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THE EFFECT OF USING PHONETIC TRANSCRIPTION OF WORDS AS FOOTNOTES ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' PRONUNCIATION IMPROVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The current study attempts to determine the effect of using phonetic transcription of words as footnotes on Iranian EFL learners' pronunciation improvement. Since text-books should take account of students' needs as learners and should facilitate their learning processes, this paper suggests that phonetic transcription as footnotes in learners' text-books can be more effective than dictionary use as it is more convenient and available for both learners and teachers. To this end, 30 upper-intermediate learners were chosen randomly from among English students of Kish English language institute in Rasht, Guilan, Iran. The participants were randomly assigned into an experimental group and a control group, each group consisting of 15 people. A pretest-posttest design was utilized in this study. Both groups were measured before and after the treatment but only the experimental group were exposed to the treatment by provided Footnote phonetic transcriptions of new and unknown vocabularies for each page of their book. The data was analyzed through Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS), using Paired Sample t-test and

Independent t-test. The results confirmed the significant effect of phonetic transcription as Footnotes on the experimental group learners' pronunciation improvement.

Key Words: *Learning English, EFL Learners, Pronunciation, Phonetic Transcription, Footnote*

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is one of the most important skills in English Language Teaching. It is an integral part of foreign language learning since it directly affects learners' communicative competence as well as performance. If speakers have very bad pronunciation, their speech will not be understandable to the listeners. Apparently, the fault which most severely impairs the communication process in EFL/ESL learners is pronunciation, not vocabulary or grammar (Hinofotis and Baily (1980), cited in Okita (1999)). Despite the fact that acquiring pronunciation is so difficult, in many ESL/EFL classrooms, teaching pronunciation is granted the least attention. Moreover, many researchers have found that there are many English teachers who are not proficient and lack confidence, skill and knowledge in pronunciation teaching (Derwing & Munro, 2005: 389). Consequently, many learners of English language have major difficulties with English pronunciation even after years of learning the language. Some of the major problems learners faced with pronunciation learning in ESL/EFL classrooms are: the first language interference, age, lack of exposure to the target language, and not well-trained teachers who frequently do not pay enough attention to pronunciation instruction and also have their own pronunciation problems. So here the role of textbooks can be more crucial than usual and they can present a useful tool for both teachers and learners to overcome their misconceptions about and problems of pronunciation. Earlier teaching approaches focused on the segmental features of pronunciation, while more recent approaches have emphasized supra-segmental features such as sentence rhythm and intonation. However, this debate has never reached a conclusion. The growing trend in today's pronunciation curriculum design is to integrate both the most important segmental and supra-segmental aspects appropriately in one course. One huge problem for language learners is that spelling in English is very little help when it comes to learning to pronounce, particularly for learners who are not exposure to the target language. The English spelling does not serve as a guide to pronunciation. On the contrary, it can often be misleading but phonetic transcriptions provide useful help for such ambiguity describing the oral form of the words as

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authentically as possible. While learners can guess the meaning of a word from the context with a more approximate result, they cannot do so with pronunciation because it is an intrinsic characteristic of the individual word and context could not be expected to help learners overcome problems pertaining to it, and EFL learners could not always model their pronunciation on their teachers' because non-native teachers also have their own pronunciation problems so both EFL teachers and learners require a reliable resource for correct pronunciation. Gimson (1964), as quoted by Morris-Wilson 2003, has suggested that phonetic transcription is a good method to reinforce analytically the information which the learner may have received imperfectly by ear. Indeed, the transcriptions might provide a good aid to correct misperceptions. With the aim of minimizing the difference between spelling and sounds, the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) was developed in 1888 to provide a universal code that could represent the exact pronunciation of the sounds that exist in all languages. However, most EFL students are not very familiar with the IPA, and even though the phonetic transcription is present in bilingual dictionaries, many students are unable to decode the symbols and end up feeling puzzled by the unsystematic way words are represented by orthography. As any student of English can attest, written English is only an approximate representation of the spoken language. Phonetic transcription, in contrast, is an exact representation, without any ambiguity, redundancy, or omission. In a phonetic transcription, every symbol stands for one sound and one sound only. There are no "silent letters," nor are there any spoken sounds that are not represented in the transcription. Much time can be saved in many small ways by using phonetic transcription as footnotes instead of audio recordings or "repeat after me" techniques. The correct pronunciation of a word can be indicated by simply writing its phonetic transcription as footnotes on the learners books, instead of playing it over and over on a fuzzy-sounding cassette or repeating it over and over out loud for students. Phonetic transcription does have a few drawbacks, the most significant of which is that it requires that both teachers and students be familiar with the IPA (or whatever system of transcription is used). Fortunately, the IPA is easy to learn, despite the daunting appearance it might have at first, because there is an exact one-to-one correspondence between written symbols and spoken sounds. Phonetic transcription can describe the oral form of the words to reduce the confusion related to symbol-to-sound relations. According to Wells (1996), transcribing a word or an utterance in a language such as English illustrates a direct specification of its pronunciation and enables the language learner to obtain precise and explicit information on pronunciation. It is a good method to reinforce what the learner may have received imperfectly by ear. That is, it provides a good aid to correct misperceptions. One important and preliminary aspect in trying to make appropriate use of phonetic transcription in the classroom is deciding when to use phonetic symbols. Since pronunciation habits are formed early, it seems obvious that it is at that point when accuracy is neglected, the result will be fossilized pronunciation errors so the development of a good pronunciation from the beginning should be emphasized. Phonetic transcription should be used frequently, especially with beginners. They should be a constant presence in the EFL environment - on wall posters, textbooks and handouts (Ricardo Schütz). According to Baker (1992), pronunciation is very important and learners should pay close attention to pronunciation as early as possible. Otherwise, the result will be that advanced learners find that they can improve all aspects of their proficiency in English except their pronunciation, and mistakes which have been repeated for years are impossible to eradicate.

Review of Literature

If we look at the history of the English Language we will realize that because of the influence of so many languages, for example, Latin and German, the sounds of English are not uniform and phonetic. English is an unphonetic language. There is no one to be relation between the letter and the sound. In languages like Tamil and Hindi every letter is pronounced but English is not so. For example, the following words ring, women, and many the letters i, o and y are pronounced as /ɪ/ which occurs in the letter sit. So in English one letter does not represent just one sound and therefore this becomes an obstacle for the new learner of the language. One of the most important evolutions in pronunciation was the emergence of the IPA i.e. the International Phonetic Alphabet. It was developed in 1888 to provide a universal code that could

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represent the exact pronunciation of the sounds that exist in all languages. It took into account all the sounds or phonemes that can be uttered in English and each sound is given as a separate symbol. A great number of ELT writers insist on the benefits to be gained if learners master the symbols of the phonetic alphabet; for example, they will be able to work out the pronunciation of a new word (e.g. Cook, 2001). Thus, many ELT writers recommend activities that either require knowledge of the phonetic script or help learners become competent in phonetic transcription.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current study is designed to find out the effect of using phonetic transcription of new words as Footnotes on Iranian EFL learners' pronunciation improvement. The Quasi-experimental design was the research design. This study used two groups to compare. Although the curriculum of upper-intermediate level in Iranian English Institutes is approximately the same, but for making sure, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) had been administered and also a pronunciation proficiency test was administered to have participants in fairly equal level in the knowledge of English pronunciation. A total of 30 females English language learners aged between 20-35 years old were homogeneously selected based on the OPT score among upper-intermediate participants at Kish English language institute in Rasht, Guilan, Iran. Then they randomly assigned into two fifteen-student groups. Pre test –Post test experimental design was used to investigate the effectiveness of using phonetic transcription as Footnotes to enhance Iranian EFL learners' pronunciation accuracy. A teacher-made test including a list of 22 single words which was supposed to be used as both pre-test and post-test, first was administered to all of the participants of the two groups as the pre-test before the treatment. Next, the phonetic symbols represented in the dictionary will be instructed to all participants of two groups to ensure that all of them know how to use phonetic transcription of words. Then the learners in the experimental group were exposed to the treatment. First, the researcher provided Footnotes phonetic transcriptions for new and unknown vocabularies for each page of learners' book for the experimental group whereas the control group learners did not receive such treatment and their instruction was as usual. The procedure continued throughout an 18 session termic course which ran from 2 Dec 2012 to 16 Jan 2013.

In the last session, the participants of both groups were given the same test of pronunciation administered previously as the pretest to administer the post-test to measure of the two groups' progress and to check the effectiveness of the study treatment. The participants' recorded performance on the two procedures was listened to two times by the researcher to ascertain if the participants had accurately pronounced each word or not. The analysis criteria used here were the accurate sounds and placing of word stress pronunciation of sounds. For the purpose of data analysis, the data on the pre-test and post- test were collected and analyzed with the SPSS/ PC program and Quantitative approach was used for the analysis of the data. Mean scores on the pre-test and post-test were calculated. An Independent t-test was applied to determine significant differences between the mean scores on the posttests of two groups. A Paired sample t-test was also applied to have a within group comparison from pretest to posttest for both groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive analysis of the obtained data for the pre-test and post-test in the experimental group of the study has been summarized in table 1:

As indicated in table 1, the number of the participants has been 15 in the experimental group ($N_{Ex}=15$). The mean of the pretest scores was shown to be 6.1333 ($X_{Ex} PR= 6.1333$) as compared to the mean of the posttest scores which was 17.2000 ($X_{Ex} PO=17.2000$). The standard deviations obtained for the pretest scores of the experimental group was 2.77403 and for the posttest scores was 2.95683 that seems there is more variety in the PO scores than the PR scores.

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Table 1: Descriptive analysis of the pretest (Pr) and the posttest (Po) of the experimental group of the study

Test	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std.Error mean
PR_{Ex}	15	6.1333	2.77403	.71625
PO_{Ex}	15	17.2000	2.95683	.76345

As indicated in table 2, the number of the participants has been 15 in the control group ($N_{Co}=15$). The mean of the pretest scores was shown to be 6.4667 (X_{Co} PR= 6.4667) as compared to the mean of the posttest scores which was 7.1333 (X_{Co} PO=7.1333). The standard deviations obtained for the pretest scores of the control group was 2.19957 and for the posttest scores was 2.26358 that seems there is more variety in the PO scores than the PR scores.

Table 2: Descriptive analysis of the pretest (Pr) and the posttest (Po) of the control group of the study

Test	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std.Error mean
PR_{Co}	15	6.4667	2.19957	.56793
PO_{Co}	15	7.1333	2.26358	.58445

The results of the inferential analysis of the obtained data have been presented in tables 3 and 4:

As indicated in table 3, the t-value of the study was calculated between the posttests of the experimental and the control groups. The degree of freedom was 28 ($df=28$) and the mean differences was calculated as to be 10.067. The observed t value was calculated as to be 10.470 ($t_{obs}=10.470$). The level of significance (the p value) is ($p=.000$); since this is less than our alpha .05 ($p>0.05$), we can reject the null hypothesis of the study which states that using phonetic transcription of words as footnotes does not affect Iranian EFL learners' pronunciation improvement.

Table 3: The results of the independent t-test of the study

T-test Results	Observed t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Differences
Between the post-tests of				
the Experimental and the	10.470	28	.000	10.067
Control groups of the study				
(Equal variances assumed)				

As indicated in table 4, the t value of the study calculated between the pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group of the study was -53.656 ($t=-53.656$), the degree of freedom was 14 ($df=14$) and the level of significance was .000 ($p < .05$) as compared to the pretest and posttest scores of the control group of the study in which the t value of the study was calculated as to be -5.292 ($t=-5.292$), the degree of freedom was 14 ($df=14$) and the level of significance was .000 ($p < .05$). The results of the paired samples t-test revealed that there is a statistically more significant mean score gain from the pre-scores to post-scores of the experimental group $t(14) = -53.656$ than control group $t(14) = -5.292$.

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Table 4: The results of the paired sample t-test of the study

Groups	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error mean
Between the pretest and posttest of the Experimental group	-53.656	14	.000	-11.06667	.79881	.20625
Between the pretest and posttest of the Control group	-5.292	14	.000	-.66667	.48795	.12599

The results indicate that there was a significant difference between the performances of the two groups after the special treatment was given to the experimental group. In fact, participants in the experimental group outperformed the control group. Analysis of data gathered revealed that there was a significant progress in the experimental group of the study from the pretest to the posttest, whereas there was no significant progress in the control group of the study from the pre-test to the post-test. This led to the rejection of null hypothesis which stated that using phonetic transcription of words as footnotes does not affect Iranian EFL learners' pronunciation improvement. And it can be concluded that using phonetic transcription of words as footnotes does have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' pronunciation improvement. Thus, the findings suggest that phonetic transcription as Footnotes benefit the participants of the experimental group in pronunciation improvement and help them pronounce the words of English language more accurately. The results of the study showed that this method have facilitated learners' pronunciation learning in the experimental group.

The findings of this study can have several important theoretical and pedagogical implications for both English learning and teaching. According to the language learning theories, learners acquire language primarily from the input they receive so phonetic transcriptions as footnotes provide adequate input needed for pronunciation learning. Language learners are among those who can most benefit from using phonetic transcription of words as footnotes. It helps language learners' pronunciation improvement in a better, clearer and quicker way and become well understood when communicating with other speakers of English in today's world of globalization. They will learn from the beginning, which in turn, avoid any probable bad habits. Providing learners with such helpful aid can reinforce analytically the information they may have received imperfectly by ear, which in turn, can have positive learning outcomes. Teachers are the second group who may find the results of this study useful. It must be borne in mind that teachers are the models for their learners, so first of all they should have good pronunciation; otherwise, they can harm their students. Hence, the suggestion of using phonetic transcription of words as footnotes provide a useful tool for teachers who want to avoid misconceptions about pronunciation in their students early on and also avoid any probable mistake in their role. They will learn more about pronunciation, and they will also become more confident about teaching pronunciation. This study also has important implications for language teaching. Teaching pronunciation is one of the significant aspects of foreign language teaching, and is a very serious task. Therefore, it should be studied in the early stages of the language teaching program in order to eliminate the factors affecting the pronunciation of the learners in a negative way and also to overcome the negative influence of mother tongue interference, fear, making mistakes, etc. pronunciation. Therefore, utilizing phonetic transcription of new words from the beginning of the study can be very helpful in this ground.

Textbooks play a very crucial role in the realm of language teaching and learning, and should be base on teachers' and learners' need. Therefore, Text book designers, materials writers, and book compilers may find the results of this study useful because phonetic transcription as footnote is very convenient. It's not

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only very fast but also easy to use. It does not waste time and indeed facilitates language learning and teaching.

Conclusion

Teachers generally sacrifice teaching pronunciation in order to spend valuable class time on other areas of language so pronunciation practice is very unlikely to occur. Thus, it is important that the students themselves try more to overcome their pronunciation difficulties. Pronunciation can be improved by awareness and repetition of the sounds. If students do not have an opportunity to practice good pronunciation at the beginning of their learning, they may build their habits in the wrong way. By using phonetic transcription instead of audio recordings or time consuming techniques such as “repeat after me”, much time can be saved. When we transcribe a word or an utterance, we illustrate a direct specification of its pronunciation. Especially in the case of Iran that students are not exposed to English and the time used for English language instruction is very constrained and also teachers are not perfect and have their own pronunciation problems, using phonetic transcription as Footnotes is very useful and enables the language learners to obtain precise and explicit information on pronunciation. The International Phonetic Alphabet is very easy to learn, and in many situations the use of phonetic transcription can save time and facilitate the teaching of concepts related to the spoken language. If you have not previously used phonetic transcription, it takes only a few hours to learn the IPA and use it.

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