Students’ Attitudes towards Learning English Pronunciation

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 2

Saundz survey ..................................................................................................................... 3
  1.1. Pronunciation important for 90% of students .......................................................... 3
  1.2. Teachers pay more attention to other aspects of language learning ....................... 4
  1.3. Students uncomfortable with their pronunciation skills ........................................ 6
  1.4. British or American English? .................................................................................. 8
  1.5. Pronunciation generally neglected in classrooms ................................................... 8
  1.6. Majority of students practice English outside classroom ........................................ 9

Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 10
Introduction

Looking back at the emergence of English as the international lingua franca, it is easy to see how rapidly this language overtook educational systems all over the world. Classrooms soon filled with materials for teaching and learning English to support listening and speaking activities, as well as vocabulary building and grammar improvement.

One aspect of learning this global language, however, seems to have remained on the edges of peoples’ attention – pronunciation. Although clearly an impactful language dimension, pronunciation teaching never seems to have gained enough too much attention among the teachers. This is certainly justified considering various studies that examined the potential of pronunciation mistakes to lead to serious miscommunications. Coupled with a multitude of Englishes now spoken, which are popularly termed “International English,” pronunciation teaching appears even more difficult. Furthermore, the lack of standards, resources and tools for performing pronunciation activities in classroom additionally discouraged stronger focus on this aspect.

However, students of English still seem to perceive particular accents as ideals they should strive to achieve. This is most frequently the case with the widespread Received Pronunciation (RP), which is generally referred to as simply British English, which many students identify as the only true English. Along with the RP, General American (GA), known as American English, came to students’ lives in the form of popular Hollywood blockbusters, pop-music and other mass culture trends that, with the help of the Internet, transgressed the borders between countries, and even continents.

While these two remain the ones that appeal to students most, there are many other standard dialects that are important for studying English as a second language. This is one of the major reasons why teachers all over the world encourage students to listen to different accents and get used to non-standard pronunciations.

Students, on the other hand, often seem unable to “pick up” native-like accents due to the fact they’re insufficiently exposed to them. According to different studies, this is an important problem for their further studies of English in the sense they feel uncomfortable speaking English in front of others. At a particular age, students are even mocked by their peers if they have a strong accent.

In such an ecosystem, it seems painfully difficult to reconcile accent differences, lack of resources and time in order to come up with the efficient way to present pronunciation practice to students of English either in the classroom or outside of it. However, many teachers still don’t see this as an
important aspect of general ELT, even though in the age of the Internet, it has become easier than ever to access resources for improvement. Again, students stick to the opinion that pronunciation does matter, even though they are not always sure about the differences between accents.

**Saundz survey**

The online survey created by the Saundz research team collected responses from 100 students, who expressed their views on the importance of English pronunciation. These results represent a valuable insight into how students themselves see and approach pronunciation learning.

The survey respondents were from all over the world, with majority of them coming from the US (12%), Malaysia (5%), Pakistan (4%), Iceland (4%), Iraq (4%), Algeria (4%), Brazil (4%), India (4%), and others.

**1.1. Pronunciation important for 90% of students**

When asked to express their agreement or disagreement with the statement “Pronunciation is very important to me,” majority of students expressed a strong agreement. Only about 8% of students said that they either disagree or don’t know how they feel about this statement. 92% expressed agreement and strong agreement (in most cases).

Nowacka (2012) came to similar results in her survey with 157 English students from Italy, Spain and Poland. When asked to agree with the statement “It is important for me to have good English pronunciation” a great deal of students expressed their agreement with this statement (69% strongly agreed, and 29% agreed). The reasons they gave to justify their agreement with the statement were as follows: “to sound like a native /near native speaker, to be clearly understood/to communicate successfully/to avoid misunderstanding as well as to be a good model for students as a teacher, and to clients as an interpreter, in the future.” (Nowacka, 48)
Being aware of the importance of pronunciation and having a motivation for practicing it can help students achieve better results. According to Elliot (qtd. in Gilakjani, 2011), the students’ attitude towards pronunciation was the principle variable in acquiring native or near-native pronunciation. The more concerned they were, the better their performance was.

Furthermore, most students examined believed that pronunciation would be useful for their future. We live in world where English is an international lingua franca, where many job positions nowadays require excellent knowledge of English. If students do not acquire proper pronunciation, they will face difficulties in the area of finding employment (Gilakjani, 2011). Students seem to bear in mind the fact that they need to be skillful in English in order to have better future job prospects.

If students do not acquire proper pronunciation, they will face difficulties in the area of finding employment.

1.2. Teachers pay more attention to other aspects of language learning

When asked whether their teachers pay more attention to other aspect of learning a language (such as grammar, reading, writing and vocabulary) compared to time devoted to pronunciation, only 21%
of students said that this is not the case. This is an indicator of a widely rooted view that having good pronunciation skills is not as important as knowing grammar rules and having a rich vocabulary.

However, even when a student is exceptionally good in all the other aspects of foreign language fluency, pronunciation is often the key to successful communication in real-life situations (which is ultimately the goal of learning a language). Not having good pronunciation skills in direct communication can result in the bad perception of speaker’s other skills. Burns (2003) believes that clear pronunciation is necessary in communication since students are more likely to communicate effectively when they have developed these skills.

However, spending years learning a foreign language does not provide a guarantee that a student will be successful in acquiring L2 pronunciation, which is mostly due to the fact that pronunciation receives little or no attention in foreign language classrooms (Aliaga-García, 2007). This view is supported by Hariri, who believes that sounds are very important when communicating, which is why foreign language teachers must pay more attention to teaching them (Hariri, 2012).

Certainly, there are some obvious reasons why pronunciation is not often taught in the classroom. Some of the most frequently quoted ones are lack of class time, inaccessibility of resources and general uncertainty when it comes to teachers' own pronunciation skills.

My teachers pay more attention to grammar, reading, writing and vocabulary

- Never: 15%
- Seldom: 28%
- About half the time: 15%
- Usually: 36%
- Always: 6%
1.3. Students uncomfortable with their pronunciation skills

When it comes to their skills, students show an overall dissatisfaction with the way they sound. Also, since most of them believe that they would feel more comfortable if their pronunciation was better, this clearly points to the importance of practicing pronunciation both in class and at home.

Only 30% of students said they were comfortable with the way they sound now, while almost the same percentage said they didn’t know.

Although being an important aspect of language learning, pronunciation poses a great difficulty for students both while studying in ESL programs and while communicating in the real world (Hariri, 2012). This lack of proper pronunciation training is what causes discomfort for students in real-life communication causing them to shy away from speaking with other non-native and native speakers.

On the other hand, most students feel that if they were better with pronunciation, they would be more confident in English. This was the case with 85% of students who expressed agreement with the statement “If I am good with pronunciation, I will be more confident in English.”

**If I am good with pronunciation, I would be more confident in English.**

Furthermore 80% of students said they feel it is important to sound like a native speaker, while over 70% of them believe mispronunciation can cause misunderstandings.

In a related research conducted on 100 adult ESL students, Derwing (2003) found out that majority sees speaking with perfect native-like pronunciation as a desirable goal. Another confirmation of this
view is presented in Timmis’s 2002 research that examined around 400 students in 14 different countries and asked them to answer the following question:

| Student A: ‘I can pronounce English just like a native speaker now. Sometimes people think I am a native speaker.’ |
| Student B: ‘I can pronounce English clearly now. Native speakers and non-native speakers understand me wherever I go, but I still have the accent of my country.’ |
| Would you prefer to be like Student A or Student B? |

67% of students opted for Student A which also leads to a conclusion that students see acquisitions of a native-like accent as the goal they strive for. Similar attitudes were also expressed by the students in the Saundz research, whose summaries are given below.

It is important for me to sound like a native speaker.

Considering the fact that modern ESL techniques insist on International English and encourage students to embrace the different accents, this is quite a worrying stat. Namely, it seems that as much as they are exposed to different accents, students still think that native-like pronunciation is very important. This was also confirmed in the survey conducted by Nowacka (2012), where most students expressed inclination toward native-like pronunciation. When asked to agree with the following statement “Students should aim for native English pronunciation” 89% said they agree (31% strongly agreed, and 58% agreed).
1.4. British or American English?

When it comes to differentiating between native speaking varieties, the largest portion of students appears either unfamiliar with or indifferent to the native variety they would like to acquire. Also, the same form of indifference or ignorance appears in reference to the variety of English their teacher speaks. Although students show no important preference for any of the varieties of English (38% said “I don’t know”), almost half of them said they would travel to UK to learn English. Therefore, it seems that RP is still the most attractive variety for learners.

Attitudes and preferences towards RP and GA vary depending on students’ familiarity and contact with either of the variety in question. Cheng (2013) conducted a survey on 21 young educated Hong Kong people. The respondents mostly agreed with the following statements:

- “British English is formal” (79%)
- “The British accent of English is beautiful” (71.4%)
- “British English is more grammatical than American English” (76.2%)
- “British English is conservative” (71.4%)

Other interesting conclusions could be drawn from Ledin (2012) who surveyed 64 Swedish students in order to investigate their attitudes towards British and American English. When they were asked which variety of English they speak, 47.3% said American English, 25% British English, and 25% said they speak a mixture of these two varieties. When asked to explain why they speak the variety in question, those who answered American English stated that they were influenced by online games, TV shows; others stated that they see American English as more common and natural, or as nicer and prettier. Those who opted for British English, the most common explanation is that it sounds prettier than American English.

What follows from the data presented above is that students tend to perceive British English as more formal and conservative, but they prefer its melody; American English, on the other hand, is regarded as informal and less standard – the language of entertainment and urban culture.

1.5. Pronunciation generally neglected in classrooms

As the Saundz research confirms, teachers in almost 80% of cases pay more attention to activities other than pronunciation and listening. However, students demonstrate great awareness of internet-based resources that could help them improve their pronunciation. 37% of students believe that online resources are the best ways for additional practice. Even if considerable amount of time is dedicated to teaching pronunciation, students should also practice individually, since practicing only in classroom is not enough for achieving desirable results.
1.6. Majority of students practice English outside classroom

Practicing only when in class is not enough, and majority of the students seem to grasp the idea of the importance of individual work. Only 8 respondents said they limit their practice to the classroom. In terms of practice methods, most students rely on listening to music, watching films, series, podcasts and so on. This seems to be the most amusing way to learn English, hence the great number of responses that point to it. The next popular response is reading all sorts of materials in English – books, magazines, newspapers and various articles. Since there is an abundance of reading material available online, this is also an easy way to improve your English.

Speaking with other people is the next answer in line, followed by the usage of the Internet (learning by using various educational websites, interacting with other people via social networks, and having online classes). Although the Internet was expected to be rated higher, since it is omnipresent nowadays, it came to the fourth place. The least popular responses were: using English at work (7 responses), living in an English speaking country (2 responses), and studying for school (2 responses). The most popular way of practicing English thus seems to be the one that is entertaining and it does not demand a lot of effort.
Conclusion

Without a doubt, pronunciation is an important aspect in second language learning. Despite that fact, majority of teachers do not devote enough class time to teaching pronunciation thus leaving students to find learning resources on their own.

On the other hand, students are well aware of how important pronunciation is and that it can be significant for their better future. Students feel that achieving native-like pronunciation is the ultimate goal in order to avoid misunderstanding.

Contrary to students’ attitudes towards British English, there are quite a large number of teachers who speak both RP and General American. Jenkins (1998) states that people working in the area of phonology no longer consider the teaching of English as a means for communication with native speakers, thus there is no need to strive to acquire native-like pronunciation in the era of world Englishes.
References:


