

## Pronunciation Norms in EFL Context: A Case Study of Tertiary Institutions in Oman

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### Abstract

One of the continuing conundrums that continue to engage the attention of teachers and students alike is a Hamlet like dilemma where teaching phonetics is concerned. There has been a competition between *nativeness* principle and *intelligibility* principle, with curriculum designers emphasising the former aspect in countries where the norm is *exonormative*. There have not been many studies where students who learn English as a foreign language have had their voices heard insofar as their preferences with regard to learning pronunciation are concerned. This is one such study that looks at learner preferences for learning pronunciation in English classes at the tertiary level. It was conducted in four colleges in Muscat, Oman and the students were from technical training institutes that offer vocational courses.

**Key words:** nativeness, MTI (Mother Tongue Influence), RP(Receive Pronunciation), Supra-segmental features, Outer Circle countries

### Introduction

Oman is an attractive destination for expatriates, in particular teachers of English, since English is seen as the language of the globe and therefore a language worth investing in. In nearly all tertiary institutes in Oman, English is taught as a foreign language and the country advertises positions asking for native speakers of English with a CELTA, DELTA or Trinity certification to apply for teaching positions. Occasionally, non-native speakers of English with advanced degrees in ELT or Literature, a PhD with some teaching experience, are also considered for teaching positions in universities and technical training institutes.

As Husna (2009) observes:

English language is not just for trading purposes, but is also the means of communication within the country, the only tool or medium of communication between Omanis and foreigners/expatriates from all over the world who are working there. Increasingly there seems to be a need for a

single language to enable people with different linguistic backgrounds to interact in a variety of settings, especially with the revolution of information technologies. In Oman, as all over the world, English has evolved as that language and is being taught and learned with increasing intensity... (p.21)

The government's emphasis on *Omanisation*, i.e., making Oman self-sufficient in man power by gradually reducing dependence on expatriates and replacing expatriate labour with local human resources implies that Omanis need to learn English not so much to assimilate into an English speaking community as use English in order to communicate with the rest of the globe.

As has been recorded by Husna (2009):

Unless they are planning to migrate, Arabic speaking students learn English for practical, rather than cultural purposes, so that the teaching context is quite different from, for example, teaching English as a second language to migrants and refugees in Australia. Omani students learn English not necessarily for it to become part of an English-speaking community or for English to become a language of social identity... (p.22)

It is in the non-native context of teaching English to Omanis that the question of teaching phonetics and supra-segmental features arise, particularly in contexts where the necessity of teaching stress, rhythm and accent is called into question since learners are unable to master it because of mother tongue influence or simply because it is an enterprise that is fraught with futility, considering the limited interaction Omanis have with native speakers of English. The difficulty may also lie in the fact that English is a stress-timed language while most languages, including Arabic, are syllable timed. The students encounter difficulties in being able to achieve native like fluency in English because of the hurdles involved and so are put off learning other aspects of language out of fear that bad pronunciation equates to inability to learn language. This in turn can have deleterious effects on motivation and the ability to learn the language itself.

More often than not, the stakeholders, the students themselves are not asked their opinion of how useful they find learning a particular aspect of language and thus are affected by policy decisions adversely. Teachers can do their part by finding out what the requirements are and tailor make the syllabus to benefit whom they teach.

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## The Study

One of the complaints emanating from both native and non-native speakers is the inability of teachers to effectively teach phonetics to learners of English as a foreign language. While some see the teaching of phonetics as an exercise in futility on grounds that it does not really help learners or teachers in any meaningful way, others maintain that English being a stress-timed language, it is essential to incorporate a phonetics component in the curriculum and teach it rigorously. The students who matter most in decisions pertaining to what to include and how much to include are often sidelined, to their disappointment and disadvantage. This study wanted to ask of Omani learners of English who learn English as a foreign language their views on the learning of phonetics.

As explained earlier, Omani student who register at tertiary institutions have English in their curriculum for 1.5 years of a three-year course where they are taught listening, writing, speaking and reading in addition to grammar and phonetics. The books in use are imports from the UK or the USA- *New Headway Series* and *Cutting Edge* series accompanied by CDs. The materials are used in language lab to teach students phonetics. These institutes have native and non - native speaker teachers. The students however are Omanis whose mother tongue is Arabic, a language spoken in most parts of the Gulf.

Classroom observations, personal interview with students and questionnaire were used to collect data. 72 learners from four colleges participated in the study and these colleges were in and around the capital city of Muscat. The results of the analyses are provided below.

### 1. In your opinion how useful have pronunciation classes been?

This question was asked since current ELT practices derive from the ‘Centre’ (Phillipson, 1992) and recommend the implementation of such approaches as are in vogue in the Centre in the expanding circle (Kachru1986), also referred to by Phillipson as the ‘Periphery’. Thus L2 learners of English are expected to revere ‘exonormative standards’ and be faithful to the *nativeness* principle. This in turn “suggests a model of English being forced upon teacher/ learners with little regard for their own needs and preferences.” (Taylor, 2006, p. 51). A further insinuation is that it has been foisted on learners without their consent and against their preferences.

30 of the 72 learners (41.6%) answered in the affirmative, claiming satisfaction with pronunciation classes: the reason given was that good pronunciation enables a student to speak well. 9 (12.5 %) of them expressed uncertainty with “I don’t know” while the remainder seemed to have no problems with classes on pronunciation. This is important since the rate at which learners learn and the ability of learners to grasp something is proportional to the interest they show in learning and the purpose for which they are learning it.

## Q2. How would you define good pronunciation?

The second question was asked since the clear dichotomy between *nativeness principle* and *intelligibility principle* manifests in the teaching of pronunciation and has ideological implications too. The responses given would determine the extent to which native speaker norms would be applied whether warranted or not. After all, as Rajadurai (2006) puts it so well!

In the event that pronunciation is given sufficient emphasis in the curriculum and classroom, it is often taught with a rigid adherence to prescribed norms, which usually means **native norms** (emphasis mine) (p. 44)

There is no reason to believe that native speaker norms are dispensed with. The textbooks in use being imports from the UK/USA, the CDs/DVDs used to help listeners with speaking recommend R. P. / General American as the norm.

In the *intelligibility vs. conformity to native speaker norms*, the worst hit/ the victims at the receiving end are often students who are seen as deficient L2 users. Intelligibility should be given precedence as every L2 user shows some MTI.

In attempting to answer the question, learners were expected to know and appreciate that their English had to be comprehensible in order to find acceptance among other English users. It did not have to subscribe to the idealized R. P. or General American.

16 learners (22.2%) said that “good pronunciation meant “accurate style” while 5 (6.94%) said it was “correct style.” 5 (6.94%) said they had “no idea” while the remaining answers were a mixture of confused and confusing responses. Three learners said that good pronunciation meant “listening carefully to the teacher”, four replied that “by speaking and

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listening to friends” one could attain good pronunciation and the rest spoke of the ways and means to achieve/improve one’s pronunciation.

The questions assume significance in light of what actually happens in classrooms in the outer circle: “...hardly anyone in the community, and certainly nobody in the classroom, not even the teacher, or speakers like the recorded voice heard on these imported tapes and CDs played in classrooms” (Rajadurai, 2006, P. 45).

### **Q3. Do you think good pronunciation is important to speak English?**

This question was asked since fluency in a language is often confused with pseudo-accents: it is often also assumed that unless one gets rid of mother tongue influence and aims long and hard for neutral accent, one is not speaking English the way it ought to be spoken, a phenomenon that was labelled *native speaker fallacy* by Phillipson (1992). It is understandable considering that “poor pronunciation or heavily accented English tends to be stigmatized at the work place.....” (Rajadurai, 2006, P. 44) and non-native speakers are often made fun of for what is undoubtedly a genuine issue for them with regard to be able to use English as per native speaker pronunciation norms: but then, when what is standard and what is good are themselves relative terms, it becomes rather unreasonable to thrust such norms down learners’ mouths.

Almost all the learners agreed that good pronunciation was necessary to speak “good” English. Where they differed was in their perceptions about what good English is. When asked to explain what the elements of (a) good pronunciation are, nearly half the speakers rooted for British English and the other half for American.

### **Q4. Have you benefitted from pronunciation classes? If you have, please explain how these classes have helped you.**

- (a) I have learnt to speak English in a manner that is easy to understand.**
- (b) I know how to pronounce words the way they are pronounced by native speakers.**
- (c) I have learnt to correct my pronunciation errors.**
- (d) I have been able to use English with native speakers without shyness or fear.**
- (e) I have lost the fear of being mocked or ridiculed for speaking English with an accent.**

It reflected the reasons for learners’ keenness to learn pronunciation. It is apparent that the desire to speak English clearly and easily trumped one’s keenness to speak with

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native speakers. Learners have every right to learn those pronunciation norms to which they aspire but because one's accent is "linked to one's social and individual identity," (Rajadurai, 2006, P. 46) the ardent wish to maintain that identity may overrule any attempts to sound like a *British* or *American* Arab. 34 (47.2 %) of learners opted for (a) implying that the necessity to be understood well stood foremost among reasons for wanting to learn pronunciation. 13 (18.05%) learners opted for (b) which meant they were keen to attain native-like competence while an equal number chose (c) which conveyed learner willingness to correct their pronunciation errors to the extent they could. Only 5 (6.94%) chose (d) meaning that they were keen to speak like a native with native speakers and the remaining said they "lost the fear of being mocked or ridiculed for speaking with an accent" - choice (e).

**Q5. Which area of pronunciation did you find useful?**

**(a) English consonants and vowel sounds**

**(b) Stress, rhythm and intonation**

Students had to choose between segmental and supra-segmental features :48 students said they found learning consonants and vowel sounds very useful while 24 students claimed they were equally satisfied with learning supra-segmental features.

The rationale behind asking the question was that while the sounds of English are easy to learn, stress rhythm and intonation are not. Levis concedes that:

During the past 25 years, pronunciation teachers have emphasized supra-segmentals rather than segmental in promoting intelligibility (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992: Morley, 1991), despite a paucity of evidence for this belief (Hahn, 2004, 2005, p. 369).

While teaching them, segmentals would be useful to help them approximate their pronunciation to the ideal model, supra-segmentals can complicate things. Besides making it rather tough for learners to speak like a native, this rigid insistence on rules can push them off the learning curve altogether.

**Q6. Do you believe that in order to speak English well, native speaker-like pronunciation is necessary?**

This question was asked since many of the Outer Circle countries, which insist on *exonormative* standards, also demand that learners acquire a neutral accent with an emphasis on suprasegmental features. The cassettes and CDs those students listen to have a disembodied voice recommending that spoken English be spoken the way it is spoken by users of R.P. or General American. Native English speaker teachers endorse such models little realizing that it is beyond an average student.

34 (47.2%) learners claimed that they used or tried to use suprasegmentals while 34 (47.2%) said they never used it since they found it difficult and rather “unnatural/artificial/unwanted”. Two said they had “no idea”.

Teachers who had taught the students said that some of the students did try to affect on American or British accent but that they had never heard anyone speak with stress, rhythm, and accent which needed full sentences and extensive talking. Learners had limited command of English and therefore those who claimed they spoke English with suprasegmental features were either trying to impress or were ambivalent in their responses.

## **Conclusion**

Some conclusions that have important implications for teaching pronunciation may be drawn from the study.

(a) It is rather difficult to teach sounds of any language to learners already in possession of a mother tongue when the mother tongue doesn't have these sounds. To Omani learners Arabic is the mother tongue and this language does not have /p/ sound phoneme /p/ is replaced by /b/. Likewise, Omani learners have problems with /θ/ which is substituted by /z/. Thus, *this* becomes *zis*, *thenzen*, *those zose*, etc. This is perfectly acceptable so long as meaning -making becomes possible.

As has been rightly suggested by Deterding:

There are many features of pronunciation found extensively in the region which do not occur in Inner Circle Englishes, but which do not seem to interfere with comprehension, and in some cases they might even enhance intelligibility. If a feature of pronunciation is used by a wide range of speakers

and does not stop them being easily understood internationally, there seems little reason to try to eradicate it (2010, p.364).

Deterding is speaking with reference to Southeast Asia when he talks of “pronunciation found extensively in the region” which can be applied to any of the Outer Circle regions, considering that these regions have speakers whose mother tongue is not English and which they need to learn in order to communicate across their own country, as is the case in India or across continents and countries, as is the case with most non English speaking countries of the world.

(b) Supra-segmental aspects of English are rather difficult to master: making learners undergo the rigorous exercises in order to attain mastery is an exercise in futility since the benefits of such an exercise is not too evident, particularly when English is spoken in various dialects and forms by the native speakers themselves. Some supra-segmental features such as nuclear stress are amenable to teaching while other features are not. Also, it has been known for quite some time now, based on research, that:

Accent is influenced not only by biological time tables but also by sociolinguistic realities. In other words, speakers speak the way they do because of the social groups they belong to or desire to belong to. The role of identity in accent is perhaps as strong as the biological constraints. Accent, along with other markers of dialect, is an essential marker of social belonging (Levis, 2006, pp. 374-75).

It does not do well to penalize learners for what is purely a problem of willingness to want to belong to a particular stratum of society or willingness/desire to identify with a race.

(c) Jenkins (1998) maintains that “... rigid stress-timing is no more than a convenient fiction for class-room practice” and that going by David Crystal’s prediction” ( p.123) that non-native speakers can dispense with.

(d) Most Omani speakers would be interacting with other non-native speakers and therefore need no aim for a native-like pronunciation. R. P. or general American can be treated as a model so that one may “approximate to them more or less according to the demands of a specific situation (Jenkins, 1998, p. 124).

Training in pronunciation is definitely an activity/an idea well worth the effort provided it is done sans value judgment and without attempts to mock learners for not being able to sound ‘native’! Pronunciation exercises and activities that promote intelligibility should be encouraged. Norms that aim for perfection should be replaced by models that learners can gainfully benefit from when learning pronunciation.

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