

## Urdu EFL Students' Pronunciation, Awareness, and Instruction in Pakistan.

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### Abstract:

This study probed into the speech of 40 Urdu EFL learners in a 16 weeks listening/speaking course, exploring the relationship between students' pronunciation improvement and their pronunciation awareness, examined through learners' conceptions of learning. The course focused segmental and supra-segmental aspects, including connected speech processes, intonation, and fluency. Students wrote weekly articles eliciting measures of pronunciation awareness and completed read-aloud and picture description tasks at the beginning and end of the course. Speech analysis was made through seven measures, including fluency and segmental and supra-segmental accuracy. Results displayed significant improvements in students' segmental production, enchainment, and some aspects of intonation and fluency. Several variables were associated with pronunciation awareness measures. Results have been discussed in the light of L2 pronunciation improvement and instruction awareness links.

**Key words:** Speech, English as a second language, awareness, pronunciation

### 1. Introduction

Presently research on the impacts of second language (L2) pronunciation teaching explored a significant augmentation in publications between 1990 and 2012 (Saito, 2012). Although pronunciation might no longer be characterized as being suffered from "the 'Cinderella syndrome'—kept behind doors and out of sight" (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996, p. 323), yet numerous questions stay behind, chiefly for learners of English as foreign language. Two of these questions related to how the progress of learners' L2 pronunciation is associated to pronunciation instruction specifically and to learners' awareness of pronunciation patterns in general. In the current study here, L2 pronunciation refers not only to students' performance on production tests focusing individual segments, such as vowels and consonants but also on supra-segmental, such as linking, stress, rhythm, and intonation. So pronunciation understanding, which is given in detail below, shows learners' own conceptions of how they learn pronunciation and how pronunciation patterns facilitate speakers pass on proposed meanings in L2. Many textbooks for English as an L2 for phonology and pronunciation, but very little is acknowledged about the development of English pronunciation among learners, so teachers and students depend on intuition, course materials, and past knowledge to direct their teaching and learning behavior. Besides, earlier researches on English language understanding have targeted mainly on phonological awareness for young learners or on the relationship between academic activities and learners' understanding of grammatical and lexical forms (e.g., Erlam, 2003). The present study, therefore, probed into the pronunciation development of young learners of English at the beginning and end of listening and speaking course and mainly discovered learners' perceptions of English pronunciation. By and large the main object was to make contribution to the knowledge about how Pakistani EFL learners' pronunciation improvement is linked to pronunciation instruction and learners' pronunciation awareness.

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### 2. Literature Review

Teaching of English as foreign language has been a significant object in Pakistan and researches on the teaching of pronunciation around the world in L2 settings have mainly touched on two areas: the effectiveness of diverse instructional approaches and indicating the role that language awareness plays in learning pronunciation. An illustration from the former area is a comparative method study by Derwing, Munro, and Wiebe (1998). These researchers explored the effectiveness of instruction focusing supra-segmentals and common speaking habits for a group of English as L2 students, with the instruction for fluency phenomena, intonation, rhythm, and word stress. This type of instruction was studied comparatively to a more conventional training aimed on individual segments or sounds. After a 12-week course, while both groups enhanced in terms of making of individual sentences, only the supra-segmental group revealed development in extemporaneous speaking. An instance of research focusing language awareness in pronunciation can be taken from Couper (2011), who proved that pairing intensive listening practice with an approach permitting the instructor and the learners to build up a mutually agreed upon set of meta-linguistic descriptors for sharing pronunciation coming as a result of the best performance as compare to other approaches, in both perception and production. Both these researches have proved that focusing on pronunciation through overt instruction is useful (as shown by Derwing et al., 1998), particularly when learners are taught how L2 pronunciation works, for example, through metalanguage (as suggested by Couper, 2011).

Teaching of Pronunciation in L2 English, there is currently a scarcity of knowledge about L2 English learners' improvement of pronunciation in instructional settings and a very little information about their awareness of pronunciation in Pakistan. Recent studies on L2 English pronunciation have normally measured one-time learner speech with a focus on learner proficiency (Birdsong, 2003) or diverse contexts of learning (Thomas, 2002). For example, Birdsong's research revealed that out of 22 post-adolescent learners, only two showed similar pronunciation to native French speakers' at segmental and supra-segmental levels. While interesting, however, these findings have little to say about the development of pronunciation over time. The few longitudinal studies on the learning of French pronunciation have been set in university contexts. For example, Harnois-Delpiano, Cavalla, and Chevrot (2012) tracked the use of liaison (as in *mes amis* [my friends], spoken as [me-za- mi]) over one year by second-year learners in a weekly three-hour French language and literature course at a Korean university. The learners showed significant increases in their production of obligatory and optional liaison in word pairs over this 12-month period. However, because the instruction given to the learners in this foreign language context was not described in sufficient detail, attributing learning gains to the quality or quantity of instruction is problematic. The effects of training aimed specifically at the pronunciation of French learners were also explored in research at a French- English bilingual university in Canada (Champagne-Muzar, Schneiderman, & Bourdages, 1993). The learners, enrolled in a beginner-level French as an L2 course, completed an hour of listening and pronunciation exercises for 12 weeks, presented on cassette tapes in a language lab. The exercises targeted French intonation, rhythm, and segments. As part of instruction, the learners completed active listening tasks such as discriminating between sounds, rhythmic groups, and intonation patterns; they also repeated or transformed model utterances. Before and after training, the learners were tested in an elicited imitation task with sentences containing various into- nation contours and rhythmic patterns. Native French speakers then rated these recordings on four 5-point scales for seg- ments, intonation, rhythm, and global impression. The scores of the trained learners and the comparison group, who completed listening comprehension exercises without pronunciation practice, were not

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significantly different for any pretest ratings. However, the posttest ratings of the trained learners were significantly more native-like on all four scales than their pretest ratings. For the comparison group, only segment ratings significantly improved from the pretest to posttest. In another university study, Knoerr (2000) made on French learners in complete semester pronunciation course. The learners made use of computer program displaying intonation model utterances and their own speeches for at least 15 minutes a week up to six weeks. Results revealed better performance in almost all of the 10 types of intonation practice.

### 3. Learner Awareness

One way to construe the positive impacts of overt instruction on pronunciation development, chiefly in the light of results by Couper (2011), is at least to speculate a link between explicit instruction and enhanced learner awareness. Although language awareness is a wide-ranging and many-sided construct, yet some aspects of this fact refer to be aware of “the way language works to convey meaning” (Hawkins, 1984, p. 5) and also to getting of “how language is acquired” (Tulasiewicz, 2000, p. 10). However, both aspects of language awareness are clearly attuned with Couper’s conception of pronunciation training as meaningful practice (Achar & Niemeier, 2004; Fraser, 2010). Research exploring connections between instruction and learner awareness of spoken language has primarily emphasized on the usefulness of a meta-cognitive approach to L2 listening (e.g., Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). This approach includes producing learners’ awareness of listening processes by focusing their attention to use meta-cognitive strategies, involving anticipating listening contents, evaluating comprehension and success in understanding. Normally, this kind of research showed positive impacts of increasing meta-cognitive awareness in listening L2 (Graham & Macaro, 2008; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). However, regarding L2 pronunciation, researches of instruction-awareness connections have been unusual. With the exceptions of only, are studies by Ramírez Verdugo (2006), which investigated learners’ awareness of English intonation patterns by Spanish learners following instruction; Moore (1997), who worked on Japanese learners’ pronunciation awareness in a speaking course; and Kennedy and Trofimovich (2010), conducted a study on learners’ awareness of English pronunciation in a university-level ESL speaking course. Ramírez Verdugo (2006) applied a multidimensional approach with meta-linguistic information, oral models, and phonetics software with visual display to increase learners’ awareness of intonation of English language. Students getting this treatment revealed better post-test performance as compare to controlled group in the range of contours applied and in ratings of their spontaneous speech. In unidentified post-instruction questionnaires, the treatment group also told improved awareness of English intonation. Thus, there are some evidences to be noted that explicit instruction in pronunciation is not only linked to measurable pronunciation learning, but also connected to enlarged learners’ awareness of pronunciation patterns in L2.

Taking research objectives into account, the studies of pronunciation thus far have provided restricted evidence of links between instruction and improvement in learners’ pronunciation. Of the studies discussed above, it was felt conduct study on Urdu EFL learners that should also include both a description of the instruction and significance testing for pretest and posttest measurements as no study is there to see Urdu EFL learners’ awareness of pronunciation. The present study examined both of these problems, addressing the following two research questions:

1. How does Urdu EFL learners’ pronunciation in two different speaking tasks develop following focused pronunciation instruction?

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2. How is Urdu EFL learners' post-instruction pronunciation related to their pronunciation awareness?

### 4. Method Participants

The participants were 40 learners of Urdu EFL learners (all females) who were enrolled in an graduate-level listening and speaking course at the University of Lahore Pakpattan campus, Pakistan. None of them had received elementary or secondary schooling in English. The learners, whose age was between 20-34 years, spoke Urdu as their native language.

### 5. Instruction

The 16-week listening and speaking course conducted per week for 10 hours, with about 30 minutes consumed to practice in a multimedia lab. The main object of the course was to develop learners' L2 oral production and listening skills. The instructors were non-native speakers of English with M.Phil degrees in applied linguistics and 10 years of L2 English teaching experience. Integrated form-focused instruction was employed for segmental and supra-segmental aspects of spoken English. But, the main target was on connected speech processes, with a little focus on increasing speech fluency. While teaching connected speech processes, learners' comprehension of spoken language was emphasized predominantly, but the students were also made to produce enchainment and obligatory relationships in practice tasks.

In terms of fluency, focus was on fluent delivery of speech, and target was achieved through work on phrasal stress and intonation, with practice including both controlled output recorded in the lab and guided practice (e.g., expressive readings, rehearsals for a scene from a play). Students were made to work in small groups, annotating their text, making loud practices, and helping one another. The researchers got regular oral feedback on both comprehension and production exercises, in class as well as in the lab. Individual written feedback, in the form of text annotation of errors, was also made for recorded productions. In a classic academic sequence, a topic (such as schwa deletion) was completed in one class meeting and recapitulated during the following class. Each meeting normally started with an exploratory activity, followed by the researchers' elucidation of that particular process following listening exercises, such as dictation of a cloze dialogue. The learners then exercised targeted aspect or process in communicative activities such as role-plays, and fluency tasks. Lab-based multimedia materials included short sentences for the targeted speech aspects and learners used provided materials to undertake dictation or production tasks. All the students performed their tasks in lab as instructed by the researchers.

### 6. Tasks

Speech data of the students were collected using read-aloud activities and picture description activities. Learners ended up with each of these activities thrice, in Week 2 and 3 as a pre-test and in Week 16 as a post-test with the same equipment, instructions, and process their speeches were recorded in a multimedia lab using the CAN-8 Virtual Lab interactive software. At testing times, the read-aloud activity always used before the picture description task, and both activities were conducted after a sequence of perception tests. Pronunciation awareness data were collected conducting a dialogue journal task with students' journal entries in Weeks 4-16 of the course, and learners' experience to English outside the class was checked with language logs throughout the term.

### 7. Read-Aloud Activity

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This activity was a 200-words tale that involved an exchange between a woman standing at the platform in a ticket line and a woman who wanted to cut into the line for getting a ticket. The dialogue between the two women (9 turns, 11 sentences) was preceded and followed by a three-sentence description. The sentences were 15–20 words long (Mlength<sup>1</sup>/411 words), and 90% of all vocabulary was among the first 1,000 most frequently used words in English (Cobb, 2000), suggesting that the text offered little lexical challenge for the learners and was suitable for illustrating the speech phenomena focused in this study. For the read-aloud activity, the learners were given a copy of the text and had a 4-minute period to look over the text and to be ready for the reading. The recording screen was then conducted on each personal computer from the instructor's comfort, and the learners had 180 seconds to record the text.

### 8. Oral Picture Description Activity

This activity, which was comprised of eight-panel image sequence, featured two people who moving into each other on a jam-packed street corner, by coincidence their identical suitcases were exchanged, but they realized their mistake only later (Derwing, Munro, & Thomson, 2008). The learners were provided a copy of the picture story, entitled "Suitcase Mix-Up" and had 4 minutes to look over the picture story and to be ready for oral description; note-taking was prohibited. The recording screen was then started on each computer giving five minutes to learners to record their description.

### 9. Journal Entry Activity

For this Activity, each learner was coupled with a partner in Week 3 of instruction, after which both partners started exchanging written entries. The learners were directed to give reflection on their learning by building associations between their learning inside the classroom and their experiencing use of English outside the class. The learners, who wrote in English, exchanged their entries and gave responses to their partner's entries on a weekly basis. Overall, each learner was able to do a mean of nine entries per term (3–12 entries), with an average of 200 words per entry. Among 40 learners, half produced more than 10 journal entries. Journal entries were not examined by researchers or instructors until the course grades were finalized.

### 10. Language Log Activity

The learners made a weekly language log all the while for self-reported use of English which included estimates of the time consumed for using English in different domains inside and outside of class, for instance during social interaction, leisure moments, and working activities. To obtain a measure of using English outside of class, the total number of hours using language in all reported domains was collected for each student and then divided by the total number of language use logs accomplished by each student during the term (4–12 logs, with a mean of 10 logs over 12 weeks). Learners report showed that their weekly out-of-class use of English was at a mean 18.2 hours (3.8– 80.6 hours) during the term.

### 11. Speech Measures

Transcription of all pretest and posttest recordings was done and verification was made by trained research assistants. The audio recordings of both tasks, measured along with the transcripts. Later the audio recordings were analyzed for seven measures which reflected the course aims and

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content. The measures spanning the domains of segmental and supra-segmental phonology as well as fluency, were the following:

### 12. Segmental Errors:

Described as individual segment additions, deletions, or substitutions (e.g., **go** /gəʊ/ spoken as /gɒ/, as well as spelling-based mistakes (e.g., Bail [the temporary release of an accused person] spoken and spoken as Bale [a large wrapped or bound bundle of paper, hay, or cotton]. Only one segmental error per word was checked and confirmed, even if there had been many errors allowing better control of intense cases of changeability in learners' error counts which came up as a conventional accuracy measure. Final calculation, taken into account per learner separately in each task, was a proportion of the total number of segmental errors over the total number of words produced.

Among other strategies the less preferred strategies were singing a song, memorizing, and connecting words together rather than pronouncing them individually. Different learners have different learning strategies; some might benefit from singing a song and memorizing more than others. However, teachers need to teach connected speech to learners and emphasize that in normal speech, native speakers do not pronounce words individually but rather they connect words and pronounce phrases.

### 13. Conclusion

Teaching pronunciation is usually ignored in Urdu EFL contexts or teachers follow their own intuitions in deciding which aspect of pronunciation they need to emphasize. Based on the results of this study, teachers are informed of Urdu EFL learners' pronunciation needs and strategies from their own perspectives. Teachers need to give more attention to supra-segmental features of pronunciation since majority of learners believe that supra-segmentals are more important than segmentals. Teachers also need to develop pronunciation tasks and activities to help students improve their pronunciation learning strategies, enable them to be autonomous and communicate successfully in English.

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