A study on identifying pronunciation learning strategies of Turkish EFL learners

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Abstract

Pronunciation is an integral part of foreign language learning since it directly affects learners’ communicative competence as well as performance. Poor communication skills can decrease learners’ self-confidence, restrict social interactions, and negatively affect estimations of a speaker’s credibility and abilities. Therefore, one of the key elements of language proficiency is to secure acceptable pronunciation for the language learners. The literature on the pronunciation studies revealed that language learners use various pronunciation learning strategies; however, there are very limited studies in number on the use of pronunciation learning strategies in the Turkish context. Thus, this study is an attempt to gain some preliminary insights into the pronunciation learning strategies and diverse tactics that help students learn to produce a foreign language. The study focuses exclusively on the responses of two groups of university students collected through the use of a questionnaire and an interview. This is an experimental study which attempts to elicit a general view over the pronunciation learning strategy use and to compare whether there is any significant difference between the group of learners taking a pronunciation course and the group not attending to any specific course on pronunciation learning.

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Keywords: pronunciation; strategy use; EFL learning
1. Introduction:

Pronunciation has been one of the most neglected parts of foreign language learning and it has been referred to as the “Cinderella area” (Kelly, 1969). However, it is one of the key requirements for language proficiency to secure an understandable pronunciation for the language learners. Especially for the prospective English teachers as a foreign/second language, accurate pronunciation plays a significant role in supporting both the overall communicative skills and striving for a perfect modeling for their students. Concerning the issue of insufficient qualifications observed in pronunciation teaching specifically in English as Foreign Language (EFL) setting, it is advocated to raise learners’ consciousness of pronunciation learning strategies that will help them work on their pronunciation outside classroom (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 1996). In the new communicative approach framework, language is seen as a means of communication. Under the impact of this view, the native-like pronunciation goal has been changed into a more reasonable goal of intelligible and functional communication (Celce-Murcia, 1996). Triggering from this fact, a new variable has emerged out: pronunciation learning strategies. Whereas there have been several research in the variable of foreign/second language learning strategies in general, little attention has been paid to strategy research in relation to pronunciation learning. Oxford (1990) defines the specific learning strategies as specific actions taken by the learner to make pronunciation learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations. Given the shift toward the learner-centered classroom in the Turkish education system, English teachers are expected to pay more attention to learner needs and to give the students the resources they need to become responsible for and involved in their own pronunciation learning. Pertaining to the needs of the students, the main purpose of the research study is to help the students become aware of the kinds of the strategies they use intentionally or unintentionally and further to foster learner autonomy.

This paper aims at examining the kinds of learning strategies used by pre-service EFL teachers at English Language Teaching Department to improve English pronunciation. This quasi experimental study is based on a questionnaire and a set of open-ended questions. After reviewing the studies done on pronunciation learning strategies in brief, the article further displays the results of a study designed through these research questions stated below:

1. Which pronunciation learning strategies are most or less frequently utilized by Turkish EFL learners?
2. Is there any significant difference between the students currently attending to a pronunciation course and the students taking no any specific course on pronunciation?

2. Literature Review

In the last decade, there have been a number of studies that have dealt with learning strategies in relation to the pronunciation of a second/foreign language. Almost all of the strategy inventories of language learning (SILL) applied in these studies is based on Oxford’s (1990) classification of language learning strategies. Oxford first divides language learning strategies into two classes and then further into six groups. The six major strategies are enumerated as the following: memory (e.g., using key words), cognitive (e.g., recognizing and using formulas), compensation (e.g., avoiding using unknown words, using mime and gesture), metacognitive (e.g., focusing on specific sounds, organizing), affective (e.g., rewarding yourself), social/cooperation (e.g., asking for correction).

While some researchers have investigated merely favorite pronunciation strategies used for repairing their communication breakdown, in Peterson’s (2000) study, twelve strategies and 43 tactics were reported through the use of diaries and interviews by eleven adult learners of Spanish. Regarding the findings of this study, the largest number of specific tactics pertained to the cognitive group, in particular,
to the strategies of practicing naturalistically and formally practicing with sounds. Strategies from the memory, compensation and affective groups were the least popular among students. The memory strategy was reported only by advanced learners and the affective strategy was recorded only at the beginning level. As a result, the study provided an ample evidence of a wider range of specific pronunciation learning tactics that had been previously documented.

Vitanova and Miller (2002) did a pilot study to reveal perceptions of pronunciation students on the instruction that they were receiving. The students were in favor of developing their pronunciation beyond the classroom context. However, they couldn’t set any relation between the proficiency level and the strategy use.

Derwing and Rossiter (2002) conducted a much more detailed study to elicit the favorite strategies implemented by 100 ESL learners at college level. This study added a new set of pronunciation strategies to Oxford’s classification. It was unfolded that using paraphrasing was the most popular strategy. Concerning the results of this study, pronunciation changed when being excited or nervous. Furthermore, the findings unearthed that students perceiving a pronunciation problem in their communication were not getting a suitable instruction or the instruction they received were ineffective.

Osburne (2003) also searched for the pronunciation learning strategies of advanced second language learners. The participants were from sixteen different native language groups. The data were collected through monitoring of the learners’ conversation. On the completion of the task, participants reported what they did to improve their pronunciation. The researcher categorized eight main strategies. In spite of defining eight categories, Osburne did not express the specific tactics mentioned by the participants in the interviews.

Among so far published studies in Turkey, Berkil’s study (2008) has been the most comprehensive study concentrated on the pronunciation strategies. This detailed study gave an intricate picture of the pronunciation strategy use of 40 Turkish university students learning English. The main objectives were to examine the relationship between pronunciation learning strategy use and pronunciation ability and to look for patterns of secondary variables in the use of each strategy including self-perception of pronunciation ability, perceived importance of pronunciation, gender, out-of-class exposure to English, length of English study and age at the beginning of English study. The findings indicated that there was no significant relationship between pronunciation learning strategy use and pronunciation ability. As for the secondary variables, it was seen that the strategy use varied significantly by gender. As related to the findings, female students were found to use more strategies than males. The study further suggested that the use of all types of pronunciation learning strategies in concert with one another would increase their effectiveness upon learners’ second language pronunciation ability.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants were made up of eighty two university (n= 82) students of English Language Teaching Department at a university in Turkey. Forty two of them were freshmen students in the first year of their four-year degree program. The other thirty six students were in the preparatory training studying intensive English before attending to the same department in the undergraduate program. The selection of the students was done in random regardless of gender and race. This department was especially chosen for the study since the students were estimated to be pre-service teachers with great zeal to learn more and develop themselves in English pronunciation. The students ranged in age from 17 to 26, and 33 of the 82 students were male. The 46 students, taking a specific course entitled Listening and Pronunciation II in their freshman year, were considered to be experimental group. The 36 students, taking no course on pronunciation in preparatory training, were taken as the control group.
3.2. Instruments and Data Collection

The main instrument used in this study was the Pronunciation Strategies questionnaire based on taxonomies of pronunciation learning strategies presented by Oxford (1990) and Peterson (2000). However, the researcher applied a new version of the questionnaire adapted by Berkil (2008). Furthermore, a small adjustment was performed to increase a three-point Likert scale to five-point Likert scale with five description categories of “always”, “frequently”, “sometimes”, “rarely”, “never”. The purpose was to gather frequency counts of pronunciation learning strategies under six categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and cooperation. The questionnaire contained 52 items and they were asked the students to rate how frequently they employed such strategies. To check the reliability, the instrument was analyzed through the Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient $\alpha = 0.73$, which shows a high level of reliability. The researcher also made use of open-ended questions that the participated students answered in written format on demand whether in native language or target language. The aim was to elicit realistic responses. The questions included in some information about to what extent correct pronunciation is significant and whether the students have different tactics to improve English pronunciation.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS. 20). Descriptive statistics were utilized to run for frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviation. In order to find out significant differences the variables were compared through the use of independent samples t-tests.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the outcomes of the current study and compares the findings with the previous researches. The findings were structured along with the research questions stated previously in the introduction part.

4.1. Strategies pre-service EFL teachers use to improve their English pronunciation

Whereas Peterson (2000) saw positive relationships between pronunciation learning strategy use and pronunciation ability, the overall findings of this study consistent with previous studies conducted in different conditions (Ellis and Sinclair 1989; O’Maley and Chamot 1991; Peterson 2000; Berkil’s 2008) suggest that all students use each type of pronunciation learning strategies. However, the results provide a different view towards pronunciation strategy use. As table 1 demonstrates, of six main types of strategies, it would be appropriate to conclude that the study participants appeared to cooperation strategy to improve their English pronunciation with a mean score of 3.03. It was followed by memory ($M=2.94$), affective ($M=2.89$), compensation ($M=2.88$), metacognitive ($M=2.88$) and lastly cognitive strategy ($M=2.85$). These results were also in line with the students’ written reports that involve specific tactics such as talking to classmates in the target language and interaction with native speakers. Even though the cognitive strategy was noted to be the least rated one, it cannot be stated that the students do not use that kind of strategy. It can just be commented to be the least frequently utilized strategy in general.

4.2. The most/least frequently used strategies used by pre-service EFL teachers

The descriptive statistics findings at the particular item level provided more complex and detailed patterns of strategy use. Table 2 demonstrates the most frequently used 5 strategies employed by pre-service English teachers. This table reveals the most frequently rated strategy item (I associate English pronunciations with Turkish pronunciations) by all participants. The other most popular items, recording one’s own voice to hear the pronunciation, noticing contrasts between English and Turkish pronunciation,
making up songs to remember pronunciation of a word and memorizing rather than reading a presentation were among the most popular items. At the individual item level, the frequent use of memory and cognitive strategies draw attention. Concerning the comparison between Turkish and English phonology, Thompson and Gaddes (2005) point out that the differences between learners’ mother tongue and the target language are momentous topics that learners should not only be aware of but should make a conscious effort to study and focus on. The statistical findings attract the attention to such an inference that the participated students regard mechanic repetitions after a teacher (I repeat aloud after a teacher or native speaker/I try to imitate my teacher’s mouth movements) and learning about phonetics, use of dictionary and phonetic symbols to correct pronunciation as less effective.

Table 1. The five most frequently utilized pronunciation learning strategies by pre-service EFL teachers (n= 82)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D</th>
<th>S.E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. I make up songs or rhymes to remember how to pronounce words.</td>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I associate English pronunciations with Turkish pronunciations.</td>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. I record my own voice to hear my pronunciation.</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. I notice contrasts between Turkish and English pronunciation.</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. I choose to memorize, rather than read, a presentation.</td>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The five least frequently utilized pronunciation learning strategies by advanced EFL learners (n= 82)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D</th>
<th>S.E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I use phonetic symbols or my own codes to remember how to pronounce words.</td>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I repeat aloud after a teacher or a native speaker</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. I try to imitate my teacher’s mouth movements.</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. I check the phonetic symbols of the words from a dictionary for correct pronunciation when I have difficulty pronouncing.</td>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. I try to learn something about phonetics.</td>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3. Pronunciation learning strategies with respect to taking or not taking a pronunciation course

The results of the current study with respect to taking a specific pronunciation course unearthed totally 31 significant strategy items computed through t-test between the students attending and not attending to a formal pronunciation instruction. Under the category of memory strategy, item 5 (I try to recall how my teachers have pronounced something) was found to be striking to indicate the most popular strategy utilized by the students taking no pronunciation course. Resulting from this finding, it may be concluded that students not having a specialization on pronunciation tend to take the most professional around them one as the model. As Peterson (2000) suggested at the end of his study, memory strategies were most frequently preferred by beginning level language learners without any pronunciation training experience. Conversely, the freshmen taking a pronunciation course singled out item 2 (I make up songs or rhymes to remember how to pronounce words.) and item 4 (I associate English pronunciations with Turkish pronunciations.) indicating the role of self-hypothesizing on sounds.
With regard to the cognitive strategy, it had a wide range of items came upon significant as it was in the original strategy inventory based on Oxford (1990). Under the light of the findings, the most striking item deployed most frequently by the students taking pronunciation course was item 24 (I record my own voice to hear my pronunciation.) that was also among the most frequently rated items overall. Similarly, in that case, the use of self-evaluating process and the will to acquire the optimal result drew the researcher’s attention. However, it was clear that the majority of the items were in favor of prep-class students not exposing to any pronunciation training. Of these items, item 21 (I listen to tapes, television, movies or music) appeared to be the most popular one. It may be concluded that these students without having a special training experience apply to the closest external help to improve their pronunciation.

As related to the metacognitive strategy, two items were found to be essential. Item 37 (I read reference materials about target language pronunciation.) was the most frequently utilized strategy by the first-year students. On the other hand, the prep-class students turned out to use item 43 more frequently (While preparing for a presentation, I write words that are difficult for me to pronounce very large in my notes.). As revealed in Berkil (2008), affective strategies were highly favored by prep-class students. The most frequently favored item by these participants was item 48 (I try to pay more attention to my pronunciation if my pronunciation is appreciated by others.). At this juncture, it would be appropriate to expound that affective strategy is a great support providing students with a high level of self-confidence and a non-threatening environment (Hismanoglu, 2006).

As for cooperative strategy, the findings confirm the balance between the overall and the specific outcomes. While the first-year students were especially in favor of item 51 (I study with someone else.), the other group comprising the prep-class students with a limited knowledge of pronunciation training opted for item 52 (I tutor, teach or help someone else to learn about pronunciation.).

5. Conclusion

This research provided ample information about the nature and the direction of the pronunciation strategy use by the pre-service EFL teachers both taking and not taking a specific pronunciation course. Following the result, researchers must reconceptualize L2 learning strategies to include the social and cooperative sides of learning along with more intellectual sides. In that sense, Varasarain (2007) stated the effectiveness of a formal instruction on pronunciation by supporting the use of cooperative strategy as following: “...learners were able to experience the learning context, and begin to appreciate the meaning of working with others and helping each other” (p.196). Resulting from this fact, pronunciation courses and the related materials should be constructed in the way of positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction and group processing. In sum, this study suggests more attention to pronunciation learning strategies and strategy research is needed so as to make pronunciation learning much more enjoyable, autonomous and suited to the demands of communicative-oriented classes.

References


