
The Influence of Regional Bangla Dialects on English Pronunciation of Bangladeshi EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Learners:

A Review

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ABSTRACT:

This paper will discuss the relationship between dialectic accents of Bangladeshi EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners and Standard English pronunciation. This paper will attempt to address the common and serious pronunciation errors that Bangladeshi learners produce. This study will find out whether we should appreciate standard pronunciation or we should go only for comprehensible pronunciation. It will also attempt to find out whether regional dialects have any impact on the learning of correct English pronunciation or not. Specific ways and means will be suggested to overcome the accent problems of Bengali speaking learners of English on the basis of the findings of the study.

Keywords: *Dialectic accents, pronunciation errors, regional dialects, accent problems.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a country where we can find different varieties of dialects. That's why different dialects dominate Bangla language in various ways. Therefore, the strong influence of dialects on Bangladesh EFL learners' pronunciation of English is quite evident. In communication skills, pronunciation is perceived as one of the important elements. Bangladeshi EFL learners constantly encounter the problem in the pronunciation and understanding the speech of native speakers of English. As English has spread worldwide, the world is constantly witnessing different varieties of English language. They encounter with the baffling variety of English pronunciation that has been influenced by the regional accent. Consequently, world English has now moved away from the control of its native speakers. English is no longer a language of the British or the Americans; rather it is language that is shared by today's global population. Thus, it seems reasonable to take account of and identify what dialectic problems the Bengali speaking EFL learners encounter and why. The consideration and interpretation of the issue in question are completely based on my practical experience as a learner and my observation as a teacher-researcher of EFL. Finally a number of suggestions have been made so as to address and eliminate the problems, on the one hand, and ensure the smooth and optimal learning of EFL on the other.

1.1 The Statement of the Problem

Since English is a non-phonetic language and there is no one-to-one correspondence between the graphemes (the letters of the alphabet) and the sounds actually produced and realized, at the phonetic and phonological level, the Bengali speaking EFL learners often face difficulties in, firstly, 'speech production' encompassing which articulator(s) to use how to pronounce which

speech sound and how to pattern speech sounds to convey meaning and, secondly, in ‘speech perception’ covering how to receive which speech sound(s) to perceive meaning. Because of different varieties of regional dialects, both the EFL learners and teachers experience multidimensional pronunciation problems in Bangladesh. Their dialectic differences influence on the articulation of speech organs. This is because they are not taught phonetic features at school and college levels. The negative influence comes from the mother tongue (L1) interference.

1.2 The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to identify the impact of different varieties of regional dialects on English pronunciation by exploring the relationship between different dialectic accents of Bengali speaking learners and to focus on the correct pronunciation of English as suggested by the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet). It will also attempt to shed light on the common and serious pronunciation errors that are conspicuous in Bangladeshi EFL learners which sometimes make the utterances unintelligible to some extent. This study will also endeavor to figure out whether Bangladeshi EFL learners should stick to striving to achieve the native proto-type pronunciation in the global language or comprehensible pronunciation will serve the purpose. The research will provide some incentives and feedback that might be useful to overcome some of the problems.

1.3 Objectives

The research work has been designed to explore the following objectives:

- To explore the inter-relationship between different dialectic accents of Bangladesh.
- To make learners aware of phonological features of the target language.
- To help learners overcome pronunciation difficulties which are produced due to inter-lingual factors.

2. ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Pronunciation is defined as ‘a way of speaking a word, especially that is accepted or generally understood’ (American Heritage Dictionary, 3rd ed., 1992). Pronunciation is a prominent factor in foreign language teaching and learning. While communicating with one another, people are to ensure correct pronunciation so that meaningful communication can be achieved. Concerning pronunciation in language teaching, its role has been more recognized nowadays. It has significantly resulted from a change in position on language learning and teaching. This change has obviously influenced and moved from teacher centered to learner centered classrooms. Moreover, there has been a shift from specific linguistic competencies to broader communicative competencies as goals for teachers and students (Morley, 1999). More attention, therefore, has been directed to intelligible pronunciation which is considered to help produce meaningful communication. When the importance of pronunciation is mentioned, it is more appropriate to claim the importance of ‘good’ pronunciation’ also. Here, it comes to ‘intelligibility’.

2.1 Bangla Language and its Status

Bangla is the first language (L1) spoken in Bangladesh and is the second spoken language in India (Kadeer 2). Bangla ranks 4th among all the languages of the world (Kadeer 2) and is one of the Indic languages, a part of the Indo-European family. It is most closely related to Assamese and Oriya, particularly the former. The Alphabet is based on, but is distinctly different from, the Devanagari of Sanskrit (187)

2.2 English as an international language

In this age of globalization, English is no more a unique possession of the British or American rather it has achieved the status of a global language (lingua franca). As English has spread worldwide, the world is witnessing different varieties of English language. As the number of English speakers is increasing around the world, English language is being constantly burdened with baffling variety of English pronunciation with the influence of regional accent. In this regard, Shahidullah et al has stated:

World English has now moved away from the control of its native speakers. There is a joke that global English is neither British nor American, rather it is bad English. However, the question of bad English is irrelevant now. Today's slogan is mutual intelligibility among users of the language. (275-276)

2.3 Standard English and Received Pronunciation (RP)

According to George Yule, in standard English the sounds, words, sentences are concerned. And this variety is used in newspaper, books, mass and electronic media(180). He also adds that the second language learners of English use this variety to learn English and it is clearly associated with mass education (180). It is observed that Perera's view of Standard English is a bit different from that of Yule because he includes the notion of sound in Standard English but Perera does not. Perera states:

Standard English refers to the structure of the language, i.e. its grammar and vocabulary, not to its pronunciation. Standard English may be spoken in an accent that does not reveal the speakers geographical origin in English; such an accent is called Received Pronunciation (RP).(80)

2.4 The Emergence of Standard Pronunciation

The incorrect accent of English may act as a bar to have certain position and profession. In other words, people may fall victim to several odd situations for incorrect pronunciation. In this regard Gimson says:

The English is to-day particularly sensitive to variations in pronunciation of their language. The 'wrong accent' may still be an impediment to social intercourse or to advancement or entry in certain professions. (83)

Emphasizing on RP or Standard pronunciation he adds that pronunciation is a sign of position in society and it arises class distinction because people in authority attach a prestige value to

English pronunciation by dropping some of the characteristics of London speech. Mittins et al, Perera and Yule also agree to this point that RP has attachment with standard English on educational ground. Gimson mentions two points as the grounds for the emergence of Standard English or RP: firstly sounds of a language change from time to time and secondly, when communication between two speech communities is limited there is a different development of pronunciation of the same language in different regions, and therefore, English has its regional pronunciation in different regions basically for geographical reasons (84). In Bangladesh Gimson's notion is appropriate as regards to the use of the English language. As Bangla is pronounced in different speech communities, based on geographical boundary, (Chittagong region, Sylhet region, Barisal region, Dinajpur region, Noakhali regions etc) English in our country is pronounced differently in different regions. Though the difference is not that much acute, still it is observable.

2.5 Intelligibility Vs Standard Pronunciation

Gimson states that it is undoubtedly admitted that a good number of foreign learners will need urgently a practical purpose for learning English and will perceive no important use in getting the performance of a native speaker and for them information conveying is the main thing (316). In other words he gives importance on comprehensibility of the pronunciation. Like Shahidullah et al, Jeremy Harmer (184) and Yule (228) also put emphasis on Mutual Intelligibility. Harmer holds the point that there will be a serious problem if the second language learner cannot communicate effectively and at the same time he is concerned about how the students' sound should be (184). Jeremy Harmer holds that it has become usual for language teachers to consider intelligibility as the prime goal of pronunciation teaching (184). Mc Donough and Shaw give emphasis on 'naturally spoken English' and they believe that if a student continues his or her natural speaking flow then he or she will be easily understood (79). In this regard, they further say:

The only pronunciation practice in the materials is no individual sounds and minimal pairs; however these may be necessary but not sufficient. Our students need to be intelligent, and intelligibility entails more than articulating a vowel or a consonant correctly. Therefore, we decide to add some work on sentence stress and rhythm and on the related phenomenon of 'weak' and 'strong' forms in English. A further advantage is that students will be better able to understand naturally spoken English (79).

2.5.1 Dialect and Accent

Every language has more than one variety, especially in its spoken form. According to Yule, the variation in language speech is an important and well recognized aspect of daily lives for the language-users in different regional and dialectal communities (226). On the basis of the 'linguistic geography' and concentrating on regional varieties he (1985) explains that there is a clear demarcation between Accent and Dialect, and says:

The term accent, when used technically, is restricted to the description of aspects of pronunciation which identify where an individual speaker is from, regionally and socially. It is to be distinguished from the term dialect which describes features of grammar and vocabulary, as well as aspects of pronunciation.(225)

The existence of different regional dialects is widely familiar. On the basis of this regional variety sometimes people of a particular area are mocked at. But this is a kind of generalizing practice. Yule agrees with the point that some regional dialects clearly have stereotypical pronunciation associated with them (228). He has further stated that regional dialects become source of humor and of course this is a kind insult for those people who are ridiculed on the stereotypical ground of pronunciation (228). He also suggests that mutual intelligibility should be the prime goal of pronunciation and therefore it is very important to give special attention to the comprehensibility of the speakers and the listeners while learning correct pronunciation (228).

According to Gimson some students may be able to succeed only in speaking English with the phonetic and phonological features and in this case they may be whether totally unintelligible to the most native English listeners or comprehensible only to some extent that the listener can infer small amount of information (316) On the basis of intelligibility of pronunciation of the native and non-native speakers the achievement may lie somewhere between two extremes and he identifies two extremes as minimum general intelligibility and high acceptability (136).

2.5.2 Some Universal Problems

There are some universal problems the learners face while learning correct pronunciation of English. In this regard Crystal has mentioned that some students become worried about pronunciation because it does not match the spelling and it is the spelling which finds priorities (60). He has also given emphasis on the problem that pronunciation patterns have changed completely since the days when the spelling system was laid down and English spelling has not been a good guide to pronunciation for hundreds of years (60).

Ellis has observed that inhibition might be a problem in the utterance of second or foreign language (121). Guiora et al. also state that inhibition has a negative effect on second language pronunciation. Ellis has stated that according to behaviorist learning theory, old habits get in the way of learning new habits (21-22). Bright and McGregor have opined that where second language learning (SLA) is concerned first language (L1) interferes with the smooth acquisition of the second language (L2) and therefore the pronunciation learning becomes problematic. According to Ellis negative transfer plays an important role in this regard.

Harmer has detected two particular problems that occur in most pronunciation teaching and learning:

- a) What students can hear: Some students have great difficulty in listening pronunciation features which we want them to reproduce. Frequently speakers of different first language have problems with different sounds; especially where as with /b/ and /v/ for Spanish speakers-these are not the same two sounds in their language. If they cannot distinguish between them, they will find it almost impossible to produce the two different English phonemes.
- b) The intonation problem: The most problematic area of pronunciation is intonation for many teachers. Some of us and many of our students find it extremely difficult to hear 'tones' or to identify the difficult patterns of rising and falling tones (184-85).

2.5.3 Teaching pronunciation

Pronunciation teaching is an integral part of speaking-listening and overall verbal communication. While speaking learners need to be aware of their pronunciation and in case of listening they should give special emphasis on pronunciation. In this regard Harmer says:

Pronunciation teaching not only makes students aware of different sounds and sound features, but can also improve their speaking exceedingly. Concentrating on sounds, showing where they are articulated in the mouth, making students aware of where words should be stressed – all these things give them extra information about spoken English and help them achieve the goal of improved comprehension and intelligibility. In some particular cases, pronunciation helps students to get over serious intelligibility problems (183).

Mc Donough and Shaw have stated that the teaching of pronunciation is carried out in many different ways and for different purposes (136). They observe: Sometimes whole lessons may be devoted to it. Sometimes teachers deal with it simply it arises. Some teachers like to ‘drill’ correct pronunciation habits, others are more concerned that their students develop comprehensibility within fluency (136). They opine that any single approach is universally applicable (136). In this regard Dalton and Seidlhofer state: “the task of pronunciation teaching is to establish models for guidance, not norms for imitation” (6). Harmer has added that the key to successful pronunciation teaching does not mean that the students should be taught to produce correct sounds or intonation, rather to have them listen and notice how English is spoken either on audio or videotape or from the teachers themselves.

2.5.4 The relationship between listening and speaking

According to McDonough and Shaw there is a link between listening and speaking and they strongly believe that listening is not a passive skill and they give emphasis on listening as they observe it is directly linked with speaking (116-118). In this regard Vandergrift states:

Listening comprehension is anything but a passive activity. It is a complex, active process in which the listener must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what is gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger sociocultural context of the utterance. Co-coordinating all these involve a great deal of mental activity on the part of the learner. (168)

For listening practice both Harmer and Brown and Yule suggest speaking as a very important factor. On the one hand, Harmer says that information presented in a speech tends to be less densely packed than it is in written form and it is also more repetitive. (118) On the other hand Brown and Yule hold the view that spoken language is less complex in respect of its grammatical and discourse structure and it gives a broken impression with new starts in mid-sentence. Pronunciation is not a separate skill; it is part of the way we speak (Harmer 186). Teachers have to plan when to teach pronunciation because teachers are to give life to the innate syllabus. Pronunciation teaching into appropriate lesson sequence is very important. Harmer gives an idea about how generally pronunciation is taught by different teachers:

- Whole lessons

Making pronunciation the main focus of a lesson does not mean that every minute of the lesson has to be spent on pronunciation work. Sometimes students may also listen to a longer tape, working on listening skills before moving to the pronunciation part of the acquisition.

- Discrete slots

Some teachers insert short and separate bits of pronunciation work into lesson sequences. Over a period of weeks they work on all the individual phonemes either separately or in contrasting pairs. At other times they spend a few minutes on a particular aspect of intonation.

- Integrated Phases

Many teachers get students to focus on pronunciation issues as an integral part of a lesson. When students listen to a tape, for example, one of the things we can do is to draw their attention to pronunciation features on the tape.

2.5.5 Teachers' Strategies & Principles

For carrying out successful teaching of pronunciation, teachers should take extra care. Johnson mentions some strategies which were found to be successful before:

- a) Putting pupils into the role of questioner and interviewer;
- b) Planning for well structured smart-group work, with clear time limits;
- c) Asking for appropriate teacher interaction in small-group work;
- d) Recording individual pupils doing their tasks, also using a microphone where necessary;
- e) Providing pupils with a cassette player so that they can record their work orally rather than in writing;
- f) Using drama, role play, puppets and play to encourage participatory talk. (39)

It has always been found that students with dialectal accent are considered as 'problems'; it is natural that students might have an influence of their mother tongue on the second language they are learning. It cannot be said that the impact of regional dialect should be ignored rather pupils having the touch of regional dialect might be considered as possessing linguistic strengths. This linguistic strength should be fostered and nourished. Johnson's principles appear to support this:

- Pupils' home languages should be respected;
- Displays and resources should reflect the cultures and contexts in which children's language is used;

- All children’s language should be encouraged in presentations and public contexts such as school assemblies;
- All children’s languages should as far as possible be reflected in the curriculum;
- Assessment of pupils’ work should not be affected adversely by any comparative weakness in English. (39)

3. Method and Analysis

Total eight regions of Bangladesh were selected and these regions were Barishal, Comilla, Chittagong, Noakhali, Dinajpur, Rongpur, Sylhet, and Jessore. A total number of 48 students were selected for sample speech collection and questionnaire survey. The students were selected on a random basis having local background with local accent. 24 language teachers were also selected from these eight districts on a random basis for questionnaire survey.

For the survey and speech sample, we used recorder, mp3 recorder, sample letter and word list and questionnaire. To collect information, questionnaires were developed both for teachers and students. The questionnaire for the students consisted of 5 multiple choice questions whereas, the questionnaire for the teachers consisted of 4 multiple choice questions along with an open ended question. In the open ended question the teachers were given the scope to incorporate their valuable suggestions regarding the development of the pronunciation of the learners.

Table-1: Barisal

Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word	Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word
Value - /vælju:/	/bælju:/	Sorry - /'sɒ rɪ /	/'s^rɪ /
Voice - /'vɔɪ s/	/'bɔɪ s/	Visit - /'vɪ zɪ t/	/'bɪ zɪ t/
Neither - /'naɪ ðə/	/'na(h)ɪ ðə/	Though - /'ðəʊ /	/'ðʊ /

Table-2: Dinajpur

Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word	Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word
over - /'əʊ və/	/'əbər/	Hear - /'hɪ ə/	/'heər/
Value - /'vælju:/	/'velju:/	Star - /'stɑ :/	/'ɪstɑ (r)/
Neither - /'naɪ ðə/	/'n æ ɪ ð ə/	Thin - /'θɪ n/	/'ð'ɪ n/

Table-3: Rangpur

Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word	Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word
Value - /vælju:/	/velju:/	Sorry - /'sɒ rɪ /	/'tfɒ rɪ /
Voice - /'vɔɪ s/	/'bɔɪ s/	Visit - /'vɪ zɪ t/	/'bɪ zɪ t/
Very - /'verɪ /	/'bherɪ /	Love - /'lʌ v/	/'lʌ b/

Table-4: Sylhet

Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word	Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word
Family - /'fæməli /	/'phæməli /	Sorry - /'sɒri /	/'tʃɹi /
Voice - /'voɪs/	/'bɔɪs/	Visit - /'vɪzɪt/	/'bɪzɪt/
Very - /'veri /	/'bheri /	Love - /'lʌv/	/'lʌb/

Table-5: Comilla

Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word	Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word
Family - /'fæməli /	/'phemeli /	Pure - /'pjʊə/	/'pjɪər/
Star - /'stɑː /	/'i:stɑː /	Visit - /'vɪzɪt/	/'bɪjɪt/
Garage - /'gærɑːʒ /	/'jerɑːʒ /	Love - /'lʌv/	/'lʌb/& /'lʌf/

Table-6: Chittagong

Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word	Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word
Value - /væljuː/	/bæljuː/	Church - /'tʃɜːtʃ /	/'sɜːtʃ /
Receive - /riː'siːv/	/riː'siːb/	Pure - /'pjʊə/	/'p(h)jʊər/
Very - /'veri /	/'berɪ /	Love - /'lʌv/	/'lʌb/& /'lʌf/

Table-7: Jessore

Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word	Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word
Value - /væljuː/	/veljuː/	Church - /'tʃɜːtʃ /	/'tʃɜːs/
Thin - /θɪn/	/ðɪn/	Star - /'stɑː /	/'eːstɑːr/
Challenge - /tʃæləndʒ /	/'sælɪndʒ /	Love - /'lʌv/	/'lʌb/

Table-8: Noakhali

Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word	Word with correct IPA	Mispronounced word
Visit - /'vɪzɪt/	/'bɪjɪt/	Church - /'tʃɜːtʃ /	/'sɜːtʃ /
Funny - /'fʌni /	/'pʌni /	Star - /'stɑː /	/'iːstɑː(r)/
Challenge - /tʃæləndʒ /	/'sælɪndʒ /	Love - /'lʌv/	/'lʌb/; /'nʌb/

4. FINDINGS

After analyzing the data we have found that few common mistakes collected from different zones have been shown in different tables. Differences in accent and pronunciation in the people of different regions have been observed. It has also been observed that there is hardly any rigid dialect boundary. It is surprising that except few regions (i.e. Noakhali, Sylhet and Chittagong) the pronunciation of the same speech of the people of different surveyed regions is almost the same. In these particular three regions English pronunciation is identical with their own dialect (see table 4, 6 & 8). For example in Sylhet, students use frequently the sound (Kha) instead of (Ka) and in Noakhali region students have a tendency of using /p/ sound instead of /f/ sound. In case of Chittagong, they pronounce /s/ sound instead of /tʃ/. If other zones are considered, any rigid isogloss cannot be set rather those zones can be tagged with dialect continuum. It has been found that the people of other regions except Noakhali; Chittagong and Sylhet are almost same in their English accent. We should mention one thing here and that is people from all the zones have problem with /z/ sound. That's why it has not been mentioned in the tables and obviously it is a common problem of pronunciation of the learners in Bangladesh.

By analyzing the questionnaire we have found why the students are facing problem with their English accent. From the questionnaire survey we have come to know that most of the students (85%) have no idea about standard pronunciation. Both the teachers and the students think that they need special care for this English accent and their teacher showed extra care of that. Most of the teachers (90%) and students (80%) think that regional accent has an influence on their English accent. 95% surveyed teachers have said that they do not have enough logistic support such as multimedia, OHP, Tape recorder & CD Player for teaching pronunciation properly.

4.1 Limitations of the study

The major limitation of the study was the formal setting for sample collection as the contributors were very conscious while giving sample speeches and they tried their best to avoid mistakes. The second limitation was the number of participants; the result would have been different if we had collected more samples and if we could have included more zones to collect the speech samples. For the purpose of intelligibility, we did not consider the intonation, stressed and unstressed part of their English pronunciation as we tried to locate only influence of dialect on English pronunciation. We are hoping to continue this research as there are more to discover.

5. CONCLUSION

All types of dialects should be respected because it is a matter of prestige for the people of the particular region. Since English is a lingua franca in this global world and we are motivated to follow the standard pronunciation while communicating so, the learners should be encouraged to follow the standard form of English pronunciation.

5.1 Recommendation

From the above data analysis and discussion, the following suggestions for overcoming the problems regarding pronunciation of English can be given.

- a) When learners learn spelling they should be taught correct pronunciation simultaneously.
- b) Students should get exposure to the correct pronunciation so teacher should be careful while pronouncing English words.
- c) Teachers should be conscious that the inhibition problem does not act as a bar to give repeated effort to produce correct pronunciation.
- d) Old habit becomes a great bar for learning correct pronunciation. In our country's context if students learn standard Bangla pronunciation by getting rid of dialectical accent, it might be helpful for the learners to learn better accent.
- e) If the students are made familiar with the phonemic symbols of Standard English through English dictionary, it will be easier for them to establish the connection later on.
- f) Listening and speaking are inseparable skills; when learners hear Standard English pronunciation, gradually they will be able to produce that utterance by themselves.
- g) Tone and intonation is another neglected area of our ELT classroom. For that reason, our learners fail to do the proper use of intonation in their speech and fail to understand the speech of the native English speakers. So, the learners must take the problems seriously.

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