

Teaching English Pronunciation in Countries where English is a Second Language: Bangladesh Perspective

Mohammad Rasel Howlader*

The aim of this paper is to provide suggestions for teaching English pronunciation in countries where English is spoken as a second/foreign language. This will be partly by means of a literature review of published books currently being in use. This study specifically attempts to answer the following questions: 1) Do teachers regard pronunciation as important? 2) What model is considered best in pronunciation? 3) What technique do they currently use? To obtain primary data, questionnaire and structured interview were used. The researcher has found that: mutual intelligibility, comprehensibility and neutral accent can promote better oral communication. Models like Received Pronunciation or General American can be followed to maintain the standard of English pronunciation. Techniques like computer-assisted aid, audio-visual aid, pronunciation software and the internet can be effective in teaching/ learning English pronunciation.

The teaching of pronunciation has been neglected in ESL/EFL settings for the past decades. Grammar-translation method has been the dominant method in this setting for many years. Later in audio lingual method pronunciation practice went on through traditional minimal pair drills and short conversations. Until 1960s teaching and learning pronunciation was “viewed as meaningless non-communicative drill-and-exercise gambits” (Morley, 1991: 485-6). Now the question is which model and technique may be followed. It is really difficult to determine one specific model. RP and GA are the two dominant varieties of English in the world. All over the world there is more American influence than that of Great Britain. In some Middle Eastern countries there are more American officials. But in India they have got their own variety. Their accent is different. In Singapore and Nigeria, there is different accent. The case is also similar in New Zealand and Australia. So it is very difficult to emphasize the RP-ism or Americanism in case of pronunciation learning and teaching. So the need to develop a suitable model for learning pronunciation has become very important all over the world. Now the point is if there is no model, people will create their own model. As a result there will be no standard. The researcher will try to find this alternative model in the critical literature review. Again it is an important issue to find a proper approach for the teaching of pronunciation in countries where English is spoken as a second/ foreign language. There are many old and new approaches which offer lessons for pronunciation learning.

This study specifically attempts to answer the following questions: 1) Do teachers regard pronunciation as important? 2) What model is considered best in pronunciation? 3) What technique do they currently use? To obtain primary data, the researcher has used questionnaire and structured interview. The small scale investigation may not cover the entire Indian subcontinent but the researcher believes that it will lead to some useful suggestions for the teaching of English pronunciation in second language context, especially in Bangladesh.

* Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Daffodil International University

The status of English in the world

English is the first, foreign, second and international language in the world. It is in fact the dominant language in the world. Phillipson, R (1992) comments that within a generation from now English could be a world language: that is to say a universal second language in those countries in which it is not already the native or primary tongue. Phillipson's prediction has come true. Now English has got strong dominant status among the world languages. It is the world language of the international community. There is in fact a competitive environment of learning English in these countries. English is the model brand language of the world. Because of the dominant nature of the English language and its world wide popularity, some mother tongues are being neglected. Nearly 1.5 billion people speak English all over the world, more than 60 nations use English as official language, nearly 80 percent academic publications are done in English, it is the main language in the big organizations of the world. English is influencing every aspect of the world society: political, economic, military, academic, technology, communication and transportation, exerting its huge power to influence and control the whole world. Some linguists call it English hegemony over the world. (Tsuda:2004)

English Pronunciation in some ESL/EFL countries:

Bangladesh

The condition of English in Bangladesh is not too bad. It is getting better. But the problem of accent is still remaining in oral communication. English language teachers do avoid pronunciation teaching in their classroom. Learners are interested in learning pronunciation. The situation is changing gradually. Many language teachers are going abroad for training on pronunciation. Hopefully it will turn into a better phase in future. The government is giving emphasis on the learning of English language. English language teachers do feel the urge to have training on pronunciation. It is a good sign that teachers and learners are in interactions in English even if they are outside the classroom. Learners are more exposed to oral communication. Since the arrival of communicative language teaching in Bangladesh, English was introduced as a compulsory subject in primary, secondary and higher secondary levels. Listening and speaking skills are included now in the curriculum but still pronunciation is overlooked. It is clearly perceived that learners' communicative competence and performance depend on their command of all skills of the target language (Moniruzzman, 2007). Pronunciation is also overlooked in the syllabus, materials and sometimes in classroom activities. However it is surprisingly true that pronunciation carries an important link to communication through listening and speaking. (Gilbert, 1984)

Pakistan

Warsi, J (2004) thinks Pakistani English teachers are concerned with the teaching of English language with little satisfaction. He further points out that English plays a prominent role as a lingua franca in Pakistan. Communication in Pakistan comprises of Urdu language and a host of regional languages. Hence there is hardly any alternative except English language. In most Pakistani schools English is taught for about eight years. Students coming from rural background

face difficulty in learning English. They have weakness in four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. In some areas of Pakistan students use a regional language as mother tongue besides Urdu (Warsi, J, 2004). In this case English is the third language for them. Students coming from this background are not efficient and competent in English language. If this is the case with English, we can simply imagine the poor status of pronunciation in Pakistan.

India

English is the second language in India. A large number of people speak English in India. India has her own style of pronunciation. But they have different accents in spoken language. Predictably, phonetics is not taught at early stage in the schools. It causes some adverse effect on children. It is recommended that phonetics should be taught in the early stage in India to the children. They should be able to use the English dictionary. John and Collin (1991, Pg-6) remark “...English spelling is not a direct reflection of pronunciation. It has undoubtedly been an important factor here and has led to the publication of pronouncing dictionaries and other guides to pronunciations, both for native speakers of English and for learners.”
(<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/blogs/shailey/phonetics-teaching-india> retrieved on 23/07/09).

Why is teaching pronunciation important?

Celce-Murcia, M, Brinton, D.M and Goodwin, J. M(2000) comment that there are some groups of learners who need “a high level of intelligibility and therefore require special assistance with pronunciation.”(P-8)

Some important issues in learning/teaching pronunciation are:

- Foreign learners studying in English speaking countries need better pronunciation.
- International business people and diplomats should learn pronunciation for better communication.
- Immigrants living in English speaking countries are to cope up with the natives in English speaking countries.
- People who are non-natives and doing jobs like tourist guide, waiter, hotel personnel, custom agents need comprehensible production.
- EFL/ESL teachers teaching in different countries rather than their own.
- English born foreign students need it for surviving in English environment.

Celce-Murcia,M,Brinton,D.M and Goodwin, J. M (2000). (2000,P-8)

Why is pronunciation ignored in EFL/ESL setting?

Moniruzzman (2007) comments that pronunciation is still ignored in some EFL countries including Bangladesh. Communicative approach introduced listening and speaking skills at primary, secondary and tertiary levels in Bangladesh. Surprisingly, listening and speaking skills are not properly taught in the classroom. Therefore, learners’ communicative competence cannot reach the competent level. Unfortunately there is no specific course of pronunciation in the curriculum in Bangladesh (Moniruzzman, 2007).

As in Bangladesh, some teachers in Taiwan argue that English pronunciation is not important at all, for very few tests would require students to show abilities related to pronunciation or speaking (Lin, Fan and Chen, 1995: Source: Moniruzzman, 2007). In some other ESL/EFL setting, English pronunciation is also overlooked. Thailand is one of the countries where English pronunciation and its importance are not taken into account. (Wei and Zhou, 2002). Wei argues that there are not many techniques and strategies known to teachers in the classroom. They do not find interest in teaching pronunciation. Hence students lagging behind in better pronunciation can not achieve effective communicative competence. Teaching pronunciation in Mexico is also ignored in the curriculum of the education ministry. Dalton (2002) describes it as the Cinderella area of the English language. It may be that teachers and learners think that it will automatically be under command.

Models of pronunciation

Received Pronunciation: RP is not tied to any geographical location. It is a social accent spoken by powerful people. It is not a dialect. It gives social prestige. The interesting thing of RP is that it is widely understood. The RP speakers are among the past cultural heroes. Over the years the context has changed a lot. In today's world top stars are the footballers, cricketers. Unfortunately they do not use the RP accent. In the past a news presenter had to be trained in RP accent. But now RP is rarely used in BBC. It is surprisingly true that the British are abandoning RP. Crystal, D (1995: 365) points out that less than three percent population in UK speaks RP in pure form. If this is the case, then it is difficult to find out the model of pronunciation that can be accepted by everybody. In most non-English speaking countries RP is not the model of pronunciation. Now it is important to see the impact of general American variety in learning and teaching pronunciation.

General American English

General American (GA) is not spoken by the majority of native speakers in America. There are many language varieties in America. GA is in most cases associated with the Midwestern accent and is spoken by newscasters. The local accent in North Central America, California and Pacific Northwest has different features than the GA accent. GA is the model accent for the teachers of English as a second language. In Asian context, ESL teachers are encouraged to teach general American English. : http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_American (27/07/2009)

Jenkins, J (2000) points out that most Americans do not follow the GA accent in their daily life. About 33 per cent of the total population of both America and Canada speak with a GA accent. In other words, about two-thirds of the population do not speak GA accent. Therefore, "the so-called standard accent is not by any stretch of the imagination used by a majority in either geographical context.

American people are now attracted to Spanish language. Many of them are learning Spanish language and use them in their daily life. It is predicted that GA is declining radically. In this case the future of American English can easily be predicated.

There are also many models of English pronunciation. Some of the minor dominant models are Australian English, Canadian English and New Zealand English.

Is standard pronunciation possible without NS Models?

ESL teachers are, of course, concerned about the falling standard of English pronunciation. Lingua Franca Core is the concern of the world now. Assuming Lingua Franca Core is a threat to native speakers' model. Alternative model of pronunciation is worth considering. For many years prestige accents like RP and GA have been the models of English Pronunciation. ESL teachers tend to avoid pronunciation teaching because of inadequacy of pronunciation knowledge. Keys, K and Walker (2002) point out "negative attitudes towards teaching pronunciation are not limited to non-native teachers". They further point out that only one native speaker variant is considered prestigious in the UK and the USA. Interestingly a large number of native speakers do not possess this accent. It is predicted that they are not fully equipped to teach pronunciation. It is not the goal to replace native speakers' model of pronunciation and find a specific model for the lingua franca core. The main goal is to find way for **international intelligibility**. The interaction can occur between two L2 speakers or L2 and L1 speakers. Catford, J,C (1950) points out that intelligibility is not the effectiveness of an utterance. Intelligibility ensures that the hearers understand the speakers' message clearly.

Comprehensibility

It means the state of being understood. Comprehensibility is an important issue because of the increasing demand of communication in English between the NNS and NNS rather than NNs and NS in the world. In Venkatagiri, H.S. and Levis, J. M.'s (2007, P-263) article comprehensibility has been described "as perceived ease of understanding". They emphasize phonological awareness from the metalinguistic viewpoint. They argue that "phonological awareness is a construct, which is measured by how well learners can focus on the structure of the L2 system, in this case, the phonology". Comprehensibility is very important in oral communication.

Jenkins, J (<http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/52/2/119.pdf>, 10.08.09) shows two possible solutions for the worldwide acceptance of English pronunciation. First, there should be simplified, neutral, universal pronunciation variety, intelligible and acceptable to both native and non-native speakers of English. Second, the phonological equivalent of Quirk's 'nuclear English' (1981) which was also tried on syntax and morphology. Jenkins draws attention to Gimson's reduction of the phonemic inventory of English, i.e. 24 consonant sounds and 20 vowel sounds, to 14 and 15 respectively. According to Jenkins, this proposal of Gimson may not be a welcome note to English speakers. As an English teacher the researcher also thinks and considers Jenkins' proposal of English pronunciation that influences the British and American media, local norms, and group identity (Jenkins). In this case a neutral, universal form of pronunciation needs to be developed from the early stage rather than from the upper stage. Pennington (1996) suggests multiple models for both native and non-native speakers of English. It emphasizes the generalized

norms according to the need and choice of the learners rather than following the Received Pronunciation or General American.

Techniques of teaching English pronunciation

Penny Ur and Harmer (2002) suggest that imitation or recorded model of sounds, recording of learner speech and contrast with native model and choral repetition of drills can be effective techniques of teaching pronunciation. Celce-Murcia, M, Brinton, D.M and Goodwin, J. M (2000) suggest that some techniques of teaching pronunciation as a part of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): Listening and imitating, Phonetic training, Minimal pair drills, Contextualized minimal pairs, Visual aids (e.g. sound-colour chart, Fidel wall charts, rods, pictures, mirrors etc) and Tongue twisters.

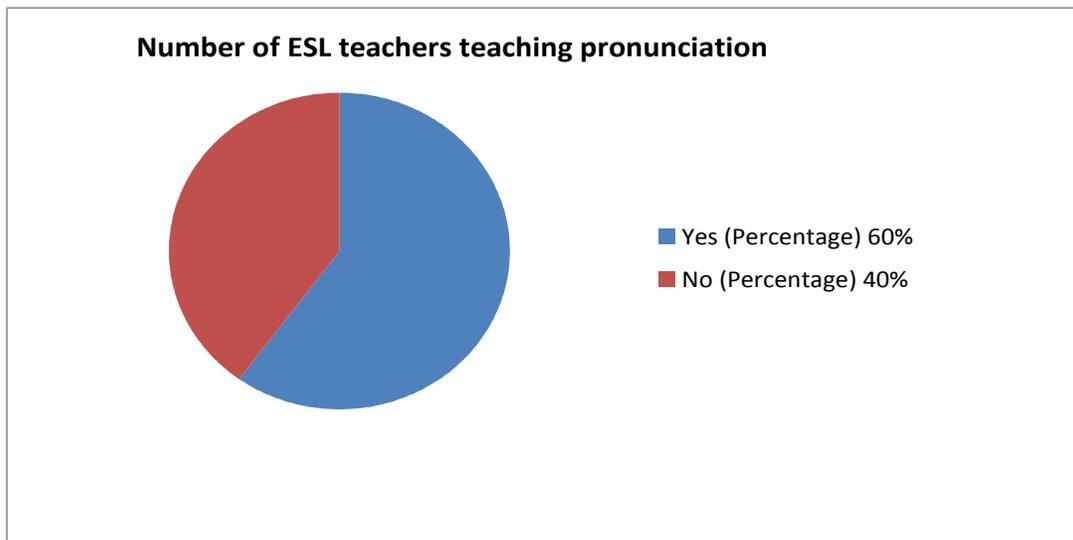
Finding every method unworthy of achieving the goal of pronunciation teaching and learning, Celce-Murcia, M, Brinton, D.M and Goodwin, J. M (2000) have discovered some new directions in teaching pronunciation. They also suggest something new apart from the traditional teaching of pronunciation. They notify that ESL/EFL teacher should use **musical aspects of pronunciation** more than sounds. They suggest that in pronunciation teaching there can be fluency building activities: effective listening exercise, fluency workshop, discussion wheel, values topics and personal introduction collage. Most effective technique of developing English pronunciation is using Multisensory Modes in teaching pronunciation. Much of the literature today suggests that employing multisensory modes in the production class can help to break down the ego boundaries of learners.

Cook (2001) identifies a number of issues in teaching and learning pronunciation. Cook says that learners' L1 has great contribution in acquitting L2 pronunciation. To him use of phonetic transcript, imitation, discrimination of sounds, and communication can be useful for learners.

Penny Ur (1996) notifies “the aim of the pronunciation is not to achieve a perfect imitation of native accent, but simply to get the learner to pronounce accurately enough to be easily and comfortably **comprehensible** to other (component) speakers”.

Results and Findings

Respondents and interviewees: The researcher collected nearly forty respondents and arranged four structured interviews. The respondents are from different ESL countries. Twenty five questionnaire responses were collected from Bangladesh. Sixteen of them are male and nine of them are female English teachers. Their age level varies from 25 to 42. Their length of experience also differs according to age level. Their responses are also variable.

Explanation and Evaluation of the ESL teachers' interest in pronunciation teaching.**Figure:01**

The figure above shows that sixty percent ESL teachers teach English pronunciation.

Table-01: Audio-visual aid is used or not by ESL teachers:

Types of aid in pronunciation teaching:	With audio-visual aid	Without audio-visual aid
Teachers teach English pronunciation:	60%	40%

Questionnaire analysis of model of pronunciation

The table below shows the percentages of the ESL teachers following Received Pronunciation (RP), General American (GA) or other models.

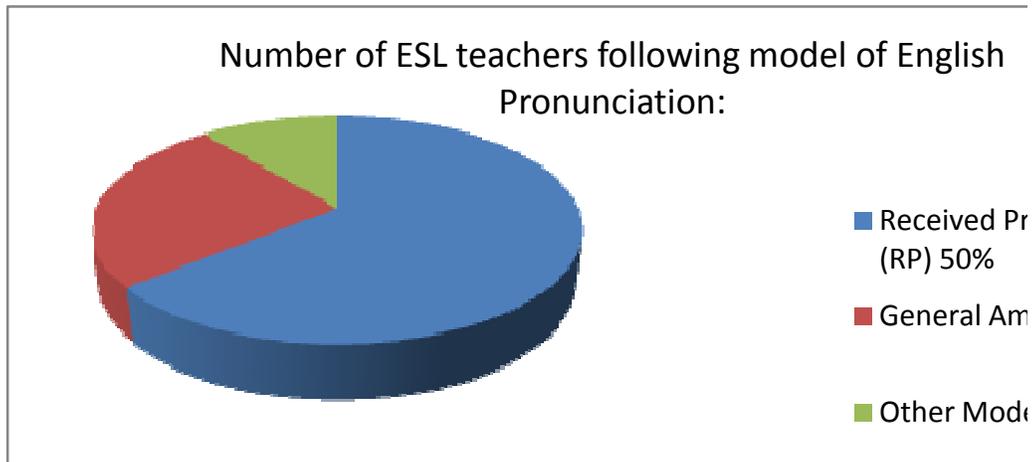


Figure: 02

The figure below shows percentage of accent of English pronunciation

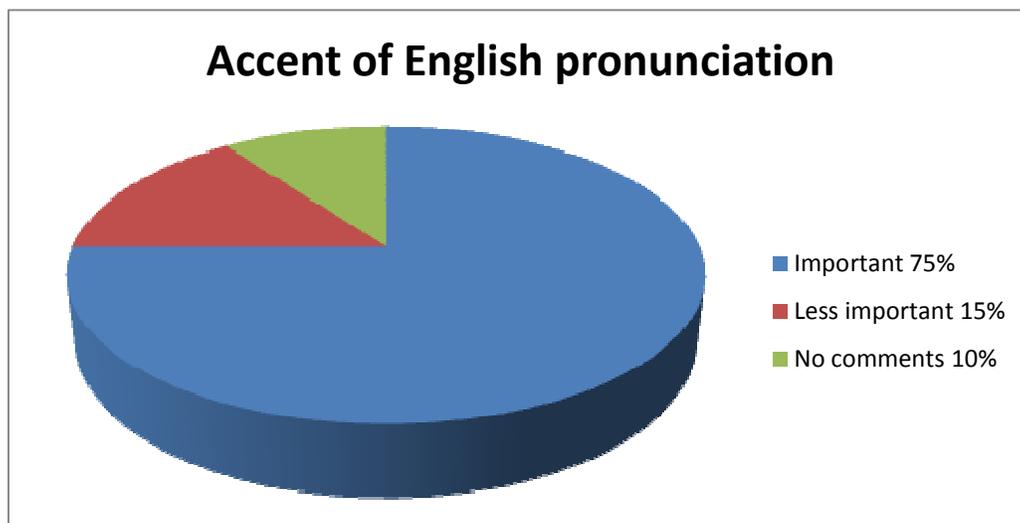


Figure 03: Percentage of accent of English pronunciation

It is quite interesting that some ESL teachers acknowledge the importance of accent in English pronunciation. Surprisingly, they have not mentioned any specific accent.

Table no-2: The importance of pronunciation to ESL/EFL teachers:

Number of teachers	Percentages
Agreed	80%
Disagreed	10%
Neutral	10%

Communicative approach and teaching pronunciation:**Table no-06: Approach of teaching pronunciation**

Communicative approach can be applied in teaching pronunciation:	Completely	Partially	To some extent	No comments
Teachers' comment:	60%	30%	10%	0%

The table shows that majority of the ESL teachers try to follow communicative approach. Thirty percent of the ESL teachers partially follow this approach. Some teachers do not have sufficient knowledge about the communicative approach. They are confused about teaching pronunciation in class rooms.

Results

The most important points of the structured interviews are given below:

- There should be models of English pronunciation preferably Received Pronunciation (RP).
- There should be mutual intelligibility in the oral communication.
- Comprehensibility should be the goal of oral communication.
- To resolve the dispute of different accents, neutral accent can be followed in communication.
- ESL teachers should be trained in pronunciation, specially IPA symbols and its phonological aspects.
- There should be more interactions between the native and the non-native speakers.
- Many techniques like audio-visual aid, computer-assisted technology, sound colour chart, pronunciation software can be applied in learning and teaching pronunciation.

Suggested model of pronunciation

There should be a model of English pronunciation. Otherwise it will be difficult to maintain a standard. It is not argued that Received Pronunciation or General American should be models of English pronunciation. However it is emphasized to make communication successful, the speakers' message should be comprehensible to the listeners. It should be mutually intelligible.

The researcher thinks that models like Received Pronunciation and General American should not be ignored in learning and teaching pronunciation. These two models are the foundation stones of English pronunciation. There are certain differences between these models. But these differences are not the problem of comprehension. Now English has become a world language. The need for standard pronunciation has become the burning question of the day. Most respondents of the questionnaire do agree with the researcher that a model of pronunciation can enhance better pronunciation. Neutral accent can be applied in this case. Stress is an important tool in conveying meaning. In sentence lexical words are usually stressed. Important meaning depends on stress in sentences.

Intelligibility and comprehensibility should be the goal of teaching and learning pronunciation in ESL context. A large number of the non-native speakers' case has to be considered. There should be clear understanding between the speaker and listener. Intelligible pronunciation leads to better communication and comprehension.

Techniques of teaching/learning pronunciation

Based on the literature review and investigation of the teaching and learning of pronunciation the researcher has got some suggestions for the techniques of teaching pronunciation.

- Use of phonetic transcript.
- Imitation.
- Ear trailing for sound contrast.
- Phonetic training (e.g. using videos and head diagrams)
- Comparison between L1 and L2 sound system.
- Focusing on individual sound
- Minimal pair drills
- Pronunciation games
- Setting up a speaking exercise, e.g. dialogue, role-play, chat etc
- Learning by heart of sentences, rhythms, jingles
- Jazz chants
- Tongue twisters

The researcher thinks that the above techniques can be tried by ESL teachers. Hopefully they will get good results.

Summary of findings

Table08: Summary of Findings:

Research Questions	Percentage Of teachers agreed	Percentage Of teachers disagreed	No comments
Received pronunciation (RP) or General American (GA) can be followed with neutral accent.	75%	15%	10%
Special emphasis should be given on Intelligibility and comprehensibility of English pronunciation.	95%	0%	5%
Stress pattern of English language should be maintained in oral communication.	60%	10%	30%
Computer-assisted technology, audio-visual aid, pronunciation software, internet, exposure to oral communication, drilling, listening to English movies, radios can be good techniques of teaching pronunciation.	90%	10%	0%
English teachers should have training on pronunciation from recognised Universities.	80%	5%	15%

Implications

The researcher would like to give some suggestions for ESL countries; especially Bangladesh in the light of the findings. ESL teachers should focus more on mutual intelligibility and comprehensibility rather than difficult intonation pattern of the English language. They should focus more on stress pattern of sentences. It is known that stress determines meaning of sentences. In this case lexical words have to be found out and put stress on it. Native like pronunciation should not be the goal of pronunciation learning. The reason is that there are more interactions among the non-native speakers rather than the native speakers. The important focus should be on the majority, not on the minority. Therefore for the betterment of the ESL/EFL countries of the world, communication should be easy and comfortable. Models like Received Pronunciation and General American should not be neglected entirely. These two models can be partially followed to maintain standard of English pronunciation. It is also true that British or Americans do not follow the standard they have created. However these are the standards with some characteristics. Many ESL countries are more influenced by these two models for economic, hegemonic, political, historical and military reasons. It is not possible to reconstruct a new model. There are many obstacles in this case. It is better to improve something in relation of the base. ESL teachers should focus more on the techniques of teaching pronunciation. Most of the techniques have been given in the previous chapters. It is true that ESL teachers do regard pronunciation as an important skill in the present scenario.

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English as a second or foreign language in Bangladesh has been used for many days. Therefore the standard of English usage in our country is not satisfactory. Especially the standard of English in pronunciation is very poor. Sometimes the pronunciation which is used by Bengali speakers is very ridiculous also. Generally, the teaching of English as a foreign language in observing English language teaching classrooms, discussing with teachers, students and educationists, who shared their valued opinions regarding this issue. Besides this, a questionnaire has been prepared in pronunciation of any language. But this is a matter of great regret that in our country most of the students are not acquainted with IPA symbols during their student life even in their professional English teaching life.