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# The effect of pronunciation instruction on students' overall speaking skills

Isil Atli <sup>a\*</sup>, Ayfer Su Bergil<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup>Instructor, Ondokuz Mayıs University, Samsun 55139, Turkey<sup>b</sup>Instructor, Amasya University, Amasya 05100, Turkey

## Abstract

Pronunciation is neglected in the majority of language classrooms. English teaching practitioners avoid dealing with pronunciation skills for different reasons. Likewise, the lack of attention allotted to pronunciation is also reflected in the amount of research that deals with it. This study aims at finding out whether pronunciation instruction influences students' overall speaking ability. In order to do this, the researchers will give 20 ELT students a pre-test in which they will be asked to tell a picture strip story which elicits problematic sounds for Turkish learners of English. After a 5-week pronunciation instruction, the post-test will be conducted to determine the influence of pronunciation instruction on students' pronunciation skills. Furthermore, in an attempt to reveal students' self-perception of pronunciation, a questionnaire will be administered at the end of the 5-week period. The obtained data will be analyzed via SPSS 15.00.

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## 1. Introduction

Pronunciation emerged as a field of systematic study towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when International Phonetic Association was established in 1886. Since then, the emphasis allotted to pronunciation teaching in ESL/EFL classrooms has been subject to fluctuations. While traditional methods such as Grammar-Translation and Reading-Based Approach neglected pronunciation teaching completely and considered it irrelevant to language teaching, in subsequent methods such as Oral Approach and Audiolingualism, it had a more central role. Likewise, from 1940's to 1960's, pronunciation teaching was of primary importance in the English Language Teaching Curriculum. Although each method was at a different end of the continuum in terms of the techniques used, they were similar in the way that they focused on the segmentals. Today, contemporary methods value pronunciation. They operate around the assumption that "... there is a threshold level of pronunciation for nonnative speakers of English; if they fall behind this threshold level, they will have oral communication problems no matter how excellent and extensive their control of English grammar and vocabulary might be" (Celce-Murcia& et. al. 2010: 8).

Regardless of the changing trends in or attitudes towards pronunciation teaching, it has always been acknowledged that pronunciation is a fundamental part of one's oral ability in the target language. Currently, discussions about the

\* Işıl Atlı

E-mail address: [isilatli@omu.edu.tr](mailto:isilatli@omu.edu.tr)

goals of pronunciation teaching often revolve around the concepts of *intelligibility* and *comprehensibility*. Intelligibility refers to “the degree to which a listener understands a speaker” and comprehensibility is “a judgment of how easy or difficult an individual’s pronunciation is to understand” (Derwing, 2010: 29). Many researchers now highlight the importance of intelligibility and comprehensibility over a native-like accent. It is argued that “..... with an increasing focus on communication,.... it (has become) of critical importance to provide instruction that enables students to become, not ‘perfect pronouncers’ of English, ..... but intelligible, communicative, confident users of spoken English for whatever purposes they need” (Jenkins, 1998: 489).

According to Celce-Murcia et. al. (2010), “teachers of English as a foreign language who are not native speakers of English and who expect to serve as the major model and source of input in English for their students” fall within the group of learners who need pronunciation instruction whereby they can achieve a high level of intelligibility and comprehensibility. Today, pronunciation instruction is an integral part of the curriculum in English Language Teaching (EL) programs in Turkish universities. In these programs, freshmen students are offered “Listening and Pronunciation I and II” courses during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> semesters. These are a three-hour credit courses and aim at equipping students with basic phonetics skills at the segmental and supra-segmental level, such as the usage of the phonetic alphabet, word stress, rhythm and intonation.

However, upon winning a place in an ELT program in a Turkish university, majority of students fail in English Proficiency and Placement tests administered at the beginning of the academic year mainly due to their insufficiency in productive skills such as speaking and writing. These students are, therefore, required to attend a 1-year compulsory preparation program before they start studying in their faculties. The primary purpose of preparation programs is to help students improve their general proficiency levels and skills in English via an intense skills-based program. In most preparation programs, pronunciation teaching is integrated into other skills classes. However, at Ondokuz Mayıs University, ELT preparation class students are required to take a two-hour pronunciation class each week. Via these classes, prospective English teachers are provided with assistance in pronunciation in order to improve their communicative competence and also performances in listening speaking classes. The purpose of this paper is to find out whether pronunciation instruction influences speaking skills of ELT preparation class students’ at Ondokuz Mayıs University and to investigate students’ self-perceptions of pronunciation skills.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Participants*

The population of this study consists of randomly selected 20 ELT preparation class students at Ondokuz Mayıs University School of Languages during the fall term of the academic year 2011-2012. The number of female and male participants is respectively 12 and 8, and their ages range between 18 and 24. All the participants are native speakers of Turkish. None of them had pronunciation classes, lived or studied in an English speaking country before they started the preparation program. Although the majority of the participants- 14 of them- have been studying English for or longer than 9 years, the number of years they have been studying English ranges between 4 and 10 years.

### *2.2. Data Collection*

The aim of this study is to find out whether pronunciation instruction has an effect on overall speaking skills of ELT prep. class students at the School of Languages of Ondokuz Mayıs University, and to investigate students’ self-perceptions of pronunciations skills and attitudes towards pronunciation instruction.

For the purposes of this study, at the beginning of academic year 2011-2012, 20 ELT prep-class students were given a picture strip story which they were asked to describe in their own words. Through the picture strip story, the researchers attempted to elicit the target vocabulary items shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Target Vocabulary Elicited Through the Picture Strip Story

Part of Speech	Target Sounds							
	/ɪ/	/æ/	/ɑ:/	/ʊ/	/ɒ/	/ɔ:/	/θ/	/ð/
Nouns	biscuit	hand	arm	cookie	coffee		bathroom	
	lip	tap					mouth	
Verbs	bit			put	wash	wash		
	spilled							
Other		back				all		then

While each student told the story whose length changed between 30 seconds and 1 minute, the researchers recorded their voice through a voice recording device. The researchers, then, transcribed the stories, and detected the problematic sounds and words for the subjects of the study. Following the recording of the story, the students were asked to attend a 2-hour pronunciation course for 5 weeks. During these classes, the participants studied The Phonetic Alphabet, simple vowels of English and two problematic consonants /ð/ and /θ/. At the end of the 5-week period, they were asked to re-tell the same picture strip story, and the descriptions were re-recorded by the researchers. The transcriptions of recording 1 and recording 2 were compared by the researchers in an attempt to investigate the effects of pronunciation instruction.

In addition to the recordings, a questionnaire on pronunciation skills has been developed. The questionnaire is in 5-point Likert Scale format and consists of 20 items that assess students' perceptions of pronunciation skills and classes. The questionnaire was first conducted on a sample group that is similar to the target group during the spring term of academic year 2010-2011. Upon the administration of the items, the reliability of the items has been calculated through Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS). Analysis of the items has shown that the reliability of these items is .84 according to Cronbach Alpha. Finally, the questionnaire was given to the participants of the study at the end of the 5-week pronunciation course. The frequency of the items has been analyzed via SPSS, and the results have been presented in tables.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Analysis of Recordings

The first and the second set of recordings have been analyzed. Mispronounced target words, the frequency of mispronunciation and the way the target words were pronounced by the participants have been represented in the below given table.

Table 2: Frequency of Errors in Recording 1 and Recording 2

Target Words	Recording 1			Recording 2		
	Frequency	Frequency of Errors	Transcription of Participant Production	Frequency	Frequency of Errors	Transcription of Participant Production
<i>All</i>	14	8	*/ɒl/	14	5	*/ɒl/
<i>arm</i>	17	0	---	18	0	---
<i>back</i>	12	12	*/bek/	13	11	*/bek/
<i>bathroom</i>	13	13	*/betrom/	13	4	*/betrom/
<i>biscuit</i>	11	10	*/biskuit/	11	7	*/biskuit/
<i>Bit</i>	10	1	*/bi:t/	9	1	*/bi:t/
<i>coffee</i>	15	11	*/kʌfi/	14	9	*/kʌfi/
<i>cookie</i>	8	0	---	9	4	*/ku:ki/
<i>hand</i>	5	5	*/hend/	5	3	*/hend/
<i>Lip</i>	13	1	*/li:p/	13	2	*/li:p/
<i>mouth</i>	6	6	*/mout/	6	2	*/mout/
<i>put</i>	4	0	---	4	0	---
<i>saw</i>	10	9	*/sɔ:w/	10	8	*/sɔ:w/
<i>spill (v2)</i>	9	0	---	9	0	---
<i>tap</i>	2	2	*/tʌp/	2	2	*/tʌp/
<i>then</i>	10	10	*/den/	10	10	*/den/

As is shown in Table 2, analysis of Recording 1 has revealed that the participants do not seem to have difficulty in pronouncing one-syllable words such as *arm*, *put* or *spilled*. However, the vowel sounds in other one-syllable words such as *back*, *hand*, *mouth*, *saw*, *tap* and the consonant in *then* have been mispronounced by all the students that attempted to use the word. The reason of inaccurate production of the sounds in these words may be the absence of certain vowels and consonants in participants' mother tongue. Similarly, /θ / sound in the word *bathroom* seems to be the source of difficulty for students. Of 13 students who used the word *bathroom* in their stories, none of them were able to say the word accurately. Other two syllable words that were mispronounced are *biscuit* and *coffee*. For these words, the source of error in student production may result from the similarity of vocabulary items in English and students' native language. The only two-word syllable word that was pronounced correctly is *cookie*.

An Analysis of Recording 2 has revealed some similarities between Recording 1 and 2. One- syllable words, *arm*, *put* or *spilled* have been correctly pronounced by all the participants in both recordings, and the number of students who mispronounced the words *bit*, *tap* and *then* has not changed. However, the number of errors has decreased in majority of the vocabulary items. To be more precise, the number of participants who mispronounced the words *all*, *back*, *bathroom*, *biscuit*, *coffee*, *hand*, *mouth* and *saw* has fallen respectively to 5, 11, 4, 7, 9, 3, 2 and 8. It is also seen that there have been an increase in the error frequency of some words. While the vocabulary item *cookie* was not mispronounced by any of the participants in Recording 1, it was pronounced incorrectly by 4 students in Recording 2. Similarly, the number of participants who mispronounced the word *lip* has increased from 1 to 2.

### 3.2. Analysis of Questionnaires

Items in the questionnaire have been classified into two groups as items assessing participants' self-perceptions of pronunciation skills and those assessing students' attitudes towards pronunciation classes. There are 12 items that belong to the former group and 8 items that fall into the second group of items.

Table 3: Participants' Self-Perceptions of Pronunciation Skills

Item No	Statement	Agree		Undecided		Disagree		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1	I am happy with my pronunciation.	6	30	2	10	12	60	20	100
2	Before I started taking pronunciation classes, I was aware of all sounds of English.	2	10	3	15	15	75	20	100
3	Before I started taking pronunciation classes, I was able to produce all sounds of English correctly.	2	10	3	15	15	75	20	100
5	I am aware of different sounds of English.	11	55	5	25	3	15	19	95
6	I can make different sounds of English.	10	50	8	40	2	10	20	100
7	Pronunciation is an important skill.	18	90	1	5	1	5	20	100
9	When I speak, I pay attention to the sounds of English.	12	60	5	25	3	15	20	100
11	I prefer American pronunciation.	5	25	8	40	7	35	20	100
12	I prefer British pronunciation.	8	40	6	30	6	30	20	100
16	My pronunciation of English is good.	4	20	6	30	10	50	20	100
18	I do my best to improve my pronunciation.	17	85	2	10	1	5	20	100
19	I do pronunciation exercises outside the class.	14	70	4	20	2	10	20	100

An analysis of Table 3 has shown that pronunciation instruction has helped students to gain an awareness of the sounds of English. As responses given to items 2 and 3 reveal, 75% of the participants were neither aware of nor able to produce different sounds of English before they started taking pronunciation classes. However, following the 5-week pronunciation instruction, 55% of them have claimed to have developed an awareness of the sounds structure of English and an increased ability to produce these sounds. These findings are an index of the necessity of a focus on pronunciation instruction to raise students' ability and awareness of the sound system of English. Furthermore, responses given to these items show that 60% of the students pay attention to the sounds of English during oral production, and majority of them study pronunciation outside the classroom. Accordingly, it may be suggested that through pronunciation classes, participants have recognized the importance of pronunciation skills. Finally, item 1 reveals that only 30% of the students claim to be happy with their pronunciation. Having a strong knowledge and a command of the sound system of English is an important skill for teachers of English. Therefore, pronunciation instruction should start as early as possible in pre-service teacher training.

Table 4: Participants' Attitudes Towards Pronunciation Classes

Item No	Statement	Agree		Undecided		Disagree		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
4	I think pronunciation classes will help me improve my pronunciation significantly.	17	85	2	10	1	5	20	100
8	I think pronunciation teaching should be a part of preparation programs at universities.	18	90	1	5	1	5	20	100
10	I like studying pronunciation in class.	18	90	1	5	1	5	20	100
13	I like doing repetition exercises in class.	18	90	2	10	0	0	20	100
14	Pronunciation classes are helping me to become more confident in speaking classes.	15	75	4	20	1	5	20	100
15	I think pronunciation classes are easy.	7	35	8	40	5	25	20	100
17	I think pronunciation classes are necessary.	18	90	0	0	2	10	20	100
20	When I speak English, I use what I learn in pronunciation classes.	15	75	0	0	5	15	20	100

As is seen in Table 4, a vast majority of students believe that pronunciation classes help them improve their pronunciation skills and gain confidence in speaking classes. Likewise, 90% of the participants think that pronunciation classes are necessary and should be a part of preparation programs in universities. 90% of them also claim to enjoy pronunciation classes, while 75% try to use what they have learned in pronunciation classes when they speak English, as the analysis of items 10,13 and 20 reveal. To sum up, responses given to the items in Table 4 indicate that have not only developed an awareness of sound system of the target language but also a positive attitude towards studying pronunciation skills in class. They seem to acknowledge that improving their pronunciation skills will contribute to their proficiency level in the target language.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this study, we aimed at investigating the influence of pronunciation instruction on students' overall speaking skills, their self-perception of pronunciation and attitudes towards pronunciation instruction. To be able to do this, the researchers have asked the participants tell a picture strip study before and after a 5-week pronunciation instruction and given out a 20-item questionnaire in 5-point Likert scale format. Speaking performances of the students have been analyzed in Recording 1 and Recording 2. Assessing recording 1, the researchers have found out that students are unable to articulate the short vowel /æ/, long vowels /ɔ:/ and /ɑ:/ as well as the consonants /θ/ and /ð/. Therefore, they had problems in pronouncing basic vocabulary items even though most of them have been studying English longer than 9 years. It may indicate that without a focus on pronunciation skills, EFL students do not seem to be able acquire the pronunciation skills. On the other hand, Recording 2 has revealed that a higher number of students are able to produce the problematic sounds correctly after 5 weeks of instruction although they still seemed to be suffering from certain problems regarding pronunciation. This may result from the fact that 5 week is a very short period of time for pronunciation instruction yield its effects. Besides, the analysis of questionnaire items that investigate students' self-perception of pronunciation skills have also shown that majority of the participants were not happy with their pronunciation, and they were neither aware of the sound structure of English nor able to articulate those sounds before the instruction. However, they claimed to have developed an awareness of the sounds structure of English and an increased ability to produce these sounds after the instruction. Thus, it is important to allocate regular time or attention to pronunciation skills in EFL classroom. More importantly, pronunciation classes should be an integral part of the curriculum in institutions that train language

teachers. Such a training will help prospective teachers of English have a command of the sound system of English and become a right model for their students in the future.

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