

## **PRESERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON PRONUNCIATION**

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The goal of this study is to investigate pre-service English teachers' views, needs and preferences about learning and teaching pronunciation. Using mixed-method approach, data have been collected through a questionnaire (N=147) and additional face-to-face interviews (N=5) with prospective English teachers enrolled in an English Language Teaching (ELT) department at a state university in Turkey. A 40-item questionnaire (adapted from Sardegna & Kusey, 2014 and Seyedabadi, Fatemi & Pishgadam, 2014 with additional items prepared by the researchers) was used to provide insights into pre-service English teachers' views, preferences and goals about learning and teaching pronunciation. In addition, face-to-face interviews were carried out with students who have prior voluntary or semi-professional teaching experience. Findings of the study reveal that pre-service English teachers consider learning pronunciation as a key area in learning a foreign language, however, they are not prepared to teach it with informed techniques in a classroom setting.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Investigating teachers' views, beliefs, awareness levels and knowledge about various aspects of teaching practice has been a popular line of enquiry. Studies that put the spotlight on teachers' cognitive processes fall under the title of teacher cognition research. Borg (2003) defines teacher cognition as "*the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe, and think*" and bases the assumptions of the concept on the following argument: "*teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalised, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs.*" (pp. 81). Along with increasing the expertise and awareness of the teachers in profession, teacher cognition research can also affect the professional development of prospective teachers (Baker & Murphy, 2011).

It is evident that there is an increased interest in researching teacher cognitions in pronunciation, however, as also mentioned by Baker & Murphy (2011), less attention has been paid to this field within the domain of pronunciation teaching so far. Studies focusing on preservice English teachers (from here onward PrET) and their developing cognitions about pronunciation teaching are even more scarce. Baker (2011) underlines the essential role of teacher education in shaping teachers' cognitions in pronunciation pedagogy, and claims that, without such an education, their knowledge of pronunciation pedagogy along with their confidence in teaching pronunciation would be limited. Similarly, Burri (2015) and Couper (2016) indicate that teacher education programs and teacher educators need to focus on pronunciation teaching techniques, which could increase teachers' or PrETs' confidence and help develop their cognitions.

A number of studies that were carried out in different countries found that teachers feel unprepared to teach pronunciation because of insufficient training they received in teacher

education programs. For instance, Henderson et al. (2015) conducted a survey in seven countries across Europe, where most of the participants appeared to be amateurs in pronunciation teaching since they received no or little training in how to teach it. Fallang (2016) mentions a similar finding that participants did not receive extensive teacher training regarding pronunciation in Norway. In a study in Canada, Breikreutz, Derwing and Rossiter (2001) found out that it was necessary to integrate pronunciation in a communicative classroom while teachers lacked the knowledge to do so, which is associated with the lack of sufficient training and training opportunities. 10 years after this study, Foote, Holtby and Derwing (2011) aimed at reexamining the state of teaching pronunciation in ESL classes in Canada. Having scanned the websites of Canadian universities that offer TESL programs, the researchers could find only 6 universities where pronunciation-specific courses are offered.

At this point, the state of pronunciation teaching in teacher education programs in Turkey needs to be explored extensively. In the country, graduates of English Language Teaching (ELT) departments are officially entitled as *English teachers*. They are allowed to work at state schools if they meet a number of other official requirements as well, such as taking a central examination. In addition, graduates of other departments like English Language and Literature or Linguistics can also teach English at state schools if they obtain a teacher training certificate and meet other relevant criteria. Higher education institutions, on the other hand, follow different procedures while employing English teachers.

Most of the ELT departments in Turkey use a dedicated course program designed by Turkish Higher Education Council (HEC). In this 4-year program, a number of linguistic and pedagogical courses are offered to PrETs. In terms of pronunciation, two pronunciation courses can be found in the program: Listening and Pronunciation I and II. HEC also describes possible content for each course, however, basically, faculty staff members are free to decide on what to teach and revise the content in these classes.

PrETs' perspectives related to pronunciation teaching in ELT programs have not been widely investigated in Turkey. As a preliminary study of a larger research project to be carried in a number of state universities, the present study aims to explore pre-service English teachers' views, needs and preferences about learning and teaching pronunciation.

## **METHOD**

The study was conducted at the English Language Teaching Department of a Turkish state university in the Spring semester of 2017. The participants were all students enrolled in the department at the time of data collection.

Data were collected in Turkish using mixed-method approach. In the first step, PrETs' views, preferences and goals about learning and teaching pronunciation were investigated with the help of a questionnaire (n=147). Secondly, semi-structured-interviews were carried out with students from the same department (n=5) with the purpose of gaining broader insights into PrETs' perspectives about learning and teaching pronunciation. Before both steps, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire including basic information like gender, age, and class.

### **The Questionnaire**

In order to find out about PrETs' perspectives in learning and teaching pronunciation, a

questionnaire with 40 likert type items (1-5; 5 being “I completely agree” and 1 “I completely disagree”) was designed. Out of these 40 items, 26 of them were adapted from two existing scales (13 items from Sardegna & Kusey, 2014 and 13 others from Seyedabadi, Fatemi & Pishgadam, 2014) and the remaining 14 were developed by the researchers. During the selection and item-writing processes, it was aimed to address PrETs' general views on learning and teaching pronunciation, perspectives in learning and teaching English pronunciation and personal goals, expectations and needs.

The questionnaire was prepared in Turkish in order to be fully understandable to the target population. The items adapted from the existing scales were translated into Turkish and the rest of them were all prepared in Turkish. To assure reliability in translation, the selected items were translated separately by the two researchers and then compared for the final form.

The questionnaire was presented to 147 PrETs who speak Turkish as their first language. Along with international students who have no knowledge of Turkish, those who speak Turkish at a low level were not included in the sample either.

The internal consistency of the instrument was investigated through Cronbach's Alpha and the Alpha coefficient value was found 0.716. The value equal to or above 0.7 is considered 'acceptable' (George & Malley, 2003), therefore, the questionnaire was found reliable for descriptive analyses.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were also conducted at the same university (n=5). Interviewees, were third year students with previous teaching experience (private tutoring, voluntary teaching or institutional experience). It was considered that recruiting participants with teaching experience could add depth to the study results.

Interviews were carried out in Turkish and all the participants were Turkish native speakers. Each interview lasted around 8-12 minutes and recorded with a voice recorder. 10 questions (see Appendix) with the following three themes were asked to the participants:

1. Preferences, goals, awareness levels, and self-efficacy beliefs related to their own pronunciation
2. Views on the role of pronunciation in teacher education
3. Views on teaching pronunciation

The interview data were transcribed, coded and analyzed for recurring themes. In order to achieve inter-coder reliability, the two researchers coded the transcriptions separately and findings were compared. While most of the themes were found similar, a consensus was still sought and reached on the divergent items.

## **RESULTS**

### **THE QUESTIONNAIRE**

#### **Demographics of the Participants**

Almost all of the participants who completed the questionnaire were found to be between the ages of 17-25 and the number of female participants was higher than male students. Besides

these, numbers of participants for first to third year students were close to one another while the number of 4<sup>th</sup> year students was considerably lower compared to the others. Details of participant demographics can be found in tables 1-3 below:

Table 1

*Age Groups*

<b>Age</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>17-25</b>	145	98.6
<b>26-35</b>	2	1.4

Table 2

*Gender*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Female</b>	91	61.9
<b>Male</b>	56	38.1

Table 3

*Years (Classes)*

<b>Classes</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>1</b>	58	39.5
<b>2</b>	34	23.1
<b>3</b>	50	24
<b>4</b>	5	3.4

### Questionnaire Findings

Participant responses have been analyzed descriptively with mean scores, standard deviations, percentages and frequencies. On the whole, the results indicate a strong tendency to rate the items positively in general. To be more specific, the mean scores of 20 items were above 4 while only 3 items were rated below 3. More specifically, the findings will be reported in detail below.

#### Agreement on the Importance of Pronunciation

According to the results of the survey, PrETs believe that learning and teaching pronunciation is essential for both learners and teachers. For instance, more than 90% of the participants rated each of the following items 4 or 5: "Pronunciation is the inseparable part of English language learning.", "I would like to have good pronunciation", "People who want to teach English must have good pronunciation." and "In my opinion, a teacher must definitely spend time on

pronunciation in his/her class". This finding shows a significant tendency to consider pronunciation a key element in learning and teaching English. However, the item "Learning to pronounce well is the most important part of learning a language" received more diverse reactions than the others shown above. Although the majority of the participants still agreed with it, 46 participants (31.3%) remained undecided while 20 (13.6%) others disagreed. This implies that PrETs value the role of pronunciation, yet they still think it is not the most important element of the language.

### **Pronunciation and Other Language Skills**

The results of the questionnaire also suggest that participants see connections between pronunciation and reading, listening and speaking. The items which underline a relationship between pronunciation and each of the above-mentioned skills were 'agreed' by at least 80%. It even reaches 90% for the item "Pronunciation has a mutual effect on listening skill."

### **Pronunciation and Affective Dimensions**

The results also reveal a strong connection between affective factors and pronunciation. The majority of the participants acknowledge the role of pronunciation in reducing language learner's anxiety (122 participants; 83%) and raising English language learners' degree of self-confidence (143 participants; 98%). Similarly, 129 PrETs (87.7%) agree that "An English language learner's poor pronunciation influences his/her willingness to communicate." Despite these results, participants seem to get less confident when it comes to their own pronunciation. 32% of them were undecided and 5.4% disagreed with the following item: "I feel confident that my pronunciation will be understood when I talk."

### **Readiness to Teach Pronunciation**

As future English teachers, participants of this study did not seem to be prepared to teach pronunciation with informed techniques. One of the lowest mean-scored items, "I know how to teach pronunciation to my students in the future.", clearly refers to the problem of lack of sufficient training. While 52 students (35.4%) disagree with the statement, 61 (41.5%) picked the "I'm undecided" option.

Participants were also asked whether pronunciation needs to be taught explicitly in class or it is a skill that should be acquired more implicitly. Analyses reveal that 65 (44.2%) participants were undecided about teaching pronunciation explicitly. On the other hand, 69 participants (47%) disagreed with an implicit way of learning while 51 others (34.7%) were undecided. These two items imply that PrETs are not sure about their preferred approach in learning and teaching pronunciation.

Two other items complete the argument with the preferences of participants. One points out to their need for a 'how to teach pronunciation' course in their undergraduate course program and 142 participants (95.2%) supported this idea. Also, 78.9% of the participants were of the opinion that they would be willing to take an elective pronunciation course if it were offered in their undergraduate program.

### **Native-like vs. Intelligible Pronunciation**

The results of the questionnaire demonstrate that participants tend to set native-like proficiency as an attainable goal in learning English. To illustrate, 126 participants (85.7%) believe that "The aim of learning English pronunciation is to achieve a native-like accent." and 134 of them

(91.1%) personally aim to reach a native-like accent. The item “Intelligible pronunciation will be adequate for the learners of English.”, on the other hand, created uncertainty for many participants since 59 participants (40.1%) were undecided while 54 of them (38.1%) agreed with it.

### **Accent Preferences**

Participants were asked about their preferences of British or American English in two separate items. The results seemed quite similar to each other without referring to any strong tendency towards one. Similarly, 50 participants (34%) remained undecided when asked about which accent they actually speak in English.

## **THE INTERVIEWS**

The 10 interview questions were grouped into three themes; therefore, the interview data were analyzed basically in three clusters. In order to reach the most commonly expressed views, the ones mentioned by all or at least the majority of the interviewees were taken into consideration and the rest was discarded. Below can be found the basic categories and concepts falling under each theme:

### *Group 1. Preferences, goals awareness levels, and self-efficacy beliefs related to their pronunciation*

PrETs generally indicated a feeling of incompetency in pronunciation. When their preferred ways to improve their pronunciation was enquired, most of them referred to watching TV broadcasts. In relation to this finding, they demonstrated a significant preference to speak in American English as they are exposed to it in their favorite TV series and movies.

It has also been found out that participants consider linguistic differences between the two languages as a possible cause for intelligibility problems for Turkish speakers. In this regard, differences in segmentals and manner of articulation were frequently addressed by the participants.

### *Group 1. Views on the role of pronunciation in teacher education*

Interviewees generally pointed out that their departmental courses focused on issues like articulation of individual sounds and International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). However, according to the participants, these courses lacked the possible techniques to teach pronunciation in actual classroom settings. They all underlined their expectations to learn practical teaching techniques or tips and demanded more extensive integration of listening and speaking skills in their classes.

### *Group 3. Views on teaching pronunciation*

Participants believe that nonnative teachers are capable of teaching pronunciation and being a native speaker cannot be a prerequisite to teach it. This widespread belief among the PrETs was commonly explained through positive experiences with their own nonnative teachers in the past.

PrETs all acknowledge the importance of focusing on pronunciation in class and being a good model for their students. They frequently pointed out that teachers need to be perfect in pronunciation. Similarly, they also expressed their desire to achieve a native-like accent.

In connection with the findings in Group 2, these interviewees had difficulty proposing suitable

techniques or ways they would use to teach pronunciation. Their suggestions were quite limited lacking variety. These results were also found in line with questionnaire findings.

## **DISCUSSION**

The goal of this study was to explore PrETs' views, needs and preferences on learning and teaching pronunciation. In Turkey, as nonnative English speakers, PrETs need to improve their own pronunciation skills in order to be good speech models for their students. Their future roles as teachers, however, will require finding ways to bring pronunciation into their classes to help other learners, possibly at different age groups. Without a doubt, it is a matter of decision for teachers or program coordinators whether or not to focus on pronunciation in their classes. As MacDonald (2002) puts it, teachers could be reluctant or feel lack of confidence in teaching pronunciation but developing their skills in integrating pronunciation could be one of the helpful solutions to overcome this challenge.

The results of this present study can be summarized in two broad categories.

In terms of learning English, PrETs tended to consider intelligible pronunciation an ideal goal for English learners (instead of aiming for a native-like accent) but the common argument was that native speaker level pronunciation was essential for teachers as they frequently stated "being a teacher requires perfection". This tendency also implies that they are highly motivated to keep improving their skills in pronunciation.

In terms of teaching English, PrETs considered pronunciation as a key area, however, they did not seem to be prepared to teach pronunciation with informed techniques in different classroom settings. When asked about what techniques they would use in pronunciation teaching, they could only suggest intuitive ideas, lacking variety. This finding was found in line with other studies in which teachers in different contexts referred to a lack of or insufficient training on pronunciation teaching in their teacher education programs (Breitkreutz, Derwing & Rossiter, 2001; Foote, Holtby, Derwing, 2011; Henderson et al, 2015).

Our observation is that pronunciation is usually neglected in teacher education in Turkey as in many other countries; however, further investigation is necessary to figure out what the case is in different institutions in higher education. Such attempts will be helpful in determining the priorities in shaping the future of pronunciation teaching and research in the country.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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## APPENDIX

### Interview Questions (Translated from Turkish)

1. Do you make conscious efforts to improve your pronunciation? If your answer is 'yes', please explain how.
2. Do you find yourself competent at pronunciation? Can you specify any areas of difficulty for you?
3. Do you speak English with a particular accent/variety (like British, American, Australian, Canadian)? If your answer is 'yes' please explain why you speak in that particular accent.
4. Do you aim to speak English with a native speaker's level of proficiency? Or do you think 'intelligibility' is a more suitable goal for you?
5. What are the factors that could reduce the intelligibility of a learner of English as a foreign/second language?
6. Are you satisfied with the pronunciation that was taught in your undergraduate classes?
7. What should be taught in a pronunciation course in English Language Teaching programs?
8. Do you think that a nonnative English teacher can teach pronunciation? Should pronunciation be taught only by native speakers?
9. Do you think that English teachers should spare time for pronunciation teaching in their class hours? If your answer is 'yes', please explain how much time should be spent for it.
10. As a PrET, do you know any techniques or ways to teach pronunciation to your students? If your answer is 'yes', please give two or three examples.