

Teachers' Incorrect Pronunciation and Its Impact on Young Learners: (*A Review on Linguistic Aspects of EFL Classroom Practices*)

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In recent years, English has become one of subjects labeled as a local content offered in elementary schools. In most elementary schools, especially in urban areas, the teaching of English is commenced in the first grade. On the one hand, the teaching of English in such early years may give a positive impact on learners' second language acquisition as young learners are in the age of critical period of acquiring second language. However, besides its positive impact, the teaching of English in elementary schools also raises a number of serious problems. One of the problems is the lack of professional English teachers. Many English teachers of elementary schools are not graduates of English education. Accordingly, many of them do not master linguistic aspects of English, especially in pronunciation. This paper tries to discuss a problem of incorrect pronunciation by teachers and its negative impact on learners. The discussion will include EFL teachers' perception on the importance of pronunciation mastery, theoretical relevance of teaching correct pronunciation for young learners, the result of a survey on the incorrect pronunciation on certain words which are often incorrectly pronounced, the possible linguistic causes of incorrect pronunciation, and the possible solutions proposed to tackle the problems.

Key words: *Teachers, Incorrect pronunciation, young learners*

Introduction

Nowadays, elementary schools have offered English as one of school subjects. Consequently, more and more English teachers are needed. On the one hand, this is a good opportunity for English education graduates as, perhaps, they can get a job quickly. Just a conventionally accepted statement that the more demand arises the more supply is needed. However, besides its good impact, the teaching of English in elementary can also result in a bad impact. This is, mainly, due to the lack of qualified English teachers. As stipulated in Law No. 14/2005, teaching is acknowledged as a profession. Accordingly, a teacher must comply certain qualifications. Amongst the required qualifications are teachers' competencies and academic qualification.

According to the Law No. 14/2005, on academic qualification, teachers shall hold a four-year college degree. This has been a serious problem as most teachers have not met this qualification (Hamied, 2011). According to Hamied, only less than 35% of English teachers comply with teaching qualification. Jalal et al. (2009) also mentions that of the total number of 2,783,321 teachers in Indonesia, 62.4% of them (1,739,484) do not comply with the academic qualification. Thus, it can be said that most teachers have not met with the required

standards. In other words, in general, the quality of teachers in Indonesia is still low. This low quality of teachers in turn affect their performance.

Like other teachers of other subjects, the number of English teachers who have met the academic qualification is also low. Furthermore, in many elementary schools, those who teach English do not have English education background. Many of them are out of subject teachers. This adds the complexity of English language teaching in many schools, especially in elementary schools.

Besides academic qualification, according to Law No. 14/2005 on Teachers and Lecturers, a teacher must posses four competencies (Pedagogical Competency, Professional Competency, Personal Competency, and Social Competency). In this regards, linguistic aspects should fall within Professional Competency as linguistic aspects is part of subject matters for English language teachers. Thus, it is important for English teachers to linguistically competent so that the teaching will reach its goal.

Theoretical Relevance

Why Linguistics?

Linguistic factors are crucial for language teachers as language and linguistics are two terms which are intertwined. Linguistics is the study of language (Fromkin, et al., 1997; Akmajian et al., 1990). Thus for EFL teachers, the mastery of linguistics cannot be separated from the essence of the teaching. In second language learning, the influence of linguistic aspects is strong as linguistic difference influences learners' ability to learn the language (Ellis, 1997).

In a general sense, linguistics refers to the study of sound patterns known as phonology, the study of word formation known as morphology, the study of phrase structure or sentence structure known as syntax, and the study of meaning known as semantics. The four aspects are the core of language as sound, form, structure, and meaning are the basic components of language.

Harmer (2007) acknowledges the importance of teaching the four aspects. He proposes alternative ways of teaching grammar, teaching vocabulary, and teaching pronunciation. For grammar, he proposes three ways: introducing the patterns of grammar followed by examples, discovery where students are encouraged to understand how language patterns are constructed and used, practice in which students are encouraged to practice using the patterns they already know, and games where students can practice more, just to mention some. According to Harmer, the teaching of grammar can be integrated into the teaching of other language skills such as in reading and speaking. For vocabulary teaching, he proposes a number of ways: introducing vocabulary where students are introduced with new words in a number of ways such as using description of actions, filling missing parts of sentences by guessing the missing words, completing crossword, practicing vocabulary in which students are encouraged to use vocabulary they know, vocabulary games, and dictionary use.

On teaching pronunciation, Harmer argues that most teachers make little attempt compared to the teaching of other aspects such as vocabulary and grammar where the last two aspects get more attention from teachers. He says:

“Almost all English language teachers get students to study grammar and vocabulary, practice functional dialogues, take part in productive skill activities and try to become competent in listening and reading. Yet some of these same teachers make little attempt to teach pronunciation in any overt way and only give attention to it in passing” (Harmer, 2007:248).

According to Harmer, the main reason why teachers only make little attempt in teaching pronunciation is, possibly, because they are nervous when dealing with sounds and intonation. For EFL teachers this may be a common phenomenon as English is not their first language and perhaps teachers are more careful in order not to make mistake. Psychologically this is acceptable. For pronunciation teaching Hammer proposes a number of ways such as differentiating similar and confusing words using word pairs, introducing stress, and practicing intonation.

From Harmer’s ideas, we can conclude that knowing linguistic aspects is crucial for English language teachers and that the teaching of vocabulary so far has been neglected compared to the teaching of other aspects of language.

Why Young Learners?

According to language acquisition theory (See Ellis, 1997), young learners may learn language faster than adult ones, as young learners are believed to undergo a critical period of acquiring language, known as the Critical Period Hypothesis. The hypothesis says that “there is a period during which language is easy to complete” (Ellis, 1997:67). This period is assumed to be up to the age of 12 years old. During this period, a second language learner may achieved a native-like achievement which cannot be achieved afterwards. Although this is still debatable in second language acquisition discourse, this may apply to some extent.

It is also argued that adults, unlike children, undergo filtering process in acquiring second language (Ellis, 1997; Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982). According to Ellis, the works of filtering processor for second language learners apply differently between children and adults. In children language acquisition, there is only a slight, if not none, filtering process while in adults language acquisition the filtering process works fully. This is the reason why children acquire second language faster than adults do. According to Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), affective filter is a subconscious screening of input processing based on a learner’s motivation, self-confidence, needs, attitudes, and emotional states. Of these factors, motivation and self-confidence are the most influential ones. In this regards, young learners may undergo less filtering process as they have better motivation than adults.

Teachers’ Perception on the Importance of Linguistic Mastery: A survey result

This section presents the result of a survey on teachers’ perception towards the importance of linguistic aspects as part of EFL teachers’ competencies. The survey was conducted in June 2011. A questionnaire on EFL teachers’ professional characteristics was distributed to 119 junior and senior high school teachers. Subjects were taken from 31 schools from three districts in Cimahi West, Java. The objective of the survey was to reveal EFL teachers’ perceptions on the perceived characteristics of professional EFL teachers, particularly with regards to characteristics of professional competency. There were 13 indicators provided in this survey, four of which are linguistic aspects. The indicators were

taken from Brown (2001) on the characteristics of good language teachers with some modification for use.

Respondents were asked to give their agreement on the importance of each indicator of professional competency of EFL teachers used in the survey. The respondents were to circle one of the numbers provided. The questionnaire was designed in a Likert model using a scale of 1 – 5 (1= Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree).

The indicators used were as follows:

1. Has the mastery of English sound systems
2. Has the mastery of English Grammar
3. Has the mastery of English morphology
4. Has the mastery of English vocabulary
5. Speaks English fluently, accurately, and acceptably
6. Is able to write in English
7. Has good ability of listening in English
8. Is able to read advanced text in English
9. Is knowledgeable in English cultures and literature
10. Understands the relation between language and culture
11. Is always well-informed with the development of English language teaching
12. Holds a TOEFL score of 525 for general secondary high school teachers
13. Holds a TOIEC score of 625 for vocational secondary high school teachers.

The result can be seen from the following figure

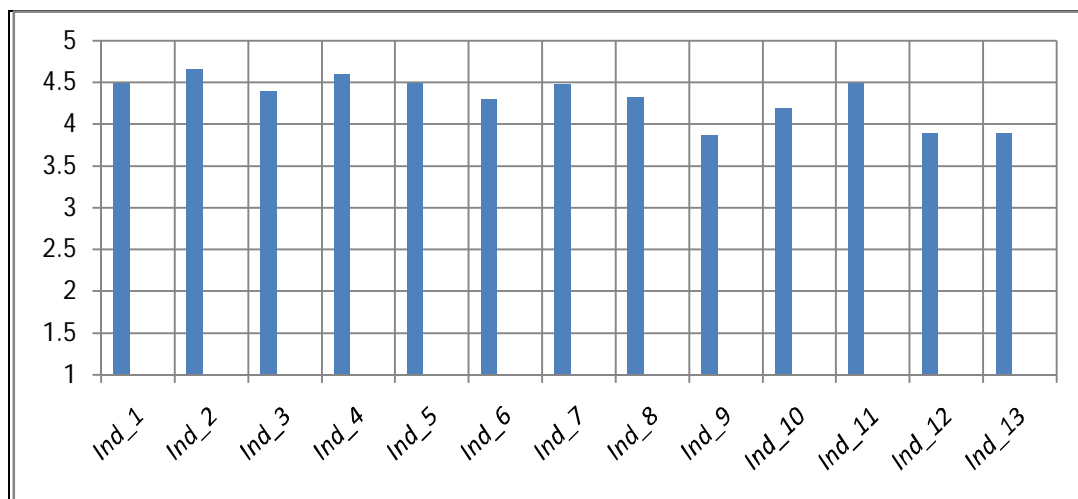


Figure 1: Mean of Each Indicator of Professional Competency (N=119)

Figure 1 describes the data findings of EFL teachers' perceptions on the importance of teachers' professional competency. As the figure shows, overall, all characteristic indicators get positive perception from respondents. Indicator No. 2 (The Mastery of English Grammar) gets the most positive agreement with a mean of 4.66, followed by indicator No. 4

(Has the mastery of English vocabulary) with a mean of 4.6. Indicator No. 1 (Has the mastery of English sound system), indicator No. 5 (Speaks English fluently, accurately, and acceptably), and indicator No.11 (Is always well-informed with the development of English language teaching) have the same mean of 4.5. This finding suggests that the mastery on grammar and vocabulary is considered by the respondents as the most important aspects that characterize professional EFL teachers. Respondents stressed on the importance of mastering grammar and vocabulary. Respondents also uphold that the mastery of English sound system, the ability of speaking in English, and being knowledgeable on the development of language teaching as more important aspects compared to other aspects such as understanding on the relationship between language and culture, knowledge on cultures and literature of English, and having high score on TOEFL or TOEIC. This may mean that for English language teachers, mastering linguistic aspects is as important as mastering the theories of language teaching and that the teaching of pronunciation is as important as the teaching grammar and vocabulary.

As can be seen from the given indicators in Table, indicators 1,2,3,4 are all parts of linguistics. From the findings, it can be inferred that the four indicators (linguistic aspects) get very positive response from respondents. This suggests that the mastery of linguistic aspects is more important than the mastery of most other subjects. This is to say that linguistics mastery is crucial in language teaching. The followings are respondents' reasons for perceiving linguistics as an important aspect:

- The mastery of linguistic aspects is the key to mastering other skills
- The mastery of vocabulary and grammar shows a teacher's intellect
- Vocabulary and grammar are keys to other skills
- Grammar is the prerequisite of language
- Words are keys for sentence building
- Without words we cannot speak
- Words are references in speaking
- The mastery of words and grammar shows the mastery of language

From these arguments, it can be said that most teachers still uphold the importance of teaching explicit grammar and vocabulary. Teachers believe that the teaching of English should take into account the central role of the two aspects of language (word and structure) in order to support other skills. This belief influences teachers in making decision in their class and in turn it influences their practices. From the findings, it can also be said that teachers still believe the effectiveness of teaching vocabulary and grammar explicitly regardless of teaching approaches used.

The respondents' positive perception on the importance of linguistic aspects, especially perception on the importance of mastering English sound system, does not always result in good pronunciation. This is because the belief about the importance of pronunciation is something different from the belief about the correct pronunciation. Furthermore, our belief about the correct pronunciation of a word is not always relevant to our having correct pronunciation. This is because belief is an acceptance of something as true or exist but belief does not necessarily have to be demonstrated or even to be tested (Woods, 1996). According

to Woods, belief is different from knowledge. Woods (1996:195) comments on the difference between belief and knowledge as follows:

“... the terms ‘knowledge’, ‘assumption’, and ‘belief’ do not refer to different concepts, but rather to points on a spectrum of meaning, even though they have been treated for the most part as separate entities in literature. We use the term ‘knowledge’ to refer to things we ‘know’ - conventionally accepted facts. In our society. In our society today, for something to be conventionally accepted, it generally means that it has been demonstrated or is demonstrable. (some concepts, such as black holes, we treat as knowledge rather than belief because we accept that they have been demonstrated, although not to us, and that they are in principle demonstrable again). The term ‘assumption’ normally refers to the (temporary) acceptance of a fact (state, process or relationship) which we cannot say we know, and which has not been demonstrated, but which we are talking as true for the time being.... Beliefs refer to an acceptance of a proposition for which there is no conventional knowledge, one that is not demonstrable, and for which there is accepted disagreement”.

Based on the above statements, we can imply that our belief about the correct pronunciation of a word does not always result in correct pronunciation. This is because our belief in a correct pronunciation is not necessarily rooted from our knowledge of the correct pronunciation.

Teachers’ Pronunciation and Its Impact on Learners

This section presents a survey finding on pronunciation of 16 selected words. The selection of words was based on the writer’s own experience. In this case, the writer often heard incorrect pronunciation (of the selected words) by EFL learners, and even by EFL teachers. These words are only a small number of words which are often incorrectly pronounced. Some of the words are familiar to children or young learners, and therefore chosen, while some others were chosen as they are very frequently incorrectly pronounced. The respondents were 84 students of a teacher college majoring in English language education. Respondents were in the fourth semester of their four-year study. The aim of the survey was to reveal whether the positive perception on linguistic aspects, especially pronunciation, has a positive impact on their pronunciation. Respondents were to choose one of two different ways of pronunciation of each word, in which one pronunciation is correct and the other pronunciation is incorrect. A standard pronunciation was taken from COED (Concise Oxford English Dictionary) to make sure that correct and incorrect pronunciation can be clearly distinguished and justified. The following list shows the selected words and the writer’s assumptions of the causes of the incorrect pronunciation, as follows:

1. Analysis [ə'næləsəs]

This word *analysis* is often incorrectly pronounced as [ænəlaɪsɪs]. Such pronunciation is assumed to be the interference of wrong generalization of the pronunciation of its verb form *analyze* which is pronounced ('ænəlaɪz).

2. Determine [dɪ'tɜrmən]

The word *determine* is often incorrectly pronounced as [di'tɜrmɪn]. It is assumed that this is the influence of the word *mine* [maɪn].

3. Prejudice ['prejədis]
The word *prejudice* is often incorrectly pronounced as [prejdais]. Like the word *determine* the incorrect pronunciation of this word is also assumed to be influenced by the other word *dice* [dais]
4. Preface ['prefis]
For the word *preface*, the case is similar to the two previous words (*determine* and *prejudice*). This word is often pronounced as [pri'feis] and the incorrect pronunciation is assumed as the influence of the word *face* [feis].
5. Bird [bərd]
The pronunciation of this word is often confused with the pronunciation of *beard*, especially for children.
6. Beard [biəd]
The case for *beard* is the same as the case for *bird*. The pronunciation of these two words are often confused to each other.
7. Peer [piə]
8. Pear [pɛə]
The word *pear*[pɛə] is often pronounced as [piə] as in *peer*.
9. Dear [diə]
10. Bear [bɛə]
The case for the word *bear* [bɛə] is assumed to be the influence of a wrong generalization from other words such as *dear*, *clear*, and *near*. In this case, the word *bear* is often pronounced as [biə]
11. Twist [twɪst]
12. Twit [twɪt]
For the words *twist* and *twit*, the writer assumes that the pronunciation of these words is influenced by the pronunciation of other words containing *i* such as in *white*, *dice*, *kite*. Thus the words will be incorrectly pronounced as *twais* and *twait* respectively.
13. Flour [flaʊər]
14. Bush [bʊʃ]
For the words *bush* the writer assumes that the pronunciation of these words is influenced by the pronunciation of other words containing *u* such as in *bus*, *rush* and so on.
15. Idiom [ɪdiəm]
The writer assumes that other words containing *i* as its initial such as in the words *idol*, *icon*, *ideas*, where *i* is pronounced as *ai*.
16. Priest [priːst]
This word has similar case with the word *twist* and *twit*.

The writer assumptions about the incorrect pronunciation for each of the words above is not necessarily always true, but the writer believes that these assumptions can be used as the most possibly justified explanation.

The result of the survey can be seen from the following figure.

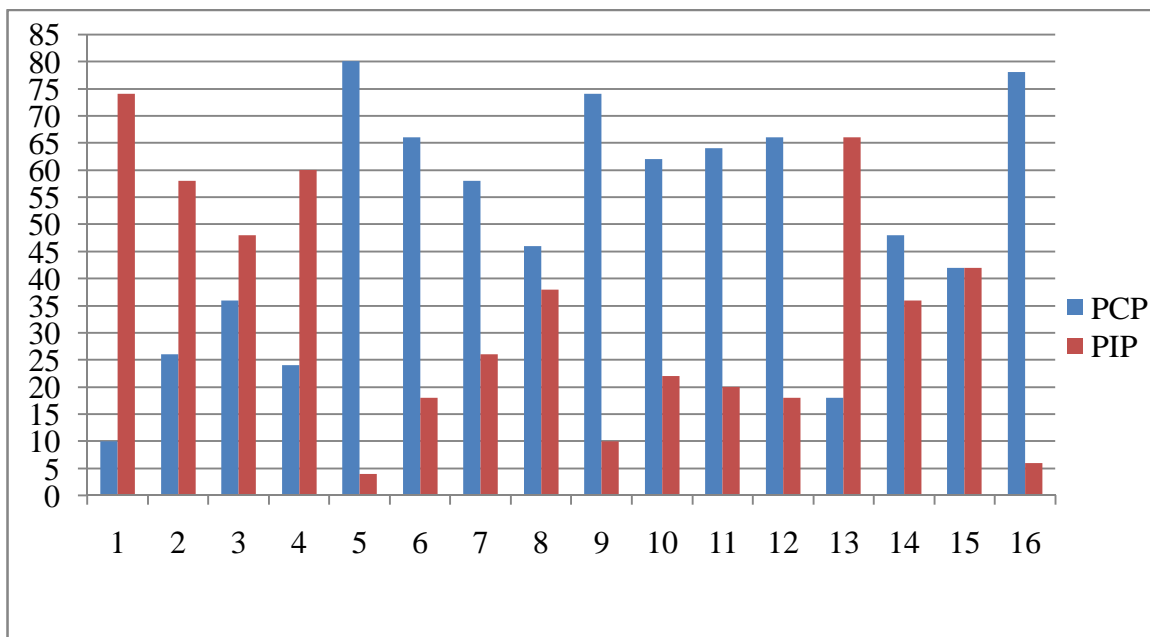


Figure 2 : Participants with Correct and Incorrect Pronunciation of Words (N=84)

Notes : PCP = Total Participants with Correct Pronunciation, PIP = Total Participants with Incorrect Pronunciation

Figure 2 presents respondents' pronunciation on selected words. To discuss this phenomenon, the writer will elaborate one by one. As can be seen from Figure 2, the word *analysis* was pronounced correctly (*ə'neləsəs*) only by 10 respondents (11.90%), while 74 respondents (88.09%) pronounced incorrectly (*'ænəlaisis*). This is the biggest number of incorrect pronunciation by respondents from the 16 words provided. The second rank of incorrect pronunciation was given to the word *flour* in which only 18 respondents (21.42%) pronounced it correctly (*flawər*), while 66 respondents (78.57%) pronounced incorrectly (*floo*). The third most incorrectly pronounced happened to the word *preface*. This word was pronounced correctly (*'prefis*) by 24 respondents (28.57%) and was pronounced incorrectly (*pri'feis*) by 60 respondents (71.42%). The fourth most incorrectly pronounced word is *determine*. This word was pronounced correctly (*di'tərmən*) by 28 respondents (30.95) and was pronounced incorrectly (*di'tərməin*) by 58 respondents (69.04%). The word *idiom* was pronounced correctly (*idieəm*) by 42 respondents (50%) while the other 42 respondents (50%) pronounced it as *aidieəm*. While for the words *beard*, *peer*, *pear*, *bear*, *twist*, and *twit* respondents pronounced the words correctly. For the words *bird*, *dear*, and *priest* most of the respondents pronounced correctly. Only less than 20% of respondents pronounced incorrectly for the three words.

The Possible Causes of Incorrect Pronunciation

There are some possible causes that make incorrect pronunciation occur. For more elaborate discussion on the causes of incorrect pronunciation produced by EFL learners, as the case in Indonesia, it is important to look at the sources of EFL learning input. EFL learners get input from their environment and the most influential environment for EFL learners are their schools. As a common practice, most EFL learners listen and use English

words in class during the English lessons. More specifically, learners listen to the sounds of English from their English teachers' talks. Thus, the most possible source of learners' incorrect pronunciation is their teachers' pronunciation. A further question may be raised as where the teacher got input of the incorrect pronunciation from. The possible answer is from their lecturers when they took their English education degree. Thus, ultimately, schools of English language educations may be judged as the ones who should be responsibility for the incorrect pronunciation of English teachers and learners. Although this can be debatable, to some extent this seems to be acceptable assumption. This is an external factor the causes of incorrect pronunciation for learners.

Another cause of EFL learners' incorrect pronunciation is perhaps learners' wrong generalization on the correct pronunciation of the words. Although in general English has many regularities in English spelling, there is no one-to-one correspondence between letters and pronunciation (Harmer, 2007). This can create problems for learners of English especially in Foreign language situation where the input from environment is almost absent. In the case of most Indonesia students who learn English, the most input is from their teachers. Thus, if teachers teach them correct pronunciation they may attain the correct pronunciation and if the teachers teach incorrect pronunciation, they will take the wrong pronunciation. In many cases, however, EFL learners may also produce incorrect pronunciation because of their wrong generalization. Examples of the wrong generalization can be seen from the selected words as mentioned earlier (See the list of 16 selected words and their explanation).

What is the impact of incorrect pronunciation

For most learners, a teacher is the model of person. Most learners will believe that what their teachers do is the correct thing. The same perception may happen to most parents. Parents believe that teachers will teach a correct and right thing to their children. This is a conventional wisdom that teacher is perceived as the one who knows the knowledge of the subjects matters. We can imagine the impact of teachers' incorrect pronunciation. Suppose that 50 % of our English teachers in Indonesia pronounced the word idiom as *aidieəm*, there we can infer that 50% of our students will do the same thing. Therefore, if there are more than 10 millions of elementary school students, more than 5 millions of them will pronounce this word incorrectly. This statement may be too exaggerated, but we have to take into account the meaning underlying the statement. A more extreme example is for the word analysis where 88.09% of our students are prone to pronounce this word incorrectly as they get a wrong input from their teachers. We can imagine how serious the impact of this phenomenon is.

Conclusion

To sum up, the writer proposes the following things:

- The teaching of pronunciation as part of language teaching aspects should be taken into a serious consideration. English teachers really must spend time to teach pronunciation overtly and not covertly, regardless of the type of teaching approaches they use.
- Before teaching, teachers must make sure that they consult dictionary for correct pronunciation, especially for new words that they are not sure of in order to promote knowledge-based teaching as well as to avoid teaching based on belief.

- To education policy makers, especially those who are responsible for budgeting and planning, it may be fair to think of providing one notebook for every English teacher equipped with a software of sophisticated English Language Dictionary.

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