

Speaking Fluency and Phonological Accuracy among Iranian EFL Teachers

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***Abstract:** Pronunciation, the rather neglected orphan of second language learning, has been ignored in most English classes. Interestingly enough, the usefulness of teaching pronunciation is a widely debated subject in the language teaching world. It is said that teachers can make a big difference in improving their students' accuracy and fluency in pronunciation. Likewise, they can have a noticeable difference in certain criteria, such as the teaching of suprasegmentals and the linking of pronunciation with listening practice. The current study investigated the Iranian English teachers' opinion who teach English in language institutes. To this end, the teachers' attitudes were racked up and compared regarding communicative fluency practice, phonological accuracy, teaching techniques and specifying appropriate ways to deal with the problems of phonological teaching and communicative English language teaching in Iran. Accordingly, the subjects of the study were 60 teachers from 6 language institutes in Sirjan, Iran. Concerning instrumentation, a questionnaire with thirty items on a five point rating scale and three open ended questions were used. To sum, the results revealed that the teachers have very highly positive attitudes towards teaching phonological accuracy and highly positive attitudes towards communicative fluency activities. Nevertheless, teachers' attitudes do not relate to the pedagogy conducted in their classrooms as highly as expected.*

***Keywords:** Speaking Fluency, Teachers' Pedagogy, Phonological Accuracy, EFL Learners*

1. Introduction

The advantage of teaching pronunciation is a widely debated subject in the language teaching world. On the other hand, the role of pronunciation in the different schools of language teaching has varied widely from having virtually no role in the grammar-translation method to being the main focus in the audio-lingual method where emphasis is on the traditional notions of pronunciation, minimal pairs, drills and short conversations. Pedagogically, it has widely been said that the majority of Iranian English language learners are quite weak in using English for communication purpose. There are many causes of this problem such as Iranian learner have few

opportunities to use English outside the classroom; furthermore, lack of skillful teachers can be an effective point in this regard. The examination system at all levels focuses on vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension. On the other hand, listening and speaking tests are rarely used or highlighted in academic contexts. In practice, students are familiar with memorizing the meaning of English vocabulary in Persian, identifying grammatical errors or reading comprehension rather than using English for appropriate communication and accurate pronunciation. Meanwhile, teachers are accustomed to explaining grammar, teaching and checking reading comprehension. Sadly to note, English language teaching atmosphere in Iran has clearly emphasized language accuracy rather than language fluency.

As matter of fact, Iranian usually have difficulties with English supra-segmental phonemes such as word stress and sentence intonation when they speak English. A contrastive analysis of segmental consonant phonemes, reveals that similar consonant phonemes between Farsi and English include /p/ /t/ /k/ /b/ /d/ /tʃ/ /f/ /s/ /h/ /m/ /n/ /ŋ/ /l/ /w/ /z/ /dʒ/ /ʃ/ /ʒ/ and /y/. However, different consonant phonemes are /g/ /v/ /θ/ /ð/ and /r/. From this analysis, it can be predicted that Iranian will have many difficulties when they pronounce /θ/ /ð/ because Farsi phoneme system does not contain articulations like the English interdental sound. Therefore, all these facts yield that a poor equivalence of some of the English phonemes has created some problems in students' accurate pronunciation.

1.1 Statement of the Problem and Objectives

English language accuracy as taught and practiced in Iran concerns grammatical knowledge in morphology and syntax rather than phonology. The current researcher is interested in the problem of students' insufficient practice with phonological and communicative fluency activities. If this problem can be solved, communicative English language teaching in Iran will be more efficient. In practice, English teachers have nearly had a very crucial role in improving students' pronunciation. Thus, they can be very helpful to solve this problem. Accordingly, this investigation has been conducted to determine the attitudes of Iranian teachers who teach English towards phonological accuracy practice, communicative fluency activity, and the reasons why these aspects are rarely conducted.

Accordingly, the objectives of this research paper are as follows:

1-Determining the attitudes of Iranian English teachers concerning phonological accuracy and communicative fluency; also, analyzing the data gained on teaching phonological accuracy and communicative fluency.

2-Touching upon appropriate ways to deal with the problem of phonological teaching and communicative English language teaching in Iran.

2. Literature Review

Technically, intelligible pronunciation is an essential English component of communication competence; hence, EFL teachers should include pronunciation in the limelight of their courses and expect students to do well in them because without adequate pronunciation skills the learner's ability to communicate is severely limited. Interestingly enough, Morley(1992) believes that not attending to the students' pronunciation needs is an absolute abrogation of professional responsibility, what is more, the need for the integration of pronunciation with oral communication, a change of emphasis from segmentals to suprasegmentals, more emphasis on individual learner needs, meaningful task-based practices, development of new teacher strategies for the teaching, and introducing peer correction and group interaction can be fruitful so as to be helpful for students pronunciation improvement. It is noteworthy that altering outlooks on language learning and teaching have influenced a move from teacher centered classrooms to learner centered ones. Concurrently, there has been a shift from specific linguistic competence to broader communicative competencies as goals for teachers and students (Wongsuriya, 2003).

According to some research studies it is widely mentioned that teaching phonemes isn't enough for intelligibility in communication (Krashen, 1986). Interestingly enough, other research supports Morey's invaluable belief in the need for 'professional responsibility'. In other words, if a threshold level of pronunciation in English which is given by a non-native speaker's falls below the standard level, he or she will not be able to successfully communicate orally no matter how good his or her control of English grammar and vocabulary might be' (Celce-Murcia, 1987). Speech production is affected by speech perception; the hearer has become an important factor in communication discourse (Davies, P., & Pearse, E. 2000). This notion illustrates the need to integrate pronunciation with communicative activities so as to give the students situations to develop their own pronunciation by listening and speaking. Amazingly, there is a consensus that a learner's pronunciation in a foreign language needs to be taught in conjunction with communicative practices for the learner to be able to communicate effectively with native speakers. In practice, there are three important dimensions that the EFL teacher should catered for in any pronunciation class; the learner's intellectual involvement, affective involvement, and physical involvement. One of the best techniques for developing learner strategies is the learner's involvement in the learning process, that is, the measures used by the learner to develop his/her language learning (Harmer, J. 2007). It is the teacher's responsibility to develop the learning process so the learner has the greatest chance to develop the learning strategies that are unique to each individual learner.

The teacher also has a special role to play in the communicative learning programme, a role that Morley (1999) describes as one of 'speech coach or pronunciation coach'. Rather than just correcting the learner's mistakes, the 'speech coach' 'supplies information, gives models from time to time, offers cues, suggestions and constructive feedback about performance, sets high

standards, provides a wide variety of practice opportunities, and overall supports and encourages the learner (Naka, S. 2011). It can be seen the teacher's role is not only to teach but also to facilitate learning by monitoring and modifying English at two levels, speech production and speech performance (Ur, P. 1999).

3. Methodology

3.1 Subjects

The participants of the study were 60 Iranian EFL teachers (both male and female) who had taught English from 1 to 10 years in different language institutes. In fact, they had been teaching in 6 different private language institutes in Sirjan, Iran. To select participants, first and foremost, cluster sampling was used to choose the language institutes. Then, the participants were chosen from the 6 language institutes owning to utilizing a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 1990).

3.2 Instruments

Regarding the instruments, a questionnaire with 30 items rated on a 5 point scale was used. Additionally, three open-ended questions asked teachers whether their students had any difficulties in English pronunciation and how they deal with those problems. Three additional open-ended questions inquired if the teachers used communicative activities in their classrooms, what problems occurred and what communicative activities they wanted to handle in the classroom.

3.3 Procedures

The research instrument was adopted from Wannakarn (2013) study and adapted to the current study according to the participants' comments and suggestions concerning the wording and concepts. The samples of the study, 60 Iranian EFL teachers, were asked to complete the questionnaire. In the end, data from the questionnaire were analyzed. The quantitative data were statistically compiled according to arithmetic mean and percentage.

4. Results and Discussion

The following tables are precisely designed to specifically classify the criteria of opinion level from a five point scale (Table 1); teachers' opinions towards phonological accuracy practice (Table 2), and teachers' opinions towards communicative fluency activities (Table 3).

Table 1
Quantitative Data from a Five Point Rating Scale Questionnaire

Level of opinions	Criteria
Most or highest	4.50 - 5.00
Much or high	3.50 - 4.49
Moderate or average	2.50-349
Little or low	1.50 - 2.49
Least or lowest	0.00-1.49

According to the table 1, the classification of the criteria from the lowest to the highest have been revealed. The most or highest criteria of the level of opinion was 4.50-5.00; moderate or average criteria was 2.50-349 and the least or lowest one was 0.00-1.49.

Table 2
Teachers' opinions towards phonological accuracy practice

Teachers' opinions	Mean Values	Mean Scores
1-Teachers should teach students how to pronounce English sounds correctly.	Most	4.68
2-Students should practice how to pronounce English correctly as native speakers.	Moderate	2.56
3-If students pronounce English incorrectly while they practice, teachers should correct their mistakes	Moderate	2.90
4-You teach how to stress words in your class.	Moderate	3.20
5-You teach sentence intonation in your class.	Moderate	3.16
6-You use minimal pairs in teaching pronunciation in your class.	Little	1.90
7-You use tongue twisters in teaching pronunciation in your class.	Little	1.73
8-You use English songs in teaching pronunciation in your class.	Moderate	2.51
9-You use English films in teaching pronunciation in your class.	Least	1.32
10-You use mimicry-memorization techniques in teaching controlled dialogue in your class.	little	1.92

11-Pronouncing English sounds correctly can lead to efficient communication. So, it is necessary for students to practice how to pronounce English correctly.	Much	4.40
12-You have sufficient English pronunciation knowledge.	Much	4.25
13-You need to gain more knowledge about how to teach English pronunciation.	Much	4.45
14-You need to improve how you teach English pronunciation	Much	3.87
15-You always teach English pronunciation in your class	Little	1.66

According to table 2, the first inquiry is whether English teachers should teach how to pronounce English sounds correctly or no. Teachers strongly agreed on an arithmetic mean score of 4.68. Regarding question 2 that asked if students should practice how to pronounce English correctly as native speakers, the mean score is 2.56. Therefore, as the mean score of these data indicates, teachers strongly agree on the idea of teaching phonological accuracy. In the other words, they consider that pronouncing English sounds correctly is very crucial for real language communication. Interestingly enough, they mentioned that whenever students pronounce English words or sentences correctly, they convey meaning efficiently. Some of them state that a correct accent improves mutual understanding. Eventually, pronouncing English sounds correctly leads to efficient communication. Nevertheless, the mean scores from question 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 asking the frequency of teaching word stress, sentence intonation and the use of minimal pairs, tongue twisters, English songs, English films, mimicry-memorization activities are 3.20, 3.16, 1.90, 1.73, 2.51, 1.32 and 1.92 respectively. It is clearly revealed that the mean scores gained from these questions are lower than for questions 1 and 2. These statistics prove that the teachers' positive attitude towards teaching pronunciation do not relate to what they truly teach in the class room. It can be concluded that, it can be seen that Iranian teachers fully know the importance of teaching English pronunciation, but they do not teach this language aspect as often as needed. This fact is completely supported by an arithmetic mean score of 1.66 from question 15 asking how often teachers teach English pronunciation in the classroom.

Table 3
Teachers' opinions towards communicative fluency activities

Teachers' opinions	Mean Values	Mean Scores
16-Teachers should use communicative activities in English	Much	4.09

language classrooms		
17-Teachers should use activities that give students opportunities to use their English knowledge and skills for communication.	Much	4.33
18-You ask questions or create conversations with students in English and ask the students to answer in English.	Most	4.74
19-You use information gap activities in your class.	Moderate	3.34
20-You use role play activities in your class.	Much	3.81
21-You use discussion activities in your class	Much	4.41
22-You use communicative games such as describe and draw in your class.	Little	1.78
23-You use classroom language such as “excellent, well-done, open your book to page..., repeat after me, work in pairs,” etc.	Much	4.40
24-Activities provided in course books can encourage your students to practice English for communication	Moderate	2.99
25-Using communicative activities regularly can help students to gain better communicative skill.	Most	4.80
26-Your students can use English for communication.	Moderate	3.22
27-You have sufficient knowledge about communicative activities	Much	3.97
28-You need to improve how to teach communicative activities	Moderate	2.88
29-You always use communicative activities in your class.	Moderate	3.41
30-You need to gain more knowledge about how to teach communicative activities	Moderate	3.45

According to table 3 that is asking if English teachers should use communicative activities in classrooms, the mean score was 4.09; thus, it reveals that the teachers confirm the use of it in classes. The data also confirms the application of activities that give students opportunities to use their English knowledge and skills for communication in question 2. The teachers also accept this concept that using communicative activities regularly can help students gain better communicative skills. The mean scores show that teachers agree on the importance of teaching communicative activities. Interestingly, the arithmetic mean score from question 18, asking if teachers should ask questions or create conversations with students in English and asking students to answer in English, is high with a mean score of 4.74. In practice, teachers stated that

they use communicative activities such as information gap, role play, discussion, communicative games with the arithmetic mean scores of 3.34, 3.81, 4.41, respectively. Teachers proved that activities provided in course books can moderately encourage their students to practice English for communication with a mean score of 2.99. It seems that the quality of some course books is quite appropriate for teaching communicative activities. An arithmetic mean score of 3.45 for question 30 revealed that teachers did not often use communicative activities in their classrooms. Additionally, teachers accepted that their students can use English for communication moderately. To put it simply, as the quantitative data reveals, teachers have positive attitudes towards teaching communicative activities.

4.1 Qualitative Data from Open-Ended Questions

Question 1: What difficulties do students have in pronouncing English sounds?

Most of the teachers had mentioned that their students have difficulties with stress, supra-segmental phonemes and segmental phonemes. In other words, students don't know which syllable should be stressed. The majority of the students do not use the pattern of intonation; namely, for Yes/No questions and Wh-questions; therefore, they speak English without using stress or intonation, whatsoever. The most problematic phonemes that Farsi speakers mispronounce a lot are: /θ/ /ð/ and /r/. Although these phonemes are very important to get the native-like accent, the majority of Iranian learners cannot pronounce them accurately. They do not know the difference when words that begin with the letter *T* and *The*. Another vital problem is that they are not aware of different pronunciation of words after adding -ed in finite verbs or adding -s or -es in nouns, the final sounds can be pronounced /d/ /t/ /id/ or /s/ /z/ or /iz/. They overuse /-s/ and / d/ at the end of words and sentences.

Question 2: How do teachers solve the problem of teaching English pronunciation?

Most of the teachers mentioned that many strategies were conducted by them. In other words, as they claimed, the rules of English stress and the rules of English intonation have been clarified; also, the differences between Farsi and English sounds have been clarified. Interestingly, they acted as a model who pronounce English words and phrases and ask students to imitate the sounds, also they wrote words on the board and for emphasizing underlined some phonemes. Students were asked to listen to CDs, watch videos, or You Tube videos of native speakers of English and imitate.

Some teachers mentioned that they asked their students to work in small groups and taught them how to pronounce or stress the words, then asked them to help each other or asked the more able students who could pronounce or stress the words correctly to help the less able students. Additionally, they suggested that students practice how to pronounce English as self-study and practice at home.

Question 3: Specify the communicative activities that teachers want to conduct in the classroom?

There are loads of communicative activities that the teachers in this investigation wanted to conduct in the classroom, namely, role play, discussion, debate, communicative games, presentation, singing contest, storytelling, read and draw, short plays and information gap. Some teachers mentioned topics such as Western culture and attitude that should be included in the communicative activities; however, some other teachers stated that the level of activities should be suitable for students' ability to stimulate them to express ideas or opinions.

5. Conclusion

Speech production is affected by speech perception; therefore, the learner has become an important factor in communication discourse (Nooteboom, 1983). This notion illustrates the need to integrate pronunciation with communicative activities so as to give the students situations to develop their own pronunciation by listening and speaking. It is mentioned that pronunciation is an essential element of oral communication; however, regarding English classes, it seems to be the most neglected part of teaching in English as foreign language classes in Iran. Accordingly, this study went through the evaluation of English teachers' attitude towards teaching and checking pronunciation in class. It can be concluded that most of the participants, Iranian teachers who taught English language at private language institutes, had positive attitudes towards teaching phonological accuracy and communicative fluency activities. Additionally, they know that phonological accuracy and communicative activities are essential for leading Iranian students to be more confident in speaking as well as to try using English for real communication. Nevertheless, the teachers' attitudes do not fully relate to what they actually performed in their classrooms.

Regretfully, according to the collected data teachers used fewer teaching techniques for teaching pronunciation and communicative activities than expressed by their aforementioned attitudes. In other words, the teachers' point of view crystalized that they consider themselves to have sufficient knowledge of teaching pronunciation and activities communicatively. Oddly enough, however, most of them want to improve their teaching. They want to review what they already know and want to update their knowledge regarding the content of phonological accuracy and communicative activities and how to teach them.

Pedagogically speaking, it is said that acquisition is a kind of subconscious and anxiety free process. Regarding pronunciation, it can be learned much easier if the context of learning is stress free. Oddly enough, since learning in English classes is a conscious process where separate items from the language are studied and practiced, it is the EFL teachers' responsibility to fully concentrate on acquisition rather than learning so as to smooth the way for grasping

pronunciation. What is more, language is best learned in a comfortable, low-stress environment. Students need to feel safe as they activate their newly acquired language skills (Lessow-Hurley, 2013). Therefore, EFL teachers should create fun or positive atmosphere in learning English pronunciation. They can take advantage of lots of different activities, as in real life situations; namely, listening to different kinds of songs, watching cartoons or films, playing games, or joining English camps.

All in all, pedagogically, EFL teachers need to be specially trained how to teach pronunciation for different levels. Research topics relevant to teaching phonological accuracy and English communicative fluency and accuracy should be delivered to institutes to be submitted to the teachers. It is worth mentioning that if the teacher and students cooperate together in the total learning process, nearly most of the EFL students can do well in learning the pronunciation of a foreign language. A good success can be achieved if each have set, respectively, individual teaching and learning goals. Therefore, pronunciation must be viewed as more than correct production of phonemes: it must be viewed in the same light as grammar, syntax, and discourse that is a crucial part of communication.

6. Pedagogical Implications, Limitations and Suggestions

One of the most important aim of every research study is the capability of putting the findings of research into actual practice. To put it mildly, it is up to the researchers, textbook writers, and in service programs for teachers to inform foreign language teachers of the new findings of the researchers in the field teaching and learning. Pedagogically, the current study can have some pedagogical implications for EFL teachers. According to the results of this study the majority of teachers' have positive attitude towards teaching pronunciation; however, it does not have specific connection to what they truly teach in the classroom. Therefore, it is clear-cut that Iranian teachers know the importance of teaching English pronunciation, but they do not teach this language aspect as often as needed. Concerning the limitation of the study, by and large, it can be mentioned that the number of participants was not sufficient, so the number of subjects can largely be increased from different cities. Thus, it can be suggested that upcoming researchers conduct a research study with more participants in different contexts. What is more, if the number of qualitative questions had been increased, the result could have been far more comprehensive.

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Appendix

Sample Questionnaire Items

Name:.....

(1) *I strongly agree*, (2) *I agree*, (3) *I am not sure*, (4) *I disagree*, (5) *I strongly disagree*.

Teachers' opinions towards phonological accuracy practice

Items	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers' opinions towards phonological accuracy practice					
Teachers should teach students how to pronounce English sounds correctly.					
Students should practice how to pronounce English correctly as native speakers.					
If students pronounce English incorrectly while they practice, teachers should correct their mistakes					
You teach how to stress words in your class.					
You teach sentence intonation in your class.					
You use minimal pairs in teaching pronunciation in your class					
You use tongue twisters in teaching pronunciation in your class.					
You use English songs in teaching pronunciation in your class.					
You use English films in teaching pronunciation in your class.					
You use mimicry-memorization techniques in teaching controlled dialogue in your class.					
Pronouncing English sounds correctly can lead to efficient communication. It is necessary for students to practice how to pronounce English correctly.					
You have sufficient English pronunciation knowledge.					
You need to gain more knowledge about how to teach English pronunciation.					
You need to improve how you teach English pronunciation					
You always teach English pronunciation in your class					

Teachers' opinions towards communicative fluency activities

Items	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers should use communicative activities in English language classrooms					
Teachers should use activities that give students opportunities to use their English knowledge and skills for communication.					
You ask questions or create conversations with students in English and ask the students to answer in English.					
You use information gap activities in your class.					
You use role play activities in your class.					
You use discussion activities in your class					

You use communicative games such as describe and draw in your class.					
You use classroom language such as “excellent, well-done, open your book to page, repeat after me, work in pairs,” etc.					
Activities provided in course books can encourage your students to practice English for communication					
Using communicative activities regularly can help students to gain better communicative skill.					
Your students can use English for communication.					
You have sufficient knowledge about communicative activities					
You need to improve how to teach communicative activities					
You always use communicative activities in your class.					