

To Say or Not to Say: ESL Learners' Perspective towards Pronunciation Instruction

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the perspective of ESL learners towards pronunciation instruction. It sought to discover how these learners view their speech classes in terms of course design, the language of instruction, preferred learning and teaching style, and their preferred type of feedback. This study utilized a quantitative-qualitative approach to the problem. The respondents were Education students majoring in English who answered a survey questionnaire and underwent an interview. The data from the survey were tabulated using frequency count and the data from the interview were then categorized, transcribed and analysed. Results showed that ESL learners are informed with their course design and they are open to providing suggestions on how the course could be improved. They favour English as the main mode of instruction, with code-switching as a welcome technique in the classroom. They are attuned to their learning style, mixing several styles. They prefer to be taught theory before practice and favour immediate corrective feedback.

Keywords: Course design; ESL; feedback; learner perspective; learning and teaching style; pronunciation instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation instruction is one of the areas in English Language Teaching (ELT) that is considered to be very difficult by teachers and students alike. In countries like Australia, the Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) has funded projects aimed at developing, testing, and evaluating frameworks for an integrated approach to teaching pronunciation to adults of non-English-speaking backgrounds (2001). The outcomes of these projects helped the improvement of participants' pronunciation, the development of instructional frameworks and techniques, and the production of materials. In the Philippines, there is an observable shortage of researchers focusing on these. The need for more materials design and pedagogical variations arises as learners of today demand contextualized, innovative learning activities with recent technological developments. As claimed by research, pronunciation teaching has generally been neglected (e.g., Fraser 2000 and Gilbert

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2008). The lack of interest in pronunciation is observed from the very few talks on the matter on teaching conferences and article publication on teacher's magazines and journals as noted by Walker (2010). Another aspect of pronunciation that has not been explored much is the learner's perspective on the approach used by teachers on pronunciation (Alghazo, 2015) and learner's preferences on pronunciation teaching (Pawlak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak, and Bielakthere, 2015).

This study aims to address the need for more research in this area. Specifically, the following research questions are discussed:

1. How do ESL learners view their speech class in terms of course design and language of instruction?
2. What is their preferred learning and teaching style in pronunciation instruction?
3. What is their preferred type of feedback when committing pronunciation errors?

Several studies have already been conducted to further understand pronunciation issues of L2 learners (e.g., Couper, 2003, 2006; Field, 2005; Hahn, 2004; Munro & Derwing, 2006; Zielinski, 2006). This research would like to contribute to this growing literature but with a focus on Filipino ESL learners' perception.

Literature Review

Experts in the field of language teaching have cited the lack of research that supports pronunciation teaching, curriculum and materials design. Fraser (2000) cited that more systematic and reliable research on ESL pronunciation instruction is needed to serve as the basis for critical decisions on the subject. Literature on pronunciation gives us some helpful insights into how it has progressed these past years. Kelly (1969) calls pronunciation the "Cinderella" area of foreign language teaching. Grammar and vocabulary came first into the scene and pronunciation took a backseat. Today, it still remains true that pronunciation does not receive academic attention as much as other areas of SLA (Deng, Holtby, Howden-Weaver, Nessim, Nicholas, Nickle, Pannekoek, Stephan, & Sun, 2009). In its early years, Celce-Murcia (1991) reports that only two approaches were used for pronunciation teaching: the intuitive-imitative approach and the analytic-linguistic approach. More methods arose later on like Direct Method, Total Physical Response (Asher, 1977), Natural Approach (Krashen & Terell, 1988), Audiolingualism, and Oral Approach. Today, integrated approaches like CLT are used in teaching pronunciation (Tikkakoski, 2015) but the traditional technique like read-aloud is still employed (Adita, Bindarti, & Wahyumingsik, 2014).

Pronunciation instruction involves several challenges, not only in choosing the appropriate approach. One of these is time constraints. Teachers often find that they do not have enough time in class to give proper attention to this aspect of English instruction (Gilbert, 2008). In the study of Foote, Trofimovich, Collins & Urzúa (2013), results showed that there was infrequent teaching time for pronunciation accounting for only 10% of all language-related episodes. The lack of confidence and training in the area is another issue for ESL pronunciation teachers (Fraser, 2000). The effects of pronunciation teaching have just recently been studied and results demonstrate that instruction can have an effect (Macdonald, Yule, and Powers, 1994; Han, 1996; Derwing, Munro, and Wiebe, 1998). The outcome of segmental and suprasegmental instruction was also studied by Derwing, et.al., (1998) revealing that segmental instruction may not transfer to spontaneous speech, but the latter affected listeners' impression of the comprehensibility of spontaneous speech. Burns (2006) also conducted a survey with Australian instructors and found that they favoured teaching segmental over suprasegmentals. Materials and references for ESL learners have

shifted from putting emphasis only on segmental but on suprasegmental features of the language as well (Morley 1994; Beisbier, 1995; Hewings & Goldstein, 1998; Celce-Murcia, et al., 2010).

As regards, the learner perspective, very recent studies with similar aims to this paper stand out. Buss (2013) analyzed the reports of seven pre-service EFL teachers in Brazil examining their knowledge, beliefs, and practices regarding pronunciation. The results showed that the participants did not have a full grasp of the phonologies of English and Brazilian Portuguese and they are not fully aware of the reasons behind common pronunciation errors. Another study on EFL learners' views on English pronunciation is by Tergujeff (2013) based on a thematic interview of 10 Finnish students. The findings showed that the learners did not aspire to have native-like pronunciation, but aim for intelligibility and fluency in speech. Two of the participants expressed their satisfaction with the amount of instruction while the others stated that pronunciation instruction was inadequate. A Saudi-based study on advanced EFL learners' beliefs on pronunciation teaching conducted by Alghazo (2015) revealed that learners know how important it is to learn pronunciation and that they are active participants in the improvement of pronunciation instruction. With these recent studies, the researcher also hopes to contribute to the limited literature on learners' perspectives on pronunciation instruction.

METHOD

This study employed a mix of quantitative and qualitative data analysis with the use of a survey questionnaire and an interview guide, with a total of 15 respondents.

There were 15 respondents involved. They are all Education (Secondary) students in their fourth-year majoring in English, enrolled at Leyte Normal University (LNU). Their ages are 17-20 years old and they speak three languages (Waray-Waray, Filipino, and English).

They were chosen because they have had the greatest number of years studying English and they are about to be deployed to the field as practice teachers. The researcher employed purposive sampling examining the total population since the population size was small (only 19 students). During the data gathering, 4 respondents weren't able to attend because of personal and family matters. The results of this study would be helpful to check how proficient and confident they are of their English pronunciation skills just before they go into actual teaching. The proficiency level of the participants in speaking was measured using their most recent grade in speech class. Five (33.33%) students were rated as good while 10 (66.67%) students were rated as very good. The proficiency level is based on the school grading standard.

Table 1. Proficiency Level in Pronunciation of Participants

Numerical Rating	Proficiency Level	No. of Students
1.3	Very Good	2 (13.33%)
1.4	Very Good	4 (26.67%)
1.5	Very Good	4 (26.67%)
1.6	Good	4 (26.67%)
1.7	Good	1 (6.67%)

A researcher-made survey questionnaire was used for data collection (see Appendix A). The profile of the participants was solicited (name, age, and year level). The survey is divided into four parts: course design, the language of instruction, learning and teaching styles, and type of feedback. The perspective of the participants

on these aspects was elicited through a Likert scale with the following range: 4-Strongly Agree, 3-Agree, 2-Disagree, 1-Strongly Disagree. They were also asked about the number of subjects for pronunciation offered in their curriculum and the number of languages they speak. To validate the results of the survey and to give the respondents a chance to further explain their answers, an interview guide (see Appendix B) was also prepared.

The respondents of this paper were all students of the researcher at the time the study was conceptualized so the dialogue was not difficult. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and the students gave a very positive response to the study. There are only 19 students in the Secondary Education program, majoring in English. All agreed to be part of the study, but only 15 students were able to attend during the data gathering. A confidentiality agreement with the respondents was signed by the researcher to ensure them that the data will only be used for this paper. The data collection was done on a school day, choosing the free time of the respondents from their classes. The survey was finished in 10 minutes. Afterwards, the interview was conducted. The researcher chose to pair the respondents so that it would be easier for them to express their opinions with a peer around. This also helped in making sure that the data would be rich and not repetitive because once Respondent B hears the answer of Respondent A, B will opt to give different information, or would simply agree with what was said saving time. The questionnaire and the interview were in English.

The results of the survey were tabulated and the interviews were transcribed. Data were analysed thematically and classified according to the four aspects of this study: course design, the language of instruction, learning and teaching style, and type of feedback.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

There were three research questions asked targeting the perspective of ESL learners on pronunciation instruction. In the questionnaire, the respondents were first asked how many subjects are offered in their curriculum. Almost all them stated that there was a total of six pronunciation subjects offered in their curriculum, but two said that there is only one. During the interview, the researcher clarified this mismatch in answers since they were all part of the same program. The respondents who answered six clarified that in their major English subjects like Introduction to Linguistics and Interactive English, pronunciation is part of their lessons. The two respondents only considered Speech and Stage Arts as the only subject solely focusing on pronunciation and saw the other subjects as supplemental for this skill.

The survey showed 14 (73.33 %) agreed that they have other subjects supporting their pronunciation skills. Topics on segmental and suprasegmental of language were also addressed in classes with 13 (86.67%) strongly agreeing and 2 (13.33%) agreeing to the statement. Most of the respondents also affirmed that the amount of instruction is enough to improve their pronunciation except for one who disagreed. However, they said that they would have liked it if there was more time for practice. As one respondent puts it, pronunciation teaching was just "a run through" and would like to "explore more."

The table below shows that topics and class activities done by the teacher greatly help them improve. During the interview, the respondents cited certain activities conducted in class that made a big impact on them like pronunciation drills and singing

rap songs. Through these activities, they became more attuned to their pronunciation. Not only that, but they also cited that their speaking endurance improved because they learned how to control their breathing, pace and intonation. Activities like monologues and rap were considered “memorable.”

Table 2. Perspective on Course Design

Statement	SA	A	D
The amount of instruction is enough to improve their pronunciation skills.	1	13	1
There are other subjects aside from my pronunciation class that supplement my learning.	2	11	2
The lessons outlined in the syllabus are covered in class.	3	9	3
The following aspects of pronunciation learning are addressed:			
• Segmental	13	2	
• Suprasegmental	11	4	
The topics found in the syllabus are the ones I expected to be discussed in a pronunciation class.	9	6	
These topics were helpful in improving my pronunciation.	11	4	
The class activities complemented the lessons.	4	11	

On the issue of language instruction, 93.33% of the respondents preferred English as the medium of instruction in pronunciation class. Because of the nature of the program of the students, they prefer English is used by the teacher when giving pronunciation instruction so that they can be exposed to the language and will, in turn, help improve their auditory skills. Code-switching is a welcome technique but it was cited in the interviews that this should only be done for the purpose of comprehension and if there is a word that needs to be translated.

Table 3. Language of Instruction

Statement	SA	A	D	SD
I prefer my teacher to use only English in pronunciation class.	8	6	1	
I prefer my teacher to use my first language over English.		2	11	2
I prefer that my teacher code switches from English to my first language.	1	9	5	

For their learning styles, the respondents strongly agreed that they employ auditory (60%), verbal (53.33 %), and visual (33.33%) styles when it comes to pronunciation. The numbers show that they employ not one but a mixture of two to three styles. The interviews also revealed that the common style pairings are verbal plus visual, auditory plus verbal and visual plus auditory. The respondents cited some topics where a certain style was helpful. Their teacher taught them the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to guide them with pronunciation practice and the use of the dictionary. Because they have taken up Introduction to Linguistics prior to Speech class, they weren’t unfamiliar with transcribing. Seeing the symbols helped them with realizing the word sound. Others said that when they hear the sound, they immediately link it to a transcription symbol or the other way around.

Table 4. Learning Style

Statement	SA	A	D	SD
When learning pronunciation, I am a visual learner.	5	7	2	1
When learning pronunciation, I am an auditory learner.	9	6		
When learning pronunciation, I am a verbal learner.	8	7		
When learning pronunciation, I am a kinesthetic learner.	1	5	7	2

The results showed that the preferred teaching style of the respondents is the intuitive style, which is theory to practice. Nine (60%) strongly agreed and six (40%) agreed with the statement. They stated they like the teacher to explain first before practice because a good background knowledge would lead them to a more grounded understanding of what they are supposed to do and achieve. As an example, the respondents shared that when learning about vowel sounds, the teacher first explained and discussed the many variations of sounds before making them practice. This in turn helped them realize the different vowel sounds they are supposed to remember and learn.

Table 5. Teaching Style

Statement	SA	A
I prefer my teacher to explain first before practice (<i>Theory to practice</i>).	9	6

For the preferred type of feedback, all of them agreed that they prefer to be corrected immediately after they commit a pronunciation error. This would make it easier for them to remember the error and how to properly say the word(s). As one respondent said, it is better to be corrected right after the mistake because it will have a bigger impact. They mentioned that being corrected immediately in front of their classmates would help other students to learn from their pronunciation mistakes. During the interview, they were also asked how they feel about being corrected in front of their peers. Most of them did not find any issue with it. Because they have known each of their classmates for a long time, they are comfortable enough to receive criticism in front of them. However, it was emphasized that the manner of giving feedback also affects them. They would like it if the teacher would correct them in a gentle manner so that they wouldn't feel ashamed of committing mistakes.

Table 6. Type of Feedback

Statement	SA	A
When I commit pronunciation errors, I prefer that my teacher immediately corrects me.	9	6

The purpose of this paper is to be able to examine pronunciation teaching from the learners' perspective. It also aims to give an opportunity for student involvement in curriculum improvement. The results found in this study provide information on the actual situation of pronunciation instruction in the Philippine context for ESL learners who will be future English teachers.

This study revealed that the curriculum of the English majors of LNU provides enough subjects that would develop their pronunciation. The respondents expressed that it is not in the number of subjects the curriculum needs improvement but in the allotted time for each subject. As Gilbert (2008) stated, time is one of the challenges encountered by teachers. This paper proves that students are also well aware of this issue. The speech classes are usually taken in a summer semester which is shorter than regular semesters. This would imply that the syllabus might not be covered in full as it would on a regular semester. Most of the respondents expressed their desire and interest in taking more subjects on pronunciation that would give them thorough practice and reinforce their learning. This shows that students are motivated and active in the learning process, as found in Alghazo's (2015).

As regards the specific topics found in their syllabus, the respondents strongly agreed that they were helpful in the development of their pronunciation. The segmental and suprasegmental features of the language were both addressed in the class, supporting the balanced approach that experts demand from the teacher (e.g., Celce-Murcia et al., 2010 and Kennedy, 2008). The preference of teaching segmental and suprasegmental was also studied by Burns (2006) and Derwing (1998). Learning phonemic transcription was found to have a high impact on the respondents as they can easily connect the sound to the symbols. Tergujeff (2013) found that learning phonemic transcriptions helped Finnish EFL learners with their English pronunciation and it has also been suggested that transcription skills and English pronunciation skills correlate in advanced Finnish learners of English (Lintunen, 2004). Although the orthography of the respondents' L1 is not close to that of English, the interviews revealed that learning the IPA made it easier for them to deal with the ambiguous spelling of English (Wells, 1996).

The activities performed in class showed that the teacher experiments with innovative techniques like using music and film clips to aid in pronunciation instruction. This is in line with suggestions by Morley (1991) and Celce-Murcia (2010) on turning away from traditional methods and moving to controlled then guided practice and communicative tasks. Nonetheless, the respondents strongly agreed that for aspects like segmental and prosody, the traditional methods of drills and read-aloud were welcome techniques. As Gabrielatos (2002) stated, reading aloud may help in improving pronunciation as proven by Adita, et.al., (2014).

This study also revealed that the respondents preferred English only as a mode of instruction for pronunciation. This result was not surprising knowing their program of study and as they have stated in the interviews, as English majors, they need to be exposed to the language as much as they could. It is important to note that the respondents could speak at least three languages, making them multilingual ESL learners. Code-switching is a generally accepted technique but the teacher rarely uses it for pronunciation. The respondents also reported that although code-switching is not an issue for them, it should only be employed when there is miscommunication and an explanation in the L1 is warranted to deepen understanding. This shows that they are assertive of their learnings and are willing to share their views on instruction design that could potentially improve instruction. This study had similar results with that of Alghazo (2015) where Arabic students also welcomed code-switching in the classroom which is indicative of their motivation to improve their skills.

The second question addresses the learning and teaching style preferred by the respondents. The results gave a mix and match result and show that the learners are attuned to their own techniques that would help them develop their pronunciation skills. Critics say that knowing your learning style does not help improve your learning. However, it could be beneficial for self-reflection and metacognition (Fleming & Mills, 1992). Knowing how you learn should not be the end, but the catalyst of further action for improvement. As regards the preferred teaching style in pronunciation, and intuitive style (theory to practice) is the unanimous answer. They like knowing the rules and concepts of pronunciation before doing the actual practice. For example, in learning the consonant sounds, the teacher first explained the different ways of classifying them (as in manner or place of articulation and voice) before doing practice. According to the students, it helps them set goals for practice after the discussion. They also feel that this is more beneficial because the practice activities that come after are catered

only to the extent of concepts discussed in class, therefore reinforcing the concept/theory learned.

For the type of feedback, all the respondents agreed that they like immediate corrective feedback, even when in front of their peers. This shows that they have high confidence and they are willing to accept criticism for improvement. This is supported by other pronunciation studies that also cites students preferring immediate feedback for errors (Baker & Murphy, 2011; Alghazo, 2015). It should be noted that although they chose direct and instant feedback, the manner of providing feedback is important. Students do not want to feel embarrassed and they do not like to be shamed in front of their classmates. Harsh delivery should be avoided and a gentle way of giving the correction would be more helpful as expressed by the students in the interview.

DISCUSSION

This paper aimed to address the lack of information on learners' perspectives on pronunciation teaching. It was conceptualized with the goal of giving learners an opportunity to give their insights on improving the teaching situation on pronunciation in the Philippine context. Results showed that the students are confident in their skills and see the curriculum design as very helpful to their development. This positive response from learners also makes way for a chance of improvement and students are very open in giving their suggestions on this. With their perspective known, there are several implications that could be deduced. One is that the time provision for pronunciation teaching should be increased so that practice and enhancement could be thorough especially for future English teachers who need to be able to master the language.

Another is that knowing the preferred learning and teaching style of students will give teachers a chance to review or revise their course design to fit the needs of the learners. The results also showed that learners employ mixed styles of learning which means that teachers should expect a diverse classroom. Keeping them interested in learning is very important so if the techniques employed are innovative and match with the students' style, it would make learning fun and easier for such a difficult subject. This study also revealed that immediate corrective feedback is helpful in correcting errors, but it should be noted that the manner of giving the feedback should be student-friendly for them to be receptive.

CONCLUSION

Research on the perspective of ESL learners has not been explored as much as other aspects of pronunciation teaching such as teachers' views and teaching approaches. This paper sought to give light to the current situation of pronunciation instruction in the Filipino context. The study provided information on how ESL learners view course design, learning and teaching style, and feedback done in pronunciation teaching. Time constraint was the main issue cited by the respondents and data also showed that innovative class activities are helpful in reinforcing their pronunciation skills. It is highly recommended that a similar study be done on a larger scale. To advance studies in this field, a comparison of teachers' and learners' perspectives could be conducted to see the alignment of their views.

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