

# Pronunciation of the Aspirated English Sounds by Bangladeshi EFL/ESL Learners: An Empirical Study

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## Abstract

The present study aims to explore how Bangladeshi EFL/ESL learners pronounce the aspirated English consonant sounds in their utterances. For this purpose, language samples were collected from 60 Bangladesh EFL/ESL learners who are currently studying English as a compulsory subject at the Higher Secondary Level. The EFL/ESL learners were selected from some fifteen colleges from eight districts under four major divisions of the country. From each of these institutions, four EFL/ESL learners were selected through purposive sampling. They were asked to read aloud a list of 15 English words in which the aspirated English consonant sounds occurred some 15 times in different linguistic contexts. The findings indicate that most of these Bangladeshi EFL/ESL learners do not apply aspiration in their English pronunciation. On the basis of the findings, some suggestions are recommended both for the teachers and the learners for improving the teaching-learning of this important aspect of English pronunciation.

## 1. Introduction

In the present globalised village, English is acknowledged to be a common mode of communication among different nations for different socio-cultural, geo-political, educational, economic, trade-commerce-sports related purposes. Bangladesh, as an integral part of this global village, cannot but recognize the significance of this international language. So, English is officially acknowledged as one of the major tools for education and as a medium of communication in vital sectors of life. In the academic arena, English is taught at schools and colleges as a compulsory subject. And at the university level, this language is also taught in the English departments as well as at other departments as a relative course. Moreover, most of the books at the higher level education are written in English. Again, in the field of business, in the court of law, in the field of trade and commerce, English is also used as a mode of communication.

All the students of Bangladesh learn this language compulsorily for more than twelve years in their academic life and try to master different skills of this language. However, their skill in English, especially their pronunciation is not satisfactory. Banu finds a huge gap between the British Received pronunciation and the English pronunciation of Bangladeshi speakers (63). Due to this huge gap, many Bangladeshi users of English often cannot understand properly when they listen to any native speakers in real life contexts or when they watch any English movies or English news. Similarly, when they use English for communication, they often fail to make themselves intelligible to the foreigners. One reason behind this problem is that Bangladeshis cannot cope with the subtle aspects of English pronunciation such as aspiration, stress, intonation, rhythm, etc.

The present study is devoted to exploring how the Bangladeshi EFL/ESL learners deal with aspiration, one of the subtle aspects of English phonetics. The study attempts to find

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out how Bangladeshi EFL/ESL learners pronounce the aspirated English consonant sounds /p/, /t/ and /k/.

## 2. Literature Review

In the past, some studies were conducted on the problems of Bangladeshi speakers with English pronunciation. Studies conducted by Hai and Ball (1961), Rahman (1995), Banu (2008), Muzaffar (1999), Shahidullah (1988), Hoque (2010), Barman (2008), Tahareen (2015), and Jahan (2011) focused on the problems and difficulties that Bangladeshi EFL/ESL learners encounter when they learn English pronunciation..

In a study on the pronunciation problems of the Bengali speakers in English, Rahman identifies some particular areas of English pronunciation that cause difficulties for Bangladeshi EFL/ESL learners such as aspirated English sounds ( /ph/, /th/, /kh/), labio-dental English fricatives ( /f/, /v/), dental fricative ( /θ/, /ð/), palato-alveolar fricative ( /ʃ/ /ʒ/), stress, intonation, etc. (1).

Banu in her study on Bangladeshi English observes that Bangladeshi users of English cannot pronounce English long vowel /ɜ:/, English diphthong /ei/ and English central vowels /ʌ/ (64). She also observes that Bangladeshi speakers of English mistakenly replace some unaspirated English consonants /f/, and /v/ with the aspirated ones /ph/, and /bh/ (65).

In a case study on the English pronunciation of Bangladeshi tertiary level students, Hoque identifies that Bangladeshi students replace English long vowels with short ones; cannot pronounce English diphthongs properly, mispronounce labio-dental /f/ and /v/ as bilabial ones; has difficulties in pronouncing consonant clusters; mispronounce alveolar /s/ as post-alveolar /ʃ/; have problems with /z/, /ð/ and /d/ sounds (197).

In another study Hai and Ball observed that Bengali speakers of English pronounce four English vowel sounds /ɑ:/, /ɜ:/, /ʌ/, and /ə/ in the same way as they pronounce the Bengali vowel /a/ (8). They also observe that Bengali speakers do not differentiate between the long and short vowels of English; rather only use short vowels (10).

Shahidullah in his study on the English and Bengali phonology finds that Bangladeshi speakers mix up the alveolar and the palato-alveolar fricatives, that is, they confuse /s/ with /ʃ/, and /z/ with /dʒ/ (71). He also finds that English aspirated sounds /ph/, /th/ and /kh/ become unaspirated in Bangladeshi English (73).

## 3. Theoretical Perspective

In linguistics, aspiration is defined as the sudden burst of air that follows the release of some certain plosive consonant sounds. It is the audible breath which may accompany when certain plosive consonants are released (Crystal 37). On the other hand, aspiration is defined as a phonetic phenomenon where a sound segment is followed by a voiceless breathing (Trask 36).

In the International Phonetic Alphabet, aspiration is marked as a superscript [h] after the concerned phoneme as in /thaim/. This is called post-aspiration. There is also pre-aspiration where the superscript [h] precedes the main phoneme (Barman 2).

Aspiration plays different roles in different languages. In some languages, it is distinctive, that is, the presence or the absence of it affects the meaning and in others, it is redundant and does not create any semantic differences. In Bengali phonology, it is a distinctive feature in as it creates a difference in meaning (Barman 1). For example, in Bengali, /kan/ and /khan/ are distinguished by the presence and the absence of aspiration

leading to semantic differences: the first word meaning a body part (ear) and the second word indicating an invitation to eat.

Shaw also claims that aspiration is a distinctive feature in Bengali because it differentiates sounds which are similar in other respects (299). For example, Bengali /b/ and /bh/ have similar places and manner of articulation. Both of them are bilabial plosive consonants but when they are used in a minimal pair, such as /baʔ/ (a disease) and /bhaʔ/ (rice), they provide different meaning and this difference is caused by the presence and the absence of aspiration in this particular context.

Chatterji classified Bengali consonant sounds as aspirated and unaspirated. According to him, every second and fourth letter in Bengali 'barga'<sup>1</sup> is aspirated and the rest of the letters in the 'barga' are unaspirated (42). Shahidullah also recognizes aspiration as a distinctive feature in Bengali (30-31). Islam takes into consideration aspiration to categorize Bengali consonants (Islam 44).

However, aspiration is not a distinctive feature in all languages. In some languages, it is a distinctive feature and it is non-distinctive in others (Barman 1). For example, in English, aspiration is a redundant or non-distinctive feature as its presence or absence does not make any differences in meaning (Hyman 5-6). In English, the pronunciation of the word 'kill' (/kɪl/ and /kʰɪl/) with aspiration and without aspiration indicate the same meaning. That is, this feature is redundant in this language, and so it does not make any differences in meaning.

In English, the production of /p/, /t/, and /k/ is followed by an audible plosion like a burst of noise making a sound like /h/ and this quality is called aspiration (Roach 32). Again these sounds behave differently in different situations: in syllable initial positions, these sounds are usually aspirated, that is, these are produced with a burst of air like /pʰ/, /tʰ/ and /kʰ/. However if these sounds are preceded by the consonant /s/ like *speak*, *start*, and *sky*, they will not be aspirated; rather will remain unaspirated (Jones 69-74). Again in some situations, they are followed by the consonants /r/, and /l/, such as *pray*, *play*, *try*, and *cry*, *clay*. In such contexts, they are also aspirated.

In syllable medial positions, whether they will be aspirated or unaspirated depends on the quality of their preceding and following syllables. If they are followed or preceded by stressed syllables, they are not aspirated, but if they are followed or preceded by unstressed syllables, they are aspirated (Roach 33). The /p/, /k/ and /t/ are unaspirated in *vapour*, *liking* and *water* because they are preceded by stressed syllables but aspirated in *repeat*, *locate*, and *retake* as they are preceded by unstressed syllables.

In final position, they are always unaspirated (Roach 33). The /p/, /k/ and /t/ are unaspirated in *trip*, *sick* and *hat*.

#### 4. Objective of the Study

- a) The broader aim of this study is to investigate into how aspirated English consonant sounds are pronounced by Bangladeshi EFL/ESL learners. At the micro level, the study aims at finding out:
  - b) (a) Whether and to what extent Bangladeshi EFL/ ESL learners can apply aspiration in their pronunciation of English consonant sound /p/
  - (b) Whether and to what extent Bangladeshi EFL/ ESL learners can apply aspiration in their pronunciation of English consonant sound /t/
  - (c) Whether and to what extent Bangladeshi EFL/ ESL learners can apply aspiration in their pronunciation of English consonant sound /k/.

## 5. Methodology

### 5.1. Study area

The study was conducted in 8 districts under four major divisions of the country. The districts covered in the study are Dhaka and Gazipur from Dhaka division; Cumilla and Cox’s Bazar from Chattogram division, Sylhet and Habigong from Sylhet division and Rajshahi and Natore from Rajshahi division,

### 5.2. Study Population

This study was conducted on a total of 60 (sixty) EFL/ESL learners of some 15 colleges of the country. From each of these colleges, four EFL/ESL learners were selected as respondents for the study.

### 5.3. Sampling

The study areas, educational institutions and the respondents of the study were selected through purposive sampling. The table below shows the distribution of the respondents from the fifteen colleges from the eight districts under four major divisions:

Division	District	No. of Colleges	No. of Students	Sampling
Dhaka	Dhaka	2	8	Purposive Sampling
	Gazipur	2	8	
Chattogram	Cumilla	2	8	
	Cox’s Bazar	2	8	
Rajshahi	Rajshahi	1	4	
	Natore	2	8	
Sylhet	Sylhet	2	8	
	Habigonj	2	8	
		Total = 15	Total = 60	

Table 1: Distribution of the respondents

### 5.4. Data Collection

As the study involves pronunciation of English utterances, a list of 15 English words containing the aspirated /p/, /t/ and /k/ in different linguistic contexts were developed. In these words, the aspirated /p/ occurred 5 times in the words *paddy*, *pet*, *pan*, *power* and *apply*. Likewise, the aspirated /t/ occurred in the words *tiny tour*, *toy*, *tea* and *entrap*. And the aspirated /k/ occurred in the words *castle chasm*, *kit*, *cop*, and *succumb*.

All the 60 EFL/ESL learners were asked to pronounce these words and their pronunciation was recorded with the voice recorder of Samsung M10 mobile set.

### 5.5. Data Analysis

After collecting data from the EFL/ESL learners, the recorded pronunciations of these words were transcribed with IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet). Then the aspirated and the unaspirated pronunciations of /p/, /t/ and /k/ are identified, analyzed, and presented through descriptive statistics using SPSS.

**6. Findings and Discussion**

The empirical data collected from the respondents show that aspiration is marginally present in Bangladeshi English. Each respondent pronounced these sounds once. And, the total number of pronunciations of these aspirated sounds was 900. That is, 60 EFL learners pronounced /p/ 300 times, /t/ 300 times and /k/ 300 times. Among these pronunciations, only 127 (14.11%) pronunciations were aspirated, that is, the learners were able to apply aspiration 127 times when they pronounced the words in the list having the aspirated /ph/, /th/ and /kh/. In 773 (85.89%) pronunciations, these learners did not apply aspiration.

**6.1. Aspiration of /p/ in the study**

The data show that the aspirated /ph/ occurred 5 times in the words paddy /phædi/, pet /phet/, pan /phæn/, power /phəʊə/ and apply /əphlaɪ/ and was pronounced 300 times by 60 EFL/ESL learners. However, aspiration was found in only 42 (14%) pronunciations, that is, these learners pronounced /p/ 42 times as aspirated /ph/. On the other hand, they pronounced the aspirated /ph/ as unaspirated /p/ 258 (86% ) times The chart below shows the aspiration of /p/ in the study:

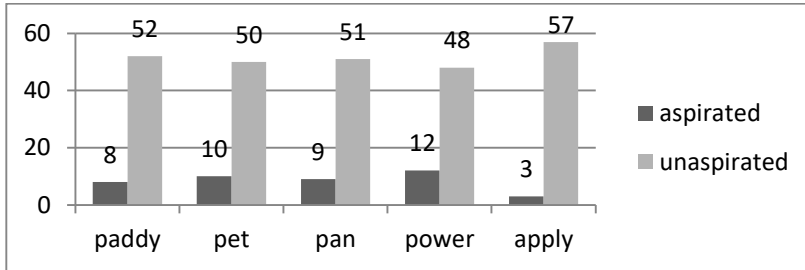


Figure 1: Aspiration of /p/ in the study [Source: Field Data]

**6.2. Aspiration of /t/ in the study**

The data show that the aspirated /th/ occurred 5 times in the word list and was pronounced 300 times by the 60 respondents. However, aspiration was found in only 49 (16.34%) pronunciations, that is, learners pronounced /t/ 49 times as aspirated /th/. On the other hand, they pronounced the aspirated /th/ as unaspirated /t/ 251 (83.64 %) times The chart below shows the aspiration of /t/ in the study:

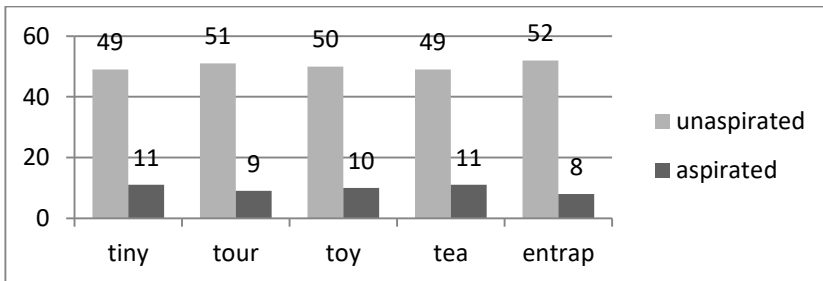


Figure 2: Aspiration of /t/ in the study [Source: Field Data]

**6.3. Aspiration of /k/ in the study**

The data show that the aspirated /kh/ occurred 5 times in the word list and was pronounced 300 times by 60 respondents. However, aspiration was found in only 35

(11.67%) pronunciations, that is, learners pronounced /k/ 35 times as aspirated /kh/. On the other hand, they pronounced the aspirated /kh/ as unaspirated /k/ 265 (88.33 %) times. The chart below shows the aspiration of /k/ in the study:

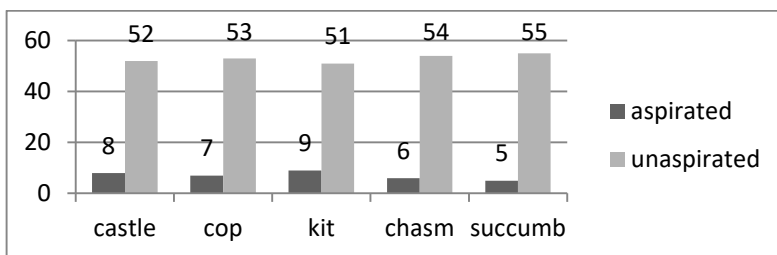


Figure 3: Aspiration of /k/ in the study [Source: Field Data]

#### 6.4. Aspiration of /p/, /t/ and /k/ in the study

The data show that aspiration occurs only 127 ( 14.11%) times in the pronunciation of all the respondents. That is, /k/, /t/ and /p/ were pronounced as aspirated /kh /, /th/ and /ph/ 127 times. No aspiration was detected in 777 (85.89%) pronunciations. The chart below shows the status of aspiration in the study:

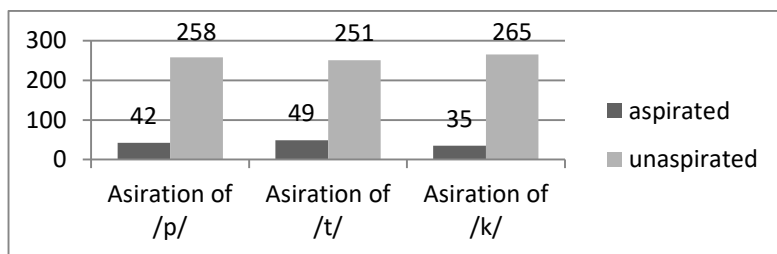


Figure 4: Aspiration of /t/, p/ and /k/ in the study [Source: Field Data]

### 7. Importance of the Study

Bangladesh is a part of today’s global village. So, Bangladeshis are to maintain the global communication across this globe for different socio-cultural, geo-political, educational, economic, trade-commerce-sports related purposes. And for these reasons, communicative competence in English is very significant. For effective communication in this fast growing global world, we need to be prepared with better communication skill at the national and international level. At the national boundary, we need to communicate with the foreigners from different parts of the world who come here everyday for numerous purposes. We need to talk to many native as well as non-native English speakers. For this, we need better communication skills in English .Again, when we travel to different English speaking countries, we need to make us intelligible to the people of those countries.

So, the study emphasizes one of the components of English phonetics which is very important for mastering intelligible pronunciation. The findings of the study can help our teachers to prepare our future generations with intelligible pronunciation skill by which they can become successful in communicating with the foreigners at the national and international arena.

## 8. Recommendations and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to find out whether and to what extent Bangladeshi EFL/ESL learners can apply aspiration in their English pronunciation. The findings indicate that aspiration occurs in Bangladeshi English pronunciation but very marginally.

So, on the basis of the findings of this study, some suggestions are recommended both for English teachers and Learners as regard to the teaching and learning of this important component of English pronunciation. The following tips can be very useful to the EFL/ESL teachers and learners:

- Having training on English phonetics
- Awareness about the places of articulation of the aspirated English sounds
- Awareness about the manner of articulation of the aspirated English sounds
- Providing /receiving the right kind of language input
- Exposure to the native like model of English pronunciation
- Playing /listening to audios of native English conversation, songs, news etc. in the class.
- Showing/watching videos of native English conversations, English movies, drama, in the class.
- Speaking activities like role-play, singling , speech in the class
- Question /Answer session
- Discussion in pair and group

## Notes and References

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### Appendix

The List of Words Used in the Study

kit	cop	power	pet	paddy	'pan'	tiny	entrap
chasm	castle	succumb	toy	apply	tea	tour	

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<sup>1</sup> A serial of five letters in Bengali Alphabet