



Foreign language learners' views on the importance of learning the target language pronunciation

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Abstract

Pronunciation is one of the controversial topics in the field of English language teaching as a second or foreign language. The aim of this study is to understand the attitudes of prep class students at Kastamonu University (state university) in Turkey towards the importance of pronunciation in language learning. Therefore, a pronunciation attitude inventory (PAI) was implemented in order to achieve this goal. 58 students who were from different majors such as business management, forest engineering, tourism and hotel management, etc. attended the research at total, and they were asked to give their opinions about 12 statements by using five-point Likert scale aiming at eliciting the attitudes of the participants from the strongest (always or almost always true of me) to the weakest (never or almost never true of me). The descriptive results of the answers were analyzed by using SPSS 16 program. The responses given to the items in the questionnaire that intended to figure out the attitudes of the participants towards correct pronunciation in learning foreign language prove that pronunciation conveys a significant role in the target language learning, and it needs to be specifically handled by the instructors throughout the teaching process.

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Keywords: Pronunciation; attitudes; adult learners; foreign language learning

1. Introduction

Pronunciation is a field in second language acquisition (SLA) which is studied less than the others due to its nature that is more difficult to conduct researches and many different variables interfere with its process such as gender, motivation, field dependence / independence, etc., (Asher & Garcia, 1969). Because of the mother tongue (L1) and negative transfer, Turkish students may find it difficult to acquire the pronunciation of English (Corder, 1992; Liu, 2011; Ringbom, 2007; Demirezen, 2010). The other reason for not being so efficient in the target language pronunciation lies in the absence of some particular sounds in Turkish sound inventory such as /θ/ and /ð/ (Çelik, 2008). Apart from the inexistence of some particular sounds in some languages, the age of learners also has a great influence on pronouncing the sounds accurately. In this respect, Piske, MacKay & Flege (2001) state that age is the most important predictor in acquiring a foreign language accent. The reason for this case can also be explained through Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). According to CPH (Lenneberg, 1967), learners have the disadvantages of starting to learn a language at late ages especially after puberty for the first language. On the other hand, proper pronunciation instruction is another issue that needs to be

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dealt with in Turkey (Çakır, 2012; Celik, 2008; Demirezen, 2010; Hismanoglu, 2012; Cagiltay, Saran & Seferoglu, 2009). As many of the English language teaching departments at universities do not cover the course of phonetics appropriately, a great number of the teachers may not feel themselves confident with their own pronunciation levels. Therefore, they either prefer not to teach pronunciation or are unable to integrate it into the course properly, which automatically affects the attitudes of learners towards learning it.

1.1. Review of literature

In foreign language learning learners usually find the target language pronunciation difficult because the new sounds do not always correspond to the ones in their mother tongue. As it is a hard issue to tackle with for many teachers and learners, some people claim that it needs to be presented explicitly. That is to say, intentional teaching of pronunciation would help learners overcome the anxiety in oral communication that mostly derives from the lack of correct pronunciation. In his research, Nakazawa (2012) states that especially university level students feel anxious and they are afraid of making mistakes while pronouncing the words, and they mostly confess that they get embarrassed when speaking because of the possibility of making mistakes in pronunciation. However, one of the key factors in foreign language teaching is creating a “stress-free environment” and lowering learners’ anxiety as much as possible (Krashen, 1982). Furthermore, it is advocated that if the learner is too stressed, s/he cannot learn the language as s/he cannot receive the comprehensible input because of the anxiety, which is characterized as “affective filter” (Krashen, 1982).

We all know that in foreign language learning atmosphere, affective filter plays an important role for producing correct pronunciation; learners cannot improve themselves because of the fear of making mistakes in front of the others. Although it is regarded as an important component of foreign language teaching, it is seen that not too much attention has been paid to this phenomenon adequately. Deng et al., (2009) believe that pronunciation is not an aspect of SLA that takes an academic attention. The research proves that the number of the researches conducted to find out the attitudes of learners is limited (Burgess and Spencer, 2000; Derwing, 2010; Foote, Tracey & Derwing, 2010; Elliott, 1995). Burgess and Spencer (2000) carried out a research about the attitudes of instructors in the UK, the results showed that instructors found pronunciation difficult to teach and stated that learners especially had problems about the sounds that were not existent in their L1. Derwing (2010) found through his study that 53 % of the participants thought that “Canadians would respect them more.” if they are good at pronunciation. Thus, the results prove that articulating the correct pronunciation in target language may show the social status of the people or their educational background. As people do not want to be seen different from the rest of the group, they would like to pronounce in a native-like way as much as they can. Another finding of the study of Foote, Tracey & Derwing (2010) reveals that 75 % of the instructors wished they could be trained, and said “Too many teachers avoid teaching pronunciation because they lack confidence in their own ability to succeed it”.

While presenting and learning the target language, motivation, undoubtedly, needs to be taken into consideration. Dörnyei (1998) shows the importance of motivation and makes it clear by saying “Without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long term goals.” (p. 117). That is to say, it becomes incredibly difficult to teach if the learners do not want to learn and they use their mental blocks by doing so. Elliott (1995) found out in his study that learners who are concerned with their pronunciation had better pronunciation skills. The same finding was also obtained in Suter’s (1976) study. As communication is the main goal for many foreign language learners, it is true to state that learners should be careful about their pronunciation; pay

utmost attention to its correct production; and try to improve their overall pronunciation skills. In order to attain all these goals, they need to be encouraged and motivated as required. Brown (2001) defines motivation as two opposing camps: one of these stresses the importance of rewards and reinforcement, and the other states the cognitive process in a deeper sense. Writing in the same context, Gass & Selinker (2008) believe that individuals who are motivated will learn another language faster and to a great degree.

The other factor that has a great influence on the correct pronunciation is age of the learners, which is considered as a predictor of acquiring foreign language pronunciation (Granena & Long, 2012). In this vein, Nunan (1998) states that in human life there is a period during which language can be acquired more easily and after that period it becomes much more difficult which is originally suggested by Lenneberg in his Critical Period Hypothesis, (1967). In Turkish students learning English language context, Demirezen (2010) notes that some sounds are difficult for Turkish learners to articulate as they do not exist in the Turkish sound inventory. Negative language transfer from mother tongue can harm the communication, especially when talking to native speakers of English. While talking to non-native speakers of English, as in many classrooms in Turkey, it may not bring about a problem, because all learners go through the same learning stages. English language teachers whose mother tongue is Turkish should be careful so as to be a good model. Hismanoglu (2009) maintains that non-native teachers of English in Turkey do not have phonological competence to teach pronunciation clearly. Teachers' inability results in failure for their learners' competence, too. Pronunciation reveals the person's background if s/he speaks with a foreign accent. Some linguists favour having a foreign accent as they accept it as a part of their identity, while some others do not, considering the fact that negative foreign accent places speakers in a disadvantaged position (Morley, 1991).

1.2. Purpose of the study

This study aims to find out the attitudes of the foreign language learners studying at prep classes towards the pronunciation. The subject groups were requested to specify their opinions on the importance of correct pronunciation in oral communication in the target language. Thus, randomly selected 58 participants attending the English prep program were required to fill in pronunciation attitude inventory (PAI).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The study was carried out at English preparatory school of a state university in Turkey. The university offers an optional English prep program to students who are willing to study English for a year. Since the study is conducted at a university prep program, the age of the participants ranges from 18 to 22. 58 participants from various departments voluntarily took part in the research. The distribution of the participants by departments is shown in detail in the Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of the Participants by Departments

| Department | Male | Female | Total |
|-------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Tourism and Hotel Management | 18 | 20 | 38 |
| Business Administration | 7 | 8 | 15 |
| Primary School Education | - | 2 | 2 |
| Education and Religion Ethics | - | 1 | 1 |
| Forest Engineering | 1 | - | 1 |
| Psychology | - | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 26 | 32 | 58 |

As is clearly seen in the table above, most of the participants (n 38) study in the department of Tourism and Hotel Management where they professionally need the effective use of the target language. 15 of the participants from the department of Business Administration in this survey also will be in need of the foreign language in their future careers. For that reason, the number of the participants from these two departments outnumbers the others. The distribution of the participants by genders in this randomly selected subject group is displayed in the Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Participants by Genders

| Gender | f | % |
|--------|----|------|
| Male | 26 | 44.8 |
| Female | 32 | 55.2 |

2.2. Data collection procedure

In this study, a survey that was adapted from Pronunciation Attitude Inventory (PAI) (Elliott, 1995) has been administered to 58 participants. This survey includes 12 statements about pronunciation, and it is designed in the form of five-point Likert scale ranging from *always* or *always true of me* to *never* or *almost never true of me*. While adapting the survey instrument PAI, some parts have been evaluated and modified in accordance with the purpose of the research. To get the final version of the research instrument two experts in the field were asked to review it. The survey was administered to the research group without giving any time limitation in order to create a relaxed atmosphere while responding.

2.3. Data analysis

The results were analyzed through SPSS 16 program using descriptive statistics and frequencies. Each item has also been analyzed in terms of mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum values.

3. Results and discussion

The figures in the Table 3 below show the statistical results of the items in general. As it is clearly seen, there is no missing value, and participants replied to all statements. When we look at the minimum and maximum values, we see that all statements have the maximum value of five which means “*always or almost always true of me*”, as for the minimum values we have the value of one meaning “*never or almost never true of me*” in ten items and we have two statements that have the value of two meaning “*usually not true of me*”, the statements of these answers are “*I believe I can improve my pronunciation skills in English.*” and “*I’m concerned with my progress in my pronunciation of English.*” It means that there is no student thinking absolutely in a negative way about these two statements. It is conceivable that students are careful about their pronunciation skills and want to improve it. However, there are many other things we can say when we take a look at mean values of the survey statistics. Item ten has the highest mean value of 4.33; and item three has the lowest mean value of 2.28. Item ten says “*I want to improve my accent when speaking English*”, item nine says “*I will never be able to speak English with a good accent.*”. Item ten shows the positive attitudes of the participants towards pronunciation in English. Although their level was not excellent, they want to improve their accent, from which we can infer that they are motivated enough to improve themselves, item three explains us the importance of pronunciation very well. Students believe that they can speak English with a good accent; it again shows us the motivation of the students. They do not ignore pronunciation; on the contrary they place a great importance to it.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the items.

| Item | Mean | St.Dev. | Min. | Max. |
|------|------|---------|------|------|
| 1 | 4.22 | 1.044 | 1 | 5 |
| 2 | 4.17 | .976 | 1 | 5 |
| 3 | 2.28 | 1.073 | 1 | 5 |
| 4 | 4.07 | .856 | 2 | 5 |
| 5 | 4.16 | 1.005 | 1 | 5 |
| 6 | 4.02 | 1.084 | 1 | 5 |
| 7 | 3.62 | 1.152 | 1 | 5 |
| 8 | 4.21 | .969 | 1 | 5 |
| 9 | 2.59 | 1.463 | 1 | 5 |
| 10 | 4.33 | .825 | 1 | 5 |
| 11 | 3.88 | .880 | 2 | 5 |
| 12 | 3.90 | 1.087 | 1 | 5 |

The responses given to the items in the questionnaire that intended to figure out the attitudes of the participants prove that correct pronunciation plays an important role in learners’ motivation towards foreign language learning. In this regard, statements 1, 2, 6, 10 and 12 aimed to display participants’ views on learning the target language pronunciation. These statements also intended to depict to what extent they would like to improve their pronunciation in learning the target language.

Table 4. Numbers and Responses of Responses to the Statements 1, 2, 6, 10, and 12.

| Item | Statements | Descriptive Statistics (DS) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Total |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----|-----|------|------|------|-------|
| 1 | I'd like to sound as native as possible when speaking English. | f | 2 | 2 | 8 | 15 | 31 | 58 |
| | | % | 3.4 | 3.4 | 13.8 | 25.9 | 53.4 | 100 |
| 2 | Acquiring proper pronunciation in English is important to me. | f | 1 | 3 | 8 | 19 | 27 | 58 |
| | | % | 1.7 | 5.2 | 13.8 | 32.8 | 46.6 | 100 |
| 6 | One of my personal goals is to acquire proper pronunciation skills and preferably be able to pass as a near-native speaker of the language. | f | 2 | 5 | 6 | 22 | 23 | 58 |
| | | % | 3.4 | 8.6 | 10.3 | 37.9 | 39.7 | 100 |
| 10 | I want to improve my accent when speaking English | f | 1 | 1 | 4 | 24 | 28 | 58 |
| | | % | 1.7 | 1.7 | 6.9 | 41.4 | 48.3 | 100 |
| 12 | Sounding like a native speaker is very important to me. | f | 3 | 2 | 13 | 20 | 20 | 58 |
| | | % | 5.2 | 3.4 | 22.4 | 34.5 | 34.5 | 100 |

As it is depicted in the Table 4, learners to a great extent would like to learn target language and use it fluently and in a native-like accent. In the questionnaire item 1 aimed to portray the importance of correct pronunciation for learners, and the results show that they (53.4% and 25.9 %) would like to sound as native as possible while speaking English. This intention is verified with the results given to item 10 with the percentages of 41.4 and 48.3. Furthermore, the results obtained from the statements 2, and 6 revealed that participants (n=46) intend to acquire proper pronunciation in English is important for them, and they aim to use the target language properly (37.9 % and 39.7 %). Being able to sound like a native speaker (Item 12) is the other expectation that the participants would like to attain in foreign language learning process. Although the expectation of learners from the target language learning pronunciation seems ideal for learners, it is safe to say that it is not possible to achieve this aim as the participant's desire due to certain factors such as age, motivation and course syllabuses offered in English preparatory classes.

Table 5. Numbers and Responses of Responses to the Statements 3, 4, and 5.

| Item | Statements | Descriptive Statistics (DS) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Total |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| 3 | I will never be able to speak English with a good accent. | f | 18 | 14 | 19 | 6 | 1 | 58 |
| | | % | 31.0 | 24.1 | 32.8 | 10.3 | 1.7 | 100 |
| 4 | I believe I can improve my pronunciation skills in English. | f | 0 | 4 | 7 | 28 | 19 | 58 |
| | | % | 0 | 6.9 | 12.1 | 48.2 | 32.8 | 100 |
| 5 | I believe more emphasis should be given to proper pronunciation in class. | f | 1 | 1 | 16 | 10 | 30 | 58 |
| | | % | 1.7 | 1.7 | 27.6 | 17.3 | 51.7 | 100 |

In items 3 and 4 participants were required to specify their opinions about the possibility of realizing the correct pronunciation while and after learning English. The data obtained from the statement “*I will never be able to speak English with a good accent*” is one of the negative statements in the survey, and it is seen that this statement has the lowest mean score (2, 28) showing that participants do not agree with this statement and think that they can have a good accent (See Table 3). On the other hand, item 4 reveals that participants have the optimistic attitude towards learning the target language pronunciation (48.2 % and 32.8 %). In order to achieve the intended goal, 17.3% and 51,7 % of the learners believe that in each lesson a certain time should specifically be devoted to pronunciation in English language teaching classes.

Table 6. Numbers and Percentages of Responses to the Statements, 7, 8, 9, and 11.

| Item | Statements | Descriptive Statistics (DS) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Total |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| 7 | I try to imitate English speakers as much as possible. | f | 5 | 3 | 14 | 23 | 13 | 58 |
| | | % | 8.6 | 5.2 | 24.1 | 39.7 | 22.4 | 100 |
| 8 | Communicating is much more important than sounding like a native speaker of English. | f | 1 | 3 | 7 | 19 | 28 | 58 |
| | | % | 1.7 | 5.2 | 12.1 | 32.8 | 48.3 | 100 |
| 9 | Good pronunciation skills in English are not as important as learning vocabulary and grammar. | f | 20 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 8 | 58 |
| | | % | 34.5 | 17.2 | 17.2 | 17.2 | 13.8 | 100 |
| 11 | I'm concerned with my progress in my pronunciation of English. | f | 0 | 4 | 14 | 25 | 15 | 58 |
| | | % | 0 | 6.9 | 24.1 | 43.1 | 25.9 | 100 |

Item seven says that “*I try to imitate English speakers as much as possible*”. It has the tenth highest mean score, showing that students do not agree with the idea. Although they are motivated enough to improve their pronunciation skills, they want to do that without imitating English speakers. The results for the statement 8 indicate that 47 (81.1%) of the participants stress the real function of language, which is communication. That is to say, respondents are more motivated about pronunciation but they believe that communication has the prior importance. In contrast, as the data obtained from the statement 9 in Table 4 show learners believe the importance of pronunciation and accept it as one of the most important aspects of language such as grammar or vocabulary. 20 (34.5 %) of the respondents have the belief that correct pronunciation in communication is as important as lexical and syntactic knowledge in target language. It is seen that this view is supported with the responses given to the item 11 in that foreign language learners are generally concerned with the progress in their pronunciation of English.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the views of the students on the importance of pronunciation in foreign language learning. The results obtained from the questionnaire reveal that learners have a great tendency to be able to use the target language not only syntactically but also phonetically. To do this, the participants would like to be offered the target language pronunciation appropriately in a foreign language learning setting. Needless to say, pronunciation plays a crucial role in communication, and it can bring about intelligibility problems. For that reason, it can be stated that foreign language learners should be exposed to the target language not only in written but also orally in order to acquire the sound system correctly. So, the teacher with mispronunciation is the fundamental reason for miscommunication among the learners. In this vein, Thomson (1987) notes that teacher with a strong Turkish accent may damage learners’ potential pronunciation abilities. What is more, current teachers’ phonological awareness should be raised; they should know that pronunciation is not a skill that students can learn on their own, but a special effort needs to be spent on. Although Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967) strongly advocates that it is virtually impossible for adults to acquire native like pronunciation in a foreign language, it is advisable that foreign language classes should give importance to pronunciation; certain limit of time (such as 10 minutes for each lesson) should be dedicated to pronunciation specially.

As aforementioned, pronunciation is one of the most important aspects of a language. Considering the fact that it is usually neglected and is not appreciated properly, this study intended to present the attitudes of the students towards pronunciation in English. The results of the study prove that students are very motivated and hopeful about their pronunciation skills, and they also believe that they can improve their skills and achieve good foreign accent without imitating the native speakers. The other significant finding of this study indicates that participants to a great extent have a belief in common that pronunciation conveys a great role in establishing a mutual intelligibility, which is an essential component of communication competence (Morley, 1991). What is meant by intelligibility is the degree to which a speaker’s utterance is understood by a listener. Therefore, it is safe to say that teachers should ideally include components of pronunciation in their courses and expect students to do well (Otlowski, 1998). In this respect, what is expected from the foreign language teachers should be to stress on the intelligibility of speech. In other words, mutual intelligibility need to be the modus operandi when considering what should be taught.

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APPENDIX A**The Pronunciation Attitude Inventory (PAI)**

Please answer all items using the following response categories:

5= Always or almost always true of me

4= Usually true of me

3= Somewhat true of me

2= Usually not true of me

1= Never or almost never true of me

| | | | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I'd like to sound as native as possible when speaking English. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Acquiring proper pronunciation in English is important to me. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. I will never be able to speak English with a good accent. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. I believe I can improve my pronunciation skills in English. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. I believe more emphasis should be given to proper pronunciation in class. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. One of my personal goals is to acquire proper pronunciation skills and preferably be able to pass as a near-native speaker of the language. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. I try to imitate English speakers as much as possible. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. Communicating is much more important than sounding like a native speaker of English. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. Good pronunciation skills in English are not as important as learning vocabulary and grammar. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. I want to improve my accent when speaking English. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. I'm concerned with my progress in my pronunciation of English. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. Sounding like a native speaker is very important to me. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

(Adapted from Elliott, 1995)

Hedef dili sesletimi öğrenmenin önemi konusunda yabancı dil öğrenenlerin görüşleri

Öz

İngilizcenin yabancı veya ikinci dil olarak öğretiminde sesletim konusu tartışmalı alanlardan birisidir. Bu çalışmanın amacı Kastamonu Üniversitesi İngilizce Hazırlık Programı'na devam eden öğrencilerin sesletim eğitimi konusunda görüşlerini belirlemektir. Bu amaçla, işletme, ormancılık, turizm vb. gibi bölümlere kayıtlı 58 öğrenci bu çalışmaya katılmıştır. Katılımcılardan beşli Likert ölçeğine göre hazırlanmış 12 ayrı konuda görüş bildirmeleri istenmiştir. Tanımlayıcı istatistik uygulanan bu çalışma verileri SPSS 16 programında yorumlanmıştır. Elde edilen sonuçlara göre katılımcılar yabancı dil öğrenirken doğru sesletimin önemli olduğunu belirttiği görülmektedir. Ayrıca sesletim konusunun yabancı dil öğretimi sürecinde ders izlencelerinde yer almasının gerekliliği ve ilgili öğretim elemanının da bu konu üzerinde durması gerektiği vurgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: sesletim, tutum, yetişkin öğrenciler, yabancı dil öğretimi

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İsmail Çakır, Ph.D., had M.A. degree, Gazi University, and Ph.D. degree, Hacettepe University, in English Language Teaching. His research interest is in teaching foreign language, teaching language skills, teaching culture, teaching methodology, materials development and evaluation in foreign language teaching, and teaching vocabulary. He has several national and international publications and presentations on foreign language teaching.

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