

ADVANCES IN GLOBAL EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

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What's Wrong With My Pronunciation? Pronunciation Difficulties Experienced and Strategies Employed by Pre-Service Foreign Language Teachers in Turkey

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Abstract

Foreign language teachers are expected to have mastery of the phonological system of the target language. Since they are often (mis)judged on the basis of their pronunciation, the perceived pronunciation difficulties and strategies of teacher candidates deserve an in-depth exploration prior to practicum. With the aims of identifying (i) the pronunciation problems preservice teachers experience, (ii) the strategies they use to overcome these difficulties and (iii) whether having an extra year of language studies before starting undergraduate courses contributes to their perceived beliefs about pronunciation skills, data from forty-two teacher candidates will be reported. The participants responded to a questionnaire along with some open-ended questions about pronunciation problems and strategies in an EFL setting in Turkey (adapted from Derwing & Rossiter, 2002). The results indicated that difficulties in speaking a foreign language arise from a lack of grammatical, lexical and phonological knowledge of that language. Paraphrasing, repeating, slowing the speech rate and self-check through online resources were the most frequently utilized strategies. The role of doing an extra year of language studies before starting undergraduate courses was not a significant factor determining the pre-service students' beliefs. The study offers implications for policy makers and curriculum developers in higher education institutions.

Keywords: pronunciation difficulties, pronunciation learning strategies, student beliefs, EFL

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Introduction

Foreign and second language teachers are expected to meet the demanding linguistic standards of the target language including the rules of its syntax, morphology and semantics. One other important expected standard of the profession is to model language use, which is an important indicator of the mastery of the phonological system of that language. Without having acceptable pronunciation, no matter how accurate one may sound, the cases of a communication breakdown would be impossible to prevent (Julia, 2002). What is more, the listeners of the target language could judge the overall ability of the non-native speaker quite positively as long as she has acceptable pronunciation despite serious problems with grammar (Lund, 2003; Pourhosein, 2012). Still, foreign language teachers are most frequently (mis)judged by their pronunciation skills and

relevant teaching practices in the classroom environment. These criticisms are backed up with research findings in the field. For instance, some non-native language teachers are reported to avoid teaching pronunciation altogether (Derwing & Munro, 2005) even though non-native learners report to have benefited from the explicit instruction targeting pronunciation rules (Thomson & Derwing, 2014). Some non-native language teachers believe that the ability to learn foreign accent is based on talent or exposure to the target language (Nair et al., 2017). Yet only 10% of the classroom time is dedicated to teaching pronunciation usually through tongue twisters and providing corrective feedback. This is only half of the time devoted to grammar teaching and only about one seventh of the time spared for vocabulary teaching (Foote et al., 2016).

Along with the (un)just criticisms voiced in the field, studying learner needs and beliefs about pronunciation strategies could shed light on what foreign language teachers actually do in the classroom and provide input as to what to revise or integrate into the curriculum and lesson planning especially in higher education institutions. This study attempts to explore the difficulties first-year undergraduate foreign language education students experience, their strategies to overcome these difficulties and whether doing a one-year intensive foreign language program results in a difference in the students' perceptions of pronunciation problems and strategies in the context of Turkey.

Literature Review

Teaching the phonological system of a second or foreign language has not received the attention it deserves in foreign language classrooms mostly due to the instructors' lack of knowledge, time, and interest in explicit teaching of pronunciation rules (İdris, 2016; Kelly, 2002). Still, the pronunciation difficulties EFL learners experience is well-documented in the literature. To exemplify, Turkish EFL speakers are reported to have difficulty in pronouncing schwa [ə], voiced [ð] and voiceless th [θ] and ng [ŋ] sounds (Bayraktaroğlu, 2008; Demirezen, 2007; Geylanioglu & Dikilitaş, 2012), which can be resistant to modification due to mother tongue interference (Demirezen & Kot, 2016). First language interference is also observed when Turkish EFL learners pronounce words with certain consonant clusters which are allowed in English but are illegitimate in Turkish such as /spl-/, /st-/, /str-/ (Şenel, 2006). Similarly, mispronunciation of silent letters, consonant clusters and vowels with multiple pronunciation by Arabic EFL learners has been rooted in native language interference and lack of practice and exposure to native speakers (Farrah & Halahlah, 2020). This set of specific problems with the target language pronunciation leads learners to devise a variety of pronunciation learning strategies.

Research on Pronunciation Learning Strategies (PLSs) (e.g., Derwing & Munro, 2005; Foote et al., 2016; Jenkins, 2005; Campos, 2018), thus far, concluded that foreign language learners employ different strategies yet to a varying extent. Turkish EFL learners report that compensation, affective, metacognitive and cognitive strategies are frequently used while learning the rules of pronunciation (Akyol, 2013). It has also been found that Turkish learners of English do not give importance to pronunciation learning strategies and the related tactics (Hismanoglu, 2012). Osburne (2003) states that foreign language learners mostly focus on sounds below the syllable level, prosodic structure, individual words, and syllables. Peterson (2000) lists the pronunciation learning strategies used by the non-native speakers as practicing with sounds, analyzing the sound system, using humor to lower anxiety, cooperating with peers in order to find out more about the target language pronunciation. Finally, Derwing and Rossiter (2002), whose framework I adopted

for this paper, report that the students utilize the strategies of self-repetition, paraphrasing, an increase in volume, a slower speech rate and clearer articulation of the sounds. At times, learners tend to avoid difficult sounds, too. If none of these strategies works, non-verbal means of communication such as using gestures or writing and spelling difficult words can be resorted to.

Methods

Research Setting

This study was conducted at the foreign language department of a state university in Turkey where mandatory courses are dictated by the Higher Education Council. In foreign language teacher education programs, the teaching of listening and pronunciation skills in a foreign language is restricted to a two-semester mandatory course. The teacher candidates are supposed to attain mastery of pronunciation and listening skills in this course which lasts 90 minutes for an average of 14 weeks each semester. The aim of this work was twofold. First, the perceptions of the pronunciation needs and strategies of the first-year preservice English language teachers were to be explored and second, the role of having an extra year of language studies, that is, a year of instruction at the school of foreign languages, on the perceived pronunciation difficulties and strategies was to be investigated. The outline of the paper is as follows: First, the method is presented, followed by the results and the discussion of the main findings. The paper is concluded with some implications for foreign language instructors, curriculum developers and policy makers.

Data Collection Procedure

The necessary ethics clearance was taken from the University Board of Ethics (Approval ID: 2020/08). The data were collected on university campus just before the Covid 19 pandemic broke out. The study was conducted after the students took the first-year compulsory course Listening and Pronunciation I for 14 weeks. A pilot study was administered on 10 students. The participants were given the Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q, Marian, Blumenfeld & Kaushanskaya, 2007) first. Next, they responded to a survey and some open-ended questions about beliefs on their pronunciation skills (adapted from Derwing & Rossiter, 2002). The researcher administered both inventories in English, transcribed and coded the qualitative data. The data was entered anonymously for further statistical analysis. The administration of the LEAP-Q took around 15 minutes and responding to the questions together with the 5-point Likert Scale did not take more than another 15 minutes for each participant. The deviant responses to the open-ended questions were not included in the data analysis. The data was re-coded and thematically analyzed by a second coder and the interrater reliability between the two coders was .95.

Instrument

The Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q, Marian, Blumenfeld, & Kaushanskaya, 2007) is a self-report of the target language exposure and dominance, which proved to be handy especially with the advanced speakers of a second language (L2). The responses to the LEAP-Q ranges from 0 to 10, where 0 means none or never and 10 means excellent or all the time. The extent of the factors contributing to the learning of English as an L2 ranges from 0 to 10, where 0 means not a contributor and 10 means the most important contributor. Self-evaluations

of the extent of the first language accent onto that of the L2 is also evaluated on a scale of 0 to 10. 0 means none and 10 means pervasive (see Table 1). The open-ended questions and the 5-point Likert Scale about their perceived pronunciation difficulties and strategies examine the role of the affective factors such as anxiety, excitement and anger, which may play a role on deviance from the foreign language accent (adapted from Derwing & Rossiter, 2002). This mini questionnaire had 8 items and the expected responses range from 1 to 5, where 1 means strongly disagree and 5 means strongly agree. The open-ended questions comprised of nine questions starting with the experience in working with the L2 phonology. The content validity was established through three expert opinions and the face validity was established through a discussion with the learners in the pilot group. The set of the questions includes the root(s) of a possible communication breakdown, what to do in such cases, the identification of the main pronunciation problem areas, the most frequently used strategies to overcome them and their perceived difficulty of being understood by the other speakers of English. The questions seek to explore students' perceptions of the foreign accent in their L2 English together with whether they would be interested in taking a phonology course in the future. The Cronbach Alpha value for the LEAP-Q was .82 and .84. for the Derwing and Rossiter (2002) inventory.

Sample

Participation to the study was on voluntary basis. The participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Data from 42 Turkish teacher candidates will be reported in this study. Half of the participants completed a prep year (PY, henceforth) (mean age=19.29, SD=.56) and the other half did not do a prep year (NPY, henceforth) (mean age=18.71, SD=1.52). The participants were all first-year undergraduate students at the Department of English Language Teaching at a state university in Turkey and did not differ statistically age wise, $t(40)=1.61$, $p=.076$). The age of acquisition for the students who did a preparatory year (mean age=10.6, SD=2.7) and those who started their departmental studies right away (mean age=9.3, SD=1.8) did not manifest a statistically meaningful difference, either, $t(40)=1.86$, $p=.07$). The reported age to have gained fluency in English as a foreign language between those who did an extra year of language studies (mean age=16.6, SD=2.3) and the rest who did not (mean age=15.9, SD=2) again did not yield a statistically meaningful difference, $t(40)=1.05$, $p=.29$). None of the participants had any hearing impairment, language difficulty or a working knowledge of a third language.

Design

This is a descriptive study with a quasi-experimental design involving responding to a questionnaire and open-ended questions. Responses to the open-ended questions were included in the design since they offered several advantages including the flexibility in the issues to be discussed (Dawson, 2002).

Analysis

After documenting the learner tendencies in the survey data, thematic analysis was used in analyzing the responses to the open-ended questions which aided to identify, analyze and report themes in the data in full description (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes that emerged after the thematic coding will be presented in the results section. Frequency counts mean percentages and

a series of Mann-Whitney U test results will be reported based on the output obtained from the statistical software SPSS (version 25).

Results

The descriptive and referential statistics will be reported under three headings with respect to within and between group responses: (i) the responses to the Language Exposure and Dominance Questionnaire (ii) the responses to the mini questionnaire and (iii) the responses to the open-ended questions.

Language Exposure and Dominance Questionnaire (LEAP-Q)

The student responses to the LEAP-Q comprised of how much the target language was used in daily life, and the perceived proficiency in understanding and speaking English (see Table 1).

Table 1. Student Responses to the Leap Q

Item	Mean (SD)	Tendency	Frequency
What percentage of the time are you currently and on average exposed to English? (out of 100%)*	35% (13)	Moderate	14(40%)
When choosing to communicate to speak with a person who is equally fluent in Turkish and English, what percentage of the time would you choose to speak English?(out of 100%)+	39% (27)	Half of the time	8(50%)
Your level of proficiency in speaking English (out of 10) a	6.24% (1.28)	Good	11(26%)
Your level of proficiency in understanding spoken English (out of 10)	8% (3.03)	Excellent	9(50%)
Rate to what extent you are exposed to English via watching TV (out of 10)b	6.02% (3.4)	More than a fairly important factor	10(28.8%)
Rate to what extent you are exposed to English via listening to radio/music (out of 10)	7.64% (2.60)	The most important factor	14(33.3%)
Rate to what extent you are exposed to English via self-instruction (out of 10)	6.14% (2.34)	A fairly important factor	13(31%)
Rate how much of a foreign language (Turkish) accent do you have in English (our of 10)c	4.9% (1.9)	Moderate	8(11.9%)
Rate how frequently others identify you as a non-native speaker based on your accent in English? (out of 10)d	6.7% (1.8)	More than half of the time	20(47.6%)

*The ratings were made out of 100%. For instance, 35% of exposure to English meant 65% of exposure to Turkish on a daily basis

+ The ratings were made out of 100%. For instance, 39% of communication in English meant 69% of communication in Turkish

a 0-none, 1-very low, 2-low, 3-fair, 4-slightly less than adequate, 5-adequate, 6-slightly more than adequate, 7-good, 8-very good, 9-excellent, 10-perfect

b 0- not a contributor, 1-minimal contributor, ..., 5-moderate contributor, ..., 10-the most important contributor

c 0-none, 1-almost none, 2-very light, 3-light, 4-some, 5-moderate, 6-considerable, 7-heavy, 8-very heavy, 9-extremely heavy, 10-pervasive

d 0-never, 1-almost never, ..., 5- half of the time, 10-always

As given in Table 1, the students reported to have a moderate amount of exposure to English on a daily basis. They rated their proficiency in speaking and understanding English as fairly well and they were aware of the fact that the other speakers of English identified them as non-native speakers of English more than half of the time. The PY group reported that the other speakers of English identified them as non-native speakers of English more often than the NYP group did. However, the NPY participants rated themselves more proficient in speaking and understanding English than the PY group. The NPY group reported that they were exposed to TV and music in the foreign language more often than the PY group. The PY participants reported that their Turkish accent was somewhat noticeable when compared to the NPY group that believed to have moderate

Turkish accent on their L2 English. None of the ratings yielded a statistically meaningful difference across the two groups.

Mini Questionnaire

Table 2 summarizes the student responses to the affective factors which might be influencing changes in the foreign language accent. The factors listed included whether the person being interacted with and the mood of the student affected accent changes.

Table 2. Student Responses to the Role of Affective Factors in Changes in Pronunciation

Item	Mean (SD)	Tendency	Frequency
My accent changes depending on who I talk to *	3.26(1.33)	Agree	13(31%)
My accent changes if I am excited*	4.21(1.87)	Strongly agree	20(47.6%)
My accent changes if I am angry*	3.43(1.27)	Agree	13(31%)
My accent changes if I am nervous*	4.00(1.01)	Strongly agree	16(39.1%)
People have trouble understanding my accent+	2.31(.84)	Rarely	23(54.8%)
People ask me to repeat things+	2.17(.73)	Rarely	22(52.4%)
I pay attention to how people pronounce words in English+	4.52(.71)	All the time	27(64.3%)
My ability to remember how English words are pronounced a	3.86(.61)	Very good	26(61.9%)

*1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-not sure, 4-agree, 5-strongly agree

+1-never, 2-rarely-3-sometimes,4-usually, 5-all the time

a 1-very poor, 2-poor, 3-good, 4-very good, 5-excellent

Recall that the responses given to the above questions were on a scale from 1 to 5. All the students strongly agreed that their accent was subject to change when they got excited or nervous. They paid a lot of attention to how people pronounced words in English and rated their ability to remember how the English words were pronounced as very good. They agreed with the statements that depending on who they talked to and their level of frustration, their accent changed. One final word was that they were rarely asked to repeat their utterances since the people they had been interacting with rarely had trouble understanding their pronunciation. Whether or not the participants had a year of preparatory school did not affect their accent change depending on who they talk to ($U=204$, $z=-.42$, $p=.67$), their level of excitement ($U=212$, $z=-.21$, $p=.82$), anger, ($U=187$, $z=-.85$, $p=.39$), or nervousness ($U=191$, $z=-.77$, $p=.44$). The two groups did not statistically differ from each other with respect to the difficulty level they were rated to be understood by the others ($U=196$, $z=-.68$, $p=.49$). or how often they were asked to repeat their utterances ($U=199$, $z=-.59$, $p=.55$). Similarly, both groups did not manifest a meaningful difference with respect to the attention they paid to the other speakers ($U=218$, $z=-.05$, $p=.95$) and self-ratings of how well they remembered the pronunciation of the English words ($U=203$, $z=-.49$, $p=.62$).

Open-Ended Questions

Out of the twenty-one students who did not do a preparatory school year, three (14.3%) reported that they had taken a pronunciation course before, and out of the remaining twenty-one students who did a preparatory school year, fourteen (66.7%) reported to have had a pronunciation course prior to their departmental studies. This difference between the groups was statistically significant, ($U=105$, $z=-3.41$, $p=.001$).

The next question investigated the student responses about whether they saw the problems communicating in English more likely to be a language or a pronunciation problem. As given in the Table 3, only three students thought it was a problem of both and twenty-two students had the opinion that the problem was rooted in lack of linguistic knowledge and the remaining seventeen

students held the belief that the problem arose as a result of lack of mastery of the English phonological system. There was no significant difference between the groups ($U=196$, $z=-.69$, $p=.48$).

Table 3. Student Beliefs About the Nature of Communication Breakdown

Response	PY (n=21)	NPY(n=21)
Language problem	12(57.2%)	10 (47.7%)
Pronunciation problem	8(38%)	9 (42.9%)
Both	1(4.8%)	2(9.4%)

PY: The students who had a preparatory year

NPY: The students who did not have a preparatory year

The second question aimed at identifying the main pronunciation problem areas and how one could tell them. The table below summarized the main problem areas identified by the undergraduate students under 6 different areas: grammar ($n=11$), vocabulary ($n=21$), phonology ($n=18$), the pace of the speaker ($n=6$), stress ($n=11$) and the environment ($n=4$). The reported grammar-related problems had to do with the problems with word order, poor paraphrasing skills and structure as well as disconnected speech. The problems related with the knowledge of vocabulary were listed as not knowing the word(s), forgetting the words and not being able to find the appropriate vocabulary items. The problem of not being able to keep up with the pacing of the speaker was also voiced. Affective factors such as suffering from feelings of excitement, nervousness, anxiety, overthinking and lack of self-confidence were reported to contribute to the main pronunciation problem areas. The students were aware of the fact that not having the necessary chances to interact with the native speakers could put them behind in terms of the mastery and practice of the foreign language phonological system. Joining clubs or residing in an English-speaking country is believed to be some of the factors contributing to their pronunciation skills. Finally, lack of knowledge of the foreign language phonological system was reported under the main pronunciation problem areas.

Table 4. Student Beliefs About the Main Pronunciation Problem Areas*

Main pronunciation areas	Frequency (%)	
	PY(n=21)	NPY(n=21)
Grammar issues (i.e., word order, structure, poor paraphrase, disconnected sentences)	5(15.6%)	6(15%)
Problems with vocabulary (i.e., lack of vocabulary, forgetting words, can't find the right word)	12(37.5%)	9(22.5%)
Speaker speech (i.e., pace)	1(3.1%)	5(12.5%)
Lack of knowledge in phonetics/phonology (i.e., accent, stress, intonation, cannot separate words into syllables, mispronouncing long words)	8(25%)	10(25%)
Affective factors (i.e., anxiety, excitement, lack of self-confidence, overthinking, slip of the tongue)	4(12.5%)	8(20%)
Environmental factors (i.e., not having native speakers around, no speaking clubs, lack of experience in an English-speaking country)	2(6.3%)	2(5%)

*The reader needs to be reminded that the respondents may have cited more than one main problem area

The pre-service language teachers linked the roots of the main pronunciation problem areas mainly to the issues with grammar ($U = 110$, $z=-2.93$, $p= .003$), the pacing of the speaker ($U = 165$, $z=-4.47$, $p<.001$), the affective ($U=120$, $z=-2.62$, $p=.009$) as well as to the environmental factors ($U=114$, $z=-5.09$, $p< .001$). Yet, there was no statistically meaningful difference between the groups.

Next, the students were asked to rate how difficult it was to be understood by the other speakers of English. As presented in Table 5, most students had the opinion that it was not very difficult to be understood by the other speakers of English. Sixteen of the PY students thought that mutual

intelligibility was not difficult and fifteen of the NYP students agreed with them. Again, both groups had a similar tendency ($U=176$, $z=-1.16$, $p=.24$).

Table 5. Student Responses About the Intelligibility of Their Pronunciation

Response	Frequency (%)	
	PY($n=21$)	NPY($n=21$)
Easy	4(19%)	2(9.5%)
Not difficult	6(28.6%)	4(19%)
Not very difficult	6(28.6%)	9(43%)
Sometimes difficult	5(23.8%)	4(19%)
Difficult	0(0%)	2(9.5%)

The students were asked what they did when they realized that they had not been understood by the others. The mostly cited strategies were paraphrasing, repeating and switching to a slower speech rate as well as making use of gestures.

Table 6. Strategy Use in Times of Communication Breakdown*

Strategy	Frequency	
	PY($n=21$)	NPY($n=21$)
Repetition	4	4
Paraphrase	13	15
Slow rate	5	3
Clear speech	1	3
Write, spell	0	2
Switch to first language	1	0
Use of non-verbals (e.g., gestures, mimics)	4	2

**The reader needs to be reminded that the respondents may have cited more than one main problem area*

Among the strategies listed in Table 6, repetition ($U=108$, $z=-3.85$, $p<.001$), paraphrasing ($U=128$, $z=2.0$, $p=.04$), slowing the speech rate ($U=108$, $z=-3.85$, $p<.001$), delivering the message clearly ($U=114$, $z=-5.09$, $p<.001$), writing and spelling ($U=140$, $z=5.70$, $p<.001$), switching to the first language ($U=101$, $z=-6.01$, $p<.001$), and using body language ($U=116$, $z=-4.47$, $p<.001$) stood out. However, the two groups manifested no significant difference in their use of the abovementioned strategies.

Next, the students were asked which strategies they used the most. The most commonly used strategies were summarized in Table 7 below. Repetition, paraphrasing, having a slower rate of speech, elaborating, making use of online resources, giving a clear speech, reading out loud, writing and spelling, switching to the first language, i.e., Turkish, calming down and making use of the nonverbals were given as the most commonly used ones.

Table 7. The Most Commonly Used Strategies*

Strategy	Frequency	
	PY($n=21$)	NPY($n=21$)
Repetition	1	5
Paraphrase	5	10
Slow rate	1	2
Elaboration with examples and details	3	1
Online resources for self-instruction and checking	6	5
Clear speech	1	1
Reading aloud	1	0
Write, spell	1	0
Switch to first language	1	0
Stress-relief	2	1
Use of non-verbals (e.g., gestures, mimics)	4	1

**The reader needs to be reminded that the respondents may have cited more than one main problem area*

Three students in the PY group and another two in the NPY group reported that they did not use any of the mentioned strategies. The two groups did not manifest a statistically meaningful difference in their most commonly used strategies to fix the problems in pronunciation.

Finally, the students were asked whether they had control over their accents. Twenty-two of the students (half of them had a preparatory year- PY) reported that they had control over their accents and the remaining twenty students (half of them did not have a preparatory year-NPY) reported that they failed to do so. This difference was not statistically meaningful ($U=168$, $z=-1.73$, $p=.08$). When they were asked what they did to control their accents, the students in the NYP group, who reported to have no control over their accents, stated that they got too anxious or too much focused on accuracy in grammar and vocabulary so that they forgot how they sounded like. The participants were actually aware of this problem and reported to be working hard to control it through listening to stories and watching videos in English. In the same group, the ones who could control their accent stated that their strategies to improve pronunciation included imitating the native speakers or characters on TV series, practicing with friends as well as practicing on their own through self-instruction. Interestingly some reported to be very picky in terms of the accent and the nationality of the speaker who was favored as the role model. Some reported to slow down and pay attention to the stress and intonation patterns. Some reported to pay effort to practice speaking fast and fluently. The students who did not have control over their accents in the PY group reported that they suffered from high levels of anxiety. And those, who can control their accents, reported that they did so by working on their intonation and stress patterns by slowing their speech or by imitating song lyrics or the native speaker film characters. Some reported that they checked their pronunciation through online resources and definitely practiced a lot before an oral presentation.

They were asked to identify whether they had a change in their accent. Three of the students who did not do a preparatory year and eight of those who did a preparatory year reported that they did not notice any change in their accents. Eighteen of the students who did not do a preparatory year (85.7%) and thirteen of those who did a preparatory year (61.9%) noticed a change in their accents. This difference was not statistically meaningful ($U=168$, $z=-1.73$, $p=.08$). Those who reported to have noticed a change in their accents reported that this change took place after succeeding in the nationwide university entrance exam or in the nationwide placement test (YDS), upon learning that they were exempt from the preparatory school and after taking the Listening and Pronunciation I course.

As a follow up question, the participants were asked whether anybody else noticed a change in their accents. Two of the students who did a year at the school of foreign languages reported that they were not sure whether anyone noticed a change in their accents. Twelve of the students who did a preparatory year (57.2%) and thirteen of the students who did not do a preparatory year (61.9%) reported that no change in their accents was noticed at all as opposed to seven of the PY (33.3%) and eight of the NPY participants (38.1%) who reported that the people around them noticed a change in their accents. This difference was not statistically significant, either ($U=197$, $z=-.68$, $p=.49$).

The last question had to do with their future plans to improve pronunciation. They were asked whether they would be interested in taking a pronunciation course if one were available. One of the students who did a preparatory year reported that she was not sure about it whereas twenty students from each group (95.2%) reported that they would love to do so. Only one student who

did not study at the school of foreign languages reported that she would not like to take another phonology/phonetics class in the future. This preference did not pose a significant difference between the two groups ($U=220$, $z=-.03$, $p=.97$).

Discussion

This study explored the perceived pronunciation difficulties and strategies of the undergraduate students doing a degree in teaching English as a foreign language in Turkey. The participants, who reported to carry on around 35% of their daily conversations in English, reported that the problems with pronunciation were mostly related to the feelings of uneasiness and stress when they were required to communicate in the target language and when they lacked the knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and the phonological system of the target language. One factor under investigation was the role of having a year at the school of foreign languages on pronunciation difficulties and strategy use in communicating in a foreign language. The students who did a preparatory year in this study did not differ in their beliefs about difficulties and strategies in learning pronunciation skills from those who started their undergraduate studies right after high school graduation. This, of course, raises questions about the curriculum design and the place of teaching or practicing pronunciation and speaking skills in the advanced classrooms of the preparatory schools, where foreign language teacher candidates are mostly placed. One would expect that the students who completed a preparatory year of foreign language studies would exit the program at least with some introductory knowledge of the phonological system of the target language.

As for the main findings, both groups thought that the other speakers of English did not find their pronunciation very difficult to understand. This makes sense as a result of long years of exposure to the target language. Both of the groups attributed the problems while communicating in English to the difficulties with the language itself mostly. This finding actually implies that financial and human resources need to be channeled to intensive programs of foreign language instruction which can start at earlier ages. Yet, 38% of the PY students and 43% of the NPY students agreed that problems arise in interacting in English due to the difficulties in pronunciation. Among the main areas of pronunciation difficulties, the PY students cited the lack of vocabulary knowledge, difficulty pronouncing long words and dividing words into syllables as the main factors leading to communication breakdowns. For instance, when faced with some unknown or less frequently used words, the students report to feel powerless as to how to pronounce the word. This lack of knowledge can increase the anxiety levels of the learners. Then, it is no surprise that the NPY group reported that the cognitive factors, such as not remembering the appropriate word and problems with the accent, stress and intonation, to be the most problematic areas. At times of communication breakdown, the NPY students preferred to communicate in writing and self-check their utterances, different from the PY participants who relied more on gestures and body language as the communication repair strategies. Both groups relied heavily on paraphrasing as the main repair and compensation strategy when they were not understood by the other speakers of English. With the ease of attaining any form of instruction through web-based technologies and the absence of resourceful native speakers, the students first tried to figure out the acceptable way to pronounce words or chunks on their own before resorting to the final means such as using nonverbal strategies. More than half of the students who did a prep year reported to have control on their accents as opposed to more than half of the NPY students who reported not to have control over their accents. All the participants agreed that they would take another phonology course if they were offered one in the future.

Implications

The findings of this study lend support to previous work in the literature suggesting that prior to practicum, foreign language teacher candidates require more instruction on phonetic transcription, imitation, discrimination of sounds, and communication through different techniques (Cook, 2001) such as elicited mechanical production, ear training for sound contrasts, and sounds for meaning contrasts (Schmitt, 2002). Integrating pedagogical aids including phonemic charts, drills and chants can contribute to the development of the pronunciation skills of the learners (Carey, 2002). In addition, the learners need to be trained in individual correction, self-study, communication, and affective strategies to ease the strain in communicating in a foreign language (Scarcella & Oxford, 1994). The focus on pronunciation teaching could be shifted to strategy teaching to acquire stress, intonation, and rhythm patterns as well as the features of consonants and vowels (Lin, Fan & Chen, 1995). What is more, finger correction strategies and the use of mimes, and gestures can also be introduced as compensation or repair strategies (Noll & Collins, 2002) rather than dedicating time and effort to merely giving corrective feedback and teaching a couple of tongue twisters. As suggested by Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016) activities to teach pronunciation skills should be contextualized and integrated into the teaching of oral skills using authentic materials with a specific focus on the use of suprasegmental features in the target language. Pointing out the differences and the similarities between the first and the second language explicitly through to use of different software in and out of class will aid learners to adapt to the new sound patterns. Finally, learning to imitate native-like pronunciation and non-verbal means of communication will equip the learners with more self-reliance in the process of developing communicative competence.

Conclusions

This study concludes that the first-year university students who will take up teaching a foreign language as a profession, are well aware of their lack of knowledge in the phonological system of English. The obligatory course offered for two semesters at the college level is viewed to be not adequate to master the phonological system of English. Other compulsory as well as elective courses, which especially focus on both the segmental and suprasegmental features of English, need to be further integrated into the program. What is more, the students desire to have some other role models apart from their instructors or TV characters to practice and improve their pronunciation and speaking skills outside the classrooms. For one, the students could be given more chances to interact with the native speakers of the target language via visits abroad supported by the Erasmus exchange programs. However, during the time of the pandemic most exchange programs have had to be cancelled. For another, the instructors need to incorporate different techniques and strategies for integrating pronunciation teaching in their in-class practices so that the teacher candidates will feel much more comfortable in learning, practicing and teaching pronunciation skills in the future. This would decrease the stress and anxiety levels and improve the self-confidence of the preservice teachers. As for final words, one requirement to attain a degree in teaching foreign languages definitely needs to be set as possessing a solid knowledge of the target language phonological system after completing a certain number of course credits on pronunciation instruction. The ultimate aim is to equip the teacher candidates with acceptable, standard pronunciation and the knowledge to act as mentors to their own students.

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