Pronunciation of English Diphthongal Sounds by Bangladeshi ESL/EFL Learners at the Higher Secondary Level: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore how Bangladeshi ESL learners deal with the pronunciation of English diphthongs. For this purpose, some 60 ESL/EFL learners were selected from some 15 colleges in 8 districts of 4 major divisions across the country. A list of 8 words having all the diphthongal sounds of English was developed. The selected learners were asked to pronounce these eight words in isolation and their utterances were recorded. After analyzing these utterances, it is found that Bangladeshi ESL/EFL learners have considerable pronunciation problems with these diphthongal sounds of English. Based on the findings, this study suggests some recommendations for the ESL/EFL learners and teachers so that they can improve the quality of the pronunciation of these English sounds with a view to developing better communicative skill in different ESL/EFL situations at home and abroad.

Introduction

Pronunciation is a very important component of any language and is directly connected with speaking and listening. Without a sound knowledge of pronunciation, it is quite hard to communicate intelligibly in any ESL/EFL situations at home and abroad.

Bangladeshi ESL/EFL learners start to study English as a compulsory subject from the very beginning of their school life. They study this subject for five years at primary level, five years at secondary level and two years at higher secondary level. That is, they pass twelve years of their academic life studying this language as a compulsory subject. During this long period, they learn different aspects of English as such grammar, writing, and reading skills. However, they are hardly taught a course on English pronunciation.

As a result, Bangladeshi ESL/ EFL learners are hardly aware of the various features of English pronunciation. They are quite unaware of the manner and places of English pronunciation. They have no idea of the properties of English vowel and consonant sounds. They do not have any knowledge of vowel length, glides, diphthongs, and tripthongs. Likewise, they are not aware of aspiration, voicing, friction, stress, and intonation which are very important aspects of English pronunciation.

So, the present study aims to explore how Bangladeshi EFL/ESL learners deal with the pronunciation of English diphthongal sounds, a very important aspect of English phonetics and phonology.

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2. Literature Review

Few studies have been conducted by some researchers on the problems of Bangladeshi speakers with English pronunciation. In this regard, studies by Hai and Ball (1961), Rahman (1995), Banu (2008), Muzaffar (1999), Shahidullah (1988), Hoque (2010), Barman (2008, 2009), Tahareen (2015), and Jahan (2011) are worth mentioning.

In a study Banu observes that there exists a huge gap between the British Received pronunciation and the English pronunciation of a Bangladeshi. She finds that Bangladeshi users of English cannot pronounce English diphthongs /eɪ/ and //əʊ/ and usually mispronounce them as /e:/ and /o:/(64).

In a case study on the English pronunciation of Bangladeshi tertiary level students, Hoque investigates the influence of the local varieties on the sound patterns of English of Bangladeshi students. He identifies that the Bangladesh students at the tertiary level cannot pronounce English diphthongs properly and they usually pronounce the first part and prolong it (214).

Hai and Ball conducted a study on the structures of English and Bengali phonemes. They observed that Bengali speakers of English pronounce the first part of the diphthong and ignore the second part (11). They opine that that Bengali speakers only pronounce the /e/ of the diphthong /eɪ/ in *make* and the /ʊ/ of the diphthong /ʊə/ in *tour* (11).

However, Shahidullah observes that Bengali speakers do not have any great difficulty with the pronunciation of English diphthongs (91).

3. Theoretical Analysis:

In many languages of the world, there exist some vowel sounds whose quality is not constant, rather, the quality of such vowel segments changes continually and the vowel segments having such continually changing quality are diphthongs (Abercrombie 60). On the other hand, Roach defines diphthongs as those sounds which are produced with a movement or a glide from one vowel to another (20). Unlike a pure vowel which does not glide but remains constant, a diphthong always takes a glide. In fact, a diphthong is a combination of two vowel sounds in which the first part is always much longer and stronger than the second part and the glide from the first part to the second, becomes noticeable only in the last quarter of its pronunciation (Roach 20).However, a diphthong represents only one sound, not two. (Underhill 22)

 In RP, there are eight diphthongs and these are classified into two groups according to their final segmental property: centering diphthong and closing diphthong.

3.1. Centring diphthongs

 Some diphthongs take a glide towards the central part of the vowel area and so, these are called centring diphthongs (Arnold and Rahilly 99).RP has three centring diphthongs: /ɪə/, /eə/, and /ʊə/.

English diphthong /ɪə/: During its articulation, the glide starts from a little earlier position than the English short vowel /ɪ/ and moves towards the central vowel /ə/ (Roach 20). This diphthong is found in worlds like *here* /hɪə/, *beard* /bɪəd/, near /nɪə/. etc.

English diphthong /eə/: This diphthong begins from the half-close and half- opens area, that is, from the position of the short vowel /e/ and then takes a glide towards /ə/ (Kelly 35). This sound can be traced in the words *fair* /feə/, *scarce* /skeə/, *dare* /deə /, etc.

English diphthong /ʊə/: This diphthong starts from an area which is slightly closer than the short vowel /ʊ/ and then a glide occurs towards the central vowel /ə/ (Kelly 35). Examples of such sounds are found in words such as *tour* /tʰʊə/, *poor* /pʊə/, *doer* /dʊə/, etc.

3.2. Closing diphthongs

Some diphthongs take glide towards a closer vowel and so these are called closing diphthongs. As the second portion of any diphthong is very weak and short, the glide cannot reach the position of a close vowel (Roach 21).

3.2.1. Closing diphthong ending in [i]: Three diphthongs take glides towards the close vowel /ɪ/ and these are /eɪ/ , /aɪ/. and /ɔɪ/.

English diphthong eɪ: This diphthong starts from a position between the half-close and half- open area that is, from the position of the short vowel /e/ and then takes a glide towards the closer vowel /ɪ/ (Hooke and Rowell 155). Sounds of this sort are found in words like *make/meɪk/, hate/heɪt/, save/seɪv/, late/leɪt,* etc.

English Diphthong aɪ : It starts from the position of an open vowel that is between front and back; then it takes a glide towards the close vowel /ɪ/. (Kelly 36) Such diphthongs are heard in words like *time/tʰaɪm/, tide/tʰaɪd/,* and *light/laɪt/.*

English Diphthong /ɔɪ/: The starting point of this diphthong is the position of the English long vowel /ɔ:/ and then it takes a glide towards the closing vowel /ɪ/ (Roach 21). Examples of this diphthongal sound are found in words like *toy/tʰɔɪ /, boy/bɔɪ/,* and *coy/kɔɪ/.*

3.2.2 Closing diphthong ending in /u/: Two diphthongs take glides towards the close vowel /u/.

English Diphthong əʊ: This diphthong begins from the central position of the short vowel "schwa" / ə/ and then a glide from this area occurs towards the close vowel /ʊ/(Hooke and Rowell 167). During its production, lips are slightly rounded at the time of gliding. Such sounds can be found in words like *go/gəʊ/, show /ʃəʊ/, home/həʊm/, most/məʊst/, load /ləʊd/,* etc.

English Diphthongs /aʊ/: The articulation of this diphthong begins from the position of the long vowel /a:/ and then it glides toward the close vowel /ʊ (Roach 22)/. However it cannot reach there and the glide stops somewhere between half-close and half-open area. A slight lip-rounding also occurs during its pronunciation. These diphthongs are found in words like *mouse/maʊs/, house/haʊs/, bow/baʊ /, loud/laʊd/,* etc.

4. Objectives

The overall objective of this study is to explore the pronunciation problems of Bangladeshi EFL learners with English diphthongal sounds. Specifically, the study has the following objectives:

a. To explore the pronunciation problems of Bangladeshi EFL/ESL learners with English Centring Diphthongs

b. To explore the pronunciation problems of Bangladeshi EFL/ESL learners with English Closing Diphthongs

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. From each of these districts, two colleges: one from urban areas and one from rural areas were included in the study. However, from Rajshahi district, only one college from rural area.

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 eight districts under four major divisions of the country:

Division	District	No.of Colleges	No. of Students	Sampling Type
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	
4 Divisions	8 Districts	15 Colleges	60 Respondents	

Table 1: Sampling of Study Area, Colleges and Respondents

5.4. Data Collection:

5.4.1. Word List

In the study, for collecting data regarding the pronunciation of English diphthongal sounds, a list of some eight words *late* /leɪt/, *load*/ləʊd/, *tiny* /tʰaɪni/, *toy*/tʰɔɪ/, *loud*

/laʊd/, *here*/hɪə/, *tour*/ʰtʊə/, and *share*/sheə/ having all the English diphthongs /eɪ/, /əʊ/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /aʊ/, /ɪə/, /ʊə/ and /eə/ respectively was developed. .

5.4.2. Recording: 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.

5.4.3. Data Analysis:

After collecting data from the EFL/ESL learners, the recorded pronunciation of these words was transcribed with IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet). Then, the transcribed pronunciations of the learners were analyzed through a contrastive analysis with RP (Received Pronunciation) as in the Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary.

6. Findings and Discussion:

6.1. Pronunciation of Closing Diphthongs:

6.1.1. Pronunciation of English Diphthong /eɪ/:

The empirical data in Table 2 show that only 46.7% learners were able to pronounce the diphthongal sound /eɪ/ in the word *late* /leɪt/ correctly. Whereas 43.3% learners mispronounced this diphthong replacing it with the short vowel /e/ while another 10% learners mispronounced this sound replacing it with the short vowel /æ/;

Word	RP	Empirical Data	Percentages	Analysis
late	/leɪt/	/leɪt/	46.7%	/eɪ/pronounced correctly
		/let/	43.3%	/eɪ/ replaced by /e/
		/læt/	10%	/eɪ/ replaced by /æ/

Table 2: Pronunciation of English Diphthong /eɪ/
Source: Empirical Data

6.1.2. Pronunciation of English Diphthong /əʊ/:

The empirical data in Table 3 show that only 15% learners were able to pronounce the diphthongal sound /əʊ/ in the word *load* /ləʊd/ correctly. Whereas 63.3% learners replaced this sound with the mid back vowel /o/; 10% learners with the short vowel /ɒ/; 6.7% learners with the closing diphthong /aʊ/ and another 5% with the short vowel /ʊ/.

Word	RP	Empirical Data	Percentages	Analysis
load	/ləʊd/	/ləʊd/	15%	/əʊ/pronounced correctly
		/lod/	63.3%	/əʊ/ replaced by /o/
		/lɒd/	10%	/əʊ/ replaced by /ɒ/
		/laʊd/	6.7%	/əʊ/ replaced by /aʊ/
		/lʊd/	5%	/əʊ/ replaced by /ʊ/

Table 3: Pronunciation of English Diphthong /əʊ/
Source: Empirical Data

6.1.3. Pronunciation of Closing Diphthong /aɪ/:

The empirical data in Table 4 show that only 18.3% learners were able to pronounce the diphthongal sound /aɪ/ in the word *tiny* /taɪni/ correctly. On the other hand, 71.7% learners mispronounced this closing diphthong replacing it with the short vowel /ɪ/ while 6.7% leaners replaced this sound with the short vowel /e/ and another 3.3% learners with the closing diphthong /eɪ/.

Word	RP	Empirical Data	Percentages	Analysis
tiny	/tʰaɪni/	/taɪni/	18.3%	/aɪ/pronounced correctly
		/tɪni/	71.7%	/aɪ/ replaced by /ɪ/
		/teni/	6.7%	/aɪ/ replaced by /e/
		/teɪni/	3.3%	/aɪ/ replaced by /eɪ/ replaced by /e//

Table 4: Pronunciation of Closing Diphthong /aɪ/
Source: Empirical Data

6.1.4. Pronunciation of Closing Diphthong /ɑʊ/:

The empirical data in Table 5 show that 80% learners were able to pronounce the diphthongal sound /ɑʊ/ in the word *loud* /lɑʊd/ correctly whereas 16.7% learners mispronounced this closing diphthong replacing it with the mid back vowel /o/ ; 1.7% learners with the diphthong /əʊ/ and another 1.7% learners with the short vowel/ʊ/;

Word	RP	Empirical Data	Percentages	Analysis
loud	/lɑʊd/	/lɑʊd/	80%	/ɑʊ/ pronounced correctly
		/lod/	16.7%	/ɑʊ/ replaced by /o /
		/ləʊd/	1.7%	/ɑʊ/ replaced by /əʊ/
		/lʊd/	1.7%	/ɑʊ/ replaced by / ʊ /

Table 5: Pronunciation of Closing Diphthong /ɑʊ/
Source: Empirical Data

6.1.5. Pronunciation of Closing Diphthong /ɔɪ/:

The empirical data in Table 5 show that only 5% learners mispronounced the closing diphthong /ɔɪ/ in the word *toy* /tɔɪ/ replacing it with some different vowel sounds /e/, /ui/ and/əʊ/.

Word	RP	Empirical Data	Percentages	Analysis
toy	/tʰɔɪ/	/tɔɪ/	95%	/ɔɪ/ pronounced correctly
		/te /	1.7%	/ɔɪ/ replaced by /e/
		/ tʊɪ/	1.7%	/ɔɪ/ replaced by /ʊɪ/
		/təʊ/	1.7%	/ɔɪ/ replaced by /əʊ/

Table 6: Pronunciation of Closing Diphthong /ɔɪ/
Source: Empirical Data

6.2. Pronunciation Centring Diphthongs:

6.2.1. Pronunciation of Centring Diphthong /ɪə/:

The empirical data in Table 7 indicate that 93.3% learners mispronounced the centring diphthong /ɪə/ in the word *here* /hɪə/ replacing it with the centering diphthongal sound /eə/.

Word	RP	Empirical Data	Percentages	Analysis
here	/hɪə/	/hɪər/	6.7%	/ɪə/pronounced correctly
		/heər/	93.3%	/ɪə/ replaced by /eə/

Table 7: Pronunciation of Centring Diphthong /ɪə/
Source: Empirical Data

6.2.2. Pronunciation of Centring Diphthong /ʊə/:

The empirical data in Table 8 show that all the learners mispronounced the centering diphthong /ʊə/ in the word *tour* /tʊə/ replacing it with the mid back vowel /o/ (58.3 %), the close rounded vowel /ʊ/ (35%) and with the closing diphthong /aʊ/ (6.7%):

Word	RP	Empirical Data	Percentages	Analysis
tour	/tʰʊə/	/tor/	58.3%	/ʊə/ replaced by /o/
		/tʊr/	35%	/ʊə/replaced by /ʊ/
		/taʊr/	6.7%	/ʊə/ replaced by /aʊ/

Table 8: Pronunciation of Centring Diphthong /ʊə/
Source: Empirical Data

6.2.3. Pronunciation of Centring Diphthong / eə /:

The empirical data in Table 9 show that only 3.3% learners mispronounced the centering diphthong /eə / in the word *share* /ʃeə/ replacing it with /æə/.

Word	RP	Empirical Data	Percentages	Analysis
share	/ʃeə/	/ʃeər/	96.7%	/eə/pronounced correctly
		/ʃæər/	3.3%	/eə/ replaced by /æə/

Table 9: Pronunciation of Centring Diphthong /eə/
Source: Empirical Data

6.3. Pronunciation Problems of Bangladeshi ESL/EFL Learners in the Study

From the Table 10 below, it is seen that the aggregated percentage of correct pronunciation of the diphthongal sounds produced by Bangladeshi EFL/ESL learners at the Higher Secondary Level education in this study is around 43.33% while the percentage of mispronunciation or deviated pronunciation of these sounds is 56.67%. So, it is clearly evident that Bangladeshi ESL learners have huge pronunciation problems with English diphthongal sounds. The highest percentage of errors (100%) is found with the pronunciation of the centring diphthong /ʊə/ in the word tour /tʊə/ while the lowest percentage of errors (3.3%) is found with the pronunciation of the

centering diphthong /eə/ in the word *share* /ʃeə/.The diphthongs that are found to be problematic for Bangladeshi ESL/EFL learners are /ʊə/, /ɪə/, /aɪ/, /eɪ/, and /əʊ/ while other diphthongs such as /aʊ/, /eə/, and /ɔɪ/ are found to cause very little difficulty.

Words	RP	Diphthongs	Correct Pronunciation (%)	Incorrect Pronunciation (%)
late	/leɪt/	/eɪ/	46.7%	53.3%
load	/ləʊd/	/əʊ/	15%	85%
toy	/tʰɔɪ/	/ɔɪ/	95%	5%
loud	/laʊd/	/aʊ/	80%	20%
tiny	/tʰaɪni/	/aɪ/	18.3%	81.7%
share	/ʃeə/	/eə/	96.7%	3.3%
here	/hɪə/	/ɪə/	6.7%	93.3%
tour	/tʰʊə/	/ʊə/	0%	100%
Aggregated Percentages			43.33%	56.67%

Table 10: Pronunciation Problems of Bangladeshi ESL/EFL Learners in the Study
Source: Empirical Data

7. Importance of the Study

Bangladesh is a part of today's global village. So, Bangladesh has 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 how Bangladeshi EFL/ESL learners deal with the pronunciation of English diphthongal sounds. The findings indicate that the pronunciation of English diphthongal sounds poses huge problems for Bangladeshi ESL//EFL learners.

So, some suggestions are recommended both for English teachers and learners as regard to the teaching and learning of these important sounds of English language.

Tips for English Language Teachers:

- Make the learners aware of how the diphthongal sounds are produced
- Make the learners aware of what articulatory organs are required to produce these sounds
- Make them aware of the two parts of each diphthong
- Arrange listening drills of these sounds in isolation and in contexts
- Arrange listening activities to Native English conversation
- Arrange listening to English music, movies, news, commentary
- Make them practice these sounds in minimal pairs
- Encourage Oral production of these sounds in isolation and in contexts
- Make them read aloud
- Arrange oral presentation
- Arrange tongue-twisting activities
- Introduce IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet)
- Teach them how to use dictionary for pronunciation

Tips for English Language Learners:

- Being aware of how the diphthongal sounds are produced
- Being aware of what articulatory organs are required to produce these sounds
- Being aware of the two parts of each diphthong
- Listening to these sounds in isolation and in contexts
- Listening to Native English conversation
- Listening to English music, movies, news, commentary
- Practicing these sounds in minimal pairs
- Oral production of these sounds in isolation and in contexts
- Reading aloud
- Oral presentation
- Tongue-twisting
- Learning IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet)
- Using dictionary

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