

Teaching English Pronunciation to the Students at the Secondary Level: Practises and Challenges

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Abstract

Pronunciation is one of the most significant and unavoidable aspects of teaching English language. Teaching English pronunciation, however, is the most challenging part in the EFL context in Bangladesh. Therefore, the current study investigates the practises and problems of teaching English pronunciation to the students at the secondary level of Bangladesh. Consequently, it aims to find out the reasons behind the mispronunciation of EFL learners and suggests some solutions to develop pronunciation skills for them. The participants consist of 15 non-native English teachers from three different schools in Dhaka City. The researcher employed the mixed methods research to carry out the study where a set of questionnaires, a semi-structured interview for the teachers and classroom observations were used to collect data, and then, obtained data are analysed in different processes. The major findings of the study are time limitation of class, lack of materials, teachers' and students' low willingness and sometimes, misconception about correct pronunciation. In addition, grammar, reading and writing parts are given more importance than pronunciation practise in the class. The researcher, therefore, suggests some authentic techniques and solutions to overcome those problems and improve pronunciation skill.

Key Words: Pronunciation Teaching, Secondary School Certificate (SSC), Suprasegmental features, International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), Challenges.

Introduction

Pronunciation is an inalienable component of any language. It is the way in which a word or a language is spoken. It is considered as an integrated and integral part of second/foreign language learning as it directly influences learner's communicative competence as well as performance (Maniruzzaman, 2008). Pronunciation is defined by Carter and Nunan (2001) as, the production and perception of the significant sounds of a particular language in order to

achieve meaning in contexts of language use (p. 56). Therefore, pronunciation sometimes allows for intelligible articulation. The components of pronunciation include the particular vowels and consonants of a language (segments), aspects of speech beyond (suprasegmental aspects), and how the voice is projected (voice quality). This paper, however, concentrates on the issues regarding English pronunciation teaching problems and practises at the SSC level. In addition, to find out the actual problems in teaching and practising English pronunciation, this paper proposes a conceptual framework consists of the problem statement, significance and objectives of the study, research questions, literature review, research methodology, research findings, recommendations and conclusion.

Teaching English pronunciation has passed through a long evaluation. It becomes a difficult task for teachers nowadays. Although it is not given much importance at the SSC level, it should be given preferential treatment. The major reason behind this is in English language teaching, the more significance is given on grammar and vocabulary. Teaching pronunciation is almost ignored there. Besides, in the public assessments or examinations, there is no system of evaluating students' pronunciations and oral skills. Furthermore, utmost English instructors are not interested in teaching this aspect of language, perhaps because they are not trained enough and unable to utter the words correctly as well. In this relation, Maniruzzaman (2008) claims that most of the teachers do not have useful strategies or techniques for teaching English pronunciation; as a result, when they meet a specific problem, they simply avoid pronunciation instruction in the classroom by employing shrewd tricks.

English pronunciation teaching with accuracy no doubt is very important not only for the students of secondary level but for every level also in Bangladesh. Without accurate English pronunciation, learners cannot be able to make the listeners understand what they want to mean and also cannot assert themselves internationally as it is an International language. In addition, learners with correct English pronunciation lead to understanding the language even if they make mistakes in other areas. In spite of having great skill in grammar, on the other hand, learners with wrong pronunciation face huge difficulties in perfect communication. Regarding this issue, Hewings (2004) claims, "Difficulties with pronunciation might mean that students fail to get their message across, even when the correct words are being used, or they might fail to understand what is said to them." (p. 11).

This study has got some objectives that will justify the statement of problem. Therefore, the general objective of the study is to find out the problems in teaching and practising English pronunciation to the students at the SSC level. To specify, the objectives are:

- To sketch out a picture of the present condition of teaching English pronunciation at the SSC level.
- To investigate the present classroom practises regarding pronunciation.
- To find out English pronunciation difficulties face by the teachers as well as learners.
- To discover curative magnitude for common pronunciation problems of SSC level learners.

Literature Review

English pronunciation teaching and practise of it has a great significance in the classroom. Regarding this view, Purcell and Suter (1980) hold that (as cited in Maniruzzaman, 2008) pronunciation practice in the class has little effect on the learner's pronunciation skills and, moreover "that the attainment of accurate pronunciation in a second language is a matter of substantially beyond the control of educators" (p. 286). However, it becomes a very challenging task at present. It is still peripheral and neglected in the syllabus and the teaching materials at the secondary level. There are several issues for which it becomes very complex task to the teachers. In this regard, Maniruzzaman (2008) stated, the teaching of EFL pronunciation has received varied treatment from having no room in the synthetic syllabus and the grammar-translation method to being the cardinal focus in the situational syllabus and the audio-lingual method in emphasis is put on the traditional notions of pronunciation, minimal pairs, drills and mini-conversations.

Robertson (2002) thinks (cited in Jahan, 2011) that Asian students should practise with identifiable areas of speech, i.e. country specific complex sounds, cluster problems, 'th' words, linking words and sounds. Pronunciation usually consists of suprasegmental features such as sounds of the language, stress and rhythm, intonation as Lindsay (2000) mentioned. So, teachers and students require achieving essential knowledge on those sounds, especially the sounds related to the English language. Moreover, the four letters /c, x, w, y/ whose pronunciations are sometimes complicated to identify borrows sounds from other letters. For example, the letter 'x' borrows its sound from the /z/ sound as in the word 'xenon' and the /k/ sound as in the word 'Xmas'. This study is related to the current study in finding out the proper ways to teach English pronunciation in the EFL classes in Bangladesh.

Another researcher Tahereen (2015) made a research on "Challenges in Teaching Pronunciation at Tertiary Level in Bangladesh". She deals with the challenges that the teachers face while teaching pronunciation, interference of native language during pronunciation, learners' little exposure to English, lack of awareness and concern for pronunciation, fossilization, the influence of local accent in tertiary level learners, and gives some possible solutions to overcome such sorts of difficulties.

Haque (2010) writes on the influence of the local variety on the sound patterns of English in his article, "The influence of the local varieties on the sound patterns of English: A Case Study of Bangladeshi Tertiary Students". The paper reflects how local pronunciation can greatly influence on accurate English pronunciation. The results of the study are the incorrect pronunciations of English words because of the influence of local varieties, ignorance and lack of the Standard English pronunciation system etc. This article relates to the current study in finding out solutions for the pronunciation problems.

Dalton and Seidlhofer's (1994) Bottom-up and Top-down approaches, according to Mumeneen (2011), were used to analyse his research data. In his study, it appears that there is no specific course on English pronunciation offered at the tertiary level in the English department at the universities in Bangladesh. Based on the research results it shows that most of the English departments of our country offer courses in 'English Phonetics & Phonology', which usually cover the theoretical aspects of pronunciation. As a consequence, students do not get ample opportunities to practise English pronunciation very well. Besides, the teachers undergo from lack of materials, courses and infrastructural facilities for teaching English pronunciation in their educational institutions. In the same way, the students also suffer from the same problems to practise such skill.

Jesry (2005) says in his article that it is not necessary to speak English like native speakers but it should be “well enough to be understood”. Obviously, the positive outcome of good pronunciation in the process of reading English texts or presenting a session on various topics or communication in the classroom is assured and reinforced in Jesry’s comment. So, our EFL students in SSC level must be trained in the standardized way of English enunciation.

Maniruzzaman (2008) says, that at the tertiary level in both public and private Universities in Bangladesh, the English departments offer courses in English language, ELT (English Language Teaching), English literature, discourse analysis, media studies, business English, and so on. Amongst the courses, a course in English Phonetics and Phonology including some theoretical aspects of segmental and suprasegmental is offered. Besides, one or two courses in English speaking and listening are taught. But English pronunciation practise appears very rear and to have inadequate attention in both teaching and learning. We came to know by this study that why EFL pronunciation teaching is ignored in our country. The article provides incentives to the current study a lot.

Rupom, Imam and Arif (2013) write about the challenges in pronouncing English vowels and consonants of Bangladeshi students generally in their article “Classroom Teaching: Recovering Problems in Pronouncing English Vowels and Consonants of Bangladeshi Students in Primary Level”. According to them, at the early stage, it is easier to teach pronunciation in the classroom. Bangladeshi learners encounter problems in pronouncing English due to lack of some phoneme in the Bengali phoneme list comparing to English phoneme list and due to some geographical-historical barriers. The study focuses on the mistakes Bengali learners make usually in pronouncing English. Their study is related to the current study for its general overview of pronunciation style of the Bangladeshi learners.

Research questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

- **RQ 1.** To what extent is English pronunciation taught at the SSC level learners in Bangladesh.

- **RQ 2.** What are the possible hindrances to English pronunciation practise?
- **RQ 3.** What challenges do the English teachers face in teaching English pronunciation at the Secondary level?

Research Methodology

This study is a mixed quantitative and qualitative research based on the objectives and different research questions. The method embraced in this exchange is the observation method. 15 teachers of three different schools are the primary respondents to this investigation. The survey has been directed through interview session, questionnaire and class observation to collect information from the sample participants so that they can provide their ratings and views regarding the pronunciation of English language teaching at the secondary level in Bangladesh. However, teachers are asked to give their opinion about interview questions, and fill in a questionnaire with 10 items on a modified Likert-scale (1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neutral, 4=disagree, 5=strongly disagree). A set of questionnaire is prepared for the teachers. The researcher uses the questionnaire to modify the knowledge or the facts, and the questionnaire has been done all over 15 teachers. They fill in the questionnaire and participate in the interview session as well. However, the researcher has taken interview of 15 teachers individually which takes 5-10 minutes respectively. Out of 37 teachers, not all teachers are responded to the questionnaire and the interview. Next, the researcher has observed three classes from three secondary level school. The questionnaires include both open-ended questions, i.e. interview questions (Appendix A) and close-ended questions (Appendix B). Therefore, the observation schedule is presented in Appendix C.

Findings of Teacher's Interview Questions

The researcher has made five interview questions for the teachers based on principal research questions. These questions are discussed in detail downward:

In response to the first question "Do you think English pronunciation teaching is important?", eight teachers agreed with the view that English pronunciation teaching is important because they think if the students learn correct pronunciation it will increase their confidence level very much. In addition, five educators said it is much more important because "... good pronunciation helps a person to communicate with others more effectively," a teacher said. Two teachers claimed as English is an international language, it should be taught correctly. Otherwise, whenever a student will go abroad for obtaining overseas degrees or doing job he/she will face many difficulties. Only one teacher said there is no need to give importance on teaching English pronunciation as no mark is allocated to it into their syllabus. Thus, it seems that most of the teachers realize the importance of teaching English pronunciation to their students.

Question number two “How much effort do you give on English pronunciation in your teaching?” shows that three teachers said they always give the effort to teach English pronunciation to a great extent. Besides, five teachers asserted they give a little emphasis on it in their teaching just because many of their students do not have any interest in learning correct pronunciation. The rest of them said it varies and depends on the students’ interest. “...if they are able to learn and feel interest about it, then we put much effort into it”, claimed a teacher. Therefore, the results tend to point out that most of the teachers give a little effort on English pronunciation in their teaching.

In reply to the third question “Do you feel your students want to focus on English pronunciation?” three teachers claimed that, a very few students of them want to learn correct pronunciation. According to four teachers, it depends on the students’ qualification and capability. Moreover, five teachers pointed out that most of the students are not interested in and do not want to focus on learning English pronunciation. They only learn English for getting good marks in the examination. The findings, therefore, show that most of the students have lack of interest in learning correct pronunciation.

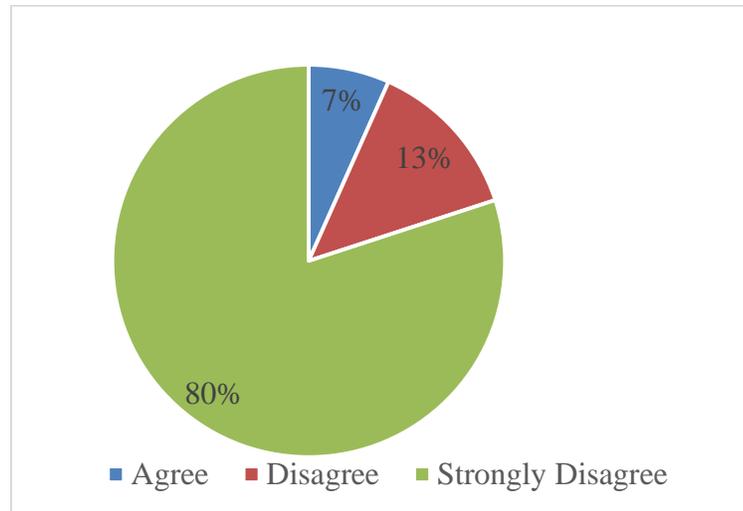
In response to the fourth question “What sorts of activities do you do in the class for teaching and practising English pronunciation to the secondary level students?” five teachers asked students to imitate their pronunciation while reading and speaking and also to read aloud. Again, three teachers claimed they carry a dictionary to check the pronunciation when needed. Next, they try to speak English correctly and ask the students to make a dialogue, to play word games or to do a role play in the classroom, four instructors asserted. According to the last three teachers, they try to use multimedia to teach correct pronunciation to the students. So, from these responses it appears that teachers play various activities to teach the students correct English pronunciation.

The last question of the interview “Do you face any kind of problem while teaching English pronunciation to the students of secondary level?” displays, thirteen teachers mentioned students feel shy and have lack of listening input, eagerness and motivation for learning correct pronunciation. In addition, two teachers pointed out that the size of the classroom, too many students and limitation of class time are the main barriers to teach pronunciation. Again, five teachers claimed that they have no enough materials, time and suitable environment. As a result, they face difficulty to teach English pronunciation. Another four teachers enunciated that students have first language (L1) interference and dialectical problem. Thus, it seems that almost all the teachers face many problems in teaching English pronunciation in the class.

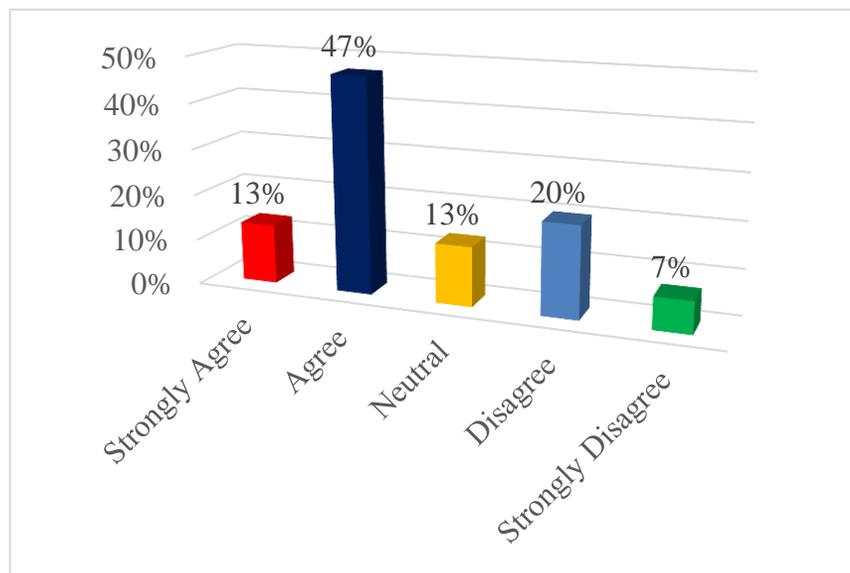
Findings of Teacher's Questionnaire

The questionnaire comprised structured questions. It is consisted of ten closed questions in a 5-point liker scale that has been done by 15 teachers. The outcomes of teachers' responses are presented in a table:

S.N.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Teaching English pronunciation is given more importance at the secondary level.		1		2	12
2	Most of the teachers have the interest to teach English pronunciation accurately.	2	7	2	3	1
3	Features of English pronunciation are taught to the students of secondary level.	1	5	5	4	
4	I would like to spend more time to practise pronunciation in class.	2	6		6	1
5	Many of my students have the interest to learn correct English pronunciation.	2	5		7	1
6	Students do not get enough opportunity to practise English pronunciation inside the classroom.	1	8		6	
7	There are no enough materials to teach Pronunciation in class.	3	9		3	
8	Students feel shy to utter English words in the class.	11	4			
9	My local accent comes along while teaching pronunciation.		2	3	7	3
10	I do not get enough time to teach English pronunciation in class.	9	6			

1: Teaching English pronunciation is given more importance at the secondary level.**Figure 1: The Results of Q. 1 as Percentage**

In the first pie chart regarding this question, it is shown that well over three-quarter per cent (80%) of teachers have a negative attitude as they strongly disagreed with this view that English pronunciation teaching is not given more importance at the secondary level. Only a tiny fraction agreed with this view.

2: Most of the teachers have the interest to teach English pronunciation accurately.**Figure 2: The Results of Q. 2 as Percentage**

According to the second chart, there are different opinions regarding teachers' interest in teaching correct pronunciation. Among 15 (100%) teachers, under a half per cent of teachers agreed that many educators want to teach English pronunciation accurately. Contrariwise, other 20% of teachers marked disagree, and rest portions marked neutral and strongly disagree.

3: Features of English pronunciation are taught to the students of secondary level.

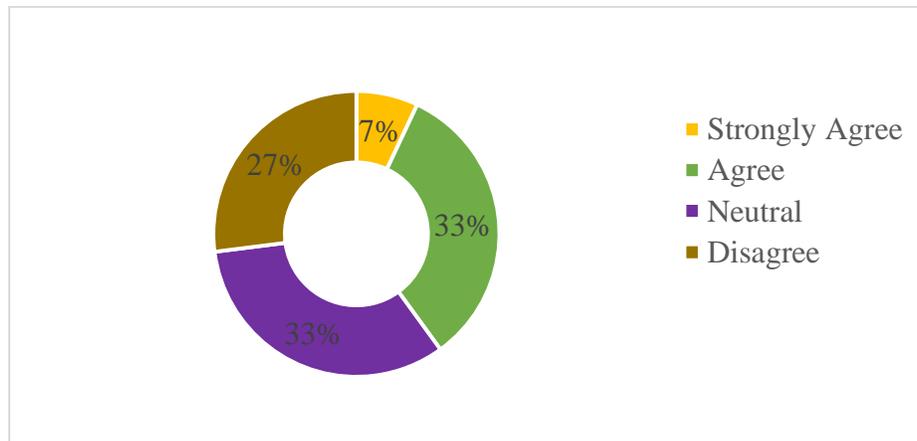


Figure 3: The Results of Q. 3 as Percentag

The third chart is about the components of English pronunciation that are taught to the students of secondary level. In connection with this, several teachers (33%) agreed with this statement. Few teachers (27%), on the contrary, did not agree with this view just because many of them were not well familiar with all the features of pronunciation.

4: I would like to spend more time to practise pronunciation in class.

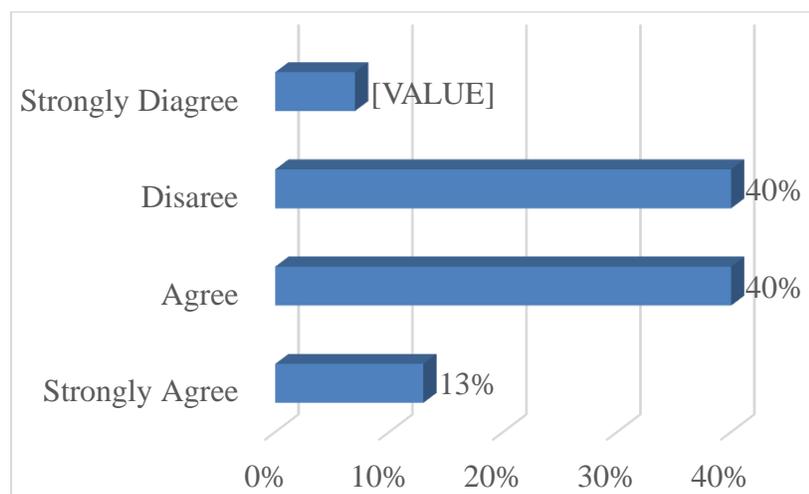
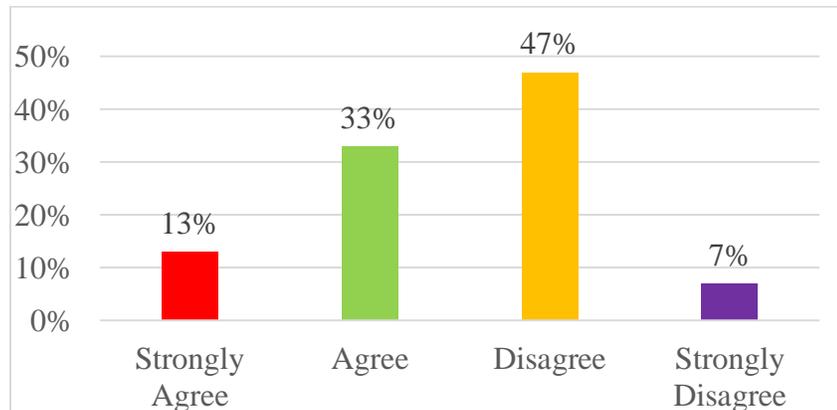
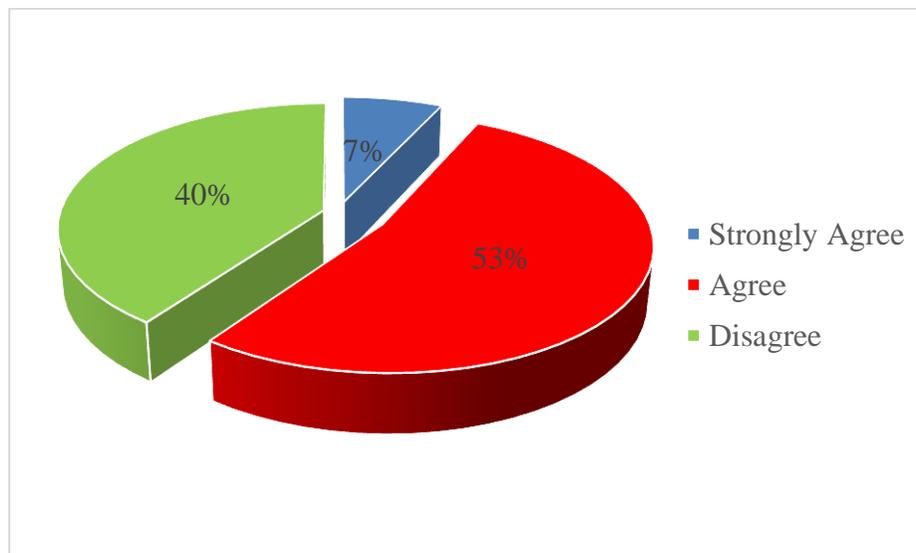


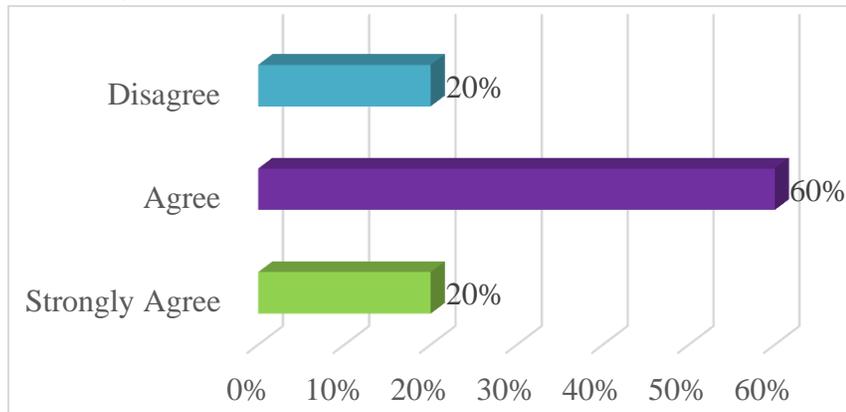
Figure 4: The Results of Q. 4 as Percentage

5: Many of my students have the interest to learn accurate English pronunciation.**Figure 5: The Results of Q. 5 as Percentage**

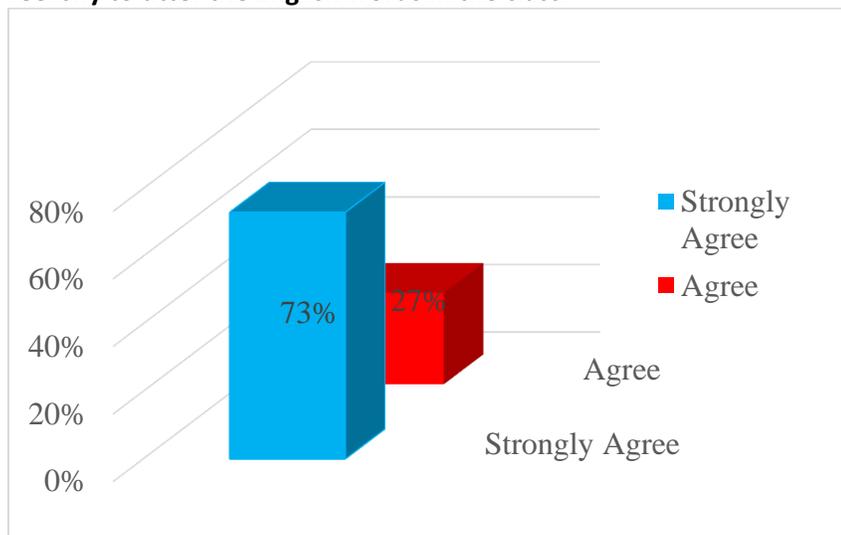
Concerning the students' interest in learning accurate English pronunciation, this column chart shows that around 33% of the teachers agreed they want to learn correct pronunciation. But the majority of them (47%) gave completely opposite views regarding this statement.

6: Students do not get enough opportunity to practise English pronunciation inside the classroom.**Figure 6: The Results of Q. 6 as Percentage**

In this pie chart question number six represents over a half per cent of instructors agreed that the learners do not get enough scope to practise English pronunciation in the class just because there are a lot of activities they had to do there. About this statement, only a tiny fraction marked strongly agree and others marked disagree.

7: There are no enough materials to teach Pronunciation in class.**Figure 7: The Results of Q. 7 as Percentage**

Regarding the shortage of pronunciation teaching materials in the class, this bar chart depicts that 60% of teachers agreed and some 20% strongly agreed with this statement. According to them, they need smart board, sound system and multimedia in the class. But, due to the lacking of these teaching materials, they cannot teach them properly in the class.

8: Students feel shy to utter the English words in the class.**Figure 8: The Results of Q. 8 as Percentage**

This chart is concerned about students' shyness of uttering different words in front of their teachers and fellow mates. Majority of the teachers strongly agreed with this opinion, whereas, over a quarter per cent of them only agreed about it. Therefore, it is clear that most of the students feel uncomfortable to read out or speak English in front of the teachers in the class.

9: My local accent comes along while teaching pronunciation

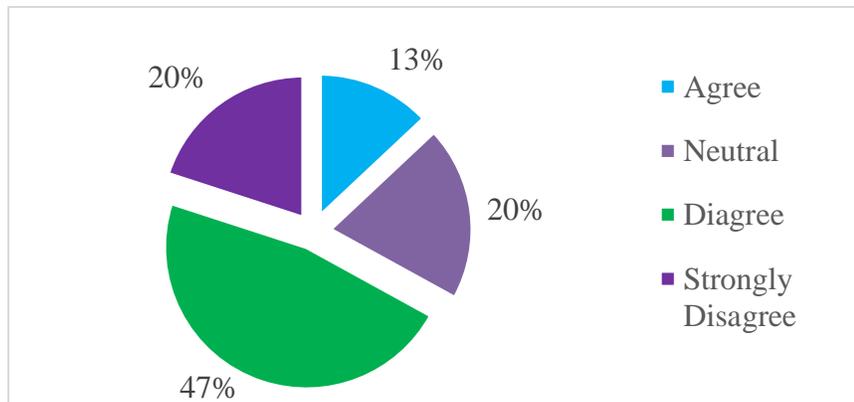


Figure 9: The Results of Q. 9 as Percentage

Regarding the mixing of teachers' local accent while teaching English pronunciation, the majority of them disagreed. They claimed that it cannot interfere in their speaking and pronunciation teaching. On the other hand, some of them agreed that it intervenes sometimes while teaching pronunciation. Moreover, 20% of teachers marked neutral as they did not want to comment anything about this statement.

10: I do not get enough time to teach English pronunciation in class.

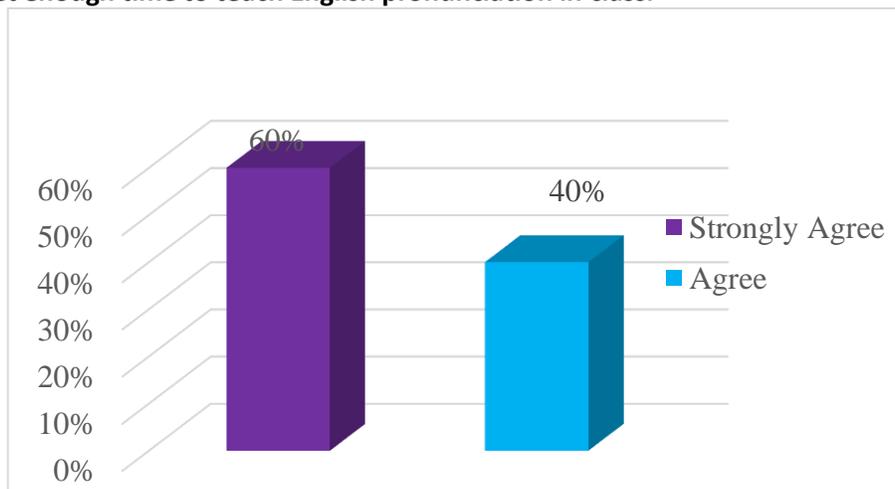


Figure 10: The Results of Q. 10 as Percentage

The last column chart displays, two-third per cent of teachers strongly supported and less than a half per cent of them agreed with the view that they cannot get enough time to teach English pronunciation due to the limitation of time in the class.

Description of Classroom Observation

The researcher had visited three secondary schools to observe three English classes for collecting her necessary data. The three classrooms of those schools were quite different according to their class size, length, capacity and receptivity. In every school, however, it was English 1st paper class. Before starting the classes, some educators cheered up the students so that they feel enthusiastic. Next, they directly jumped to their class lessons where they taught them three different passages from their textbooks. At first, they had selected three different passages and started to deliver their lectures. After a few minutes, some students were asked to read out some portion of the passage respectively. In the meantime, they took some notes about some specific sounds that the students could not articulate correctly or they might supplant with different sounds which might be near to them in the place of production, and noticed other students whether they were attentive or not in the class. Therefore, the whole three classes were running in such a way.

Almost all the teachers used both English and Bengali languages in the class except one. However, the teachers in two schools spoke most of the time and tried to give their best to teach the lessons. In another school, on the other hand, the teacher made the class interactive by asking questions to the students and students felt very confident to answer. Afterwards, the teacher gave a brief description of the students' questions.

During observations, however, the researcher had noticed that there were mainly three reactions when a student made mistakes: the teachers repeated the error words with correct pronunciation, explained the reason why it pronounced like that, and sometimes they ignored it. Here, the teachers mainly corrected the segmental features of pronunciation. There was a little touch on suprasegmental elements (tone) in the correction of words. However, there were some common limitations such as; the classrooms were not well equipped with smart board, multimedia projector, sound system etc. Therefore, in such a way the instructors taught the students in the classrooms.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, some useful suggestions and probable solutions could be considered for the successful correct English pronunciation teaching at the SSC level in Bangladesh that will help to solve the problems that the teachers face while teaching English pronunciation in the class.

1. The learners must not feel shy to speak English and also should practise the correct English pronunciation more.

2. Learners should have a clear idea about English vowel phonemes and consonantal phonemes while speaking as they are naturally trained to articulate Bengali sounds.
3. Most of the teachers of our country are not quite accustomed to the modern way of teaching English except few. So, to correct the learners' error, the government should train the teachers in linguistics, phonetics and phonology by arranging a mandatory training program for the language teachers.
4. Stress and intonation (suprasegmental elements) are quite important to pronounce English words. So, learners must practise these elements in their conversations through role plays or other interesting activities.
5. All the institutions of our country should take necessary steps to provide huge teaching materials and also a language lab with audio-visual equipment, multimedia, overhead projector, smart board for educators and learners.
6. The government should change the current syllabus design by including additional marks on pronunciation for teaching English pronunciation.

Finally, each and every English teacher should apply some pedagogic activities and techniques such as teaching English alphabet with IPA symbols, drilling, use of dictionary and applications, reading aloud and watching cartoons etc. in the EFL classroom in order to teach correct pronunciation to the learners.

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be said that teaching English pronunciation at the secondary level in Bangladesh is very essential and strenuous. Though there are lots of challenges instructors have faced in pronunciation teaching at this level, achieving a target level of pronunciation is not impracticable yet. Most of the difficulties of it arise due to existing curriculum and syllabus of English in the early years of education which result in limited teaching practises. The educational system of Bangladesh is now progressing, but the teachers, the administration and education board tend to ignore these difficulties. Efforts from the teachers' side can moderate the distance between the target level and the achieving level of pronunciation of learners. Teachers can accomplish the objectives and goals of pronunciation teaching if they combine the above mentioned theoretical framework with the classroom activities. If all these elements can align with each other, teachers can overcome most of the challenges in teaching and practising English pronunciation to the students at the secondary level.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for the Teacher

1. Do you think English pronunciation teaching is important?
2. How much effort do you give on English pronunciation in your teaching?
3. Do you feel your students want to focus on English pronunciation?
4. What sorts of activities do you do in the class for teaching and practising English pronunciation to the secondary level students?
5. Do you face any kind of problem while teaching English pronunciation to the students of secondary level?

Appendix B

The Teachers' Questionnaire

Please tick only one option for each sentence.

S.N.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Teaching English pronunciation is given more importance at the secondary level.					
2	Most of the teachers have the interest to teach English pronunciation accurately.					
3	Features of English pronunciation are taught to the students of secondary level.					
4	I would like to spend more time to practise pronunciation in class.					

5	Many of my students have the interest to learn correct English pronunciation.					
6	Students do not get enough opportunity to practise English pronunciation inside the classroom.					
7	There are no enough materials to teach Pronunciation in class.					
8	Students feel shy to utter English words in the class.					
9	My local accent comes along while teaching pronunciation.					
10	I do not get enough time to teach English pronunciation in class.					

Appendix C

Classroom Observation Schedule

Date:

Number of students:

Subject:

Topic of the lessons:

Class time:

.....

1. Description of classroom:

- Class size, space
- Favourable for teaching
- Teaching materials

2. Uses of Language:

- Mother tongue/ Bengali
- Target language/ English

3. Interaction pattern:

- Teacher/ Student
- Teacher/ Students
- Students/ Students

4. Limitation: