Teaching and Learning Pronunciation in ESL/EFL Classes of Bangladesh

Nusrat Jahan

Department of English, Daffodil International University

102, Shukrabad, Mirpur Road, Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1207, Bangladesh

Ph: +8801741131112   E-mail: nusrat-diu@daffodilvarsity.edu.bd

Abstract:

The main concern of this paper is to explore the approach of teaching pronunciation at tertiary level in Bangladesh. Like other ESL countries, students' poor pronunciation becomes the cause of anxiety for the teachers. Importance of teaching pronunciation cannot be denied because, our students are mostly from Bengali medium where achieving good pronunciation is neglected. So, at tertiary level, ESL teachers should help their students to develop their pronunciation skills. Without learning correct pronunciation other aspects of English language like grammar, vocabulary become useless. This present study aims to find out the difficulties that teachers and students face in learning and teaching pronunciation at tertiary level in Bangladesh. For the study purpose questionnaire survey was conducted with a view to knowing teachers' point of view. To know the students' point of view, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was arranged in Dhaka. The participants were the students of different universities of Bangladesh.

Keywords: Articulatory Phonetics, Phonology, International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as a Second Language (ESL), Suprasegmental Features.

1. Introduction:

Pronunciation teaching is the most complicated but significant aspects of ESL/EFL teaching. In the process of communication, pronunciation has great importance because successful communication takes place only with correct pronunciation. Bad pronunciation of English will make people misunderstand the speaker easily, whereas, good pronunciation will encourage them to listen the speaker willingly. Nunan (1991) has mentioned that teaching of pronunciation is dealt from different point of view because influence of first language seems prominent in case of pronunciation and only gifted learners can attain the mastery over pronunciation, though they start learning language after puberty.

Pronunciation includes supra-segmental features and they are: sounds of the language, stress and rhythm, intonation as Lindsay says. Each language has a great number of possible sounds. For example: English has forty-four distinctive sounds, whereas in English there are twenty-six alphabets. Since alphabets are not able to show the difference between different sounds like 'th' in this, that and 'th' in thank, throw. These difficulties can be removed by introducing International Phonetic Alphabets (IPA). Robertson (2003) has especially said about the needs of the Asian students. According to him Asian students should practice with identifiable areas of speech, i.e. country specific complex sounds, cluster problems, th' words, linking words and sounds. So, teachers and learners require achieving essential knowledge on those sounds, especially the sounds related to English language.

In language classrooms, use of correct English stress and pitch pattern will help the students to improve the production of vowel and consonant sounds. Incorrectly articulated consonants and vowel sounds affects one another. Teachers often concentrate only on teaching difficult sounds' articulation and allow the class to produce native-like sounds, though this endeavor does not work among the learners after the semester. Accurate pronunciation helps students to achieve goal in communication, i.e. their utterance can be understood by the audience clearly and easily and they will also be able to understand native speakers' conversations. But achieving accuracy in pronunciation does not become so easy for the students and teaching pronunciation seems to be difficult for the teachers. Therefore, the present study was designed to explore the difficulties Bangladeshi students and teachers face while they work with pronunciation and from the result of the study few recommendations has been provided.

2. Review of the Literature:

It is not possible for ESL learners to achieve a perfect native like accent. If their pronunciation can easily be understood by the competent speakers of English, communication process will be successful. To have native like pronunciation is quite hard because immigrants living in a country for twenty years can have a 'foreign accent' than can cause the difficulty to comprehend their speech. (Rivers 1968) Exercises may be designed to help students discriminate sounds which are causing them difficulty, once the kind of problem involved has been identified. (Rivers & Temperley1978)

On building awareness and concern for pronunciation, Kenworthy (1987) has referred,

> " … English pronunciation has various components such as sounds, stress and variation in pitch, and the learner needs to understand the function of these as well as their form… Learner also needs to develop a concern for pronunciation. They must recognise the poor, unintelligible speech will make their attempts at conversing frustrating and unpleasant both for themselves and for their listeners." (p.27)

To develop pronunciation, importance should be given on suprasegmental features like stress, rhythm and intonation as Morley (1999) referred that their use not just to complement meaning but to create meaning.

Pennington and Richards (1986 as cited in Nunan: 1991) describes the current status of   research on teaching pronunciation from the perspective of Communicative Language Teaching. They suggest focusing on a long-term goal for teaching pronunciation. Pronunciation should be taught as an integral part of oral language use and teaching should aim to reduce the amount of native language influence. As pronunciation is linked to listening vocabulary and grammar, Teacher should highlight these interdependent factors. While integrating pronunciation into other program, we should concentrate on the error in phonological forms, those can make problem to comprehend. Kenworthy (1987 as cited in Nunan: 1991) have identified six main factors affecting pronunciation learning. These are:

1.   The native language
2.   The age factor
3.   Amount of exposure
4.   Phonetic ability
5.   Attitude and identity
6.   Motivation and concern for good pronunciation

Similarly, Jones (1972) finds out few difficulties regarding to pronunciation. He refers that a student must learn to recognise instantly the various speech sounds and learn to remember the acoustic qualities. Students have to make the foreign sounds with their own organ of speech. besides, it is also a difficulty that students must learn to use the sounds in proper places with accurate usage of pitch, stress and length. Rapid and stumble free pronunciation level should have to be acquired by learners. To overcome the problems, the necessity of 'ear-training' i.e. if the learners' ear is good by nature, learning pronunciation can be successful:

> "The possession of a good ear involves (1) ability to discriminate between sounds, (2) ability to remember the acoustic qualities of foreign sounds, and (3) ability to recognise foreign sounds with ease and certainty." (Jones 1972, p. 3)

So, non-native speakers, who want to achieve fluency and accuracy in speaking, should concentrate on some techniques related to speech mechanism and that will help them to pronounce the sounds of English language.

3. The Study Method:

3.1. The Study Participants:

For the questionnaire survey, fifty-one teachers were selected from private and public universities in Bangladesh. The universities surveyed were University of Dhaka, National University, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Daffodil International University, Stamford University Bangladesh, State University of Bangladesh, Northern University, Eastern University, and World University of Bangladesh. The data were collected in June 2008. The teachers who were the respondents had either taught a particular course on developing pronunciation in English or delivered instructions on how to improve pronunciation in their EFL classes. And the students who participated in discussion were from various Faculties like Faculty of Business and Economics, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science and Faculty of Science and Information Technology.

The questionnaire for teachers (see Appendix-I) consisted of eight multiple choice questions. The questionnaires were pre-tested several times before gathering data. The data collected from the teachers were scored by hand. The researcher was present while collecting data and when group discussion was held. Students (see Appendix-II) are also asked some common and some different questions to compare and contrast the opinions and the comments have been notified carefully.

3.2. The Survey Results and Analysis:

The first question asked the teachers are they satisfied with the students' pronunciation level while they start English language class. 8% teachers said they were satisfied with the students' pronunciation level, while 60.78% teachers, the majority, said they were dissatisfied with the students' pronunciation. 23.53% teachers ticked the option 'Strongly Dissatisfied', while no one ticked the options 'Strongly Satisfied' and 'Neutral'.

The second question asked how many students of their class were really poor in pronunciation. Here, 7.84% teachers ticked '80% and above'. 19.61% teachers ticked '70% and above'. 37.26% teachers, the majority, ticked the option '60% and above'. Besides, 25.49% answered '50% and above' and 9.80% teachers ticked the option 'Less than 50%'.

The third question asked the teachers if they spend a significant amount of time in providing instruction to improve their pronunciation. 92.16%, the majority ticked the option 'yes' and only 7.84% teachers responded negatively.

The fourth question asked the teachers what were the problems they face in teaching pronunciation. Here, 14 out of 51 teachers marked that they were not able to understand their students' poor pronunciation. That is, 27.45% teachers were not able to understand students' poor pronunciation. 21.57% teachers ticked the option 'Students don't understand you because they are not a good listener'. The majority of teachers that is 41.18% opined that students were highly influenced by their mother tongue. On the other hand, only 5.88% teachers said that students were reluctant to improve their pronunciation and 3.92% marked the option 'Others'.

The fifth question asked the teachers what kinds of help they provided for improving their students' pronunciation. Here, 37.45% teachers marked that they teach their students how to use dictionary. 15 out of 51 teachers, that is, 29.41% ticked that they detected students' wrong pronunciation in class and correct immediately. Only 3.92% said that students used audio/video taps in class.13.73% teachers said they arranged a group discussion where peers are allowed to detect their partners fault. 15.69% teachers said they taught the students phonetics and phonology in detail.

The sixth question asked what kinds of materials the teachers use in teaching pronunciation. The majority, 68.63% answered that they use particular text book. 31.37% answered that they provide hand out while they taught the students pronunciation.

The seventh question asked the teachers what was the most common activity that they followed while teaching pronunciation in language class.35.29% teachers, the majority, said they followed the activity 'imitation of sound and repetition of drills'. Only 5.88% teachers ticked the option 'self-correction through listening to recordings of own speech'. 25.49% teachers favored the students to perform dialogues. 21.57% teachers taught their students pronunciation by rhymes or songs. 11.76% teachers taught pronunciation by practicing tongue twister.

The eighth question asked the teachers do the students improve their pronunciation at the end of the course. The majority,64.71% of the teachers ticked the option 'yes' and 35.29% teachers' answer were negative.

3.4. Focus Group Discussion:

In discussion with the students of different public and private universities in Dhaka, some problems of learning pronunciation have been identified. Students, who participated in this discussion, have a variety of background from different parts of the country.

First of all, students were asked of their background of studies. Most of them come from small towns where learning English is only restricted to the classroom. Besides, one student[2] commented that they did not get proficient English teachers at Secondary and Higher Secondary level. Now at tertiary level, they had faced difficulties to understand teachers' lectures as most of the teachers speak English in classroom.

All the students felt the necessity of learning pronunciation. Some students[3, 4, 9] argued they felt shy while practicing drill or when their teachers criticized them and made a correction of their pronunciation at tertiary level. In an answer to a question of the activity they like best, almost all the students said that they liked 'Tongue Twister'.

A student[1] commented that learning English sounds from IPA chart was less interesting and stressful, while most of the students showed their interest on knowing IPA symbols. One of the students said they need more classes for learning pronunciation. Students[7, 8] from University of

Dhaka commented on their foundation course. They were satisfied with the book provided by Department of English.

In our country, spoken English is an area of learning which is particularly underdeveloped. Many teachers mispronounced words, creating confusion. A student[5] who completed his SSC and HSC outside Dhaka disclosed the fact.

4. Major Findings:

From the above analyses, it has been observed that most of the teachers (60.78%) are dissatisfied with the students' pronunciation level while they start English Language class at tertiary level. In the discussion, students also admit that they are not happy with their pronunciation level and then they commented that they did not get proficient teachers. This view is supported by Sadek, Ahmed & Begum (2006:57). In their study, they referred that there is no oral practice in the class room in rural primary schools and the students are also very shy about trying out any skill in the class room. It has been observed that students cannot overcome their shyness at tertiary level also, as some of the students admit in the discussion that they felt shy while practicing drill or when their teachers criticized and made a correction of their pronunciation. Moreover, the study revealed that 7.84% teachers found 80% of their students are really poor in pronunciation, while 37.26% teachers thought 60% or above students are really poor in pronunciation. In the discussion, students also expressed their view that they felt the necessity of improving their pronunciation.

Next, a good number of teachers (41.18%) admitted that their students are highly influenced by their mother tongue. Only 5.88% teachers replied that students were reluctant to improve their pronunciation. Through the discussion among students, it was also clear that some students did not want to practice as they felt shy while 21.57% teachers claimed that students did not understand their lectures because they were not a good listener. Gilbert has given importance on listening comprehension:

> "If they cannot hear English well, they are cut off from the language…if they
> cannot be understood easily; they are cut off from conversation with native
> speakers." (Gilbert 1984, p.1)

Students' poor pronunciation was also a barrier to understand the students and thus communication process did not work.

After that, for improving students' pronunciation, 37.45% teachers taught them how to use dictionary. In a good dictionary, IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols with stress, intonation are found after every word. If teachers help them to know the IPA symbols in the dictionary, students will learn how to pronounce new words without teachers' help. (Lindsay 2000) It is noticeable that 15.69% teachers preferred teaching Phonetics & Phonology in detail. In discussion, some students felt IPA symbols interesting to learn. Further, 29.41% teachers detected students' wrong pronunciation in class and then corrected it immediately, whereas 13.73% teachers preferred arranging a group discussion, where peers are allowed to detect their partner's fault.

Only 3.92% teachers are able to use audio or video taps in class. Anderson-Hsich (1994) stated that suprasegmentals like stress, rhythm and intonation can be taught effectively by visual and auditory feedback. Lindsay (2000, p.219) also refers the importance of using visual aids in pronunciation practice. While teaching pronunciation most of the teachers (68.63%) were dependent on particular text book while some teaches preferred to provide hand out. In discussion with students, it was also clear that students also preferred a reliable text book.

During teaching pronunciation in language classes, majority of the teachers liked the activity 'Imitation of Sounds and Repetition of Drills'. While describing some techniques for teaching pronunciation, Dalton (1997) showed some exercises based on repetition are given. A good number of teachers liked 'Performing Dialogue' while teaching pronunciation. Some teachers opted 'Rhymes or Songs' as Lindsay (2000, p.113) states that in many traditional songs and rhymes there are regular 'stress-timing'. 'Tongue Twister' was also a favorite activity among the teachers. Students enjoyed 'Tongue Twister' most. Lastly, most of the teachers said that students' pronunciation level was improved at the end of the course.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation:

From the above findings it can be said that language teachers should give the priority to help the students develop their pronunciation skill. If the students' vocabulary and grammar are up to the mark, but his/her utterance cannot be understood, all the efforts of learning English will be useless. So, learners should put extra effort on achieving good pronunciation and teachers should help the learners in this respect. On the basis of above analyses, it can be recommended that:

1. During teaching a particular topic, teachers should spend few minutes on teaching pronunciation of a new and difficult vocabulary. Students should practice with the teacher and teacher will correct their pronunciation if necessary.
2. Teachers have to employ some funny methods during teaching pronunciation so that learners enjoy every moment while learning and participate spontaneously in class activities.
3. Teachers should not feel shy to correct their students' pronunciation. At the same time, learners also should not feel shy. They have to keep practicing until they pronounce correctly.
4. The teachers should have well equipped knowledge in recent technologies and apply those while teaching pronunciation. Applying audio-visual aids will certainly help the students to improve their pronunciation.

5. Teachers should focus on individual students while group activities are performed in the class. Often students with bad pronunciation remain hidden in the group.

6. Teachers should introduce IPA symbols accurately in language classroom so that student can learn how to pronounce new words without the teacher's help. Suprasegmental features also should be taught in the class.

7. If the students feel really trouble with particular sound, teachers should explain the way of articulation of that particular sound and let the students imitate again and again until they achieve success.

8. Teachers should speak clearly and slowly in pronunciation class and they have to make sure that their language is standard and understandable. Thus, students can improve their pronunciation only listening their teachers carefully.

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Appendix: 1 (Questionnaire)

Personal Details: Name: …………..

Designation : ……………

Institution: …………….

1. Are you satisfied with the students' pronunciation level while they start English Language Class? (Tick the best answer)

       a.   Strongly Satisfied
       b.   Satisfied
       c.   Neutral
       d.   Dissatisfied
       e.   Strongly Dissatisfied

2. How many students of your class are really poor in pronunciation?

       a.   80% or above
       b.   70% or above
       c.   60% or above
       d.   50% or above
       e.   Less than 50%

3. Do you spend a significant amount of time in providing instruction to improve their pronunciation?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

4. What are the problems you face in teaching pronunciation?

☐ You are not able to understand your students for their poor pronunciation.
☐ ☐ Students don't understand you because they are not a good listener
☐ ☐ Students are highly influenced by their mother tongue
☐ ☐ Students are reluctant to improve their pronunciation
☐ ☐ Others (Write in one sentence)

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………………..

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

5. What kinds of help do you provide for improving your students' pronunciation?

☐   Teach them how to use dictionary
☐   Detect their wrong pronunciation in class and correct immediately
☐   Use audio/ video taps in class
☐   Arrange a group discussion where peers are allowed to detect their partners fault
☐   Teach them phonetics and phonology in detail.

6. What kinds of materials do you use in teaching pronunciation?

☐ Particular text book   ☐ Hand out

7. What is the most common activity that you follow while teaching pronunciation in language class?

☐   Imitation of sound and repetition of drills
☐   Self-correction through listening to recordings of own speech
☐   Performing dialogues
☐   Learning by rhymes or songs
☐   Practicing tongue twister

8. Do the students improve their pronunciation at the end of the course?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

Appendix-II

Table 1

Question	Choices	Number	Percentage
Are you satisfied with the students' pronunciation level while they start English Language Class?	Strongly Dissatisfied	0	0
	Satisfied	8	15.69
	Neutral	0	0
	Dissatisfied	31	60.78
	Strongly Dissatisfied	12	23.53

Table 2

Question	Choices	Number	Percentage
How many students of your class are really poor in pronunciation?	80% or above	4	7.84
	70% or above	10	19.61
	60% or above	19	37.26
	50% or above	13	25.49
	Less than 50%	5	9.80

Table 3

Question	Choices	Number	Percentage
Do you spend a significant amount of time in providing instruction to improve their pronunciation?	Yes	47	92.16
	No	4	7.84

Table 4

Question	Choices	Number	Percentage

What are the problems you face in teaching pronunciation?	You are not able to understand your students for their poor pronunciation.	14	27.45
	Students don't understand you because they are not a good listener	11	21.57
	Students are highly influenced by their mother tongue	21	41.18
	Students are reluctant to improve their pronunciation	3	5.88
	Others	2	3.92

Table 5

Question	Choices	Number	Percentage
What kinds of help do you provide for improving your students' pronunciation?	Teach them how to use dictionary	19	37.45
	Detect their wrong pronunciation in class and correct immediately	15	29.41
	Use audio/ video taps in class	2	3.92
	Arrange a group discussion where peers are allowed to detect their partners fault	7	13.73
	Teach them phonetics and phonology in detail.	8	15.69

Table 6

Question	Choices	Number	Percentage
What kinds of materials do you use in teaching pronunciation?	Particular text book	35	68.63
	Hand out	16	31.37

Table 7

Question	Choices	Number	Percentage
What is the most common activity that you follow while teaching pronunciation in language class?	Imitation of sound and repetition of drills	18	35.29
	Self-correction through listening to recordings of own speech	3	5.88
	Performing dialogues	13	25.49
	Teaching by rhymes or songs	11	21.57

	Practicing tongue twister	6	11.76

Table 8

Question	Choices	Number	Percentage
Do the students improve their pronunciation at the end of the courses?	Yes	33	64.71
	No	18	35.29

Focus Group Discussion (FGD):
List of participants
21 May 2011

1.   Mr. Abdullah Al Mehedi : Student of Level 1, Department of Civil Engineering, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET)
2.   Mr. Nizamul Imran Khan : First year student of National University
3.   Mr. Shabab Haider Siddique: Student of Electronics and Tele-communication Engineering (level 2 Term 1), Daffodil International University
4.   Ms. Tamanna Noor : Student of Electronics and Tele-communication Engineering (level 2 Term 1), Daffodil International University
5.   Ms. Jerin Tasnim : Student of Electronics and Tele-communication Engineering (level 2 Term 1), Daffodil International University
6.   Mr. Faysal Mahmud : Student of Electronics and Tele-communication Engineering (level 2 Term 1), Daffodil International University
7.   Mr. Abdullah Al Mamun: Second year Student of History Department, University of Dhaka
8.   Ms. Farhana Azad : Second year student of Institute of Education and Research, University of Dhaka
9.   Ms. Mohona Barua : Student of Business Administration (5th Semester), World University of Bangladesh
10.   Mr. Asif Iqbal : Student of Business Administration (5th Semester), World University of Bangladesh

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