**Payam-e-Noor University**

School of Humanities
Department of Linguistics and
Foreign Languages

# Explicit vs. Implicit Teaching of English Vowels and Stress Patterns to Iranian High-School Students

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by:
**Abul Qasem Abdi**

Advisor:
**Dr. Masoud Raee Sharif**

Reader:
**Dr. Gholam Reza Hessamy**

**Tehran – Iran**
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*In the Name of God*

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**Abstract**

The present study aimed at determining the most efficient way to learn and retrieve the accurate pronunciation of English vowels and stress patterns. Ninety male Persian learners of English studying in the third grade of high school were put into three equivalent groups based on a pronunciation test. One of the groups, serving as the control group, received no instruction on pronunciation. The other group received implicit teaching and the other, explicit instruction including extra examples and explanations. After two months of instruction, all the participants read aloud a text of about 200 words while they were recorded. After two weeks, the students were asked to read the same passage once more. This delayed post-test was administered to evaluate the participants' degree of retention in different groups. The participants' performances on the main and the retention tests were analyzed through ANOVA, and it was found that different treatments did not yield the same results. Some Tukey and t-tests were also conducted, and it was proven that the explicit treatment was the best method in improving participants' pronunciation, and also in retrieving what was learned during the course. Participants in the implicit group did not make much progress during the course, and were quite unsuccessful in retrieving what they had learned. It was also found that there was no significant relationship between self-study and learning or retrieving accurate pronunciation.

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Running head: THE EXPLICIT VS. IMPLICIT TEACHING OF ENGLISH VOWELS

# The Explicit vs. Implicit Teaching of English Vowels and Stress to Iranian High-School Students

**Abul Qasem Abdi**

**Payam-e-Noor University**

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. OVERVIEW

Teaching pronunciation is of great value in today's world of education. Since pronunciation plays an essential role in communications, foreign language teachers must attribute deserving importance to teaching pronunciation in language classes. For various reasons, teaching pronunciation has been neglected by many teachers, as Gilbert puts it "it is something of an orphan in English programs round the world," (1994) or as Kelly (1969) names it "the Cinderella" area of foreign language teaching (cited in Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin, 1996). Unlike reading, writing, listening, and oral proficiency, pronunciation has been treated as a luxury "add-on", and where it was taught, it consisted of repetitive drill work, often boring to both the teachers and the students. In Iran, teaching pronunciation has also been paid very little attention in recent years. Most learners of English at Iranian high schools face serious problems in pronouncing English. It seems so crucial to apply much more efficient methods if the education system in the country is supposed to assist the students to decrease their pronunciation problems and to be able to communicate in English.

Teaching pronunciation, like other language skills, can be approached in two ways: explicit and implicit. Unfortunately, little research has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of these two methods. The present study intends to deal with these two methods of teaching pronunciation to Iranian high-school students and to determine whether any of the two is more conducive to better acquisition of accurate pronunciation.

Ninety male high school students were asked to participate in the study. All the participants were studying in the third grade. Based on the results of a pronunciation test (the pre-test), participants were put in three equivalent groups. One of the groups received explicit instruction in pronunciation, which consisted of exposure to the correct pronunciation, exemplification, and explanations. Another group was taught through an implicit treatment which included mere exposure to the correct pronunciation alone, bereft of any other

blessings. The third group, serving as the control group, did not receive any kind of instruction on pronunciation.

After two months of instruction, the main test of the study was administered in which participants in the three groups read a passage of about 200 words aloud and were taped. The same test was administered after two weeks (the post-test) to determine the degree of retention of the different treatments.

Having analyzed the results of the tests, it was found that the explicit group outperformed the other two groups on both tests, i.e. the main and the post-tests. Thus it can be concluded that explicit instruction of English vowels and stress patterns is much more productive than the implicit one, especially when the instruction is of a relatively short duration.

The differences between the phonetic systems of the two languages were the source of a great number of participants' mistakes. As the number of the vowels in Persian is smaller than that in English, and some Persian vowels can stand for two or more English vowels, Persian learners of English face serious problems in accurately pronouncing some of the English vowels. Stress patterns are also quite different in the two languages, and do not match each other. As a result, it is sometimes too difficult for the learners to observe the stress patterns in English.

### 1.2. Statement of the problem

Teaching pronunciation has not been paid sufficient attention in most language learning programs; and the educational system in Iran is not an exception either. As a result, most Persian learners of English in Iran face profound problems in accurately pronouncing English and consequently are not able to communicate efficiently in English. High school students have serious difficulties even in pronouncing the easiest English words, and as a result, consider communication in the English language an out-of-reach attainment. Teachers are not

willing enough to devote any time to teaching pronunciation and make few half-hearted attempts to improve the students' pronunciation. Perhaps one of the reasons for this unwillingness is lack of relevant scientific and empirical research in this area to delineate the most efficient ways to achieve this goal. The few teachers who try to take some action to remove the problem do not have access to the relevant data and have to use the findings of the research done outside the country, a large part of which may be quite inapplicable in the educational system in Iran. It seems quite necessary and vital to do research inside the immediate situation and deal with the problem inside English classes in the country.

### 1.3. Research Questions

The study intends to provide answers to the following questions:

1. Is there any significant relationship between the explicit teaching of English vowels as well as stress on the one hand and accuracy of pronunciation on the other?
2. Is there any significant relationship between the explicit teaching of English vowels as well as stress on the one hand and the retention of accurate pronunciation on the other?
3. Is there any significant relationship between the implicit teaching of English vowels as well as stress on the one hand and accuracy of pronunciation on the other?
4. Is there any significant relationship between the implicit teaching of English vowels as well as stress on the one hand and the retention of accurate pronunciation on the other?
5. Is there any significant relationship between self-study and accuracy of pronunciation?

### 1.4. Significance of the study

In today's rightly-called world of communication, being able to communicate in English as an international language seems an inevitable part of progress and achievement. Communication in a language without mastering its pronunciation is surely doomed to lots of

radical problems. Consequently, learning the exact or at least an acceptable pronunciation of the English language is a skill worthy of intensive scrutiny.

Moreover, pronunciation is a central component of face-to-face interaction, and is, therefore, part of the process by which speakers of a language present an image of themselves to others.

As a result, teaching pronunciation in the most efficient way appears to be one of the vital parts of teaching English to Iranian learners. This study intends to serve as a guide to a most fruitful (if not the most) method of teaching pronunciation at high schools across Iran. Its findings, therefore, can be very helpful, first of all, to the teachers who are concerned about the existing conditions of teaching and learning pronunciation. Authorities in charge of developing educational materials and policies can also reap valuable benefits from the research findings so as to reconsider their perspectives on the issue. Lastly, English learners in Iran may also enjoy the results of the study by trying to follow the advice given and the suggestions made.

### 1.5. Research Hypotheses

H1: There is no significant relationship between the explicit teaching of English vowels as well as stress on the one hand and accuracy of pronunciation on the other.

H2: There is no significant relationship between the explicit teaching of English vowels as well as stress on the one hand and the retention of accurate pronunciation on the other.

H3: There is no significant relationship between the implicit teaching of English vowels as well as stress on the one hand and accuracy of pronunciation on the other.

H4: There is no significant relationship between the implicit teaching of English vowels as well as stress on the one hand and the retention of accurate pronunciation on the other.

H0: There is no significant relationship between self-study and accuracy of pronunciation.

# CHAPTER TWO

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

## 2.1. Introduction

Acquiring good pronunciation in the target language is usually considered as one of the most difficult tasks in language learning. As a matter of fact, it is nearly impossible to acquire native-like pronunciation after the age of puberty. Chastain (1971) believes that excessive importance has usually been put on correct pronunciation in beginner's classes. He thinks that a teacher should help the students gain the speaking ability so that they can concentrate on the message rather than on the code. This is just the same as Hockett's (1972, p. 62) view stating that "a good pronunciation of a foreign language is one which will not draw the attention of a native speaker of that language away from what we are saying to the way in which we are saying it." The goal then in teaching pronunciation is to improve the learners' speaking ability to the extent that it does not cause any interference with communication, both from the speaker's and listener's point of view (cited in Paulston & Bruder, 1976).

Foreign language classes primarily focused on teaching to read about 40 years ago. Pronunciation was considered not so salient and was usually presented so quickly through the alphabet to illustrate the characteristic sound or sounds which were associated with each letter. As any contact with the foreign culture was only through reading, the authentic production of the sounds of the language was not important at all. In fact, pronunciation hints were absolutely framed in terms of the learners' native language rather than in the form of a new language sound system.

Today language teaching more often aims at face-to-face contact with live speakers. In effect, oral communication has become one of the central goals of language study, and the philosophy on which the classroom activities are based has in the same way changed to show the present oral emphasis (Bowen, 1979).

## 2.2. Definitions

### *Implicit and explicit learning and instruction*

Various definitions have been proposed for explicit and implicit learning and instruction in the literature. Most of these definitions consider "awareness" the central element in determining whether an instruction or learning process is explicit or implicit. DeKeyser (1995) suggests that "an instructional treatment is explicit if rule explanation forms part of the instruction (deduction) or if learners are asked to attend to particular forms and try to find the rules themselves (induction)." In other words, as Norris and Ortega (2000) put it, "when neither rule presentation nor directions to attend to particular forms are part of a treatment, that treatment is considered implicit" (cited in DeKeyser, 2003).

Arthur Reber, who is considered the pioneer of implicit learning research, believes that the central issue in implicit learning is lack of consciousness of the structure being learned. He defines implicit learning as "a primitive process of apprehending structure by attending to frequency cues" as opposed to "a more explicit process whereby various mnemonics, heuristics, and strategies are engaged to induce a representational system" (1976, p. 93). Hayes and Broadbent state that implicit learning is "the unselective and passive aggregation of information about the co-occurrence of environmental events and features" (1988, p. 251) (cited in DeKeyser, 2003).

Due to the fact that defining consciousness and awareness is difficult, many other suggestions have been made, which mainly involve intentionality and automaticity. DeKeyser (2001) believes that both these two concepts are clearly distinct from what is involved in implicit learning. He argues that subjects in implicit learning usually have the intention of learning something, even though they may learn something different from what they intended to learn. He claims that automaticity is the result of a learning process, not the characteristic of the learning process itself. Based on the idea that awareness is the defining feature in the