

(Un) Intelligibility in EIL Pronunciation: An Analysis

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Abstract: *Pronunciation, despite being an obviously important component of speech and anticipated communication, seems to enjoy little or no room in the policy and practice in Bangladesh. This study, therefore, aimed at exploring the issues of teaching oral proficiency specifically pronunciation at the HSC level in Bangladesh. The purpose of the present study is to determine whether students at college level encounter problems in English pronunciation. The present study also aims to unearth reasons working behind the negligence toward pronunciation. To do so, students were interviewed with the Reading Survey focusing on problematic utterance in terms of sound and orthography for Bangladeshi learners as suggested by some previous studies. The findings show that pronunciation teaching is inadequate in policy and practice. Finally possible remedial measure for integrating pronunciation with other skills with the help of a Balanced Approach to teaching pronunciation and same inquiries in other setting were recommended.*

Keywords- *IPA, EIL, WE & EFL, ELF, Intelligibility, comprehensibility and accentedness*

I. Introduction

An old truism about spoken language advocates that the way something is said is more important than what is said and the way something is said must include along with other things—pronunciation (Levis & Grant, 2003). It further underpins information that a person's oral ability is usually the first thing to be noticed and when someone compliments saying "You speak good English", s/he may certainly be praising the speaker's intelligible pronunciation. In addition, one's level of self-confidence and ego becomes highly affected by one's ability to produce intelligible speech. This has been further established in Akter (2007) who mentions that in Bangladesh good pronunciation of a person is usually praised while bad pronunciation causes laughter and embarrassment for a speaker. An instance may be illustrated in this regard through an interview session where a graduate asks entering into the session 'May I come in 'char'? uttering the word 'sir' as /tʃar/ and further expressing her/his desire to be an EFL 'teacher' uttering it as /tiser/, would that really be misunderstood? Perhaps s/he would be understood but the way s/he has pronounced the word may let her/him feel humiliated let alone getting the job. This suggests that language teachers should attribute importance to English pronunciation in their classes.

To illustrate best the implication of pronunciation instruction the narration provided by Akter (2006:18) seems to be of real use. He narrates a personal story where his friend's brother-in-law (a Bangladeshi) having dinner at a restaurant in Hong Kong failed to comprehend a waiter's speech and ate 'd-o-g' meat thinking it as 'd-u-c-k' meat. This is how he could figure it out at last:

...At the end of dinner, perhaps something struck my friend's brother-in-law's intuition so he asked the waiter for the third time. At this, the waiter became a bit impatient and spelled the word with an empathetic voice- 'd'- 'o'- 'g'- 'duck'.

Such incident establishes the fact that inadequately pronounced segments and suprasegments may have the result of disorienting the listener hindering comprehension.

1.1 Pronunciation and its Implications Seen from Different Perspectives

Morley (1991) identifies intelligible pronunciation as an essential component of communicative competence that stays at the heart of CLT (Communicative Language Teaching Approach is introduced in Bangladesh for nearly two decades). According to Fraser (2000) person with good pronunciation skills can improve their general language skills at a greater rate than someone with bad pronunciation. Therefore, pronunciation instruction is of great importance for successful oral communication to take place.

Moreover, pronunciation has an essential socio-cultural value (Gelvanovsky, 2002) signifying its relation to attitudes and identity. Since the way we pronounce determine how we are likely to be perceived, understood and sometimes judged by others. Norton (2000 in Setter, 2008) says socio-cultural identity is a complex construct that defines the individual and the wider social and cultural environment. Setter and Jenkins (2005:6) in this regard mentions:

Pronunciation, it seems, is a more sensitive area of language than other linguistic levels because of the way in which it encroaches on identity and elicits strong attitudes.

Despite the fact that pronunciation is an essential and integrated component of oral communication and communicative competence, it very often remains neglected or absent in many language teaching programs even if it is included in the curriculum. Researchers like Morley (1991), Celce-Murcia et al (1996), Jenkins (2004), Levis (2005) and others hold the similar view. It is believed that teaching pronunciation is unnecessary in ESL/FL since nonnative teachers cannot teach native like pronunciation. In addition, Harmer (2003) found teachers neglecting it reasoning that they have already many things to do and teaching pronunciation will only add problems to their teaching.

1.2 Pronunciation in EIL Paradigm

However, the practitioners of such belief may have forgot the status of English as an international language (EIL) and that English is no more delimited between the so-called two standards of English namely British and American. The global spread of English has made it plural in its nature including as many standards as legitimized all over the world and very often termed as Englishes or World Englishes (WE). It also recognizes the fact there are now more interactions between non-natives users of English who have outnumbered the natives (Graddol, 2006). This therefore reinforces the need to integrate pronunciation with other language skills for mutual intelligibility among speakers of many varieties of English. The need to revisit the goals of teaching oral skills along with pronunciation and the way to integrate it in the syllabus and evaluation is thus as strong as ever (Richards, 2006 in Sharifian, 2009).

The focus of EIL paradigm in terms of proficiency is thus on successful communication regardless of nationality, skin color and circles and so on. Another consideration that cannot be unnoticed is that in the area of ELT profession many users of English, in fact 80% professionals as found by Canagarajah (1999 cited in McKay, 2002), need the language for lingua franca communication with other non-native speakers as well as with native speaker (Sharifian, 2009). Therefore it is rather impractical to stay behind in teaching pronunciation requiring native fluency and norms and native materials.

1.3 Pronunciation in a CLT program

Although early CLT in 1980 ignored pronunciation perceiving as a difficult area, believing teaching phonology would impede communicative practice and thus threaten students' self-confidence, recent research established the fact that pronunciation is a vital element of communicative competence, the ultimate goal to attain in CLT and that pronunciation should be given preferential treatment (Jenkins, 2004). Despite the current dominance of intelligibility as the goal of pronunciation, pronunciation is still out-of-the-way in materials.

With the advent of CLT, the focus of learning shifted from the teacher-centered teaching to the learner-centered learning environment (Brown, 2001 in Hismanoglu, 2006). The idea of Chomsky's linguistic competence (1965) turned towards a broader outlook of learning a language provided by Hymes (1972) that is to attain the ability to communicate in real speech incorporating culture. However, the very inherent nature of the communicative approaches emphasizes successful communication that in turn involves teaching pronunciation. The goal of pronunciation has taken a transition from 'perfect pronunciation' to the more realistic goals set by Morley (1991 in Hismanoglu, 2006) to upward functional intelligibility, communicability, increased self-confidence and self-monitoring abilities and strategies to use real speech beyond classroom. Still teachers tend to ignore pronunciation focusing on grammar and vocabulary. For some teachers pronunciation, as pointed out by Levis (2005), is neither teachable nor even needed as they believe students can learn pronunciation at the end of language programs without any training. Therefore the fate of pronunciation is still apparently dependent on intuition and ideology rather than research.

1.4 Operational Definition of Key Terms

1.4.1 IPA

The term stands for International Phonetic Alphabet that contains symbols to represent all the sounds existing in the languages of the world (Balasubramanian, 2000). According to Varshney (2003:59) it helps establish the international intelligibility and standardization in the pronunciation of English.

1.4.2. EIL, WE and EFL

These terms stand for English as an international language, lingua franca and foreign language respectively.

Although many scholars term EIL and WE excluding native Englishes, EIL certainly include all varieties of WE regardless of which circles, [Kachru (1986)'s three concentric circles: inner (L1), outer (L2) and expanding (FL)], they belong to. Researchers like Richards and Canagarajah (2009 in Sharifian, 2009) share the same view.

1.4. 3. English as a Lingua Franca

A lingua franca is a language used by different populations to communicate when they do not share a common language. Generally, a lingua franca is a third language that is distinct from the native language of both parties involved in the communication (Brilley, 2008).

1.4. 4. Intelligibility, comprehensibility and accentedness

Intelligibility is often misjudged with the terms like accentedness and comprehensibility. However while accentedness finds out the difference in speech, comprehensibility determine the ease or difficulty of one's speech, intelligibility involves the actual understanding of a speech from listeners' perspective (Derwing, 2010).

II. The Study

2.1 Background of the Present Study

Students of Bangladesh get about 1600 contact hours with English at their pre-university education, although, according to Rahman (1999 in Islam 2004), only 1000 hours instructional time is sufficient to attain proficiency in a language. Unfortunately several studies undertaken at ELT find that these students can hardly exchange a few words in English even after being taught for 12 years from class I-XII. Such incompetency may prove expensive in the era of globalization where one's ability to communicate in English is a prerequisite as seen in the job advertisements in everyday newspaper, job websites and so on. Many graduates in Bangladesh fail to meet the demand of the workplace where the ability to communicate in English is an imperative for any good career (Khan, 2007). A connection can be made in this regard that 'the-more-and-earlier' policy to teaching English could not probably be adequate to provide quality language teaching in order to enhance the ability of students to communicate in real life context.

Although some studies have been carried out on English pronunciation in Bangladeshi context to date, many of them are reflective. In this regard, the present study is significant for the research community providing illumination on students' problems in speech production putting forward some possible solutions. This study focuses only on the higher secondary level, as mentioned to be the foundation for higher education, since many students passing HSC will enter public or private university, go abroad for higher education or job. Due to time constraint, the current empirical study could not cover everything about pronunciation namely suprasegmentals.

The present study, therefore, seeks to find out:

- to what extent students at HSC level encounter problems in speech production.
- whether students' mispronunciation are likely to distort meaning or cause unintelligibility.

2.2 Data Elicitation

To collect data, four colleges (two from Dhaka City {the Capital of Bangladesh} renowned for their result in HSC every year and two from Gazipur) were selected from Dhaka Division. Although the study targeted to meeting three students from each college for in-depth analysis in relation to the topic nonetheless seeing students' interest to participate in the reading session, five students from each college (twenty students who sat for HSC in 2012) were chosen at last varying at their earned GPA (Grade Point Average) in SSC.

2.3 Data Instrumentation

A Reading Session (Appendix-A) with students recorded using a digital cam recorder was used as a means of data elicitation. It was administered at the end of 2012. The session was constructed focusing on the research objectives 1 & 2. Students read aloud given sentences intended to focus on some problematic utterances. The selection of words was carried out based on several previous studies undertaken by Banu (2001), Akter, (2006), and Maniruzzaman (2008). These studies identified some distinguished problems of Bangladeshi students at phonological and orthographical level.

2.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The Data collected from twenty students was interpreted and analyzed under several steps. Based on the IPA transcription of intended words, individual students' problematic utterances was distinguished at first. Since the target of the study is to support mutually intelligible pronunciation as far as the intended meaning retaining student's positive self confidence is concerned, the next section focused on the problematic utterances that impair understanding. A full list of such features was prepared by the researcher and sent to two Assistant Professors for their review. After being reviewed and sent back to the researcher, a final list was made of unintelligible or meaningless or nearly associated with a different word &/ or meaning was prepared.

III. Analysis

The Student Reading Session (Appendix –A) was devised with sentences focusing on short and long vowels, diphthongs and also consonants. This was devised to see whether student can utter words properly giving due length to the utterance. However, it was found that in most of the cases students could not utter long vowels as longer as required. 80% of the students utter the word ‘*calm*’ using short vowel /ʌ/ instead of long /ɑ: /

Similarly, while uttering diphthong, usually longer than pure vowel, students left the second vowel unsounded in many cases. 100% students could not utter the diphthong ‘*quiet*’. All of them uttered the word like ‘*quite*’ or ‘*quit*’ that have different meanings. Similarly, 90% students uttered ‘*lake*’ as /lek/. In terms of consonants, 100% of students failed to pronounce the word ‘*conscience*’ and ‘*tragically*’ (see Table 4.2). Schwa /ɔ/ in all positions posed difficulty for both group of students (urban and rural) as in ‘*ago*’, ‘*quiet*’, and ‘*western*’. A good number of them failed to articulate the short vowel /ʌ/ in ‘*son*’, long vowel /ɜ:/ in ‘*hurt*’, diphthong /eɪ/ in ‘*paper*’, voiceless fricative /ʃ/ in ‘*conscience*’, voiceless plosive /t, k/ and voiced affricate /dʒ/ in ‘*tragically*’ ‘*cover*’ and in approximant /w/ in ‘*Wednesday*’.

In comparison to students of urban colleges, students from rural colleges mispronounced to a greater extent. While none of the students from urban colleges had problem uttering the long vowel /u: / in ‘*who*’, 50% rural students replace /u: / with /ʊ / . While only 30% of students in urban faced problem pronouncing the diphthong in ‘*hate*’, 90% of rural students mispronounced it. None of the students from urban had problem uttering words ‘*meat*’, ‘*next*’, ‘*ABC*’, and ‘*do*’, a good number of students in rural faced problem uttering those. A good number of students from Gazipur added an / æ/ before words like ‘*MA*’, ‘*ABC*’, ‘*apple*’ and so on. They also had great difficulty with voiceless approximant in initial position in words like ‘*war*’, ‘*Wednesday*’, and ‘*website*’ since they utter /w/ as /ɔ/.

3.1 Unintelligible Pronunciation Found in Students’ Responses

However, the aim of the study is not to scrutinize all minute deviations from RP/GA rather to encourage learners for mutually intelligible pronunciation. The following table 1 shows the mispronunciation of students at segmental level that may affect intelligibility or cause meaning difference(s).

Table 3.1.1: Unintelligible Pronunciation at Segmental Level

Word	IPA Transcription	Students’ Mispronounced Form	Nearly/ another Sound	Similar to Meaningful
Apple	/ˈæp.l/	/efel/; /abel/	--	
Lieutenant	/lefˈten.ənt/ /lu:-/	Liutenant/ljittenənt/; lilentent/ / litentent	--	
Suffer	/ˈsʌf.ə r / /-ə/	/sʌpʌr/	Supper	
Pneumonia	/nju:ˈmæʊ.ni.ə/ nu:ˈmœ.njə/	Pinumina/pinominʌ/; Piniominia/pinɒminʌ/; /fiomɔɪnʌ/	--	
Psychology	/saɪˈkɒl.ə.dʒi/ /-ˈkɑ:.lə-/	/psɪkʌlədʒi /fidʒɒkələdʒi/	--	
Quiet	/kwaɪət/	/kwaɪt/ ; /kwɪt/	Quite, Quit	
Hate	/heit/	/hit/	Hit	
Liar	/ˈlaɪ.ə r / /-ə/	/lɪər /	Leer	
Riding	/ˈraɪ.dɪŋ/	/rɪdɪŋ/	Reading	
Gaining	/ˈɡeɪn.ɪŋ/	/zəɪnɪŋ/	--	
Smiling	/ˈsmɑɪ.lɪŋ/	/sɪmlɪŋ/	---	
Knee	/ni:/	/kɪn/ ; /kɪnɪ/	Kin	
Aspect	/ˈæs.pekt/	/eksept/	Accept	
Do	/də/ , /du/ , /du:/	/dɑ:/	Dough	
Who	/hu:/	/hɑ:/		
Caged	/keɪdʒ/	/krek/	--	
Left	/left/	/lɪft/	Lift	
Mess	/mes/	/mɪs/	Mis/Miss	
Resume	/rɪˈzju:m/ /-ˈzu:m/	/rɪsʌm/	--	
Lake	/leɪk/	/lek/ /laɪk/	Like	
Double	/ˈdʌb.l/	/dʌvɪ/	---	
Heart	/hɑ:t/ /hɑ:rt/	/hɪart/	---	
Disease	/drɪˈzi:z/	/dɪsɪs/ /dɪsɪs/	---	
Shy	/ʃaɪ/	/se/; /fe/	--	
Jolly	/ˈdʒɒl.i/ /ˈdʒɑ:.li/	/zɒli/	---	
Toward	/təˈwɔ:dz/ /təˈwɔ:rdz/	Sounds like ‘coward’ /təʊ.ərd/	Sounds like ‘Coward’	
Beat	/bi:t/	/vɪt/	Veet	
Concise	/kənˈsaɪs/	/knsɪs/		
Wise	/waɪz/	/ɔeɪz/	Ways	
Kid	/kɪd/	Sound like ‘kite’ //kard/	--	

Trip	/trɪp/	Sounds like 'tribe' /traɪp/	---
Freshen	/' freʃ. ə n/	/fresen/	--
Conservative	/kən'sɜː.və.tɪv/ sɜː.və.tɪv/	/knserviʃ/	--
Wednesday	/' wenz.deɪ/	/wetnesde/	--
Through	/θruː/	/ /θrəʊ/ /θroʊ/(missing gliding vowel)	Throw
Pronunciation	/prəˌnʌnt.sɪ' eɪ.fən/	/prəznɪʃən/; /prənaʊnsɪʃn/	
Since	/sɪn t s/	/sains/	Science
Meat	/leɪk/	/met/	Met
Well	/wel/	Sounds like 'oil' //ɔɪ/	Oil
Interested	/' m.trəs.tɪd/ /-trɪs-/	/' interested/	
While	/waɪl/	/whɪl/	Wheel
What	/wɒt/ /wɑːt/	/hɒt/	What

In response to the unintelligible articulation that students made during the reading session, the above given table shows their mispronounced forms in association with nearly or very similar sound existing in English. While some of them may contribute in changing meaning, some may cause unintelligibility with no meaning at all. The articulation of words 'do' as 'dough', 'quiet' as 'quite' and 'quit', 'since' as 'science', 'through' as 'throw' (as they drop the gliding vowel) will very likely affect intelligibility and comprehensibility. Students tend to utter words based on the spelling as evident in enunciations of 'disease' 'concise' where they do not replace /s/ with /z/ or leave diphthong /aɪ/.

IV. Implications

Surprisingly, seldom anyone has shown interest in conducting research at HSC level in this respect. It might be related to the fact of ignorance toward pronunciation in the English teaching, its' absence in evaluation and also in the teacher training materials (Khan, 2007). In this respect, the present empirical research would raise awareness among language teachers, policy makers, and the concerned authority to help build an examination that will influence teaching-learning oral skills underlying pronunciation. The research community would also be benefited from the findings of the study since they will get updated information regarding the significance of pronunciation and the distinguished problems that students have.

Form the findings it is found that students have serious problems on pronouncing short vowel /ə/ and /ɪ, i/, all long vowels, diphthongs, and voiceless consonants. They face serious difficulty uttering words inconsistent in spelling and sound as found in 'lieutenant', 'pneumonia', 'doubt', 'Wednesday' and others. It suggests students need teaching sounds using IPA with a view to produce learners with mutual intelligibility not imitating ability. The distinctive way of speaking by Bangladeshi learners generally accepted and intelligible in the country can be identified through collaborative action research and be introduced to the student as a variety of our own.

Teachers also need to be trained on the aspects of pronunciation on how to teach it and the issues relating to it. Raising awareness toward the significance of pronunciation is required not only for teacher but also for teacher trainers, policy makers, and head teachers. Sessions can also be arranged, even if needed, for guardians and parents who may pressurize teachers to focus on exam-oriented teaching. Moreover, a change to evaluation is the demand of time since the loopholes between policy and practice has to blame the evaluation system that extensively focuses on writing and memorization of drills only.

Students should be exposed to Balanced Approach of learning English with a view to preparing them for the future interactions in EIL. They should be taught English as a language not as a subject incorporating proficiency aspects, local and target language culture, and more importantly all these should be done using *realia* so that learners can feel motivated and personalize it in their real life context.

Based on the findings of the study following suggestions can be made:

- Awareness raising sessions in the form of seminar, conference, workshop and so on should be familiarized at all levels of education in the country
- Training for trainers and teacher on phonetics and phonology
- Testing oral skills underlying pronunciation
- Integrated pronunciation teaching with other skills
- 5-7 minutes short session on pronunciation can be enormously helpful for bringing a change in pace of the class activity (Harmer, 2003)
- Bangla-English differences in terms of sound-orthography can be categorized. For example English contains /a/ in many forms as in / ɒ ə ɑː ɔː ɜː ɒː / whereas in Bangla we have only two letters.

Collaborative action research to perform contrastive analysis undertaken by some known and well reputed scholars in the country can be of real help for students to contribute further

- Varieties of Englishes should be familiarized

The current empirical research focused on the significance of pronunciation at HSC emphasizing segmental aspects of pronunciation. However, further study can be undertaken on suprasegmentals including nuclear stress that also causes unintelligibility to a larger extent (Jenkins, 2004).

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