

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Bangladeshi ESL Students' Attitude Towards Learner Autonomy in Pronunciation Learning

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Abstract

Pronunciation is a vital skill for successful communication. Unfortunately, due to classroom constraints, it is most often disregarded. Teachers can incorporate autonomous learning to solve this issue whereby students can take greater responsibility and practice pronunciation autonomously, both inside and outside the classroom. The first step to that is to find out how students feel about the connection between pronunciation and learner autonomy. This study, therefore, has attempted to investigate learners' attitude towards autonomous pronunciation learning and discover what learning strategies they have at their disposal to learn pronunciation autonomously. The findings from both qualitative and quantitative methods used in this research revealed that students were enthusiastic and had a positive attitude towards autonomous pronunciation learning despite being unaware of its full extent. The results also showed that the use of learning strategies by students were at best only moderate. Such findings may imply that students need to be trained and mentored before they can undertake the full responsibility of autonomous pronunciation learning both within and beyond the classroom.

Keywords: Learning, autonomy, pronunciation, strategies, attitude

Introduction

One of the most neglected aspects of communication is pronunciation. Throughout the history of language teaching, different methods have assigned pronunciations multiple roles as can be seen by how it has been given the utmost importance in methods like the Reform Movement, the audiolingual method, and the oral approach, while the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method and Natural Approach of language teaching relegated it to a lower position (Ketabi and Saeb 1). With Communicative Language Teaching as well, pronunciation lost its appeal once the method became widely used in the 1980s (Isaacs, qtd. in Thomson 1).

Pronunciation thus often becomes an additional activity in the classroom. It depends on the teacher whether s/he wants to religiously include this aspect in her/his instruction. Research conducted by Gilakjani and Sabouri investigated why Iranian EFL teachers ignore pronunciation and found that the main reason for ignoring pronunciation activities in the classroom is the lack of knowledge of the pronunciation of the teachers themselves (197-205). Thomson also argues that teachers do not neglect pronunciation because they perceive it as unimportant, but rather they lack the understanding of the most effective methods to teach it (65-66). However, understandable pronunciation is an integral component of communicative competence, and although the fairly modern concept of World Englishes advocates intelligibility rather than the native speaker norm, learners need to be aware of how native pronunciation works in order to understand the speakers. Moreover, it has been suggested that learners can face several problems due to poor pronunciation skills such as “breakdown in communication” “negative judgements” and “pejorative stereotyping” (Morley 21-22).

One way teachers can improve learners’ pronunciation is by shifting the responsibility to the learners themselves through learner autonomy, which according to Holec essentially constitutes the ability to “take charge of one’s learning” (qtd. in Chan 285). A learner who can define learning objectives, choose the course of study, and analyze and assess his or her success

and progress is considered an autonomous learner (Chan 286). Although there is controversy surrounding the opinion that learner autonomy is solely a Western territory, several researches suggest otherwise (Chan, "Learning Autonomously" 285-295; Littlewood, "Asian Students" 31-34; Lamb 229-242). One can achieve autonomy gradually and students at any level usually practice some extent of autonomous learning rather than being solely dependent on teachers. Over the years several researches have been conducted to examine students' perspectives on learner autonomy. There is also research into how students feel about vocabulary learning autonomously (Tran 86-92). However, research into their attitudes regarding autonomous pronunciation learning is very scarce. This study, therefore, aims to examine the following questions:

1. What are ESL students' attitudes about autonomous pronunciation learning?
2. Which strategies do they use regarding learning pronunciation?

The Autonomous Learner

In layman's terms, the autonomous language learner can be called an independent learner. However, that independence is taken to the next level in learner autonomy where the learner is in control of the content, process and pace of his/her learning. According to Holec, this independence encompasses accepting responsibility, taking charge, selecting methods and techniques and evaluating learning (qtd. in Chan, "Learning Autonomously" 285). Chan also distinguishes the autonomous learner in terms of two categories- "literature" and "language learning behaviour" ("Learning Autonomously" 286). According to her, based on previously published work or "literature", the autonomous learner is able to decide on his or her learning objectives and techniques, devise his/her plan of study, identify his/her weaknesses and a way to solve these obstacles, recognize and choose the tools and resources needed for learning,

establish his or her own standards for judging performance and learning, and evaluate learning progress (286).

Chan also argues that regarding “language learning behaviour”, the autonomous learner is someone who actively engages in classroom tasks, interacts and asks questions, co-operates with peers who encounter challenges when learning, examines several approaches to problems, critically assesses the decisions made by the instructor on aspects such as “management, resources, activities, and assessment practices” and lastly recommends different alternatives and independently creates learning tasks both do in and beyond the classroom borders (“Learning Autonomously” 286). The autonomous learner is thus not solely dependent on the teacher. The teacher is not the master of learning for the students. He is a collaborator in the classroom and someone who facilitates and aids in the learning process.

With the help of several English language practitioners from across the world, Hedge provides a precise image of what makes a “self-directed learner” (76). According to her, these learners-

1. Have an understanding of their needs and cooperate effectively with the instructor in order to accomplish their goals
2. Gather knowledge not only within the classroom but also outside it
3. Expand materials provided in the classroom
4. Understand how to employ resources with independence
5. Impose active thinking on their learning process
6. Modify strategies when required to enhance learning
7. Are able to effectively manage and allocate time for learning.
8. Do not consider their teacher to be a god who can grant them the ability to learn a language.

Littlewood in his article distinguishes between and elaborates on the concept of proactive and reactive autonomy (“Defining and Developing Autonomy” 75-77). Holec argues that the proactive learner is in control of learning objectives, methods, techniques and evaluation (qtd. in Littlewood, “Defining and Developing Autonomy” 75). On the other hand, the reactive autonomous learner needs help with the direction of learning but is able to independently assemble resources to meet learning goals (Littlewood, “Defining and Developing Autonomy” 75). Thus, it can be argued that autonomy is not an absolute quality, rather it can be achieved in degrees, and the learners can be autonomous at different levels.

Language Learning Strategies

Second-language learners usually make use of learning strategies to make their learning process easier and more meaningful. One of the most common definitions of learning strategies is that they are “specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques— such as seeking out conversation partners or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult task—used by students to enhance their own learning” (Scarcella and Oxford, qtd. in Oxford 2). Brown simply suggests that a strategy is a process that actively supports learning (qtd. in Hardan 1713). O’Malley and Chamot give a more sophisticated definition of strategies. According to them, strategies are the means for “active, self-directed involvement” in order to improve the communicative competence of the L2 (qtd. in Zafar and Meenakshi 642). Awareness of strategies is vital in autonomous learning. Once students are able to identify which strategies suit them they can move toward greater independence through the employment of suitable strategies. Strategies can be categorized in many ways. O'Malley and Chamot in their book *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition* classify them into three types:

1. *Cognitive strategies*: Cognitive strategies allow the learner to directly modify the language material (Oxford 12). These strategies “enable learners to deal with the information presented in tasks and materials by working on it in different ways” (Hedge 77-78). O'Malley and Chamot mention the following cognitive strategies:

- **Resourcing**: Identifying and making use of language resources such as websites, dictionaries, audio, video etc.
- **Repetition**: Loudly or silently mimicking a linguistic model (such as a native speaker).
- **Grouping**: categorizing words or phrases in terms of common qualities to remember points in L2.
- **Deduction**: Use or devise rules based on “language analysis” while producing the L2 (O'Malley and Chamot 119).
- **Imagery**: Visualizing pictures in mind to encourage learning.
- **Auditory representation**: Keeping sounds of a word or phrase or a “longer language sequence” in mind (O'Malley and Chamot 119).
- **Keyword method**: Recalling a new word in L1 by making connections with an already-known word in L2 with the help of images and sounds.
- **Elaboration**: Connecting and associating new knowledge with one another or with what is already known.
- **Transfer**: Using pre-existing linguistic knowledge or skills to facilitate production or understanding of new linguistic items.
- **Inferencing**: Making calculated deductions to understand concepts in L2
- **Note-taking**: Writing down a linguistic point in the form of pictures, sentences or numbers to facilitate learning.
- **Summarizing**: Making a summary of new information acquired through listening or reading, either verbally or in writing.

- Recombination: Building a comprehensible sentence or longer “language sequence” by rearranging already known components (O’Malley and Chamot 120).
- Translation: Translating to and from the first language for L2 comprehension and/or production.

2. *Metacognitive strategies*: As the term suggests, metacognition means going beyond cognition. This essentially means it is thinking about thinking, learning about learning, knowing about knowing. According to O’Malley and Chamot, they are “strategies about learning rather than learning strategies themselves” (qtd. in Zafar and Meenakshi 642). O’Malley and Chamot in their book have classified such strategies into three categories- Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation.

- Planning
 - a. Advance organizers: Reviewing the materials in advance for a learning task.
 - b. Directed attention: Focus on particular aspects of the task disregarding the unnecessary elements.
 - c. Selective attention: Deciding beforehand which aspects of input to give more attention to.
 - d. Functional planning: Preparing language elements in advance to facilitate a future learning task.
 - e. Self-management: Understanding and attempting to create the ideal learning environment.
- Monitoring
 - a. Self-monitoring: Monitoring oneself during the production and reception of language.

- Evaluation
 - a. Self-evaluation: Evaluating one's performance in language learning in comparison to a standard.
- Social mediation: Language is essentially a social activity and these strategies involve the learner in a social activity in order to negotiate meaning in order to understand and get the message across to the listener. O'Malley and Chamot included the following two social strategies:
 - a. Questioning for Clarification: Seeking clarification or confirmation from an instructor or peer in the form of explanation, rephrasing, or examples regarding the subject matter.
 - b. Cooperation: Collaborating with peers to address a challenge, gather data, evaluate a learning assignment, model a linguistic task, and receive feedback on a spoken or written performance.

In addition to these categories, Oxford included some more strategies of learning:

- Memory-related strategies: These strategies assist students in making connections between concepts or items in L2, but do not necessarily require in-depth comprehension. Some examples of memory-related strategies are using acronyms, rhymes, images, body movement, flashcards and location.
- Compensatory strategies: Compensatory strategies aid the learner in filling gaps in their knowledge. Such strategies include using synonyms and avoiding the missing word to help with speaking and writing; guessing from the context while listening and reading and using gestures and pauses.
- Affective strategies: Affect deals with our feelings and emotions. Research has shown that when the affective filter is low, language production is smoother and more fluent. Some effective strategies mentioned are recognizing one's attitude and level of anxiety,

discussing feelings, rewarding oneself for success, and employing deep breathing or “positive selftalk” (Oxford 13-14).

Some other categories of learning strategies can be found in Weinstein and Mayer. They talk about rehearsal strategies (copying, underlining, repeating etc.), elaboration strategies (paraphrasing, summarizing, analogising), organizational strategies (outlining, organizing based on hierarchy), comprehension monitoring strategies (checking for possible comprehension errors) and affective strategies (managing test anxiety by being focused and calm) (3-4).

The Research

Participants

The subjects were 33 CSE (Computer Science & Engineering) students studying in a private university in Bangladesh. The students were all in their 1st year and they were taking a course titled Speaking & Listening on which they received instructions for 3 hours per week. The participants had studied English as their compulsory subject for 12 years and their mother tongue is Bengali.

Data Collection

The research was conducted in two parts. First, a questionnaire was provided to the students using Google Forms, and later a semi-structured interview was taken of 7 students. The questionnaire contained three parts with 22 questions in total. The first part aimed to deal with students’ attitudes towards pronunciation while the second part elicited their views regarding learner autonomy. The last part was aimed at finding out the extent to which students are autonomous in learning pronunciation.

The semi-structured interview constituted 5 questions intended to learn how learners incorporate autonomous learning in their pronunciation practice and also presented a clearer picture of how students viewed autonomous pronunciation learning. The interview responses matched with those of the survey questions reinforcing that students have a positive attitude towards autonomy. The questions further delved deeper into students' attitudes towards autonomy in pronunciation learning and also threw insights as to how they incorporate autonomy to learn pronunciation.

Findings

Attitude about Pronunciation

The results of this part of the questionnaire indicated that the vast majority of students viewed pronunciation learning as important for speaking and listening. 94% believed that correct pronunciation can give them confidence while more than 80% thought that mispronunciation may lead to the breakdown of communication. More than three-fourths believed that they could make themselves understood better if they could pronounce words correctly and the same number feared that people would judge them if they made mistakes in their pronunciation. The majority of the learners (84.8%) also felt that there should be more instruction on pronunciation in the class.

Attitude about Learning Autonomously

Students in this study had similar positive attitudes about learner autonomy. More than three-fourths of the learners agreed that it is important for learning and they feel more confident and motivated when they are learning autonomously. The majority (65.7%) believed that autonomous learning is better than lecture-based learning and 71.9% felt that this type of

learning can improve their grades. An overwhelming 90.7% also shared that they want to take responsibility for their learning.

With regard to why they think autonomy is important for pronunciation learning some students gave the following answers:

Participant B: *In my opinion, autonomous learning is very important for each and every student. When we grow up and come to a university, we don't get much time from the teachers. Teachers may be busy after giving the lectures. So, if we have any problem, we can learn on our own. Pronunciation is a very important part of the English language. So, if we want to improve pronunciation, self-learning and self-correcting is very important. I am a very introverted person. I become very shy when I come in front of everyone. In my case, I can improve my pronunciation by self-learning.*

Participant C: *I think it is very important for learning anything, because how can we learn our best? Everyone has different methods to learn, especially pronunciation. For different methods, autonomous learning is best for learning pronunciation.*

Participant E : *It is important because the student will find out what he is interested to learn. So he will feel motivated to look up the pronunciation of those words.*

Attitudes to Autonomous Pronunciation Learning

The learners also revealed the ways autonomous learning can help in pronunciation learning. Most of their comments were related to the fact that it is helpful because the learners themselves can set the pace of their learning and select the method and content.

Participant A

Pronunciation learning is a procedure. When you go home you can practice. You can take notes. You research on Google on the topic. This makes it easier for you to gain knowledge about the topic.

Participant B

We get a lot of time when we learn on our own. In that case, we can repeat something over and over again. That way we can improve.

Participant C

I think it will improve because I practice a lot. It will give me a specific method, that doesn't waste my time and I know exactly what I have to do.

The Role of the Teacher

With regards to the role of the teacher in the classroom, students mainly saw the teacher as a resource person and guide who can facilitate their learning process and teach them learning strategies. The other role they had of the teacher was that of the evaluator, one who can gauge their progress.

Participant A

When you are in a classroom, the teacher can teach you something basic at the beginning, then the teacher can give you some tasks in the classroom. You can pair up with your friends. Finally, the teacher can take an exam or the teacher can give you some homework.

Participant B

The teacher can help us by giving us important resources or links. Sometimes the teacher can help to self-learn because it's not always possible to teach everything in the classroom

Participant C

I think the teacher can find different kinds of resources and they can help you with extempore speaking, word games. They can also give fun activities to make the learning easier.

Participant E

A teacher can guide us on how to learn, and provide us with many resources. The teacher can help us learn pronunciation best. He can make us practice with classmates and teachers.

Participant G

The teacher can give us the perfect guidelines on how to learn well and how we can improve, and without guidance, we don't know what we should do because a teacher has already passed these things.

Autonomy in Practice and Learning Strategies

The findings of this study revealed that students were fairly autonomous in learning pronunciation. The majority (68.7%) felt confident in learning pronunciation autonomously while 65.7% acknowledged that they set their own goals while learning pronunciation. Consistent with the behaviour of autonomous learners, 90.7% looked for resources, such as websites and online dictionaries outside the classroom to improve their pronunciation skills. Similarly, 81.2% of students reported that they are able to identify their own strengths and weaknesses with regard to learning pronunciation. In addition, more than two-thirds agreed and strongly agreed that they could evaluate and monitor their own learning progress and a large number of students (62.6%) were aware of which learning conditions suit them best concerning pronunciation learning. Lastly, exactly three-quarters of the students in this study reported that they were able to make decisions as to what they needed to learn to improve their skills in pronunciation.

As to how students autonomously learn pronunciation, they reported that they mostly use resources from the internet. Interestingly, they follow different strategies while taking help from online. Some of them gave the following responses regarding this point:

Participant B: *I learn pronunciation and other stuff, mostly from the internet, by googling. If I have any task about pronunciation, I play the materials on the sound box and then listen to them. I write the words down so I can revise them.*

Participant C: *I would just find the word and google it, and there would be a lot of meanings. I would just click on the mic and they would pronounce it easily in different accents. Also, I can speed it up and I can slow it down to match my mouth position with them. I listen to it repeatedly so I can learn the correct pronunciation. Also, I try to use them in sentences whenever I try to speak with my friends.*

Participant E: *I usually search on Google and note it down and I try to pronounce it. I watch movies with American and British pronunciations. I will try to make a comparison. I find out the best way to learn. I prefer the American pronunciation.*

Participant F: *When I learn something I teach someone. That's a great process to learn. When I hear a new word, and I want to learn its pronunciation, I talk about it with my friends or with my little brother.*

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that students have a positive attitude towards autonomous pronunciation learning, and they were aware of the importance of pronunciation. They know most of the features that constitute learner autonomy and are willing to take charge to autonomously learn pronunciation which is evident in their responses towards the teacher's role in the classroom and their proactiveness in finding learning resources outside the classroom. It is important to note that they also demonstrated knowledge of resources that can help them learn pronunciation by themselves. The students also consider the teacher as a facilitator and resource person in the class who will make the learning process easier. They were reluctant to the idea of the teacher merely imparting knowledge while they sat in the class as a passive

audience. This positive attitude towards learner autonomy and unwillingness to be a bystander in the classroom corresponds to previous research conducted by Littlewood and Chan. The participants of this study were aware of what kind of learning method and condition is best suitable for them. For example, if they did not like reading books (Participant A) they resorted to other resources. They all preferred using online resources.

At the same time, it is important to note that students still perceived the teacher, as King phrases, like a “sage on the stage” as opposed to a “guide on the side” (30). This is evident in their preference for the teacher to set the pace and select the learning content. In other words, they wanted the direction to be set before embarking on the path of autonomous learning. The participants also wanted the teacher to be the sole evaluator of their learning process by giving feedback on their output and making error corrections. This actually points to the students having mostly the quality of reactive rather than proactive autonomy.

From the students’ responses, it is also revealed that they considered autonomous pronunciation learning as something they have to do outside the classroom. They lacked the knowledge that learner autonomy can also be incorporated within the bounds of the classroom where occasionally they will take the center stage while the teacher takes the backseat. This is in alignment with the findings of Chan, Spratt and Humphreys who conducted a similar study to know about the perception towards learner autonomy of Hong Kong students where, although students had positive attitudes towards autonomy, they were less willing to take responsibility on “methodological” areas of learning (Chan, et al. 5). They imply that this may be because of contextual constraints such as learners relying too much on teachers or pressure of workload. These factors may direct the autonomy of Eastern students towards a more reactive kind, which is in contrast to their Western peers.

From their interviews, it can be seen that students used both cognitive and metacognitive strategies, albeit to a small extent. For cognitive strategies, they used

“resourcing” by identifying various online resources such as Google Translate, YouTube, online dictionaries etc. They also employed the strategy of note-taking, translation and repetition to learn pronunciation more accurately. In addition, they tried to contextualize what they learned which is evident in the way they tried to use the newly learned pronunciation of the word by using it in sentences or by teaching the pronunciation to others to reinforce learning (Participant C and Participant E).

From their responses, it was obvious that they possessed self-awareness with regard to pronunciation. They knew which method would work for them best and which learning resource would suit them more. Thus to a certain extent, they already had the quality of metacognition. However, as per O'Malley and Chamot's characterization, only the metacognitive strategy of “directed attention” can be observed in the participants; as it was found that some participants focus on the broader aspects of learning pronunciation by skipping words they do not understand and choosing their own preferred accent. In short, the learners are trying to learn pronunciation autonomously and trying to utilize their mental resources as far as their knowledge permits them.

Conclusion

This study has aimed to understand the attitudes of students with regard to autonomous pronunciation learning and tried to gauge to what extent they can be called autonomous..Overall, students were fairly autonomous in looking for resources and in selecting learning strategies. However, in terms of pacing, sequencing and evaluation of learning in the classroom, they were still quite dependent on their teachers. Therefore, it can be deduced that the students were not completely ready to undertake autonomous pronunciation learning yet. However, at the same time, it should be noted that their relatively less usage of learning strategies and low understanding of the proactive kind of autonomy could be attributed to their

lack of knowledge about these two aspects. From their responses, it is clear that the students are acting autonomously to learn pronunciation as far as their knowledge would allow. Therefore, to maximize their potential for autonomous pronunciation learning the teacher can teach them how to utilize learning strategies—both cognitive and metacognitive—, and at the same the student should be made aware of the full range of the salient features of learner autonomy to decide on their readiness of the proactive kind of autonomy.

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