

The Effect of Accent(s) and Pronunciations(s) of English on Bangladeshi English Language Learners' Listening Skill Acquisition Process

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Abstract

Listening, the most vital skill in language acquisition, is often regarded also as the most difficult skill to attain by second language learners. This study investigates Bangladeshi English language learners' problems in acquiring listening skills in connection to pronunciation(s) & accent(s) of English and its possible connection to the motivation of learners. To conduct the study, a number of 255 first year undergraduate students from twenty universities in Bangladesh were selected as subjects. The findings of the study suggest that native accent(s) and pronunciation(s) of English play a critical role in listening skills acquisition process and that motivation to learn listening skills among English language learners in Bangladesh is affected by native pronunciation(s) and accent(s) of English.

Introduction:

Listening is a very crucial skill in the process of second language acquisition (SLA) (Dunkel, 1991; Rost, 2001; Vandergrift, 2007). However, second language learners are very often found to hurdle with this skill which becomes some sort of 'stressor' to them (Noro, 2006). Research in second language studies suggests that comprehensible input is critical for language acquisition as well as comprehensible output (Swain, 1995). In fact, a large part of the acquisition of a second language is caused by a learner's ability to successfully communicate and in this process listening plays a vital role. In this connection Rost (2001) observes: "a key difference between more successful and less successful acquirers relates in large part to their ability to use listening as a means of acquisition" (p. 94). This comment clearly indicates the importance of listening skills in the acquisition of a second language.

However, despite knowing that the skill of successful listening is indispensable in learning a second language, second language learners consider it as the most difficult skill to learn (Hasan, 2000; Graham, 2003). As a practitioner of English in a second language setting in Bangladesh, I have found first year undergraduate students doing foundation courses hurdling over practice texts for listening as they find “native” accent(s) and pronunciation(s) of English alien and alienating. My students are from BBA (Bachelor of Business Administration), CSE (Computer Science and Engineering) or EEE (Electrical and Electronic Engineering), or are English department first year undergraduates studying in a private university. According to these students, this situation sometimes demotivates them from learning English as a second language. However, I have also noted that when teachers speak with them in English, they do not find it that difficult to understand them. When I interviewed some students, they mentioned that since Bangladeshi English language teachers have a non-native pronunciation and accent, they find it easier to comprehend them. Taking this issue into consideration, this study attempted to find out whether “native” pronunciation(s) and/or accent(s) really act as negative factor(s) resulting in demotivation in second language learners to learn a language. If so, to what extent does it affect the second language learning process?

Literature Review:

Listening is the most crucial skill in the process of second language learning since the learners are basically unfamiliar with the pronunciation and accents of a non-native language. Keeping the fact into consideration, diversified researches done in the past few decades in the field of second language acquisition have focused on the challenges of listening instruction and the factors that influence or affect listening comprehension of second/foreign language learners. Recent research has found out that the development of listening comprehension depends on various factors such as metacognitive knowledge, lexical knowledge and prosodic cues, stress and intonation, and affective factors like anxiety and motivation (Kurita, 2012). For the purpose of the present study, I would like to discuss some of the major and relevant findings on the issue of pedagogical and affective studies.

Overview of Research:

One of the most notable issues in second language listening research is pedagogy. There have been various research projects carried out on varied aspects of teaching and learning listening skills. For example, a study relevant to the current one has been done on Chinese ESL learners (studying in Singapore) by C.C.M. Goh. In her 1998 study, she includes the five most important factors that affect a learner’s listening comprehension. These include: vocabulary, prior knowledge, speech rate, type of input, and speaker’s accent. Among these factors, a speaker’s accent is most relevant. It was found in Goh’s study that 68% of those interviewed reported that the speaker’s accent affected their listening comprehension. They mentioned that as learners they had to struggle whenever they found any accent which was not familiar to them and which they thought was not “standard” e.g. accents apart from British or American. This problem occurred because the subjects of Goh’s study were much exposed to standard British or American English.

In another study on marine learners of English by Hooshang, Salehzadeh & Saed presented in the International Maritime English Conference (2011), researchers found that a factor affecting the perception of spoken language was unfamiliarity with the pronunciation of words because of recognition problems which researchers call “Pronunciational Problems”. It was mentioned in the study that the third highly reported difficulty was students mishearing and non-recognition of words in connected speech streams. According to these researchers, this problem could be due to two reasons. First, students may not know the pronunciation of some words or perhaps they know a wrong pronunciation. Secondly, the phenomena of elision and assimilation heightens the difficulty of recognition as locating word boundaries become quite challenging for non-native listeners. In the study the researchers expressed their view that less experienced listeners need to practice the cadence of the target language to improve their ability in word segmentation.

Kurita (2012) notes that Buck (2001) found numerous difficulties encountered in listening tasks, such as unknown vocabulary, unfamiliar topics, fast speech rates, and unfamiliar accents (Chang & Read, 2008). Another study by Elkhafafi (2005) concluded that since the listening process is easily disrupted by anxiety and listening tasks themselves may cause listening anxiety, reducing student anxiety and providing a less stressful classroom environment might help students improve both the listening comprehension proficiency and overall course performance.

Noro’s (2006) study on Japanese students reveals that the main sources of listening difficulties are rate of speech, vocabulary and pronunciation. According to Noro, affective reactions in the face of listening difficulties are irritation, lack of concentration, aversion, sense of resignation and loss of self-confidence. He concludes that second language learners must recognize that the listening anxiety comes from listening difficulty in speech recognition and that they should use appropriate strategies to cope with the problem.

Some other recent researches have found that there might be a positive relationship between listening tasks and listening anxiety. In a study, Chang and Read (2008) found that different types of listening support affect learners’ performance in different ways and a metacognitive approach is effective in reducing listening anxiety.

Studies on Affective Factors:

However, as listening is a skill which is reciprocal in nature, requiring both ‘conscious attention and involvement’ (Rost, 2001), the relationship between acquiring this skill and motivation is deep-rooted in connection to the second language learning process. Various researchers have seen and investigated this particular phenomenon. It has been suggested by many of them that listening skills, motivation and successful language learning are essentially interconnected in increasing comprehensible input (Kurita, 2012).

Vandergrift (2005) has examined the relationship among motivation, metacognition, and proficiency in listening comprehension in a study which shows some

positive connections among these factors. Certainly, there is some evidence to indicate that there is a positive relationship between motivation, use of metacognitive strategies and listening success. (Vandergrift, 2005)

A recent study by Kemp (2010) concerning motivating autonomous learning clearly demonstrates how keeping a listening log can motivate learners to engage with and reflect on their experiences. According to Kemp, by making learners listen according to their choice we can motivate them to listen with more metacognitive strategies to help them continue learning. He also points out that keeping a listening log allows learners to think about their motivation, learning process, metacognitive awareness and involvement in learning.

The literature review thus presents a basis for the present study since it also deals with the acquisition process of listening skills and its possible connection to motivation and native accent(s) and pronunciation(s).

In fact, the present study is an attempt to investigate whether native accents(s) and pronunciation(s) play a role in the acquisition process of listening skills of English language learners of Bangladesh. More specifically, it strives to find out whether there is a connection between native accent(s) and pronunciation(s) of English and the motivation to learn listening skills among English language learners.

Research Question:

The research question of the current study was:

Is there a relationship between a learner's motivation to learn listening in English with native accents and pronunciation of the language?

Research Design:

To conduct the study, a number of 255 first year undergraduate students across faculties from 20 Bangladeshi universities (7 Public and 13 private) were chosen as subjects. Those interviewed were in their first year and were students majoring in subjects such as BBA, English, Law, Journalism, Political Science, CSE and EEE. The rationale behind choosing these students as subjects was that since they were in the first year of their studies, they were attending foundation courses of English involving language skills in their respective universities. Not surprisingly, learning listening skills was also a part of these foundation courses.

The method used for the presents study was quantitative. A questionnaire with 10 items was sent to the subjects (255 students) where they could either agree or disagree or remain undecided. A certain rank was assigned to each option, e.g. Agree (5 marks), Disagree (5 marks), and Undecided (0).

Respondents	Survey Questionnaires	Document Study
1st year undergraduate students of 20 universities from the faculties of Humanities Business Studies Engineering Journalism Film and Media	255	✓

Target population:

The target population was first year undergraduate students of public and private universities in Bangladesh who attended or were attending compulsory English foundation courses on listening skills.

Sampling procedure:

A breakdown of how various representative samples of the target population were selected for the current study is given below:

Respondents		Instrument	Number
		Survey Questionnaire	
Public universities (7)	University of Dhaka:		20
	Jahangirnagar University		20
	Chittagong University		15
	Jagannath University		15
	Shahjalal University (Sylhet)		15
	Rajshahi University		10
	Comilla University		10
Private Universities (13)	BRAC University		10
	East West University		10
	North South University		10
	University of Liberal Arts		10
	Stamford University		10
	Eastern University		10
	University of Asia Pacific		10
	State University		10
	University of Development Alternative (UODA)		10
	IUBAT		10
	BUBT		10
	Daffodil University		10
	South East University		10
Total			255

Research Findings:

The study was a quantitative one where the questionnaire was analysed using pen and paper. It was found from the responses given to the questionnaire that the subjects of the study are exposed to native speakers through various media like TV programs, internet or the tape scripts provided as listening practice books like the ones in the Headway series.

Table 1: Analysis of the survey questionnaire.

Item no	Description of the item	Responses of the subjects		
		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
1	Native pronunciation and accent creates uncomfortable feeling in ESL (English as a Second Language) learners.	57.31%	33.38%	9.31%
2	ESL Learners feel anxious while listening to native speakers	51.69%	45.18%	2.13%
3	ESL learners have to struggle to understand each word while listening to any English native speakers due to their native pronunciation.	61%	37.84%	0.92%
4	Sometimes learners feel stressed when they don't understand English spoken by native speakers.	65.23%	34.76%	0%
5	ESL learners find native accents of English very difficult to understand.	56.92%	34.46%	8.61%
6	Sometimes learners feel helpless when they don't understand localized pronunciations and accents of English of its native speakers.	59.08%	40.92%	0%
7	Learners feel demotivated to learn listening skills in English properly (by practicing) due to its pronunciation/ the way it is spoken by native speakers.	83.58%	13.86%	2.56%
8	When learners listen to any text in English by non-native English speakers, they find it easier to understand.	89.02%	10.98%	0%
9	Learners feel that texts selected for learning listening comprehension should be texts spoken by non-native speakers of English, which according to them are easier to understand.	71.07%	26.47%	2.46%
10	Learners do not feel demotivated to learn listening comprehension in English if the text for practice is by non-native speakers.	82.15%	6.27%	1.58%

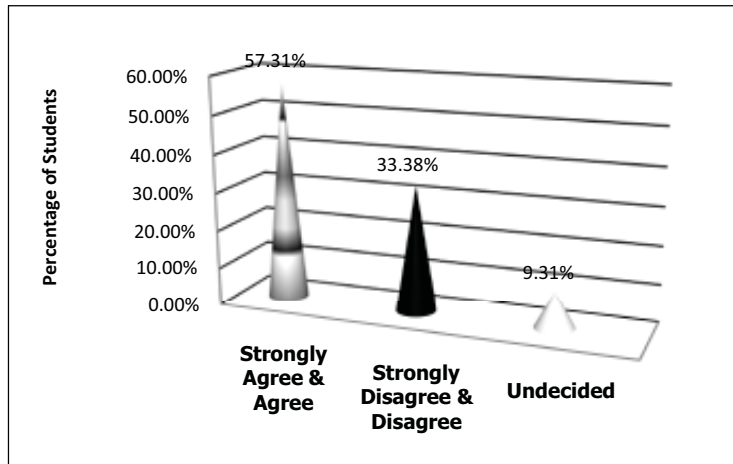


Chart 1: Listening to native speakers arise uncomfortable feeling

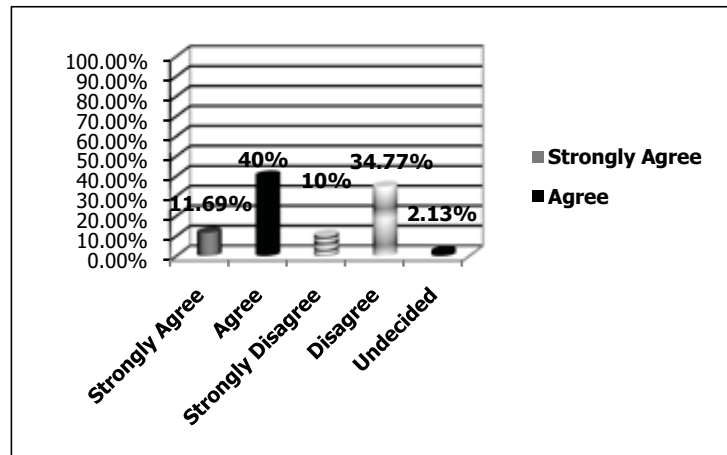


Chart 2: Percentage of learners feeling anxious while listening to native speakers.

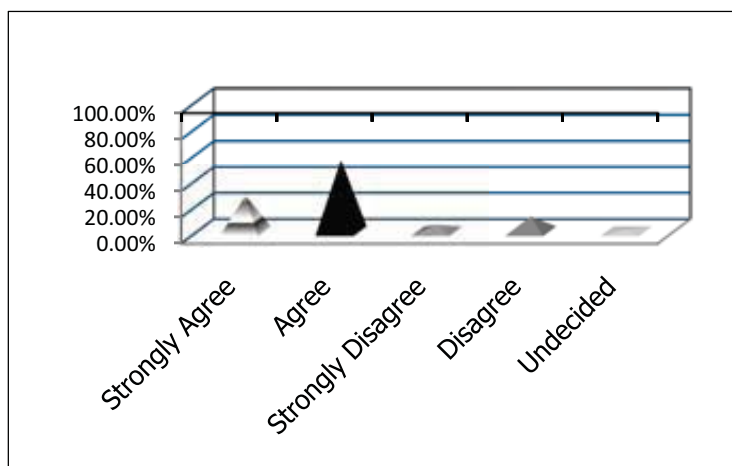


Chart 3: Attitude of students on the effect of native pronunciation and accents on demotivating them towards learning listening skills as ESL learners.

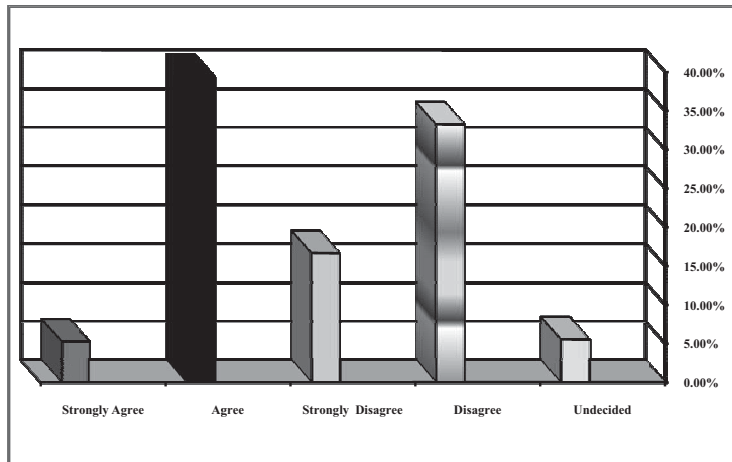


Chart 4: English spoken by non-native speakers do not demotivate learners.

The findings suggest that native pronunciation and accents of English cause anxiety in learners, resulting in de-motivation in learners in some cases. Clearly, the analysis of the survey results on the basis of the questionnaire (Table 1) and the charts show that most students have discomfort, anxiousness, difficulty and a sense of helplessness while listening to native speakers of English (Chart 1). It was suggested by the subjects of the study in the questionnaire that this is due to their lack of exposure to real-life interactions with non-native speakers. As a result, most of the students interviewed (83.58%) mentioned that they feel demotivated to learn listening comprehension and thus fail to acquire this important aspect of second language learning. Hence, the subjects (71.07%) of this study felt that while practicing listening to texts to learn listening comprehension, the texts selected for them should be by non-native speakers (Chart 4). Thus, it was agreed upon by the subjects (82.15%) that they would not be demotivated to learn listening skill since according to them (89.02%), the texts spoken by non-native speakers are easier to understand.

Suggestions and Conclusion:

Taking the results of the study into consideration, I would like to suggest that the level of listening comprehension of the students actually depends on the level of exposure to native speakers. In other words, to understand a language from its native speakers' mouth is quite difficult for anyone who has never/ or has had little exposure to native speakers in real- life situations. As a result, in the classes when teachers use a listening practice /exercise tape scripts where the book comes from a native background and the tape scripts have recorded texts/conversations by native speakers, students feel that they are listening to an "alien" language coming from the mouths of aliens.

Consequently, the author would like to suggest that teachers in ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts can select listening texts that are spoken by non-native speakers as teaching materials so that students can develop their listening skills and do not get demotivated. Perhaps when students have developed their listening skills to a certain level,

teachers can select texts spoken by native speakers as teaching materials. Only when they follow such a course will students not feel uncomfortable, anxious and demotivated at the initial stage of the learning process of acquiring listening skills.

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