

# **Pakistani EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Regarding Pronunciation**

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## **Abstract**

Over the past few years, an overwhelming interest has been observed in teaching and learning pronunciation. Although, this resulted in proliferation of pronunciation related studies and resources, more important is to see whether they have influenced EFL teachers or not. The purpose of the present study was to investigate Pakistani EFL teachers' beliefs and practices about pronunciation. To elicit related information, 20 university teachers who were teaching linguistics and communication skills completed a survey questionnaire. The findings showed that EFL teachers had adequate knowledge of pronunciation and were willing to teach it. However, they tended to follow traditional ways of teaching pronunciation e.g. individual sounds, silent sounds in words and especially problematic sounds through repetition and drills. Moreover, EFL teachers asked for more trainings on pronunciation teaching, as reported by prior studies (e.g. Burgess & Spencer, 2000; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011). This study examines the issues and needs of EFL teacher and identifies directions for future research on belief and practices about pronunciation that will help to establish ways to overcome the issues and address their needs.

Key words: Beliefs, EFL teacher, Pronunciation, training

## **1. Introduction**

Although pronunciation is one of the most important and integral part of language teaching, it has been neglected for decades by both researchers and instructors. On the other hand, teaching of grammar has received a considerable attention from researchers (Borg, 2003). However, it is quite recent that researchers began to address various issues regarding pronunciation such as pronunciation training and professional development for teachers (Burns, 2006; Foote, Trofimovich, Collins, & Soler Urz-ua, 2016; Henderson et al., 2012; Murphy, 2014a), the importance and role of pronunciation features for successful communication (Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1998; Hahn, 2004), how L2 listeners perceive the accented speech (Lippi-Green, 1997; Munro, 2003) and teachers lack of confidence to teach pronunciation (Baker, 2011; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011; Fraser, 2000; Macdonald, 2002). However, in the recent decades, the availability of related text books, activities, interactive CDs, digital apps and advent of internet made it easier for teachers and researchers to have more focus on pronunciation teaching and explore new dimensions of teaching and learning.

Language classroom in EFL context has two integral parts: teacher and students. The focus of the present study is the former: the EFL teacher. Teachers' classroom practice is the reflection of their beliefs and knowledge about pronunciation. This study has attempted to explore the Pakistani EFL teachers' beliefs and practices at postgraduate level.

## **2. Teachers' beliefs and practices about pronunciation**

Teachers' cognition, beliefs and knowledge, is a vital concept in theory which unfolds their thought processes and teaching practices. It was not earlier than 1970s when research on language teaching tended to show interest in teachers' beliefs generating a considerable body of research. These studies helped to design a new syllabus for future ESL/EFL and modify the older ones to equip them with latest knowledge and development and in the field, material and modern instruction methods. A range of research studies on teachers' cognition have revealed some common findings. However, due to use of varied research methods, different contexts and level of participants and diverse topics, they were hardly comparable.

Breitkreutz, Derwing and Rossiter (2001) recorded the responses of instructors engaged in ESL program in Canada. The study confirmed the beliefs reported by prior studies regarding

pronunciation teaching. For instance, teachers believed that pronunciation instruction is important in L2 context. They also argued that pronunciation teaching should focus on intelligibility than attainment of native or near native accent which is further supported by the concept of 'World Englishes'. Teachers confirmed the teaching of segmental and suprasegmental features in pronunciation class. Some of the instructors noted that they had the preliminary level of professional training on pronunciation teaching and asked for more and advanced level of trainings. Interestingly, ten years later, this study was replicated by Foote, Holtby and Derwing (2011) reported the same findings about Canadian teacher beliefs and practices. However, one significant difference was that teachers were having more opportunities of professional trainings. Baker (2011) interviewed five ESL teachers from language centres in North America. She found that teachers' cognition and practices about pronunciation teaching were positively influenced by research studies emphasising the teaching of prosody in language classroom. Similarly, Burgees and Spencer (2000) conducted a study on pronunciation teaching in UK. They recorded responses from 32 ESL teachers. Most of the instructors reported to have incorporated the teaching of pronunciation with other language skills and taken on spot decision about pronunciation related problems and used various methods and techniques to teach pronunciation. Although the respondents understood the importance of suprasegmental features, they seemed reluctant to teach them.

Similarly, two other studies regarding pronunciation teaching in Australia recorded teachers' voices asking for more training on pronunciation instruction. First study was carried out by Macdonald (2002) where he interviewed eight ESL teachers. He observed that teachers did not give enough pronunciation instruction. After discussion with teachers, he found that they were quite hesitant to teach pronunciation because they did not know how to assess students' pronunciation and correct their errors. Hence, Macdonald concluded that pronunciation teaching trainings were critical for both in-services and pre-service English teachers. Burns (2006) conducted a study on ESL teachers in Australian Adult Migrant English Program. He explored that teachers were quite confident in teaching pronunciation, still were demanding for further training on pronunciation teaching. He further reported that teachers were more focussed on teaching of segmental aspects in their pronunciation classes than supra segmental aspects.

With the advent of the concept of 'World Englishes' including English as International Language (EIL) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), a range of studies have analysed EFL teachers' cognition regarding native and non-native accents i.e. Indian English, Arabic English and Chinese English. The idea behind the above-mentioned framework was to help EFL teachers and learners to focus on those aspects of pronunciation which could enable them to be intelligible to native and non-native speakers.

In Pakistan, English is taught as foreign language in most institutions, although some institutions with students from elite class may claim to teach English as a second language (ESL). In the predominant and prevailing EFL setting, it might be unproductive to teach them pronunciation using native English pronunciation norms (Deterding, 2005; Jenkins, 2000). This question is always debatable whether EFL teachers would prefer to teach local variety of English (Indian, Pakistani) or Lingua Franca Core? It has generally been observed that EFL teachers tend to prefer native model for teaching (Henderson et al., 2012) because a majority of EFL teachers believed that native or near accent is the demand of learners and parents as it is considered more correct than any local variety (Jenkins, 2005; Timmis, 2002).

EFL teachers from different contexts in various studies reported pronunciation to be one of the most important components of English language teaching. At the same time, they also expressed

concerns over the poor quality of pronunciation training. Similar findings were recorded by English Pronunciation Teaching in Europe Survey (EPTiES), EFL teachers considered pronunciation as an important language skill. However, they expressed dissatisfaction over the quality and quantity of pronunciation trainings. (Henderson, 2013; Henderson et al., 2012; Waniek-Klimczak, 2013).

University EFL teachers in Pakistan receive no pre-service training. There are some training and workshop arranged for in-service teachers by the Higher Education Commission but unfortunately, they are more focused on other language skills than pronunciation teaching. Kluge (2004) argued that although pronunciation is considered an important skill, the amount of pronunciation instruction received by the EFL teacher is inadequate.

Use of activities for pronunciation teaching in an EFL class has been a challenge to teachers but hardly a few studies have addressed the use of activities to teach pronunciation. Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu (2010) in their study with 103 EFL teachers in North Cyprus reported that they taught pronunciation using the techniques of reading aloud, dialogues and dictionaries. Similarly, Buss (2013) reported that in Brazil, EFL teachers mainly teach segmental aspects and use correction, reading aloud and repetition as activities for teaching pronunciation.

Since English is taught in more than 100 countries (Crystal, 2003) and the number of EFL learners is over a billion (Graddol, 2000), it is important to find out more about teachers' cognition and practice in EFL contexts. Prior to this research, no detailed study has been conducted on EFL teachers' beliefs and practice regarding pronunciation. Very little is known about teachers' beliefs and practices in Pakistan. The present study attempted to investigate EFL teachers' beliefs and practices in Pakistan by surveying 20 EFL university and postgraduate college teachers. Following research questions guided the study:

### **3. Research Questions.**

1. What are the self-reported practices of Pakistani EFL teachers regarding pronunciation at postgraduate level in Pakistan?
2. What are EFL teachers' beliefs and opinions about pronunciation learning and teaching?

### **4. Method**

#### **4.1 Instrument and procedure**

Data were collected using a modified version of a survey questionnaire originally developed and used by Buss (2013). A total of 50 items (open-&-closed-ended) questions elicited information regarding three main domains including: 1. Demographic information 2. Pronunciation teaching practices 3. Cognition about pronunciation.

The participant consent was obtained through telephone and email. All the selected participants were teaching Phonetics & Phonology and Communication Skills. Moreover, the participants' L1 was Pashto, but they were equally proficient in Urdu and English. Quantitative questions were analysed, and the percentage of responses was calculated using SPSS ver. 24. The responses were then grouped together in broader categories. The analysed data was tabulated according to the category for the sake of convenience and clarity. For the analysis of qualitative data, responses were coded and broader themes were identified using Nvivo ver. 11.

#### **4.2 Participants and the research context**

The majority of participants in the current study were male (80%), most of them were between 32 to 45 years of age, and were working either in university or postgraduate college of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. The average age at which the participants started learning English was 6.5 years (ranging from 5 to 11 years), 15 of them started to learn English at the age of 5 while the remaining 5 were exposed to English at 11. None of them claimed to have native or

near native pronunciation. However, all of them believed their pronunciation was intelligible to both natives and non-natives.

All the 20 participants were experienced EFL teachers. All of them taught English minimum for 10 years. Majority of them were highly qualified – three with a Ph.D. degree in Linguistics, 12 with an M.Phil. Degree in Linguistics while five with a Master's degree in language and literature were currently enrolled in M.Phil. However, only two had Diploma in English language teaching while rest of the teachers lacked formal education in the field.

## **5. Results**

### **5.1 Teaching practices**

**5.1.1 Frequency of pronunciation teaching.** In response to the item 'how often you teach pronunciation', 50 % reported always, 25 % said often; 15 % opted 'sometimes, and only 10 % answered rarely. None of the respondents answered that s/he had never taught pronunciation. One of the respondents commented that:

*Teaching pronunciation to my students makes me striving learn pronunciation of new and foreign words which have been borrowed by English language with quite unexpected pronunciation: contrary to how they appear. As an English teacher people expect me to have native like pronunciation, I don't want to be embarrassed. I need to be as perfect in pronunciation as possible, it's the question of my honour in Pakhtun society. I always go for accurate and standard pronunciation and teach the same to my students.*

The comments allow us to infer that EFL teachers wish to maintain positive face before their students and in society. However, it is still unclear whether the pronunciation instructions are explicit. However, majority of EFL teacher believe that, more or less, they did give pronunciation instruction.

**5.1.2 Suprasegmental instruction.** The teachers were asked to report on how much time they spent on teaching suprasegmental aspects (stress, rhythm, intonation). The responses showed that 70 % teachers answered they spent 10 to 30 % of class time on teaching suprasegmental aspects. Only 20 % said they devoted half of their class time to teaching suprasegmentals. The remaining 10 % answered that they allocated almost 60 % of class time to teaching suprasegmentals because they played crucial role in communicating meaning.

**5.1.3 General teaching approaches.** Discussing their approaches to pronunciation teaching, 80 % participants revealed that they taught specific features when needed or when students for the same. Similarly, 60 % answered that they incorporated pronunciation instruction in teaching functional English or literature especially poetry.

**5.1.4 Teaching of pronunciation features and activities.** The respondents were provided a range of pronunciation queries and were asked to record their responses on Likert-scale. They were also asked to encircle the item if they could not understand. It would be explained with appropriate examples.

**Table 1. How often different pronunciation aspects are taught?**

Features	Never or rarely (%)	Sometimes	Often or always (%)
1. Problematic sounds: e.g. /p/, /f/ and /i/, /e/	10	5	85
2. Suffixes: -ed and -s endings	15	10	75
3. Word stress: present = PRÉsent, major = Major	20	5	75
4. Syllable structure: uni, bi and tri syllabic words	40	5	55
5. Silent letters	5	10	85
6. Minimal pairs: rat and pat	10	20	70
7. Connected speech	25	10	65
8. Accents difference	20	5	75
9. Intonation: falling and rising	50	10	40
10. Utterance stress: stress on certain words in utterances	70	10	20
11. schwa /ə/ and /ʌ/ difference	60	5	35
12. Weak forms	30	15	55

As shown in Table. 1, the most frequently taught pronunciation aspects were problematic sounds and silent letters (85%). Teachers reported that these two aspects are always or often focused on as Pashto speakers found /p/, /f/and /i/, /e/ challenging because they could hardly differentiate between these phonemes. The second most frequently taught aspects (75 %) were suffixes –ed, -s and –es, word stress and accents difference. Teachers reported that teaching word stress in British and American English was important for intelligibility. Similarly, 70 % said they always or often taught minimal pairs to acquaint the learners with differences among closely related vowels sounds. Among others, connected speech (65 %) syllable structure (55 %), intonation (50 %) was also practised in class. The least taught aspect was utterance stress: it was hardly/never focussed when pronunciation instruction was being given.

Similar to Table. 1, a list of related activities and techniques was given to teachers asking them to mark the frequency of their practice of the listed activities and techniques.

**Table 2. How often different pronunciation activities are used?**

Activities	Never or rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often or always (%)
1. Imitation and repetition	0	0	100
2. Phonetic alphabet	20	10	70
3. Drills	5	5	90
4. Marking	50	20	30
5. Tactile reinforcement	20	10	70
6. Interactive media	50	5	45
7. Drama and role-play	60	20	20
8. Visual aids	10	30	60
9. Classroom games	50	20	30
10. Focus on rules: English phonetic and phonological rules	20	5	75
11. Recordings	40	20	40
12. Chanting	60	10	70
13. Body movement	60	15	25
14. Mirror: learners to observe own articulator	20	10	70

As shown in Table. 2, the most frequently used technique is imitation and repetition for which the frequency of practice was reported as 100 %. This is the most popular and widely used technique used in Pakistan from primary school to university, said teachers. They further added that although it helps students to get through the examination, it is also true that it suppresses students' creative abilities to emerge and develop. Similarly, phonetic alphabet (80 %), focus on phonetic rules (75 %), drilling, chanting, tactile and mirror techniques are also very famous (70 %) with teachers to practice. However, they made students to observe their fellow learners' articulators instead of looking their own in mirror. Other than them, 60 % use visual aids, interactive media (45%). The least used activities or techniques reported are the use of classroom games (30%) and body movement (25%). According to teachers, such body movements are considered inappropriate in Pathan culture and teachers and students feel embarrassed performing them.

## **5.2 Beliefs and opinions**

**5.2.1 Importance of pronunciation instruction.** The EFL teachers were asked to rate the importance of pronunciation instruction in EFL class on Likert scale (from '1' = not at all to '5' very important). It is not surprising that 90 % said it is very important and 10 % answered important. They added that pronunciation instruction meant learning good pronunciation which was equally important for both intelligibility and social status.

**5.2.2 Feature difficult to teach and learn.** In response to the query 'what are the most serious pronunciation problems experienced by EFL students?' Problems with production of the phonemes /p/ and /f/ was the most frequently reported (75 %). Similarly, 60 % respondents reported that students had difficulty with vowels especially /i/ and /e/. A total of 50 % of teachers mentioned problems with teaching as well learning of rhyme and intonation. Furthermore, 45 % respondents said learners confused the pronunciation of endings like -ed, -s and -es in words like walked (ii and iii form) and use (v) and use (n).

**5.2.3 Other related beliefs and opinions.** Teachers were provided with a number of statements and asked to show their degree of agreement or disagreement on Likert-scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). These options were merged together into three categories: disagree, neutral and agree. Table. 3 below shows that teachers have positive attitude towards teaching pronunciation. The responses reveal that teachers consider pronunciation very important to teach and learn. A large number of teachers (90 %) disagreed with the view that pronunciation teaching is necessary because learners pick the correct pronunciation when they are exposed to proper input and 85 % believed that teaching pronunciation can help bring permanent change in EFL learners' speech. Similarly, majority of teachers showed interest in teaching pronunciation (75 %), however, 60% expressed that teaching pronunciation is not an easy task to do. Similarly, a considerable number of teachers (60 %) said that native speaker is the most suitable person to teach pronunciation. A majority (70) disagreed with the proposition that it is not possible to teach English communicatively and 70 % agreed that age matters in acquisition of native like pronunciation. A large number of respondents (80 %) agreed that pronunciation teaching should help learners to be intelligible to their listeners: local and foreign. On the other hand, 80% learners like their teachers to correct them when they pronounce incorrectly. Regarding accuracy and communication, 70 % said that pronunciation instruction can help improve language accuracy and communication, and 70 % said pronunciation can be taught communicatively. Teachers' responses for other beliefs and views about teaching pronunciation can be seen in table 3.

**Table 3. Beliefs and opinions about pronunciation**

Statement	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)
1. Teaching pronunciation does not usually result in permanent changes in the speech of EFL students.	85	5	10
2. Pronunciation teaching is often unnecessary, as most learners are able to pick up on pronunciation when frequently exposed to good input.	90	10	0
3. A heavy accent is a cause of discrimination against non-native speakers.	70	10	20
4. Teaching pronunciation is difficult.	20	20	60
5. The goal of a pronunciation teaching should be to eliminate, as much as possible, foreign accent.	60	5	35
6. The best person to teach pronunciation is a native speaker.	30	10	60
7. It is not possible to teach pronunciation communicatively.	70	5	25
8. There is an age-related limitation on the acquisition of native-like pronunciation.	20	10	70
9. Pronunciation instruction is only effective for highly motivated learners.	50	10	40
10. Native speakers should be the model for pronunciation teaching.	20	5	75
11. Some individuals resist changing their pronunciation in order to maintain their identity.	25	10	65
12. I don't like teaching pronunciation	75	1	20
13. When teaching pronunciation, the teacher should avoid, as much as possible, comparing English to Pashto, Urdu or any local dialect.	65	10	25
14. Pronunciation teaching should help make students comfortably intelligible to their listeners.	15	5	80
15. Pronunciation is best learned through language immersion, without the need for rules or theoretical explanations.	25	10	65
16. Most learners don't like teachers to correct their pronunciation.	80	5	15
17. Pronunciation instruction improves language accuracy rather than communication.	70	10	20

## 6. Discussion:

Taking into consideration the first question, the Pakistani EFL teachers tend to focus more on teaching segmental features. Problematic sounds and silent letters are the most frequently taught aspects of pronunciation: more time is spent on teaching of segmentals than on suprasegmentals. Although, studies show that suprasegmentals play more important role in intelligibility and comprehensibility (Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson, & Koehler, 1992; Derwing, T.M., Munro, M.J., & Wiebe, G, 1998; Hahn, 2004), certain studies in ESL context have also shown tendency to teach suprasegmental aspects or equal focus on both.

Comparing different responses, it is evident that teachers seem to focus on those aspects of pronunciation which are considered most important and challenging for the students. The most frequently taught four aspects are problematic sounds, silent letters, suffix endings, word stress and accent difference. It is astonishing to note that intonation being one of the most important aspects of pronunciation is among the least taught aspects. Lehiste (1976) described the importance of intonation as follows "Intonation does not change the meaning of lexical items but

constitutes part of the meaning of the whole utterance —signalling, for example, a difference between a statement and question.” There can be multiple reasons why teachers avoid teaching intonation, for example, they might feel hesitant to teach because most of them considered pronunciation as ‘one of the most difficult aspect to teach’. Moreover, English intonation can be challenging for teachers to teach and learners to learn. This further strengthens the demand of EFL teachers for more professional trainings and workshops on suprasegmentals.

Both quantitative and qualitative responses revealed that teachers expressed their concerns about difficulties their students were having in learning and differentiating between /p/, /f/ and / i/, /e/. These sounds are mostly mispronounced by Pashto speakers. This substitution is considered to have high functional load error (e.g. substitution of /p/ for /f/ and / i/ for /e/) which can seriously affect intelligibility and comprehensibility to both native and non-native listeners (Jenkins, 2000; Munro & Derwing, 2006), e.g. six and sex and feel and peel.

In response to a list of activities used for teaching pronunciation, three activities: repetition, drills and phonetic alphabet are widely used as EFL teachers believe that language learning is the process of habit formation, continuous repetition results in greater learning (Freeman, 2009). The EFL teachers’ language learning experience has great influence on their use of activities their classrooms. They prefer to use those activities which they have performed during their graduation as they consider them effective for teaching pronunciation. Moreover, the use of phonetic alphabet seems due to the module on phonetics and phonology they have enrolled during their terminal degree.

Talking about teachers’ beliefs and opinion regarding teaching of pronunciation, Pakistani teachers have positive attitude to teaching of pronunciation advocating the view that pronunciation instructions help learners learn good pronunciation. They believe that pronunciation can be taught communicatively and help in attaining accuracy with intelligibility. A number of teachers also suggested that native speaker (teacher) can teach pronunciation better than a non-native teacher. This is in line with the studies on EFL teachers, in which a vast majority of teachers agreed that native speaker can teach better than non-native (Sifakis & Sougari, 2005). One possible explanation that can be offered is that EFL teachers are reluctant to teach suprasegmental features due to certain phonological limitations, native teacher is considered suitable for the job. Similarly, teachers believed that students want them to correct their pronunciation errors because error correction is useful and helps in learning a language (Ellis, 2009). It is worth noting that some students have high level of fluency but have problems with accuracy. Teachers need to focus on their accuracy so that learners can develop a successful and meaningful communication (Fawzi, 2016)

In conclusion, EFL teachers appear to have been positively influenced by the current research and modern trends in language teaching. However, no significant change was observed in classroom practices. The EFL teachers were following the same traditional way of teaching: repetition and drills that have been practiced in Pakistani language classroom for decades. Moreover, on the theoretical side, teachers tend to emphasise segmentals more than suprasegmentals. EFL teachers feel the need for trainings on modern pedagogical approaches and techniques particularly on the teaching of suprasegmentals. Similarly, they also need to be exposed to different language learning activities and their application. These suggestions are however, speculative and further research is needed to address the issues and suggest practical steps to improve the quality of teaching and student outcomes.

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