Perceptions of candidate teachers about teaching pronunciation in English language teaching classes

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Abstract

Pronunciation is regarded as one of the most significant parts to be developed in gaining speaking skills in English language teaching (ELT) classes. For the development of pronunciation skills, a lot of different approaches and ways have been employed. In choosing these ways and approaches, the perspectives of language teachers have constituted an important part. Thus, this study is designed with the aim of getting a deeper understanding of the perspectives of students from ELT department about pronunciation problems and pronunciation teaching. The research was designed on the basis of quantitative research design. A questionnaire adopted from Ducate and Lomicka (2009) was employed to learn the perspectives of ELT department students about pronunciation. Results have revealed that teacher candidates believe that they can improve pronunciation skills and pronunciation is as essential as other skills in ELT.

Keywords: Pronunciation; speaking; teacher candidates; English language teaching;

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1. Introduction

Rise of communicative methods in English language teaching (ELT) has led to rise of teaching speaking skills in a number of different ways and approaches. Modern educational ways and methods highlight the significance of emotions and perceptions of learners (Robles, 2018). As a skill, speaking has many different parts. In the production stage of speaking skill, pronunciation seems as one of the most significant parts of speaking classes in ELT. It is widely believed that, however, successful the non-native speakers of English in grammar and vocabulary, without any doubt, there will be communication problems if there is a problem related to the pronunciation (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010). Furthermore, not only for speaking skills but also for reading skills, hearing and acquiring different phonemes play an important role for the beginning of reading skills (Smith, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 1998). Thus, pronunciation needs to be regarded as the basis of all skills in language teaching.

One of the key points in teaching pronunciation is teacher as a model. According to Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010), EFL teachers who are not the native speaker of English serve as a model and "source of input" for their students. This fact imposes a new role for teachers in modern language teaching methodologies. Thus, the ideas and perceptions of teachers about pronunciation and their proficiency level become the pinpoint in EFL classes. Regardless of a strict program and curriculum that teachers follow, there have always been differences in practices of teachers. In addition to teacher role in teaching pronunciation, emergence of social constructivist methodologies in language teaching has led to a very different direction in teaching pronunciation (McNeil, 2012). As a reaction to these views, Seedhouse (2004) and Toth (2011) criticized lack of authentic material and lack of communicative environments in classroom settings.

In determining the best practice to teach pronunciation, teacher attitudes and perspectives play a pivotal role. How a teacher perceives the significance of teaching pronunciation and to what extent the pronunciation skill is teachable and is the matter of research for a long time (Yule, 2006).

As a reaction to the gap that has not been answered in the previous studies, there are two main research questions for the study:

1.   What are the perceptions of ELT department students about pronunciation and their self-esteem on pronunciation?

2.   What are the perceptions of candidate ELT teachers about teaching pronunciation?

Regarding all these questions, this study is designed for the purpose of getting a deeper understanding of the perspectives of teacher candidates from ELT department about the basis of teaching pronunciation problems along with their own pronunciation matter.

2. Literature Review

In language classes, the role of teachers' speaking style and pronunciation has a crucial role for the language acquisition process of students. Learning is a phenomenon that affects the perspectives in all areas of life (Saygili, 2018). However, due to being neglected most of the times, pronunciation is defined as "Cinderella" of language classes by Kelly (1969). But with the rise of modern educational systems and communicative language teaching, in class communication with different patterns have constituted an important place (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010). This need for communication in language classes has caused some new assumptions and approaches for the teachers. Especially, as demonstrated by Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010), "The first linguistic or analytic contribution the teaching of pronunciation emerged in the 1980s as a part of reform movement during which the International Phonetic Alphabet developed and a lot of valuable classroom sources developed during this period" (p.8).

Within this respect, Emiroğlu and Pınar (2013) suggested that listening is a skill that comes from birth unlike reading, speaking, or writing. Thus, in language learning process, to develop any of the skills, very first skill to be developed will always be listening. As a support to Emiroğlu and Pınar, Hall

(1997) suggests that pronunciation is an essential skill to be developed by language learners not only to contribute to the speaking and listening skills but also to adopt a good presentation skill. According to Soetan and Coker (2018), these skills are related with technology skills of teachers and for teachers, it is essential to integrate technology into classroom environment to foster the listening skills of students.

Apart from filling the communication gap, teaching pronunciation has two main purposes. According to Christie (2005), the main purpose of teaching pronunciation in target language is "intelligibility" and "comprehensibility." Derwing (2010) categorizes intelligibility as the listeners' degree of understanding the speakers and comprehensibility as the ability to judge the speakers' pronunciation whether easy to understand or not. Thus, teaching pronunciation is essential both for intelligibility and comprehensibility in communication phase of language learning.

In teaching pronunciation, teachers' perception and identity come to scene as a determinant factor. In that point, accordingly, the definition of the concept "professional identity" may change. In some studies, the concept is described as teacher's perceptions of self (Knowles, 1992) although some researchers define the term as the experiences emerging from the teachers' role and the personal backgrounds (Tickle, 2000). Within all these conceptual frameworks, shaping a professional identity for teachers is a challenging process, which requires to include personal experiences with the relevant training. Furthermore, the influence of school environment and personal experience during pre-service education is diagnosed as the most prominent determinant of professional identity for teacher candidates (Flores & Day, 2006). In shaping professional identity, three items are considered as the most important ones by Hebert and Worthy (2001): Match between the expectations and the realities of working environment, confirmation of impact, and strategies to administer student act and get into the sociocultural environment of the school. Thus, while teaching pronunciation and creating their perceptions about teaching language and classroom practices, all these about professional identity of teachers should be regarded.

In addition, from a different perspective, Boyd and Rubin (2006) focused on the output of the students. According to Erdogan, Turkkahraman, and Ozbek (2018), teachers should be encouraged to employ various different activities in language teaching. In the same vein with them, Christoph and Nystrand (2001) suggested to increase student-teacher interaction to improve the communicational skills of the students. Thus, the input provided by the teachers in classroom setting characterizes the output produced by the students in every skill including pronunciation in language classes. However, as a criticism to these views, Tseng (2002) implies that successful language learning does not mean collecting input and producing output; language learning is mostly related with learning the culture of target language. However, pronunciation is independent of other skills and it seems mostly about input and output relationship as it is centralized in speaking skill.

Another important issue that points the perceptions of language teachers is fossilized pronunciation errors suggested by Demirezen and Topal (2015). According to Hişmanoğlu (2017), the main reason for these types of errors in pronunciation is that the learners apply their first language pronunciation rules to the target language. Furthermore, as stated by Kasper (2001), second and foreign language learners can successfully perform under two circumstances: When some universal pragmatic knowledge operates or when both pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatic knowledge can be positively transferred from the first language to the target language. Thus, in Turkish EFL context, transfer from the first language to the target language seems impossible as English and Turkish have originated from different language families. Therefore, different ways and methods to teach pragmatics in foreign language context have been debated for long years. If this is the case, then the language educators who are expected to have advanced level of proficiency in the target language might have fossilized pronunciation errors which are transmitted to their students as an input. As suggested by Oksuz and Ozturk (2017), self-perception of teachers and beliefs of teachers lead the educational programs within the borders of classes.

In teaching pronunciation, feedback types have an important role and mostly teachers reflect their perceptions with the feedback type that they employ for pronunciation practices. While some of the researchers have focused on form-focused and meaning-focused instruction types (Doughty & Varela,

1998; Zhang & Rahimi, 2014), some others have pointed the feedback types and mainly the corrective feedback types (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Most of the studies demonstrate that corrective feedback is an effective factor in ELT classes to teach the target forms and the functions of the language (Ammar & Spada, 2006; Lyster & Saito, 2010). While meaning-focused instruction is a communicative approach emphasizing on the language use through communication and negotiation rather than explicit teaching of rules and forms. On the other hand, form-focused instruction is based on teaching of specific forms and correctness or accuracy of the linguistic rules rather than communication and transformation of the meaning (Zhang & Rahimi, 2014). As corrective feedback constitutes a reaction to the incorrect language use of the learners, especially in oral communication classes, several hierarchical taxonomies were developed for corrective feedback regarding the effectiveness of corrective feedback, types of corrective feedback, timing of corrective feedback, types of errors to correct, etc. (Ellis, 2010). Within the debate about meaning-focused instruction which advocates the exposure to comprehensible input and reject the teaching of grammar and negative example including corrective feedback (Krashen, 1985), form-focused instruction is advocated for its argue that the learners should learn the gap between the target language and the mother tongue (Erlam, 2008). In addition, form-focused instruction recommends using corrective feedback to raise the interlanguage awareness of the language learners. From a different point, Vuc, Jigoria-Opera, and Baloi (2018) suggested that validity of feedback and grading is a demonstrator of the quality of the education.

As understood from the previous studies, communication is regarded as the key point in language teaching activities and speaking skill constitutes an important part of language teaching. In teaching speaking skills, pronunciation is regarded as the way to become native-like speakers. However, in teaching pronunciation and speaking, the perspectives of language teachers regarding the ways and approaches to teach pronunciation are crucial. Thus, this study is designed to understand the perceptions and perspectives of language teacher candidates about pronunciation skills and teaching pronunciation.

3. Methodology

The study was designed with the purpose of understanding the perceptions of candidate EFL teachers toward pronunciation and teaching pronunciation. For the purpose of getting the most reliable and valid results, 67 students from the department of ELT participated the study. The ages of the students varied between 19 and 39 while 17 of the participants were male and 50 of them were female. All the students are taking or have taken listening and pronunciation course which is offered at the 1st year of university for ELT departments.

Table 1. Age of the participants

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
19	1	1.5	1.5	1.5
20	5	7.5	7.5	9.0
21	21	31.3	31.3	40.3
22	14	20.9	20.9	61.2
23	11	16.4	16.4	77.6
24	6	9.0	9.0	86.6
25	3	4.5	4.5	91.0
26	1	1.5	1.5	92.5
29	1	1.5	1.5	94.0
30	1	1.5	1.5	95.5
32	1	1.5	1.5	97.0
34	1	1.5	1.5	98.5
39	1	1.5	1.5	100.0
Total	67	100.0	100.0	

The only data collection tool was a questionnaire including 12 Likert scale items including the statements about different perceptions on pronunciation and teaching of pronunciation, which is adopted from Ducate and Lomicka (2009). The reason for adopting such a questionnaire is to have statements that would answer all the research questions.

After the implementation of the questionnaire, the results were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 21.0 descriptive statistics. Thus, in the data collection and analysis steps, quantitative research methodologies were utilized.

4. Results

The results of the study revealed a lot of interesting points in terms of teaching pronunciation. The analysis of the items in the questionnaire was conducted by regarding two different parts as perceptions about pronunciation and perception about teaching pronunciation.

In terms of perceptions about pronunciation, it is revealed that most of the participants found that it is important to sound as native as possible when speaking a foreign language (42%). Similarly, for most of them, it is essential to acquire correct pronunciation while learning a foreign language (56%).

Table 2. Q12: It is important to sound as native as possible when speaking a foreign language

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Never	3	4.5	4.5	4.5
Usually not true	6	9.0	9.0	13.4
Somewhat true	12	17.9	17.9	31.3
Usually true	21	31.3	31.3	62.7
Always true	25	37.3	37.3	100.0
Total	67	100.0	10.0	

Regarding the self-esteem of teacher candidates about pronunciation, they believe that it is possible for them to produce the sound as good as a native speaker (42%). Most of the participants have stated that it is important to sound like a native speaker in English (46%).

Table 3. Q 6: One of my personal goals is to acquire proper pronunciation skills and preferably be able to pass as a near-native speaker of the language

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Never	3	4.5	4.5	4.5
Usually not true	6	9.0	9.0	13.4
Somewhat true	12	17.9	17.9	31.3
Usually true	30	44.8	44.8	76.1
Always true	16	23.9	23.9	100.0
Total	67	100.0	100.0	

Table 4. Q12: Sounding like a native speaker is very important to me

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Never	3	4.5	4.5	4.5
Usually not true	6	9.0	9.0	13.4
Somewhat true	12	17.9	17.9	31.3
Usually true	21	31.3	31.3	62.7
Always true	25	37.3	37.3	100.0
Total	67	100.0	100.0	

It is obviously seen in the results that the participants are highly concerned with their progress in my pronunciation of my foreign language (40%).

Table 5. Q7: I try to imitate foreign language speakers as much as possible

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Never	4	6.0	6.0	6.0
Usually not true	4	6.0	6.0	11.9
Somewhat true	14	20.9	20.9	32.8
Usually true	26	38.8	38.8	71.6
Always true	19	28.4	28.4	100.0
Total	67	100.0	100.0	

When the second research question which is about the perceptions of teacher candidates on teaching pronunciation, the results have revealed that 67% of the participants believe that they can improve their pronunciation skills with proper training programs.

Table 6. Q4: I believe I can improve my pronunciation skills in my foreign language

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Never	5	7.5	7.5	7.5
Usually not true	1	1.5	1.5	9.0
Somewhat true	5	7.5	7.5	16.4
Usually true	29	43.3	43.3	59.7
Always true	27	40.3	40.3	100.0
Total	67	100.0	100.0	

Moreover, the participants believe that pronunciation is an important skill in foreign language education as much as grammar or vocabulary.

The last interesting finding of the study is that the participants believe that it is more important to sound good in foreign language than communicating (35%).

Table 7. Q8: Communicating is much more important than sounding like a native speaker of my foreign language

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Never	3	4.5	4.5	4.5
Usually not true	6	9.0	9.0	13.4
Somewhat true	23	34.3	34.3	47.8
Usually true	23	34.3	34.3	82.1
Always true	12	17.9	17.9	100.0
Total	67	100.0	100.0	

5. Conclusion

Based on the conclusions of the previous studies conducted on teaching pronunciation, the study aimed at getting a deeper insight into the issue of pronunciation and teaching pronunciation in ELT classes. It was essential for the study to understand the perceptions of the ELT teacher candidates on their own performance regarding pronunciation and teaching pronunciation in ELT classes as a skill. Based on the analysis of the questionnaire items, it is possible to say that the teacher candidates find it essential to study pronunciation.

Within the boundaries of this study, it is possible to say that pronunciation is linked with very different skills and it cannot be thought independent of other skills. Especially, feedback types for speaking skill are highly determinant in teaching pronunciation. When the perceptions and practices of teachers and teacher's candidates are under question, it is highly important to investigate the feedback types that the participants prefer in pronunciation classes. Another point to be investigated is the self-perception of the teacher candidates to see the factors that affect perceptions about pronunciation.

First of all, teacher candidates perceive pronunciation as an important skill just like grammar and vocabulary, and they find it important to sound native like while speaking English. Furthermore, the self-esteem of participants about pronunciation is very attention grabbing for the study as they state that one of their goals is to reach native-like sound production level in English. Moreover, for the participants, it is possible to have a perfect pronunciation skill.

Second, regarding the perceptions about teaching pronunciation, the participants believe that it is possible to sound better in English with the help of proper pronunciation trainings. Therefore, a proper educational environment can solve the problem of pronunciation for the teacher candidates. Thus, it is possible to say that they believe that teaching pronunciation in ELT classes is a god way of improving pronunciation.

Last but not least, the results discussed above indicate that pronunciation is very crucial for ELT department students and as a skill it should be included in the curriculum. It is possible to sound like a native speaker with proper training, and the participants are highly sure that they can sound like a native in English.

For the coming studies, it is important to deal with why the learners of English and teacher candidates find pronunciation such an important skill and their perceptions about how to teach pronunciation should be regarded.

Acknowledgments

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