

EFL Learners' Beliefs about Pronunciation Teaching

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide insight into the current teaching practices of English pronunciation in Pakistan at the university level by exploring EFL learners' beliefs. The study elicited the beliefs of 50 third and fourth-year BS English students at one of the renowned universities in Pakistan. The study adopted a survey questionnaire containing five-point Likert scale items, multiple-choice questions, and some open-ended questions to record students' views. After the thematic analysis, five major categories emerged: course design, the language of instruction, learning and teaching style, types of feedback, and nativeness of teachers. The findings revealed that students were well-aware of the importance of pronunciation for intelligibility and successful communication. They were also cognizant of what is more useful to them. Similarly, students were found eager to help improve pronunciation instruction by suggesting certain changes to be incorporated and implemented.

Keywords: EFL, course design, English pronunciation, learner beliefs, pronunciation instruction

1. Introduction:

Pronunciation, despite being a pivotal language skill, has long been neglected by language teachers and researchers. Porter (1999) believed that compared to other language skills, pronunciation teaching, both in pedagogical theory and material design, received little attention. On the other hand, quite a large number of research studies are available on teacher cognition about the teaching of grammar (Borg, 2006). Despite its key role in communication, pronunciation received little attention (Baker, 2014). Other researchers in the field, such as, (Couper, 2009, Derwing, Burgess & Spencer, 2000; 2010; Macdonald, 2002; Murphy, 2014; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Pawlak, 2010; Breitzkreutz, Derwing, & Rossiter, 2001), asked for further inquiry to address issues and challenges hampering the potential of EFL teachers.

Integral to the pronunciation class, there are two stakeholders - the teacher and the students. Since much has been researched on the former, the current study focuses on the latter- the learners. There seems a paucity of research addressing learners' cognition (beliefs, knowledge, perception and views etc.) about the ways L2 teachers teach pronunciation. For example, Pawlak, Bielakthere and Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2015, p. 5) reported, "there has [sic]been surprisingly few empirical investigations that would have attempted to tap learners' or teachers' beliefs and preferences concerning pronunciation teaching". To add to the body of knowledge, the present study endeavors to unveil learners' beliefs about certain aspects of pronunciation teaching.

2. Literature Review:

2.1 Learners' Beliefs about L2 Learning

L2 teachers' and learners' beliefs about a second/foreign language have an utmost influence on the ways learners learn and teachers teach (for example Horwitz, 2008; Borg, 2006). Learners' beliefs continue to guide them during their journey of learning a second language. Belief can be described as construct boxes with the capacity to store knowledge about people, events, content, objects and places and can define and develop relations among them (Ahmad, 2020). Hence, Learners form a set of perceptions about L2 learning and teaching based on their observation and knowledge.

Research on Learners' beliefs about L2 learning has revealed that these beliefs have an immense impact on L2 learners' classroom performance and achievements. Bernat (2008) claimed that learners' beliefs played an important role in the formation of the psycho-

cognitive process of learning which ultimately influenced their actions in L2 classroom. Moreover, studies have also suggested a link between anxiety (Young, 1991) and motivation (Bernat, 2008). Both these variables are directly related to learners' performance in the classroom. Similarly, learners' beliefs also help to direct language learning strategies which are considered important for language learning (e.g; Oxford, 1990; Cohen, 1998; Yang,1999; White, 2008). Similarly, Li and Chun (2012) study on reading literacy, Pawlak (2008) and Calka (2011) on pronunciation, Vandergrift (1999) on writing, showed the positive impact of strategies on L2 learning.

2.2 Learners' Beliefs about Pronunciation Instruction

Despite a growing interest in the field of pronunciation teaching and learning, there is still a paucity of research on students' cognition about pronunciation teaching (Muller & Levis, 2013). Although studies such as (Cenoz & Garcia-Lecumberri, 1999) investigated L2 pronunciation, studies on learners' beliefs about pronunciation learning are yet to be surfaced in mainstream literature (Baker & Murphy, 2011).

Several studies attempted to investigate teachers' views/beliefs regarding English language pronunciation instruction. Baker (2011), for example, interviewed five experienced ESL teachers to record their views regarding L2 pronunciation instruction. One common finding was that they were not feeling confident in teaching L2 pronunciation. Studies in different other contexts such as Derwing (2008) in the United States of America; Burgess and Spencer (2000) in the United Kingdom; Foote, Holtby, and Derwing (2011) in Canada and Fraser (2000) in Australia reported almost the same findings.

On the other hand, as for learners' beliefs regarding L2 pronunciation, we generally come across studies that have addressed issues such as explicit pronunciation teaching and learners' attitude (Couper, 2003), the vitality of learning second/foreign language pronunciation (Rajadurai, 2001), and model of L2 pronunciation learning (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2008). Similarly, Ma (2012) conducted a study to explore views regarding non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) and native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and its advantages and disadvantages. However, researchers and practitioners pay little attention to exploring ESL/EFL learners' beliefs about pronunciation teaching and the preferred teaching approaches and their participation and say in the course design.

2.3 Approaches to Pronunciation Teaching

The term Approach, although entirely a different concept, however; sometimes it may be used interchangeably with other concepts i.e., technique, methods and procedure. However, there is a difference between approach and other concepts mentioned before. Similarly, approach must be reflected in classroom while teaching (Richards and Rodgers 2001). In other words, approach may be defined as something that refers to theories or principles which may guide a method of teaching and ultimately inform the teaching procedure and/or techniques in a language classroom. However, broadly speaking, approach not only refers to teaching methods, techniques and/or procedures but can also refer to other relevant concepts and practices such as the language of instruction, teaching materials, course design and characteristics and role that language teachers adopt in the classroom. All of them play a significant role in deciding to select and implement techniques and procedures to be used in a language classroom.

When it comes to approach, literature does not seem to agree upon a single approach to be adopted in the pronunciation classroom. Various studies have recommended different approaches for teaching L2 pronunciation depending on the context of the study and the researcher's personal experience. Yates and Zielinski (2009, p. 19) suggests that It would not be wise to suggest one common approach for teaching L2 pronunciation as "there is no one recipe for success in any kind of teaching" because of differences in context and learners. It can, therefore, be argued that multiple factors such as institutional constraints, Learners' goals of learning L2, their levels of proficiency in the L2, teaching setting and learners' beliefs regarding various aspects of pronunciation are to be taken into consideration before deciding on the suitable approach for teaching L2 pronunciation in a particular context.

Literature on L2 pronunciation teaching made a distinction between two types of approaches: bottom-up and top-down. Both approaches help determine teaching methods, strategies, teaching material, course design and possible constraints. The bottom-up approach emphasizes teaching the L2 sounds in isolation first then syllables and finally exposing learners to advanced and more developed speech such as utterances and sentences. Goodwin (2005) called this approach a 'building block' approach to pronunciation teaching. However, this approach has been overshadowed by recently conducted research studies which consider suprasegmentals as inevitable in achieving intelligibility and

comprehensible in L2 teaching and learning (for example, 2001; Munro & Derwing, 1995; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010; Chela-Flores, Keys, 2000; Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1998). On the other hand, the top-down approach is based on the teaching of suprasegmentals by teaching stress rhythm and intonation first followed by the teaching of individual sounds. This approach, to a larger extent, is a response to research studies which emphasized the importance of suprasegmentals in successful communication (Hahn, 2004; Field, 2005).

Amid so many contradicting views on using different approaches, L2 teachers are left in confusion. They are unguided, demotivated and strayed. In recent years, language researchers and practitioners, realizing the gravity of the issue, called for an L2 teaching approach which may maintain a balance between teaching segmental and suprasegmental in a language class (e.g., Goodwin, 2001; Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Kennedy, 2008). Similarly, the experts also urged that every language class, based on teaching context and learners' needs, has different requirements in terms of teaching and material. In addition, it has to be decided by the L2 teacher on the type of course design and teaching methods best work for them to meet their students' needs and expectations. Hence, students' goals and expected use of L2 in future in EFL and ESL contexts become important. It further necessitates conducting a study, like the present one, to record their perspectives on L2 pronunciation teaching to help L2 teachers in choosing appropriate teaching material, appropriate teaching and instructional plans.

2.4. Research Questions

Since there are available only a few studies on learners' beliefs about L2 instruction, the present will attempt to address the following research questions:

1. What are L2 students' beliefs about the course design on L2 pronunciation subjects?
2. What are students' beliefs about their teachers' ways of approaching L2 Pronunciation?
3. What perspectives do students have about the roles of NNESTs and NESTs in relation to pronunciation teaching?

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Participants

For data collection, I obtained the consent of 50 undergraduate (BS English) students from one of the public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan. To

maintain the gender balance, 25 males and 25 females aged between 20 to 22 studying in the 3rd and 4th years made the sample of the current study.

Year	No. of students	age
3 rd year BS English	25	20-21
4 th year BS English	25	21-22

Table 1. Participants information

1	2	3	4	5
Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor
5 (10%)	10 (20%)	20 (40%)	8 (16%)	7 (14%)

Table 2. Proficiency levels: students' self-evaluation

3.2. Research Tool

A questionnaire designed by Alghazo (2015) was utilized for data collection. The questionnaire consisted of two portions: the first portion asked the participants the background information, for example, age, year of study, number of subjects regarding pronunciation learning while the second portion elicited their beliefs/views about the teaching approach and relevant aspects of teaching using a five-point Likert Scale (Strongly Agree = 1, Agree = 2, Not sure = 3, Disagree = 4 and Strongly Disagree = 5) and a handful of MCQs. Similarly, some open-ended questions were also included to provide the participants to express themselves openly.

3.3. Procedure

I was a faculty at the target university in the Department of English Language and Literature when data for the study was being collected. I invited the students and explained the purpose of my research, the research tool and the procedure. Some of the students looked hesitant to participate thinking that they might be punished for expressing their views. Students were given a surety that their names would be kept secret and the outcome would not affect their marks or GPA. They were further assured that the data would be used for research purposes only and would be safely disposed of once analyzed. Consequently, 50 students out of 83 provided consent to take part in the study and signed the form. The next day, the questionnaires were distributed among the participants to fill out and write their answers. The participants were given adequate time to complete the task. Once all the questionnaires

were received by the researcher, it was analyzed thematically and the following themes emerged including learning and teaching style, language of instruction, course design, types of feedback, and nativeness of English language teachers.

4. Analysis and Results

The first question sought to explore learners' views on the approach(s) used in L2 pronunciation classes. As discussed in the literature review section, a teaching approach is an umbrella term that includes a number of different components including teaching methods and strategies. These components may include course design, teaching and learning material and language of instruction. For course design, the participants responded that segmental such as place and manner of articulation as well as production and perception of vowel and consonant sounds are mostly focused on in pronunciation class and suprasegmentals, most of the time, are left untaught. However, when asked about the amount of instruction and whether it was adequate for developing pronunciation abilities, a majority of participants (76%) strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement "the amount of instruction is inadequate to develop learners' pronunciation skills". Similarly, only 9% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement while 06 % remained neutral.

	SA or Agree %	N	D or SD %
	19 (18%)	03 (06%)	28 (76%)

Table 3. Amount of Instruction.

Note: D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree

For course design, participants were solicited regarding the aspects of pronunciation they would like to be included in the course on pronunciation. In response to the query, a large number (60%) of participants recorded their preference for those aspects which they thought caused problems in comprehension. On the other hand, only 30 % asked for including all aspects of pronunciation while 10% did not pen their preference.

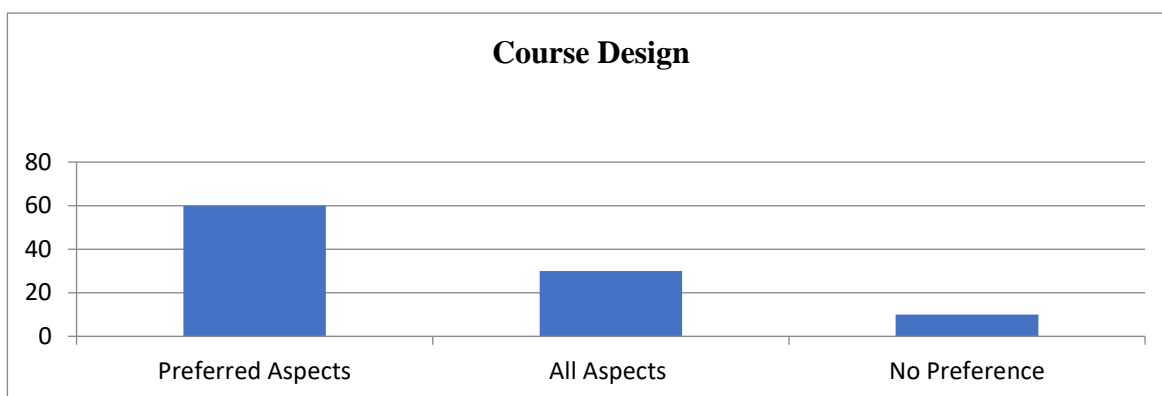


Figure 1. Course Design

Regarding participants' views on the language of instruction they would prefer in pronunciation class, an almost equal number of participants – 46% and 38% chose to use an English-Urdu mix and English only respectively. The finding related to the English-Urdu mix provides support for the studies which penned the importance of bilingual teaching or code-mixing in EFL/ESL classrooms (e.g., Forman, 2010, 2012; Ellis, 2004). However, 16% seemed to be fine with both types of instructions by opting for No preference.

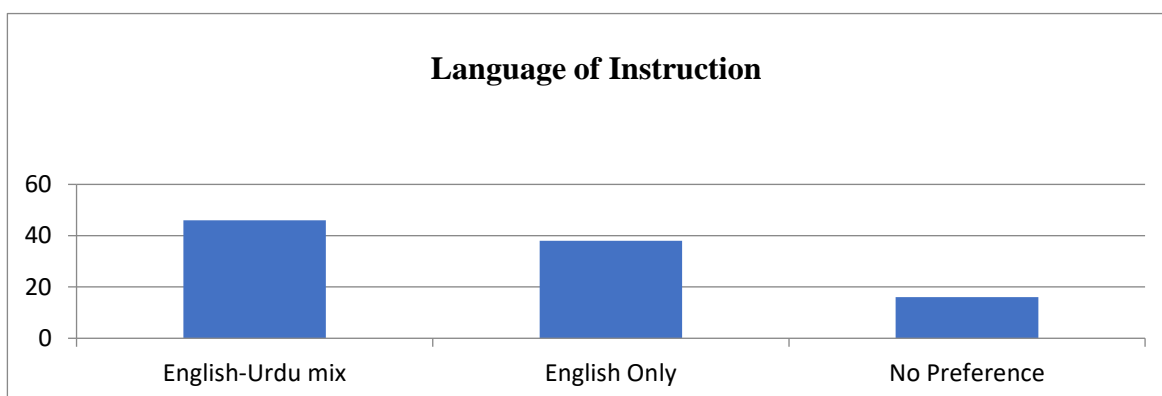


Figure 2. Language of instruction

The second question focused on the ways and methods teachers used to teach pronunciation. The participants were asked two types of related questions: teaching style and provision of feedback. We have focused on teaching style in this section. It should be worth noting that the degree of learning depends on the degree of harmony between the learning style and teaching style. The participants were asked whether they would prefer an intuitive or sensing learning style (Myers & Myers, 1980). In other words, sensing style means when the students prefer to practice the pronunciation and learn about the explanation after, sometimes called practice-to-theory. Similarly, when students prefer their teachers to provide them with the explanation first and practice pronunciation after, it is called intuitive style or sometimes theory-to-practice. When asked whether they prefer intuitive or sensing

style, a huge majority (96%) of the participants showed their preference for intuitive style, while a small number (4%) preferred to be taught pronunciation through sensing style. It indicates two important facts about EFL students. Firstly, they lack basic knowledge about the aspect of pronunciation. Secondly, they are not confident about their pronunciation of the target language i.e., English. The traditional approach (theory-to-practice) is deeply rooted in Pakistani academia and regularly practised from Primary to University level. This approach has been travelling through several generations and teachers “have to relate their teaching style to that of their student teachers and teach student teachers to adapt to the learning styles of their future pupils” (Tubić and Hamiloğlu, 2009, p. 133).

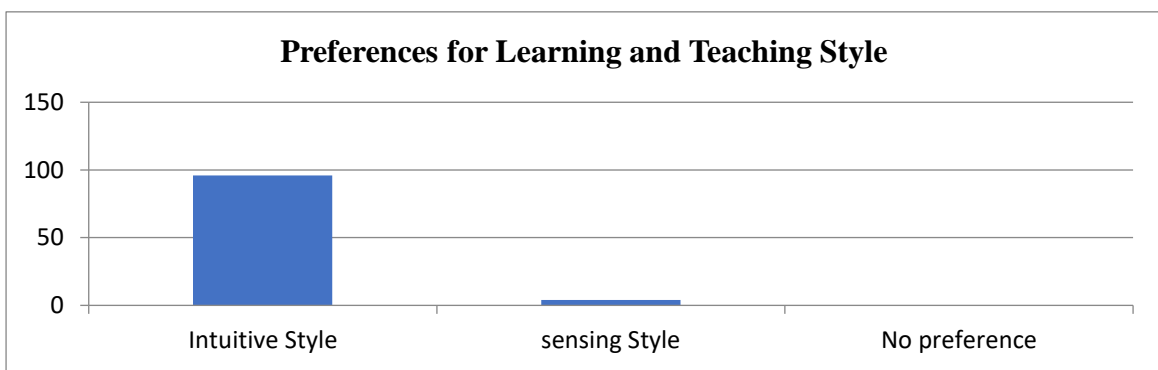


Figure 3. Learning and teaching styles

For feedback on pronunciation mistakes, a huge majority of learners (66%) preferred the delayed corrective feedback, probably outside the classroom. On the other hand, only 20% wanted their teachers to provide immediate corrective feedback on their mistakes in pronunciation while 14 % opted for No preference. As far majority’s preference for delayed corrective feedback, it may be due to the Pashtun culture where both genders avoid getting embarrassed in front of the opposite gender as stated by various Psychological theories that one’s ego, whether male or female, may not accept their own or opposite gender ‘critical judgement (see, for example, Brown, 2007) or bear of questioning eyes of their peers which often give them a feeling of being ‘ignorant or incompetent. However, the finding is also inconsistent with the studies where a majority asked for immediate corrective feedback (for example, Baker, 2011).

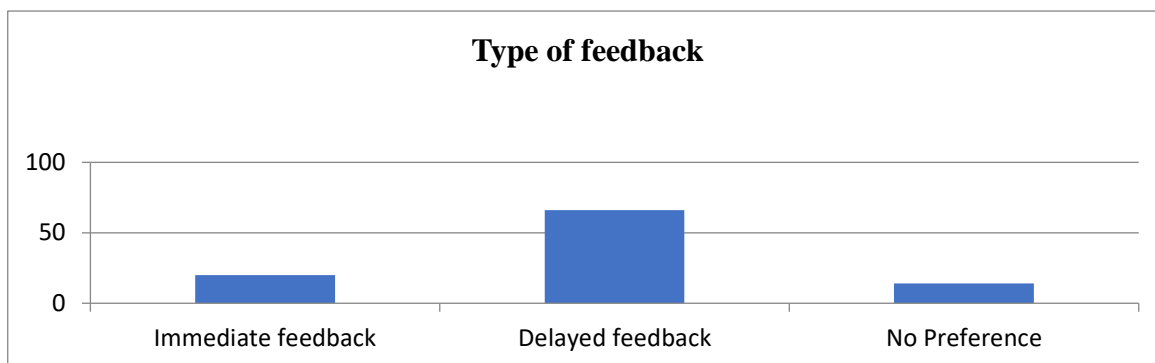


Figure 4. Types of feedback

The final question of the current research study asked students “*how you perceive the role of NESTs and NNESTs regarding pronunciation instruction*”. As indicated by (Figure. 5), a large majority (80%) of the participants preferred Non-native teachers over native teachers for the teaching of L2 pronunciation. Only 14% of the participants’ responses indicated that they wanted native speakers to teach them L2 pronunciation. Similarly, 6% of the participants were indecisive about whether they preferred native or non-native English-speaking teachers for L2 pronunciation teaching. It shows students’ level of content or subject knowledge, comprehension and comfort which encouraged them to prefer non-native teachers over native ones as I presume based on my observation and experience as a teacher, they take him/her to be ‘one of them and probably not as knowledgeable and fluent as a native speaker. The students provided a justification for their preferences. They explained that non-native teachers, sometimes, explain difficult concepts in Urdu and Pashto. Similarly, non-native teachers related the example to our own culture. In addition, students could ask a question using L1 (Pashto) and/or the national language. They felt confident with them. On the other hand, participants who preferred native teachers said that they would have the opportunity to listen to and proactive native pronunciation in a real context. They would have the maximum time to practice English language in its natural environment when taught by a native speaker. It is interesting to note that only 6% of the participants were unsure about the type of teacher they would prefer to teach them L2 pronunciation. It shows that students are well-aware of the importance of pronunciation and how to learn it.

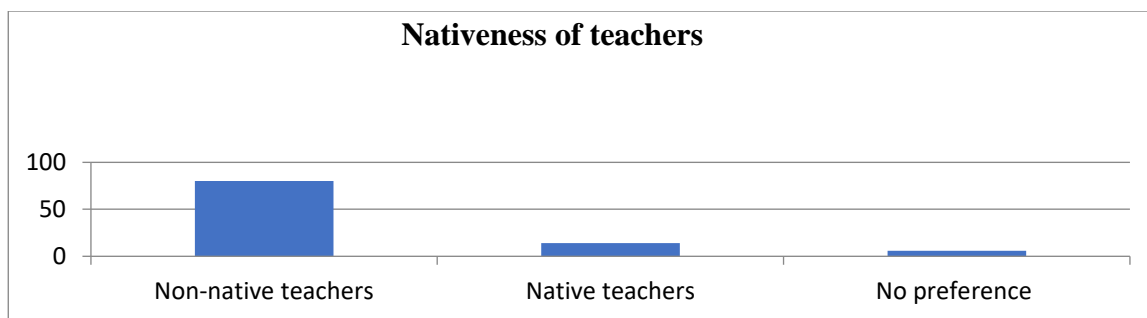


Figure 5. Language teachers Nativeness

5. Discussion

This paper has attempted to give voice to students' views and thoughts regarding the teaching of L2 pronunciation. This paper also advocates that students, being the second important ingredient of the language classroom after the teacher, need to be engaged in decision-making regarding different components of the language classroom including instruction time, course/syllabus design, teaching style and type of feedback, medium of instruction etc. Although a majority of learners were found satisfied with the amount of time for instruction, a fair number of students showed their dissatisfaction with the same. Similarly, students also showed reservations about the course design. They wanted their teachers to teach those aspects of pronunciation which seemed difficult for them to learn and where they needed more focus. On the other hand, a group of students preferred all aspects of L2 pronunciation to be taught in the language classroom. It shows that students are well aware of the importance of pronunciation in general and specific aspects in particular which are generally problematic for L2 speakers. It strengthens the argument that students should be solicited while designing L2 courses otherwise "we relegate them to a role of passivity" (Benjamin 2005, p. 146). It, therefore, becomes important to engage students by learning about their language learning goals and learning styles which will help to develop autonomy in the language class in the EFL context.

Similarly, students need to be involved in solving problems related to course design. Students' self-reports reflected that they asked for those aspects to be included in the course on pronunciation which hinders communication. Among several other obstacles, the most widely reported was the allocation of insufficient time for instruction (see, for example, Gilbert, 2008). Students also mentioned that teachers need to focus on those aspects of pronunciation which are problematic for Pashtun students to learn and practice rather than teaching all aspects of the skill. This supports Levis (2007) who argued that the use of

English as Lingua Franca focuses more on intelligibility than naïve-likeness as the ultimate goal of learning L2.

For the question related to the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, it is not surprising that in a multilingual country like Pakistan, students prefer the use of L1 in the pronunciation class. It is also pertinent to mention that majority of students in Pakistani universities hail from state-run schools/colleges where the medium of instruction, for the most part, is either Urdu or regional language(s). Such students strive to learn the core concepts of L2 aspects of pronunciation to enhance their proficiency. The use of L1, however; helps learners to improve their learning of L2 (Forman, 2007; Cook's,1999, 2003). They highlight the significance of using L1 in L2 classroom in EFL context where the findings show that use of L1 helped learners to improve their 'low proficiency level. Students desire to use 'code-switching' in the language classroom indicates that they are well aware of growth areas and have the will and motivation to improve their proficiency in pronunciation. Students' eagerness to express their views and lack of knowledge may help practitioners and course designers to improve the quality of content and teaching.

The second research question solicits students' opinions on the way their teachers teach L2 pronunciation. Regarding teaching style, almost all the students voiced called for an intuitive style. All of them collectively opined that they would like their teachers to explain the aspects of pronunciation prior to production. This is perhaps because of their 'affiliation' and 'affinity' with the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) as EFL teachers, due to multiple reasons, make use of this method in their classroom. That is why, as an EFL teacher, I believe that the intuitive style is equally famous among teachers when it comes to practice. To have an in-depth and detailed understanding of the whole picture, along with students, it would be helpful to record EFL teachers' perspectives as well on the questions concerned. It might yield interesting findings, especially in terms of the generation gap: most EFL teachers at the university level in Pakistan are from an older generation when Pakistan was not a part of the global village yet. Similarly, for another important issue i.e., feedback on their assignment and errors, a huge number of students preferred feedback to provide later – outside the classroom or even in the office. The main reason is a Pashtun culture where both males and females strive to maintain their face and self-respect in front of their peers. That is, perhaps the reason that they wanted the feedback to be provided later.

Of equal importance also is the final question related to students' beliefs regarding the nativeness factor when it comes to pronunciation teaching. Students preferred Non-native over native teachers for the teaching of pronunciation. Only a few thought that pronunciation should be taught by a native teacher. Pakistan being a former colony of Britain and being self-sufficient in producing 'English teachers' there would hardly be a native speaker teaching English pronunciation at a university in Pakistan. Similarly, with the financial crunch due to the current economic crisis, universities can hardly meet the salary expectations of foreign teachers. The findings of this study differ from those (Cook, 1999) where he argued that EFL/ESL learners preferred native English teachers because they could produce and pronounce English words accurately. On the other hand, there are studies (see, for example, Forman, 2010) which concluded that Non-native English teachers share L1 with students which helps them to explain the core concepts and perhaps that is the reason L2 learners feel at ease with them especially those with low-proficiency level. Similarly, Cook (2005) and Medgyes (1994) point out that Non-native English teachers have an extensive experience with L2 learning as students which can help them enhance their teaching as they are well aware of the problems their students would face and they also know how to address them.

6. Implications

This paper attempted to argue that students, being an integral part of a language classroom, need to be actively involved in the teaching and learning process to enhance language learning. Students' involvement, however; can only be possible in a true sense, when their views and beliefs about pronunciation are properly recorded, understood and addressed. It is also important to know what they expect from a pronunciation course. As the findings reflected, students are motivated, excited and all set to improve their pronunciation. That's why calling for improvements to be incorporated into the syllabus/curriculum. It is high time for teachers and curriculum experts to rethink the approach(s) towards pronunciation teaching. This study provides an opportunity for the pronunciation teachers, educators and all others concerned to reshape the teaching of pronunciation by incorporating 'what and how students want the pronunciation to be taught. For example, the course design can be modified by adding those features of pronunciation which are problematic for L2 learners. Similarly, a teacher may adopt a teaching style synonymous with the learning style of the students. Similarly, students complain that pronunciation instruction is given less importance and time compared to the teaching of grammar, writing and reading must be

considered and balance needs to be maintained between all components of the English language.

7. Conclusion

A large number of studies have already discussed problems in teaching L2 pronunciation in a variety of contexts. However, little has been researched on ‘soliciting’ students’ perspective(s) on L2 pronunciation instruction. It is highly hoped that, in light of this study, researchers and practitioners will engage themselves both theoretically and empirically in investigating students’ beliefs and views regarding L2 pronunciation teaching to help advance knowledge about L2 teaching. The current study has laid a foundation stone by investigating students’ beliefs (the cognitive side) about their teachers’ language instruction. However, there are other significant aspects of L2 teaching which need to be explored such as learning strategies, pronunciation models, different types of activities and their effectiveness etc.

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