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## PROBLEMS OF PRONUNCIATION FOR SECONDARY LEVEL STUDENTS LEARNING ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE IN BANGLADESH

PRODHAN MAHBUB IBNA SERAJ<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates problems with English pronunciation among secondary level students, identifying key reasons for the pronunciation problems and recommending solutions. It begins with discussing the value of intelligible pronunciation and reviewing the relevant literature. Next, it focuses on students' pronunciation problems with consonants and vowels (drawing the difference of place and manner of articulation between Bengali and English) and with stress and intonation at secondary level in Bangladesh. The study was conducted at the Sylhet division during April to October 2012.

**Keywords:** International Phonetic Alphabet, Communicative Language Teaching, Secondary School Certificate, Mother Tongue and Aspirated and Unaspirated.

### INTRODUCTION

As Communicative language Teaching (CLT) has been introduced at the secondary level, students should be more interactive and communicative in English whether in speaking and writing. Moreover, the standard pronunciation of any language is a beauty and an essential part that makes a balance in understanding to the most people of its speakers. Without standard pronunciation any language loses its beauty of speaking and listening as well as the power of good communication too. So, standard pronunciation is very important for one's communicative competence and it becomes very useful when someone is out of his or her own region. English as a second or foreign language in Bangladesh has been used for many days. Therefore the standard of English usage in our country is not satisfactory. Especially the standard of English in pronunciation is very poor. Sometimes the pronunciation which is used by Bengali speakers is very ridiculous also. Generally, the teaching of English as a foreign language in many territories of the world including Bangladesh give emphasis on reading and writing skills and little emphasis is given on listening and speaking skills. However, very recently, since the introduction of communicative language teaching, a few years ago, in different levels of education, especially primary, secondary and higher secondary levels where English is taught as a compulsory subject, the listening and speaking skills have been started in various styles which is contributing a little to build up the students' standard pronunciation of English. One thing seriously can be noticed that the students of Bangladesh throughout the country have very good passion for learning English. But this is a matter of regret that they not show as much passion for learning English pronunciation as they show in learning English languages. However this is not the only cause for which the students cannot learn standard pronunciation but there are several other services causes for which most of the time the students mispronounce English words. Sultana and Arif (2007) have pointed out some reasons of mispronunciation for the Bengali learners of English such as:

- Learners are not conscious of the difference between the letters and sounds of a word
- Learners do not give emphasis on the pronunciation of the sounds of a word when it is spelt
- Learners cannot follow either syllabic or phonological divisions of words properly

They also think that the non-native English users in Bangladesh use various local dialects with different pronunciations and intonations which influence the use of English. In this context, Amin (2006) pointed out a number of inherent problems for the Bangladeshi speakers of English:

- It is an interpersonal skill. One can listen, read and write on one's own. But for speaking there must be more than one person for interaction.
- Apart from mastery of the structures of the language, one must pay attention to acceptable/comprehensible pronunciation, stress and intonation.

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- Exposure to the language and practice in its use are essential for speaking a language. In Bangladesh both are lacking.
- In Bangladesh, the only place where students can practice speaking English is educational institutions. In most schools, colleges and universities very few students speak in English.
- A language is learned or acquired either for integrative or instrumental needs. Bangladeshi speakers of English lack both these needs.

The main objectives of the study are: i. to demonstrate the reasons of mispronunciation of secondary level ii. to find out the problems in executing the syllabus for teaching listening and speaking at SSC level, iii. to show the real situation of classroom environment for learning English pronunciation iv. to come across the problems of a teacher in class room, v. to find out whether the necessary instruments are available to learn pronunciation correctly and vi. to identify the measures that can be taken to overcome the difficulties and barriers for learning English standard pronunciation.

## METHODOLOGY

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data has been collected by closely observing English language teaching classrooms, discussing with teachers, students and educationists who shared their valued opinions regarding this issue. Besides this, a questionnaire has been prepared and surveyed on the students of secondary level at different schools in Sylhet. Researchers have used convenient sampling procedure. Books and modern websites have extensively been used. Existing English syllabus of secondary level has been analyzed. The information has been analyzed to assess the present learning situations in Bangladesh and its impact on Bangladeshi learners. The study was conducted at the Sylhet division during April to October 2012.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

For picking up the problems of learning standard pronunciation a questionnaire (appended at the end of this paper) has been served among the students of Secondary level at different institutes of Sylhet division. In the response to the first question 90% students say that they are not familiar with IPA symbols. On the otherwise only 10% students are familiar with them. In the answer to the second question only 10% students are affirmative to identify the difference between the articulation of Bengali and English phonemes. On the other hand, 90% students are not able to distinguish them. In the response to the third question 95% students say that they are not able to find words in transcription from English dictionary; even they do not know the definition and function of transcription. Only 5% who are studying in English medium school are able to do that. In the response to the fourth question 95% students say that they do not listen to English news on TV, Radio etc. regularly. In opposite of the matter, only 5% students hear English news with much enthusiasm. In the response to the fifth question 95% students say that their teachers do not take class in English. And 5% students say that their teachers take classes in English which happen in urban areas. In the response to the sixth question 10% students say that they are interested in practicing speaking English among themselves in and outside the

In the following table there is the summary of the findings of questionnaire:

Sl. no.	Question	Yes	No
1.	Do you know IPA symbols?	10%	90%
2.	Do you identify the difference between the articulation of Bengali and English phonemes?	10%	90%
3.	Do you find words in transcription from English dictionary?	5%	95%
4.	Do you listen English news regularly?	5%	95%
5.	Do your teachers take class in English regularly?	5%	95%
6.	Do you talk with others in English in and outside classroom?	20%	80%
7.	Do you have any scope speaking in English at school?	10%	90%
8.	Do you have any speaking test?	1%	99%

classroom. On the other hand, 90% students are not interested, even they feel shy and hesitate to speak English. In the response to the seventh question 90% students tell that they do not have any scope to

practice speaking in English in classroom with modern amenities. Only 10% students can get digital system at school to practice speaking English. In the response to the eighth question 99% students say that they do not have any speaking test at any level they have passed. On the other hand 1% students who are studying in English medium seldom get a chance of speaking test. From the above questionnaire and my discussion with experts the following problems are assumed. And I have tried to discuss these problems with probable solutions.

### Unawareness of IPA symbols

The pronunciations of English words are conveyed by means of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Thinking of non-native speakers of a language, in 1886, a group of French and British language teachers, led by the French linguist Paul Passy in order to invent such kind of alphabet which can be used for any language to show exact pronunciation of its vowels and consonants sooner invented IPA symbols which now a days is used to show English standard pronunciation in all kind English learning sources. There are forty-four IPA symbols in English instead for twenty-six letters. According to Amanullah (2003) letters are written and are put together to compose words whereas IPA symbols/ phonemes are spoken or used in speech. If a student learns IPA symbols he or she can easily learn standard pronunciation of English with the help of audio, video recordings or individuals who can speak in standard pronunciation. However, using IPA symbols is a very important effort to hold the sameness in pronunciation of any language. But this is a matter of great regret that in our country most on the students are not acquainted with IPA symbols during their student life even in their professional English teaching life. So, the ignorance of IPA symbols is a great problem for which the students cannot speak in standard pronunciation of English.

### The IPA Chart

Vowels	← Mouth wider horizontally		Mouth narrower horizontally →				
Mouth narrower vertically	i: sleep /sli:p/	ɪ slip /slɪp/	u book /bʊk/	u: boot /bu:t/			
Mouth wider vertically	æ cat /kæt/	ʌ cup /kʌp/	ɑ: car /kɑ:r/	ɒ hot /hɒt/			
<b>Diphthongs</b>							
aɪ beer /bɪə/	eɪ say /seɪ/						
aʊ fewer /fju:ə/	aɪ buy /baɪ/	aʊ no /nəʊ/					
eə bear /beə/	aɪ high /haɪ/	au cow /kaʊ/					
<b>Consonants</b>							
p pan /pæn/	b ban /bæn/	t tan /tæn/	d day /deɪ/	ʃ chat /ʃæt/	dʒ judge /dʒʌdʒ/	k key /keɪ/	g get /get/
f fan /fæn/	v van /væn/	θ thin /θɪn/	ð than /ðæn/	s sip /slɪp/	z zip /zɪp/	ʃ ship /ʃɪp/	ʒ vision /vɪʒən/
m might /maɪt/	n night /naɪt/	ŋ thing /θɪŋ/	h height /haɪt/	l light /laɪt/	r right /raɪt/	w white /waɪt/	j yes /jes/

### Regional influence

The influences of regional pronunciation of own language's vowels and consonants is another great problem of Bangladeshi students. It often causes a mispronunciation of the letters as well as words of English. For instance, most of the people of Sylhet Division of Bangladesh often unconsciously pronounce the letter "p" in an English word by giving sound like "ph" during their English speaking. Thus they also often pronounce the letter "k" to "kh". However, it happens because of his or her regional influence as he or she naturally builds up the sound into his or her mind.

### **Difficulty of pronunciation of monophthongs and diphthongs**

The Bengali English learners generally find the five long monophthongs in learning English language, such as /i:/, /u:/, /ɜ:/, /ɔ:/, and /ɑ:/ which are seriously problematic. If we notice we find that to emphasize a point or express various emotional effects, Bengali vowels are lengthened to some degree. But the Bengali vowel length is only phonetic, not phonological. Besides, the Bengali speakers cannot easily and authentically pronounce "schwa" /ə/ as this phoneme is absent in Bengali language. So, Bengali learners get hard in pronunciation of English because these varied pronunciations of vowels are not that much exercised in Bengali language. The learners also suffer difficulty in pronouncing English diphthongs due to his or her mother tongue interference. The English language has eight diphthongs, each of which is a combination of two monophthongs one gliding into the other and naturally longer than a pure vowel. On the other hand, in Bengali language there are eighteen regular diphthongs which are characteristically different and shorter than English diphthongs. As a result, the Bengali speaking learners pronounce only the first part of a diphthong, for example, the word 'late' is pronounced like 'let'.

### **Syllabus target**

The educational syllabus target of Bangladesh on English in government and non-government schools, colleges, universities and other academic institutions equivalent to schools, colleges and universities are not totally in favor of learning Standard English pronunciation at all. Though Communicative Language Teaching has been introduced at secondary and higher secondary level the teachers and teaching environment are not up to date. Basically, in our syllabus the importance is given on Reading and Writing, Speaking and Listening get a little importance. There is no scope for pronunciation practice. And another worse thing is that in our syllabus the most importance also is given on memorization rather than on understanding. So, because of poor management of our syllabus the learners of English language are deprived seriously in learning English standard pronunciation in our country. As a result, even after acquiring good knowledge in English language the students of Bangladesh are not being able to produce a good pronunciation of English.

### **Untrained teachers**

A further big problem for the students of Bangladesh is that most of the English teachers of schools, college, universities and other academic institutions equivalent to schools, college and universities have no proper knowledge on pronunciation of English. It happens because they are untrained in English language and they are not aware of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) (an alphabet that is used to show the pronunciation of a language). Even sometimes it is found that the teacher who teaches English is actually has no any degree on English and is not perfect or suitable for teaching English. But we know especially from primary level to higher secondary level the English teachers are most reliable guide for English learning all the time. They also strictly follow their teachers' lessons and advise regarding English. How can the students learn the standard pronunciation of English which the teachers are not smart in pronunciation on English.

### **Erroneous pronunciation on English text books' notes**

Another acute problem is the incorrect pronunciation of English notes which mislead the students English learners. As English notes play a vital role in showing English pronunciation our native language and students greatly rely on them these notes work like a disease to the students in learning of English pronunciation. If we look on English notes from primary level to higher secondary level even graduate to post graduate level we will not be able to find a single note of English which has better written in standard pronunciation. Again popularity of using American pronunciation on English notes is a serious problem of Bangladesh. Every single note remains very much pregnant with American English. Our national curriculum follows only British English and text books are also written in British English. But when a note is written on English text it mixes American English with British English which makes confusion among the students and misleads the students by its pronunciation. Thus the students learn both pronunciation of a word most of the time during their studies on English notes and once suffer from uncertainty as to what pronunciation they should use during speaking of English.

### **Unawareness of stress and intonation**

Stress and intonation are great problematic issues for Bengali learners like the other foreign learners. Stress means prominence in pronunciation normally produced by four factors; 'loudness' of voice, 'length' of syllables, 'pitch' related to the frequency of vibration of the vocal folds as well as to low and high tone and 'quality' of vowels (Roach, 2000). Unlike the Bengali language, the English language has strong and weak forms. These strong and weak forms are shown by stress and intonation. Stress and intonation are two essential aspects of the pronunciation of English words and utterances. Stress and intonation help English speakers and listeners to understand the exact meaning of the words. With the help of stress and intonation on words the force is shown by which English listeners can identify the words expressed before him in whether noun, adjective, verb or in other parts of speech. However, the Bengali speaking learners face difficulties in using stress and intonation because these are varied from Bengali language according to grammatical categories. For example, 'abstract, conduct, contract, contrast, import, incline, insult, perfect, present, produce, rebel, etc' as verbs receiving stress on the second syllables and as nouns on the first. But on the other hand in Bengali language always the stress is put on the first syllable of every word.

### **Wrong direction in English to Bengali dictionary**

To make ourselves clear about an English word's meaning and pronunciation we mostly depend on English to Bengali dictionaries which are mostly composed by our native English teachers. These dictionaries are totally pregnant with wrong direction by mispronunciations and mostly depend on American pronunciation. However, we are to follow British English pronunciation and these dictionaries are not helpful at all in learning English standard pronunciation because of their mispronunciation and mixed pronunciation of British and American English pronunciations. Another thing is that where all English word's pronunciation is not possible to be shows in Bengali alphabets English to Bengali dictionaries make an uncertain effort showing pronunciation instead of making the pronunciation clear with explanation of the real facts. For instance the equivalent of "shwa" /ə/ (the IPA symbol) sound is not present in our Bengali alphabets. Therefore it is shown in various ways.

### **Confusion between British and American English**

Basically our schools, colleges, universities' text books are written on British English even our English teachers also delivered their lecture on British English. We know British and American both kinds of English are spoken widely throughout the world and both kinds of English have been stood side by side for long time. In Bangladesh both language also are spoken because of its side by side position. But because of our ignorance of identification of British and American language when we speak then both languages make conflict with each other and we cannot often understand in what kinds of words we speak. Although most of British and American English words' pronunciation are mostly same therefore both languages have their own style of pronunciation. For example, in British English "r" after vowel and before consonant is not pronounced but in American English it is pronounced. At the same time Bangladeshi people also pronounce "r" as American people do. But we know basically we are the followers of British English. Thus in many ways we mixer British and American English carelessly when we speak which often makes us confused in mutual understanding during our production of sounds.

### **Missutterance of English consonant sounds**

As the Bengali speaking learner is naturally trained to articulate Bengali consonants and as there are a lot of differences between Bengali and English consonants, Bengali learners finds some difficulty in pronunciation of a number English consonants in both production and perception. The Bengali language has twenty plosives. On the other hand the English language has six /p b t d k g/. The Bengali speaking learner is used to using both aspirated and unaspirated sounds in his/her mother tongue as it has separate aspirated and unaspirated phonemes producing difference in meaning. But like Bengali language the English language has no corresponding aspirated plosives and the voiceless plosives /p t k/ are aspirated in the initial position of the stressed syllable but unaspirated in other positions. As a result, the Bengali speaking learner cannot exactly pronounce the aspirated allophones of English voiceless plosives /p t k/. Thus the English consonants which are absent in the Bengali language are difficult to the Bengali speaking learner and negatively affect the Bengali learners' pronunciation as well as perception.

### Classroom environment

The conditions of classrooms of Bangladesh are very poor and are not in favor of the students in learning English as well as learning English pronunciation perfectly. There are several causes which negatively affect the students and interfere them in learning perfectly. Firstly, the classrooms are too small to the large figures of students. Because of large figure students the voice of the teachers cannot reach to the students all the time. Secondly, the classrooms are not comfortable to the students. Because in most of the classes there are not enough electric facilities, comfortable seat facilities etc. Thirdly, there is lack of modern amenities such as audios, videos facilities, carphone, computer, headphone, desk phone etc. in the classroom.

### Recommendations

- The SSC curriculum should be made on the basis of full-fledged syllabus of communicative approach. More speaking and listening activities should be included in the syllabus and practiced much. In the examination there should be speaking and listening test. To learn proper pronunciation the task on IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols should be included in the syllabus as students can study individually or in a group proper pronunciation from English to English dictionary.
- The teachers should show the difference between the articulation of English and Bengali sounds.
- The students should practice Standard English e.g. BBC English.
- The students should keep away English to Bengali dictionary to learn pronunciation of new words.
- The students should be habituated to using to English to English dictionary in the class and outside the class.
- Speaking and listening should be arranged frequently.

### CONCLUSION

My study and analysis clearly indicate that the students of secondary level in Bangladesh are facing constraints in learning standard pronunciation in English. They are ignorant of the English pronunciation system; they have problems of both L1 (Bengali) interference and the influence of local varieties while they go to speak English. Moreover, they lack the proper guidelines on English pronunciation. The motivating factors from all relevant quarters can only help them to overcome the impediments to pronunciation. The move should come not only from the educational institutions and the government, but also from the guardians and the vigilant teachers. In another sense, for fulfilling the motto of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as students should be communicative in English and they should be guided and followed properly.

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