

How English Suprasegmental Features of Pronunciation Are Viewed and Treated by Instructors in Iranian Private Language Centers

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Abstract—English suprasegmental features of pronunciation (ESFP), as key elements in developing effective communications, are regarded as critical aspects of language proficiency to be practiced markedly in language classrooms. They have pivotal roles in determining the utterance meaning, and change in some of these features can lead to change in meaning. The present study was, therefore, motivated to explore how ESFPs were viewed and treated by language instructors in Iranian English language private centers. It is an account of interviews with 12 experienced language instructors reporting their insights into significance and treatment of these features in the language institutes. The results emerging from the detailed analysis of the data indicated that ESFPs were perceived by the respondents as critically significant aspects of language proficiency due to their substantial sensitivity in speech perception and production as well as boosting language learners' self-esteem and motivation. Further, close examination of the data suggested that ESFPs were assigned short shrift in pedagogical practices mainly due to such factors as skill prioritization, insufficient class time, improperly developed materials, and language learners' negative attitude and unwillingness towards such features.

Index Terms—pronunciation, English suprasegmental features, language instructors, attitudes

I. INTRODUCTION

The ability to speak one or more languages is perceived as a prerequisite in the present globalized world (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Baker, 1989; Fulcher & Davidson, 2007). Despite the European Council's attempts to further the diversity of languages, English is still the undisputed lingua franca. In the light of this fact, millions of people around the world treat the ability to communicate in English as the gateway to economic prosperity, social mobility and educational advancement (Fulcher, 2007). The ability to have an intelligibly comprehensible pronunciation appears as a key in constructing lucid communications with different people around the world (Chela-Flores, 2001; Keys, 2000; Munro & Derwing, 1995). Undermining the native-like pronunciation dominance as the yardstick, intelligible pronunciation has been perceived as an essential component of communicative competence over the past few decades (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002; Rajadurai, 2001; Morley, 1991). Arguing on retaining well-formed pronunciation abilities, Morley (1991) called for setting more realistic goals that are reasonable, applicable and suitable for the communicative needs of English learners. To her, it is of great import for the learners to develop functional intelligibility, that is, they ought to possess the capacity to make themselves easily understood. Besides, given the remarkable roles of developing intelligible pronunciation ability in forming interactive communications and inducing language learners to overcome their affective problems like anxiety, stress, and lack of self-confidence in learning a second or foreign language (Chela-Flores, 2001; Keys, 2000), it seems producing confidential materials and planning efficient pedagogical procedures to enhance language learners' intelligible pronunciation capacities is a priming requirement. However, in most EFL contexts where knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is more explicitly focused on, pronunciation is often neglected due to the fact that it is treated as a luxury 'add-on' which is often perceived by teachers and students as boring and unproductive (Harmer, 2001; Seidlhofer, 2000).

Teaching pronunciation, as suggested by McDonough and Shaw (2003), involves focusing on the sounds of the language as well as stress, rhythm, intonation, and links. Sounds of the language are referred to as segmental features of pronunciation, whereas the rest are discussed at suprasegmental level. As regards teaching pronunciation at segmental level, language instructors mainly tailor their teaching procedures towards coping with isolated consonants and vowels or showing learners how sounds are made through demonstration, diagrams, and explanation (Harmer, 2007). Focusing on segmental aspects of pronunciation, nevertheless, fails to help learners have control over their pronunciation while communicating in a foreign or second language (Keys, 2000). Therefore, numerous researchers and experts (e.g. Jenkins, 2002; Morley, 1991) have called for shifting the main pedagogical focus from segmental elements of the pronunciation to the suprasegmental ones due to the fact that the effective communicative pronunciation

competence is perceived to be achieved more efficiently and profoundly through improving suprasegmental productions rather than the segmental ones (Jenkins, 2002). In other words, participants in communications can have intelligible pronunciations to make mutually interpretable interactions through employing suprasegmental features of a language. To underline the significance of suprasegmental features, it is worth pointing out that in some languages, e. g. English, suprasegmental features are occasionally employed distinctively. They have pivotal roles in determining the utterance meaning because they accentuate the most important part of the message and indicate where the listener should pay particular attention (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2010). Moreover, change in some of suprasegmental features may lead to change in the utterance meaning (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2010). Hence, it appears that suprasegmental features of pronunciation ought to be regarded as some of the most critical aspects of communicative competence to be substantially practiced in English learning classrooms. The present study was accordingly motivated to qualitatively examine how English suprasegmental features of pronunciation (ESFP) are viewed and treated by instructors in Iranian private language centers.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Well-structured oral interactions are perceived to be markedly conditioned by speakers' intelligible pronunciation (Chela-Flores, 2001; Keys, 2000). Serious errors in pronunciation, word accent and stress, and sentence pitch, as argued by Gilakjani (2011), appear to give rise to occasional misunderstanding and the necessity to repeat words and sentences while communicating. This problem has been studied in numerous studies reviewed by Otlowski (1998) where it has been indicated that non-native like stress may make native speakers comprehend non-native speakers' speech with more difficulty.

With the dominance of more holistic and communicative approaches to English instruction, calls have been made for addressing pronunciation within the context of real communication. In this connection, Otlowski (1998) argued that English learners can expect to master the intelligible pronunciation of English. In this situation, the learners ought to know that improving pronunciation may be of substantial import and sensitivity due to the fact that it supports some aspects like listening comprehension, spelling, reading, and grammar (Wong, 1993). For instance, a number of language learners often face the problem of how the vowel sounds in the words like *ahead*, *hate*, *hard*, *hall*, and *hat* are spelt. This confusion occurs because learners expect to find a one-to-one correspondence between each sound and its spelling (Wong, 1993). Intelligible pronunciation is also perceived to exert considerable influence on language learners' self-confidence and self-esteem (Chela-Flores, 2001; Keys, 2000). Further, it induces learners to overcome their affective problems like anxiety and stress in learning a second or foreign language (Chela-Flores, 2001; Keys, 2000). It also enables them to better understand their instructors, follow the news on TV or the radio more easily, and join in English conversations, class discussions, role-plays, etc. (Gilakjani, 2011). In his study on different ways to achieve intelligible pronunciation, Gilakjani (2011) found that students can develop their pronunciation if they know that pronunciation is "an important skill of learning a language just like reading and writing. In addition, the students should be taught that there are standard ways of saying the sounds that make up words and groups of words (p. 7)". However, pronunciation, despite highly acknowledged criticality, fails to have a clear and considerable place in EFL classrooms (see e.g. Harmer, 2001; Seidlhofer 2000). Seidlhofer (2000) for instance, explored language learners' and instructors' insights on teaching pronunciation and came to the point that focusing on pronunciation is viewed to be a boring and unproductive process. His analysis of the instructors' perspectives indicated that pronunciation should be taught at higher levels.

As elements that help language learners and users develop intelligible pronunciation and efficient communications, ESFPs have created a critical area of concern and interest for numerous researchers (e.g. Florez, 1998; Harmer, 2007; Jenkins, 2002; Keys, 2000; McDonough and Shaw, 2003; Morley, 1991). ESFPs, as argued by Florez (1998), transcend the level of individual sound production, and are often produced unconsciously by native speakers. Significance of ESFPs has also been the subject of discussion by several researchers around the world (e. g. Hall, 1997; Jenkins, 2002; Keys, 2000; Ladefoged & Johnson, 2010; Wong, 1993). Acknowledging the substantial criticality attributed to ESFPs, Hall (1997), for instance, argued that ESFPs are more important than segmental features of pronunciation. Furthermore, ESFPs are perceived to exert great influence on word meaning and part of speech (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2010), sentence structure and meaning (Jenkins, 2002; Ladefoged & Johnson, 2010), oral communication (Gilakjani, 2012; Jenkins, 2002; Wong, 1993), and intelligibility of L2 learners (Lambacher, 1999). Needless to say, such findings are indicative of the considerable benefits of developing ESFPs. Likewise, on his discussion on the benefits of practicing suprasegmental features, Hall (1997) stated that language learners could practice ESFPs through marking texts for thought groups, shifting emphasis in sentences, and changing the moods of scripts by exploring different intonational patterns. In his study on the appropriate place of practicing ESFPs among non-native speakers, Bott (2005) asserted:

"In recent years, increasing attention has been placed on providing pronunciation instruction that meets the communicative needs of non-native speakers of English. Empirical research and pronunciation materials' writers suggest that teaching suprasegmentals before segmental to intermediate and advanced NNSs could be more beneficial in a shorter period of time (p. 5)".

A number of researchers have conducted various studies on different aspects of pronunciation in Iranian context. These studies have explored the Iranian EFL pronunciation errors and problems (see Gordani & Khajavi, 2012; Seddighi, 2010), called for teaching pronunciation in Iranian schools (see Shooshtari et al., 2013), reviewed the related

theories on teaching English pronunciation to EFL learners (see Nikbakht, 2011), examined the related literature to explore the place of pronunciation in EFL and ESL classrooms (see Gilakjani, 2011), and investigated the influence of integrative instruction of segmental and suprasegmental features of pronunciation (see Aryanpour & Karbalaei, 2014). For instance, in their study on 66 EFL learners, Aryanpour and Karbalaei (2014) discussed the influence of integrative instruction of segmental and suprasegmental features on the language learners' improvement in pronunciation, word reading, and spontaneous production of the target language. Review of the related literature indicates that examination of how ESFPs are viewed and treated by language instructors in Iranian private language centers is apparently under-researched. Therefore, the current researchers sought to scrutinize Iranian language instructors' insights into how ESFPs are viewed and practiced.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The incentive behind the conduction of the present study was to qualitatively examine how ESFPs are viewed and treated by instructors in Iranian English language institutes. More specifically, this study was intended to investigate the extent to which ESFPs are focused on and highlighted by the instructors in their classroom practices and explore the underlying factors that affect their tendencies towards the use of these elements.

IV. METHOD

The current study is a qualitative examination of how ESFPs are viewed and treated by Iranian English instructors in private language centers.

A. Participants and Sampling Method

The subjects of the study included twelve experienced English instructors, seven females and five males, currently teaching at four popular private language centers in Yasouj, Iran. It is worth mentioning that the instructors taking part in the study had at least six years of teaching experience. The age of the respondents ranged from 28 to 39. Besides, each had experienced instructing English courses in basic, intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced levels. To succinctly add, in line with the method and objectives of the study, the researchers employed snowball sampling method to select the participants. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the interviewed instructors.

TABLE 1:
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE SUBJECTS

No	Name*	Age	Gender	Teaching experience
1	Ali	28	Male	6 years
2	Meysm	34	Male	10 years
3	Hamid	31	Male	7 years
4	Mansur	39	Male	13 years
5	Nader	29	Male	6 years
6	Mina	30	Female	6 years
7	Mona	31	Female	9 years
8	Samira	31	Female	7 years
9	Maryam	28	Female	6 years
10	Simin	28	Female	6 years
11	Zahra	29	Female	7 years
12	Zeynab	32	Female	8 years

NOTE: THE NAMES ARE FICTITIOUS.

B. Instrumentation

In line with the objectives of the study, semi-structured interviews were utilized to understand the phenomenon under investigation and to create an opportunity for the interviewees to adequately reflect on their insights. The interviews included open ended questions concerning how ESFPs are viewed and practiced by language instructors. To assure the comprehensibility and quality of the interview questions, they were piloted on two instructors with comparable characteristics.

C. Data Accumulation Procedure

An attempt was made to conduct profound interviews with the participants of the study to elicit and examine their viewpoints on ESFPs. The interview questions were developed and asked in English. The respondents, however, were given the chance to freely select the language to respond. Interviews took ten to twenty minutes and were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Once accumulated, the data were transcribed into written texts and then analyzed. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, intensive care was taken to avoid bias through employing a prolonged and persistent field-work and accounting for the respondents' verbatim responses, as recommended by McMillan and Schumacher (2006). When the responses were in Persian, they were carefully translated into English.

D. Data Analysis Procedure

Researchers conducting qualitative scrutiny on the data accumulated through interviews have widely advocated interpretation of the collected data thorough content analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Accordingly, constant comparative content analysis, as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967), was employed in the process of data analysis to code the transcribed interviews. It involved an inductive process of frequent sifting through the data to identify similarities and patterns of reference in the interview transcripts. Detailed analyses of the similarities and patterns subsequently gave rise to the emergence of an evolving coding system for the categories. The units of analysis and coding schemes were defined and developed during the process of the content analysis; then, the codes were transformed into categorical labels or themes that were repeated or appeared as patterns in the interviews. This iterative procedure, according to Patton (2002), is intended to help the researchers in “developing some manageable classification or coding scheme” as “the first step of analysis” (p. 463). Data analysis proceeded incrementally and once the coherence and saturation of the data were accomplished, conclusions were drawn based on the analyzed data.

V. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Through conducting in-depth interviews, the researchers made attempts to scrutinize the instructors’ attitudes towards ESFPs and to discover to what extent they practice such elements in their classes.

A. *The Instructors’ Insights into ESFPs*

Close examination of the instructors’ comments on the questions exploring their attitudes towards ESFPs was suggestive of the substantial criticality of ESFPs in different aspects. More specifically put, seven subjects of the study argued on the sensitivity of the ESFPs in speech perception. Meysam, for instance, viewed ESFPs as elements which are capable of boosting language learners’ receptive and comprehensive capacities. More elaborately put, he cited:

“I should assert that a great part of language learners’ listening comprehension problems is rooted in their unfamiliarity to suprasegmental features of language. As my experience talks, occasionally, although they are able to chunk the words in a given sentence, they are not able to get the message because some factors such as intonation and pitch are not a concern while comprehending the intended meaning of a statement”, (translated by the researchers).

Besides, Nader and Simin held that one’s critically developed capacity in ESFPs could substantially maximize her potentiality in grasping what native speakers actually intend to convey in movies or songs. An illustration of this could be observed in Simin’s viewpoint where she succinctly commented:

“To tell you the truth, although I am an English teacher, I sometimes have difficulty understanding English movies and songs. I guess it is because I have not taken serious some factors like stress, intonation, sound linking and other suprasegmental features”, (respondent’s wording).

Moreover, Mina and Samira highlighted the potential role of ESFPs in determining and also changing the meaning and parts of speech of English words as the ground to reflect on the significance of ESFPs in speech reception (T1) and production (T2). Mina more specifically referred to English as a language which is potentially conditioned by some factors such as stress, pitch, intonation and sound linking. Therefore, it is, as she argued, difficult to resist the significance of ESFPs. In accord with Mina, seven other instructors also confessed to the criticality of ESFPs in speech production. Mansur, for instance, underlined “the native speakers’ high proficiency in practicing suprasegmental features in their speech” as one of most remarkable features distinguishing them from the non-native ones. Samira also referred to making speech devoid of practicing ESFPs as “senseless”. More elaborately put, she asserted:

“Such features are very important. Let me to tell you why. You know, a shift in word stress can change the meaning or part of speech. So it is important for both speakers and listeners to practice English word stresses. And also, intonation is as important as word stress in English. Sometimes paying attention to the intonation of a sentence is the only way you can distinguish whether the speaker is making a question or making a statement. As you know you can easily change a statement to a question by rising [raising] its intonation”, (respondent’s wording).

In addition, the qualitative analysis of the respondents’ attitudes towards ESFPs unveiled further perspectives on the sensitivity of ESFPs. Ali and Mona argued on the significance of boosting language learners’ knowledge of ESFPs in EFL classroom contexts. They were of the opinion that the language learners with substantial potentialities in performing ESFPs have more positive self-esteem (T3) and are more noticeably motivated to learn English (T4). In this connection, Ali maintained:

“When a student can link English sound[s] truly or make the stressed and unstressed syllables truly, he will have a better self-confidence and better views about his abilities. So, he will be more motivated to talk in English or listen to different audio files or watch movies to improve his listening”, (respondent’s wording).

In brief, it should be mentioned that in-depth analysis of the instructors’ responses concerning their attitudes towards ESFPs led to the emergence of the coding schemes and thematic categorizations illustrated in Table 2.

TABLE 2:
MAJOR THEMES AND CODING SCHEMES ON THE INSTRUCTORS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS ESFPs

ESFPs	Theme	Code
Significance in	speech reception	T1
	speech production	T2
	Learners' self-esteem	T3
	Learners' motivation	T4

B. ESFP Practice in EFL Classrooms

Needless to say, close examination of the interviewees' attitudes towards ESFPs framed the grounds for supposing a critically considerable significance for ESFP in various aspects. However, in light of the respondents' insights into how ESFPs are treated in classrooms, it was revealed that the instructors gave such critical features short shrift in their pedagogical practices. In other words, despite the acknowledgement of the substantial criticality attributed to ESFPs, the instructors ignored to consider a noticeable place for such elements in practice.

Almost all of the instructors asserted that just because some textbooks sparingly offer some tips in connection with suprasegmental features, they have to spend at least very limited time to explain them. Once explained, as confessed by seven of the instructors, ESFPs, unlike other language elements such as grammar, are not reviewed in next sessions. Nine of the instructors also maintained that they did not regard ESFPs as a consideration while assessing their students' oral skills.

As regards the reason for ignoring to place emphasis on ESFPs in their courses, a majority of the respondents including Mona, Nader, and Mansur highlighted language learners' unwillingness (T5) to acquire such skills as the major ground. Mansur, for instance, stated:

"When I am teaching one tip related to suprasegmental features, I notice that even my best students sometimes do not pay attention to my speech. I have been facing to this question from my students a lot: Are these important?", (respondent's wording).

Besides, Nader maintained that he sought to devote short periods of time to teaching ESFPs because his students found learning such factors tedious. Suffice it to quote from his final words: "Teaching such elements, I usually face to many yawns". In line with Mansur's and Nader's views, Mona also cited:

"Students themselves prefer to focus on other skills. One of teachers' duties is also to respect their learners' needs and interests. Sometimes when it takes more than a couple of minutes to explain some factors such as pitches in speech, my students ask me to do something different", (respondent's wording).

Further analysis of the respondents' comments revealed other incentives behind ignoring to focus on ESFPs in courses in Iranian private language centers. Four of the instructors pointed to insufficient time assigned for teaching each course (T6) and skill prioritization (T7) as the principal factors contributing to neglecting ESFPs in practice. An illustration of this was suggested by Samira's comment where she argued:

"I am aware of the criticality of suprasegmental features. Also I believe that learners should develop such skills. However, my students' numerous mistakes and errors in oral and written production, their limited word power and proficiency in communication, and their poor capacity in receptive skills leave no choice but concentrating solely on such skills rather than others. I suppose, I do not have enough time to cover all details practically", (translated by the researchers).

Furthermore, Hamid's argument would appear to reinforce Smira's, where he succinctly commented "it is not logical to expect a learner who is not able to make a grammatical sentence to pay attention to word or sentence stress. I guess such factors should be covered in higher levels".

Maryam also reflected on her justifications to ignore to spend a considerable time on teaching suprasegmental features in her classes. She called for "more efficient and attractive" materials directly developed for enhancing language learners' skills in suprasegmental features. Directly put, she asserted:

"I hate it when my class is boring. Teaching suprasegmental features by the examples provided in books is boring even for me. So, I do not expect my students to be interested in something which is not interesting for their instructor. If I am provided with better materials, I can spend more time on teaching such elements", (respondent's wording).

All views considered, Table 3 succinctly illustrates the contributory factors behind the instructors' negligence in teaching ESFPs.

TABLE 3:
MAJOR THEMES AND CODING SCHEMES ON THE PERCEIVED REASONS FOR NEGLECTING ESFPs

Theme	Code
Learners' unwillingness	T5
Insufficiently assigned course time	T6
Skill prioritization	T7
Improper materials	T8

The present study, all in all, was motivated to qualitatively explore how ESFPs are viewed and treated by Iranian instructors' teaching at private language centers. Taking the respondents' perspectives into account, we can suggest that ESFPs are not treated as positively as they are viewed. As regards the attitudes towards ESFPs, it is worthwhile to

mention that the present findings concerning the instructors' attitudes towards ESFPs are in accord with the related literature on the significance of ESFPs (see e. g. Chela-Flores, 2001; Greenwood, 2002; Jenkins, 2002; Keys, 2000; Ladefoged & Johnson, 2010; Morley, 1991; Munro & Derwing, 1995; Murphy, 1991). To put it in details, close examination of the instructors' viewpoints was suggestive of their positive attitudes towards high criticality of ESFPs in speech reception and production, and boosting language learners' self-esteem and motivation. Such results are in line with the ones found by Ladefoged and Johnson (2010) where they argued that suprasegmental features have pivotal roles in determining the utterance meaning because they accentuate the most important part of the message. The findings further support the study conducted by Chela-Flores (2001) in which he came to the point that improving language learners' capacities in ESFPs might help them overcome their affective problems including lack of self-confidence in learning a second language.

Turning to practicing ESFPs in classroom contexts, the interviewees' responses to the intended questions indicated that ESFPs seemed not to be considerably valued in Iranian private language centers. Data analysis revealed that a majority of the participants (8 out of 12) underlined their students' lack of interest in ESFPs as a priming factor behind overlooking such elements in practice. Mansur, for example, wondered whether developing knowledge of ESFPs was of any import. Most of the participants even found focusing on these elements tedious. These findings corroborate the argument made by Seidlhofer (2000) that pronunciation is often treated as a luxury "add-on" which is often perceived by teachers and students as boring and unproductive. Further, skill prioritization, insufficient assigned time, and improper materials were perceived to be the other grounds for giving ESFPs short shrift in practice.

In addition, it appeared that the dominance of other types of language knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary tended to overshadow the criticality of ESFPs in classrooms. The instructors apparently chose to overemphasize grammar and vocabulary at the expense of the ESFPs due to lack of time and productive materials. Such findings are in strict conformity with the observation made by Seidlhofer (2000) who found that in most EFL/ESL classes, language skills are taught separately, with grammar and vocabulary receiving more weight than other language components. Likewise, teachers often neglect pronunciation as a major language component and think that teaching/learning pronunciation should be left to higher levels. In other words, pronunciation teaching seems to be the "Cinderella" of TESOL. Findings of the current study also revealed that language instructors often failed to create rich and pertinent contexts in which EFL learners could develop their pronunciation capacities. This could, of course, be due to the instructor's failure to forage language learners' capacities in pronunciation. Provided that pronunciation, like other aspects of language, is focused in practice and learners get aware that there are standard ways of uttering the sounds that make up possible language strings, nurturing the learner pronunciation potentials seems to be readily accessible (Gilaki, 2011).

VI. CONCLUSION

The present study was an attempt to qualitatively examine how English suprasegmental features were viewed and treated by Iranian language instructors teaching at private language centers. The emerging results obtained from the in-depth analysis of the participants' responses to the interview questions indicated that the instructors had positive attitudes towards ESFPs. In other words, the responding instructors perceived ESFPs as critically significant due to their determining role in speech reception and production, and boosting language learners' self-esteem and motivation. Despite such positive attitudes, the instructors did not determine a clear and considerable place for teaching ESFPs in their courses. Examination of their responses unveiled the factors behind such a tendency. It was suggested that the instructors highlighted language learners' unwillingness to focus on ESFPs, skill prioritizations, and insufficient assigned time along with productive materials as the major reasons for neglecting to teach ESFPs efficiently and sufficiently.

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