

Handling Errors of Bangladeshi Learners in Pronouncing English Vowels and Consonants at the Primary Level

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Abstract

Correct pronunciation is not emphasized enough in Bangladesh in teaching English. It was found that learners face barriers while pronouncing English from absence of certain phonemes in Bengali. In order to explore the pronunciation errors of vowels and consonants of primary school learners and to identify remedial measures, the study design concentrated on document analysis along with observation of 10 grade 5 classes in 10 schools. A pronunciation test was conducted with 20 grade-5 learners (2 learners from each class). The researchers found that Bangladeshi Learners could not make the distinction between long and short vowels. To overcome this problem, teachers need to integrate pronunciation practice in language lessons, focus on conversation through multimedia, and include correct pronunciation in the formal assessment process.

Key words: Teaching English, Remediating Pronunciation Errors, English in Bangladesh Primary School.

I. Introduction

English, undoubtedly, is the most powerful medium of language communication in the world. Like many other countries, learning the English language has been embraced in the formal education system in Bangladesh long time ago. Yet, Bangladeshi learners' average competency in English after a prolonged formal education of twelve to fourteen years is not up to the global standard. The assessment system evaluates mostly the reading and writing skills. Very few primary schools arrange listening and speaking skills practice sessions. Huq (1990) explained that in the field of Second Language Acquisition, researchers generally have less concern in pronunciation pattern of the L2 (Second Language) learners. Teachers and learners do not give due importance to correct pronunciation.

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Huq (1990) analysed several basic reasons behind the pronunciation errors made by Bangla speaking learners of English. Learners in Bangladesh are naturally habituated to Bangla. As a result, their spoken language and listening mind set are influenced by Bangla language.

When a person wants to learn a language accurately, he/she needs to attain four-language skills -- listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For effective listening and speaking, non-native speakers must know the intelligible pronunciation of words so that the listener understands the speaker. However, it was noted by Underhill (2010.a) that, teaching pronunciation and development of interesting teaching materials in this area is often neglected. He suggested that teachers should do their best to integrate its practice in most lessons. He said:

...while much has changed in the last few decades in how we teach grammar, vocabulary, collocation, context and meaning I suggest that pronunciation is still rooted in an essentially behaviorist paradigm of listen, identify, discriminate and repeat. This is not wrong, simply insufficient, and so for most learners' and probably most teachers' pronunciation remains a mysterious zone where the rules are not clear and it is difficult to make progress or even to know if you have. (Underhill, 2010, p. 33)

Sometimes learners say, "I know English, but why doesn't anybody understand me?" This kind of situation arises when the speaker does not know the correct pronunciation; at least intelligible pronunciation. Teacher and learners in Bangladesh are often ignorant about pronunciation. Non-native speakers make slips or faults when they use English. Ellis (2003) divided the slips into two groups - 'errors' and 'mistakes'. He argues that action based on total ignorance or lack of knowledge is called an error. Error shows full unawareness of learner's knowledge. When someone makes an error, it indicates not only learner's gap in knowledge, but also that the learner does not know what is correct. On the other hand, mistake is a learner's infrequent slips and the learner can correct himself without help of any. The learner knows the fault and he/she can fix it by himself/herself. Gilakjani (2011) makes the point that English has a number of sub-skills, of which pronunciation is by far the most important. 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. When learners have difficulties in communicating in English in a job interview, in most cases it is due to learners' poor pronunciation, not vocabulary, or grammar. In spite of this situation, the teachers in the field of English language teaching neglect teaching pronunciation.

When a child learns the native language, the native language speech system is programmed in the child's brain. When the child grows up, the mother language influences foreign language learning (Rahman, 1996). Teaching pronunciation should be started at an early age, (at least at primary level) because articulation of sounds is not set at this age for the child (of 05 years-12 years). Fraser (2001) stated:

In classroom teaching, the group of learners is usually at roughly the same level (whereas more advanced learners can be very variable in the degree to which they have mastered pronunciation),

- there is less ‘unlearning’ for them to do, both in terms of the way they pronounce English, and in terms of negative expectations about their inability to learn pronunciation,
- beginners are generally expecting, and expected, to have specific times devoted to pronunciation, which means that time can be scheduled for more intensive work to be done with them. (*Fraser, 2001, p.11*)

According to Jenkins (2011), non-native speakers need not and it is impossible to pronounce like the native speaker; rather non-native speakers should try to learn the pronunciation that is mutually understandable to native and non-native speakers. She pointed out some phonemes that a non-native speaker must learn and some phonemes are not as important as others are. She emphasized that all consonants are important, and that the contrast between long and short vowels is also important. (Jenkins, 2011, p. 9)

It is accepted that non-native speakers cannot speak English like the natives. But, a speaker must focus on pronouncing reasonably correctly with three characteristics, as noted by Gilakjani (2012):

Intelligibility (the speaker produces sound patterns that are recognizable as English), Comprehensibility (the listener is able to recognize the meaning of what is said), and Interpretability (the listener is able to recognize the function of what is said). (Gilakjani, 2012, p. 06)

At the early age, it is easier to teach the pronunciation in the classroom. Huq (1990) argued that most of the people in Bangladesh could rather read, write, and understand English, but very few could speak good “intelligible” (p. 164) English. Bangladeshi learners (BL) encounter errors in pronouncing in English due to lack of some phoneme in the Bengali phoneme list compared to English phoneme list and due to some geographical-historical differences.

II. Objectives of the study

The general objective of the study is to identify the ways of recovering problems of pronunciation errors of primary level learners. The specific objectives are:

- to identify the pronunciation errors of English vowels and consonants of primary school learners;
- to explore the present classroom practices of primary schools regarding pronunciation;
- to explore remedial measures for common pronunciation problems of primary school learners.

III. Methodology

The study was conducted using a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach. There are two parts of the methodology. First part is to explore the English pronunciation problems of primary school learners focusing on vowels and consonants, and to explore the current practice of teaching pronunciation in the classroom. For this purpose, a structured pronunciation test and an observation schedule were used in 10 primary schools from 5 divisions of Bangladesh. 10 classes of grade 5 were observed and 20 learners (2 from each class) were tested. Only grade 5 learners and classes were considered due to study limitations. Divisions and primary schools were selected purposively and then the learners were selected randomly. (See Table 1.) The pronunciation test was designed on the consonant phonemes of English which are absent in Bangla phoneme list, and on the short and long vowel phonemes of English.

Table 1: Sample Design

Division	Number of School	Number of Class for Classroom Observation	Number of Learners in Pronunciation Test
Dhaka	2	2 (1 from each school)	4 (2 from each school)
Chittagong	2	2 (1 from each school)	4 (2 from each school)
Khulna	2	2 (1 from each school)	4 (2 from each school)
Rangpur	2	2 (1 from each school)	4 (2 from each school)
Barisal	2	2 (1 from each school)	4 (2 from each school)
Total	10	10	20

In second part of the study, to explore the ways of remedying the pronunciation problems of primary learners, different relevant documents were analyzed.

IV. Findings

English pronunciation problems by Bangladeshi learners

1. According to Roach (1998), there are 25 vowels in English phonetics (short-7, long-5, diphthongs-8, triphthongs-5). This study concentrated on short and long vowels only, and found the following problems: Learners cannot make the distinction between long and short vowels of English. Three quarters of the learners pronounce short /I/ 'pin' like long /i:/ 'eat'; 80% of them pronounce short /ʊ/ 'put' like long /u:/ 'food'; 75% of them pronounce short /ʊ/ 'cup' like long /a:/ 'calm'.
2. Data demonstrate that learners pronounce some short vowels correctly like /I/ 'kit' (100%), /e/ 'bed' (100%), /æ/ 'cat' (100%), /ʊ/ 'cup' (100%), /ʊ/ 'pot' (100%), and /ʊ/ 'put' (85%).

3. It is found that all of the learners articulate three different vowels /ʊ/ 'cup', /ɪ/ 'girl', and /ɑ:/ 'calm' using one phoneme from Bangla /a:/.
4. The study has found that most learners face problems while pronouncing two vowels /ɔ:/ 'ago' and /ɪ/ 'girl'. Because these two vowels are absent in standard Bangla vowel phoneme list. (Rahman, 1996)

According to Roach (2001), there are 24 consonants in English phonetics. According to Huq (1990), five consonants are absent (four completely and one /r/ partially) in the Bangla phonetics. The study gave attention on only those five consonants of English and, discovered the following problems as described below:

- a. Learners articulate post-alveolar trill phoneme /r/ 'learn' more distinctively (95%).
- b. Learners use English labiodental fricative sound /f/ 'fight' and /v/ 'vote' like bilabial /p^hait/ (95%) and /v^hait/ (90%). Bangla Phoneme list does not have labiodentals fricative /f/ and /v/; rather it has bilabial /p/ and /v/. (Rahman, 1996)
- c. Learners pronounce three different post-alveolar phonemes /dʒ/ 'Gym', /ʒ/ 'Measure', and /z/ 'Zoo' using one English phoneme /dʒ/ (95%). Bangla Phoneme list does not have this variety, rather it has only /dʒ/. (Rahman, 1996)

The research found a close relationship between learners' pronunciation problems mentioned above and classroom practice. It was also found that most of the problems occurred due to absence of some English phonemes in Bangla phoneme list along with the lack of pronunciation practice in classroom.

Present practices in the English classrooms

1. All the English teachers used incorrect pronunciation in the classroom teaching.
2. Only two classes (20%) were found where teachers arranged pronunciation practice through drilling, but allowing insufficient time.
3. No teaching aids related to pronunciation practice were found in any class.

V. Remedial Measures

To overcome the problem in pronouncing English incorrectly, the first and foremost duty is to include pronunciation in the formal assessment system. Otherwise, correct pronunciation is not likely to receive due attention. There are some other steps that must be taken as noted below.

1. According to Underhill (2010), a chart of English phoneme can be used to teach pronunciation in the classroom. He suggested a basic way to use of the chart with learners, which goes like this:
 - "point at a sound on the chart (but don't say anything)
 - The learners say that sound more or less (but not necessarily 'correctly')

- then say “let’s listen to some differences” and ask a few learners separately to say their version, while the others listen not just for what is ‘correct’ but to sensitize to the small dissimilarities between the several learners, and then let the class fine-tune their own sounds in the light of what they heard. If one of them is close enough, then encourage the others to say it like that. (And if anyone offers a pretty different English sound, then just point that new sound on the chart so the fault is used for learning).

ɪ	I	U	u:	Iə	eɪ	ɪ	ʌ
e	ə	ɜ:	ɔ:	ʊə	ɔɪ	əʊ	
æ	ʌ	ɑ:	ɒ	eə	aɪ	aʊ	
P	b	t	d	tʃ	dʒ	k	g
f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	ʒ
m	n	ŋ	h	l	r	w	j

- Once a ‘good enough’ sound is circulating, build up its quality a little more using a variety of probable resources e.g. a word they identify containing that sound, the CD dialogue containing that word or sound, a mime to help them to discover the muscle posture for the sound, the use of other sounds that contain clues, other correction techniques, and so on.
2. A nice technique to teach pronunciation is using prosody. Prosody is the easy way to integrate rhythm and melody and help to correct pronunciation. (Gilbert, 2008)
 3. Fraser (2001) argues that drilling is very important in the classroom teaching. Drilling can happen in many ways such as individually, in group or in pair. Teacher will sound a phoneme together with a word. Learners will chant following the teacher.
 4. Fraser (2001) also emphasizes showing conversation through a video and audio player. It can be very handy for teaching pronunciation in the classroom.
 5. Hewings (2004) proposes that practicing difficult and close phonemes in a pair or in a group like ‘food’ and ‘put’, ‘zoo’ and ‘measure’ etc. is effective for the learners.
 6. Hewings (2004) recommends that attitudes and motivation towards intelligible pronunciation is also an inevitable part in teaching-learning. Both the parties, teachers and learners, need to be motivated and to have an affirmative attitude for intelligible pronunciation.
 7. Huq (1990) suggested that to develop a group of trainers for English teachers to improve pronunciation, it would take a specialized course in educational institutions, conducted by native English speakers and a completely developed listening courses utilizing “language laboratory” (p. 166)

VI. Conclusion

The basic purpose of a language is communication. When we consider communication, mutually intelligible pronunciation is mandatory. Several researchers (Meyer, 2009; McMahon, 2002; Saville-Troike, 2006; Ellis, 2003) assert that correct pronunciation starts naturally with the language. But, like other language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), one has to learn how to pronounce correctly. Correct pronunciation follows a methodology and training. Proper attention requires to be given to pronunciation along with grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. The concerned authorities need to include pronunciation test with the other four language skills in the educational assessment and take necessary steps to this end.

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