation. After hearing the general mistakes in the students' pronunciation, oral corrective feedback can be given by the teachers, in order to progress EFL learners' pronunciation. Teachers can

utter the pronunciation correctly and ask the students to pronounce the mispronounced words repeatedly.

Using Dictionaries and Smartphones

Using dictionaries helps students to check the accurate pronunciation if they know phonetic transcription. By using this strategy, students see the visual shape of pronunciation (Grandyna, 2018). Besides, by using smartphones tertiary level students can be allowed to listen and check their pronunciation by downloading numerous software (BoldVoice: Learn Pronunciation, ELSA Speak, Say it: English Pronunciation, English Pronunciation) on their smartphones (Tehereen, 2015).

Communication Activities

Teachers can design communication tasks and activities for tertiary EFL learners, for example, dialogue, situational conversations, role play, and debate according to their linguistic level. Rehearsing drama and debate gives learners a varied scope to practice and correct pronunciation (Tahereen, 2015).

Computer Assisted Language Learning

Computer Assisted Language Learning or CALL permits learners to listen their own pronunciation to identify errors and mistakes and identify segmental and suprasegmental graphic representations. CALL also aids the learners in studying at their own pace and permits the instructors to monitor learners' improvement in EFL pronunciation. Furthermore, teachers can visually display speech patterns to teach intonation, stress, and phonemes to learners (Maniruzzaman,

2008). Teachers can also suggest students' pronunciation checking software where devices and the internet are available (Tahereen, 2015).

Visual Aids

Visual aids enhance teachers' report of how sounds are shaped by audio-visual aids for example: sound-color charts, Field wall charts, rods, pictures, mirrors, props, realia etc. Besides, to learn pronunciation, students can watch videos which also help them to learn body language and gestures. Students can watch movies with subtitles to learn pronunciation. Students can also watch YouTube to serve this purpose (Barman and Basu, 2013).

Working with Sounds and Spellings

According to Ur (1991), teachers can dictate the words with similar spelling problems of complete sentences. Teachers can also have a set of pairs of words differ from each other. Moreover, teachers can show the students the phonemic chart to highlight the links between the alphabetical spelling of words with pronunciation.

Methodology

In order to collect data, this research uses a survey method. The research is a mixed study being a combination of qualitative and quantitative. Therefore, a mixed method (both qualitative and quantitative) has been employed. Primary and secondary data have been collected to conduct the study. In order to collect primary data, a questionnaire survey has been adopted. The source of secondary data will be research publications, journals, articles, thesis, books etc. Three private

universities (Stamford University Bangladesh, East West University, and Green University Bangladesh) have been selected for the survey. After analysing the data, the responses have been calculated in percentages. The aim of the research is to recognize the problems challenged by teachers with students teaching pronunciation. This study also intends to identify some solutions to solve pronunciation problems.

Data Collection Methods and Tools

For collecting data, a set of questionnaires has been prepared for teachers. The questionnaires for teachers contain 4 fixed alternatives and one open-ended question. In the open-ended question, the teachers have been requested to deliver their valuable recommendations. After the survey results have been collected, the calculated responses are converted into percentages and shown in a table.

The Respondents

In order to conduct the questionnaire survey, twenty-two undergraduate teachers from the Department of English of Stamford University Bangladesh, East West University, and Green University Bangladesh were randomly selected.

Instruments

To collect quantitative data, a questionnaire methodology has been implemented for the teachers. The questionnaire has been intended for the teachers and contains 4 fixed alternate questions to elicit teaching pronunciation at the Tertiary Level in Bangladesh and one open-ended question where teachers are requested to provide their valuable remarks

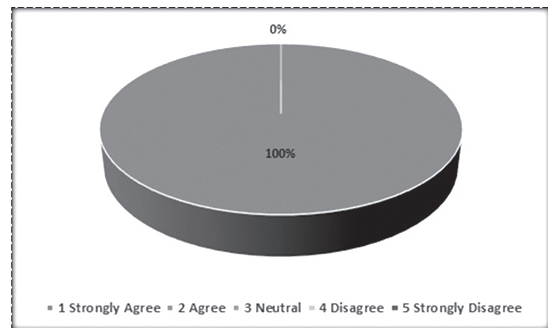
and recommendations. Two tables a few pie charts and bar charts have been used to explain the collected data.

Findings

The primary purpose of the study is to observe the responses from the questionnaire designed for teachers.

The first question is set to determine whether tertiary-level students face problems in pronouncing English words correctly. In reply, it has been found that 100% (22) of teachers think that tertiary-level students face problems while pronouncing English words correctly.

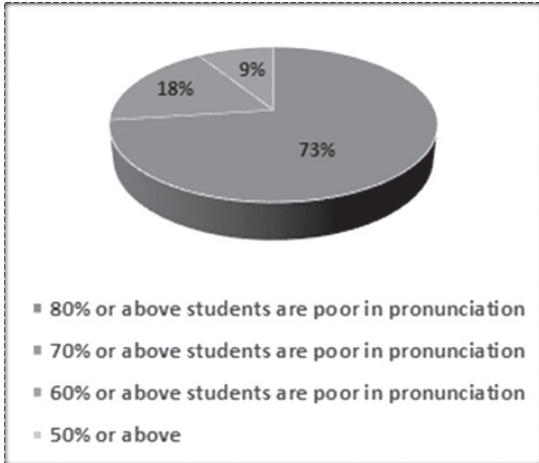
Figure 1: Whether tertiary level students face problems in pronouncing English words correctly.



The second question is set to find out if the percentage of students in the class are really poor in pronunciation. In reply, it has been identified that 72.73% (16) teachers have opined that 80% or above students are poor in pronunciation, 18.18% (4) teachers have replied that 70% or above students are poor in pronunciation, and 9.09% (2) teachers think that 60% or above students are poor in pronunciation.

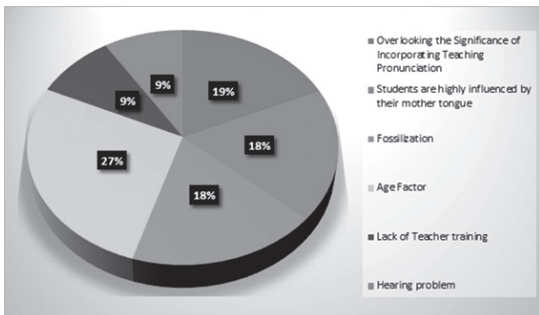
Figure 2: The percentage of students in the class with really poor pronunciation

In the third question the teachers are inquires to know what the problems they face in teaching pronunciation. In reply it has been



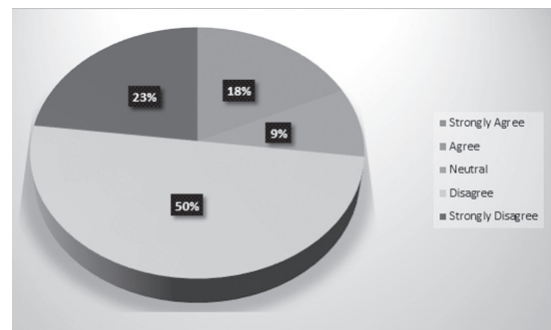
identified that 18.18%(4) teachers think that overlooking the significance of incorporating teaching pronunciation by the Curriculum / Syllabus Designer, 18.18% (4) teachers have selected that students are highly influenced by their mother tongue, 18.18%(4) teachers have opined that fossilization,27.27%(6) teachers have identified that age factor,9.09% (2)teachers have replied that lack of teacher training, 9.09%(2) teachers have identified that hearing problem is the barriers teachers face in teaching pronunciation.

Figure 3: Problems faced by the teachers in teaching pronunciation



The following question is prepared to know whether teachers get enough logistic support for teaching pronunciation. In reply, 18.18% (4) teachers have agreed,9.09% (2) teachers have remained neutral,50% (11) teachers have disagreed, and (22.72%)5 teachers have strongly disagreed about getting enough logistic support for teaching pronunciation.

Figure 4: Whether teachers get enough logistic support for teaching pronunciation



The last question is asked to get the valuable suggestions of tertiary teachers to improve the English pronunciation of Tertiary students in Bangladesh. In reply, few teachers have replied that students require to practice English consonants and vowel sounds properly. Besides, students need to learn when they have to put stress on words. Moreover, students have to listen to Native English speakers’ conversations through audio, video, news, and movies. One teacher has suggested teaching learners’ vocabulary and grammar. A number of teachers have said to incorporate teaching pronunciation in the curriculum and enable teachers to acquire the necessary skills in teaching pronunciation. Besides, some teachers have suggested emphasizing the usage of technology in teaching pronunciation. Few teachers have suggested using the facility of the language centre to improve students’ pronunciation. Some teachers have recommended that students enact dramas and

practice more pronunciation sessions. One teacher has suggested that both the teachers and students need to create an English-speaking environment to enhance the English-speaking environment. Another teacher has opined that students need to practice English consonants and vowel sounds and when stress should be given to words.

The following table shows the questions asked to the teachers and their responses:

Question Topic	Responses				
1. Whether tertiary-level students face problems in pronouncing English words correctly	Yes 100%		No 0%		
2. The percentage of students in the class really poor in pronunciation	80% or above students are poor in pronunciation 73%		70% or above students are poor in pronunciation 18%	60% or above students are poor in pronunciation 9%	
3. Problems faced by the teachers in teaching pronunciation	overlooking the significance of incorporating teaching pronunciation by the Curriculum / Syllabus Designer 18%	students are highly influenced by their mother tongue 18%	Age factor 27% Fossilization 18%	Lack of teacher training 9%	Hearing problem 9%
4. Whether teachers get enough logistic support for teaching pronunciation	Agree 18%	Neutral 9%	Disagree 50%	Strongly Disagree 23%	

Recommendations

Based on the findings, and the open-ended question designed for the teachers, the next recommendations can be suggested. The implementation of these recommendations may help to bring about some optimistic changes while teaching pronunciation at the tertiary level in Bangladesh.

Teaching pronunciation in the curriculum should be incorporated. At the same time,

teachers should be enabled to acquire the necessary skills in teaching pronunciation. Teacher training is essential to teacher development. In Bangladesh, our teachers are rarely trained in teaching, let alone pronunciation. Conditions in the rural and remote areas are terrible.

While teaching a particular topic, teachers can spend a few extra minutes teaching pronunciation with difficult vocabulary. Students should practice the sound with the teachers repeatedly to correct the pronunciation.

Teachers should pronounce the sound clearly and slowly so that all the students comprehend the articulation. If required, teachers have to repeat the pronunciation several times.

Teachers should primarily identify the needs and problems of the students. Then, based on the requirements of the students, teachers should provide appropriate learning materials to help them to recover students' pronunciation problems.

Students need to practice English consonants and vowel sounds properly. Simultaneously, students need to learn when to give stress on words. In order to develop this practice students, have to listen to Native English speakers' conversations through audio, video, and movies.

There should be enough logistic support given to the teachers to operate the classes smoothly. Audio and visual technology should be incorporated into teaching pronunciation. At the same time, more technological equipment should be used in the classroom.

In order to improve speaking skills, teachers should focus on teaching slow speech with correct English pronunciation. Moreover, more importance should be given to teaching pronunciation by giving proper attention to phonetics. In order to improve English pronunciation, all the universities should have the facility of a language centre to improve students' pronunciation.

Teachers should engage the students in sufficient pronunciation tasks and activities. More pronunciation practice can be incorporated in the classroom. Teachers should identify the pronunciation problems and correct them.

Conclusion

This research tries to find out the difficulties teachers experience in teaching pronunciation at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. It also aims to identify some remedial measures and feedback to solve pronunciation problems. While teaching pronunciation, teachers should give more emphasis on selecting appropriate teaching materials, giving required directions, and creating consciousness among the learners about speech production. All the educational stakeholders- teachers, students, syllabus designers, material developers, and education policymakers should deliberately work together to solve the problems with pronunciation. Furthermore, in teaching pronunciation, a teacher must perform the role of a guide and facilitator in order to make students involved.

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