

## *Original Paper*

# Research on the Assessment Approaches to Pronunciation Training for Pre-Service EFL Teachers

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### **Abstract**

*For EFL teacher education, it's important to polish pre-service teachers' pronunciation and their pronunciation teaching skills. Currently, the pronunciation training for pre-service EFL teachers in China only focuses on pronunciation improvement and lacks the element of teacher education so that its efficacy still needs improvement. This paper points out the rationale of applying the Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA) to the pronunciation training for pre-service EFL teachers. Then the author discusses the evaluation approaches integrating assessment of learning, assessment as learning and assessment for learning after reformulating the goals of the pronunciation training for pre-service EFL teachers. Finally, the author analyzes the effectiveness of the evaluation approaches for improving pre-service English teachers' pronunciation as well as their pronunciation teaching skills.*

### **Keywords**

*Learning-Oriented Assessment, pronunciation training, pre-service EFL teachers, assessment approaches*

### **1. Introduction**

Having good pronunciation is the foundation and key to the development of English language proficiency. The elementary education in EFL scenario is the critical period for students to develop English phonological ability, so it is crucial to enable pre-service EFL teachers in elementary and secondary schools to have excellent pronunciation and be capable of teaching pronunciation (Luo, 2014). However, the effectiveness of pronunciation training for pre-service EFL teachers needs to be improved, and attention needs to be paid to how to effectively correct their fossilized pronunciation errors and cultivate their pronunciation skills.

Teaching evaluation provides a guide of teaching. Effective planning and implementation of evaluation

activities serves as a key to improving the quality and efficiency of teaching. As a new type of educational assessment theory and practice, the concept of Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA) fits in well with the general policy of educational assessment reform nowadays. This concept is different from the traditional teaching assessment that mainly aims at judging students' academic achievements, but on the basis of judging students' academic achievements, it focuses on the function of "improvement" for the next stage of learning (Li & Gu, 2018).

This paper focuses on how to optimize the evaluation approaches of pronunciation training for pre-service EFL teachers based on the concept of learning-oriented assessment so as to enhance the effectiveness of pronunciation teaching for pre-service EFL teachers.

## 2. Literature Review

Studies on pronunciation training for pre-service EFL teachers in China can be concluded as two aspects: on the one hand, they elaborate on its current situation, importance, and complexity (Cheng, 2011; Wang & Wen, 2023); on the other hand, they attempt to reform and explore its teaching mode, which includes the exploration of its overall teaching design as well as the test and evaluation system (Gao & Hanna, 2016; Huang, 2019; Gu & Zhu, 2018).

While related studies at abroad mainly put the pronunciation training for pre-service EFL teachers in the context of teacher education, with empirical research as the main focus, such as the studies proving that ESL/EFL teachers usually do not receive adequate guidance on pronunciation teaching (Breitkreutz *et al.*, 2011; Burgess & Spencer, 2000; Foote *et al.*, 2012), so scholars have pointed out that the TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language to Foreigners) program should include English pronunciation pedagogy, which can help future English teachers to teach pronunciation effectively (Brown & Brown, 2011). At the same time, some scholars have investigated how to carry out pronunciation teaching for pre-service ESL/EFL teachers (Burri *et al.*, 2018), and investigated pre-service ESL/EFL teachers' beliefs and practices about English pronunciation teaching (Burri, 2015).

To sum up, the studies on pre-service teachers' pronunciation teaching is placed under the framework of teacher education in foreign countries, while the related studies in China is mostly mixed up with pronunciation teaching for non-teacher English majors without highlighting the characteristics of teacher education, which may result in the dilemma that pre-service ELF teachers are unable to teach English pronunciation. Thus, this paper focuses on the pronunciation teaching for pre-service EFL teachers, especially on how to improve the effectiveness of pronunciation teaching through the reform of its assessment based on the concept of learning-based assessment.

## 3. Reformulate the Goals of Pronunciation Training for Pre-Service EFL Teachers

Methods of course assessment are determined by the goals of teaching. Thus, the key step in the selection and implementation of assessment methods is to refine and clarify the goals of teaching. Pronunciation training course for English majors is a highly practical one that instructs and trains

students in English pronunciation. And here, it's necessary to clarify the difference between the course for pre-service EFL teachers and for general English majors. The former one should not only focus on systematically teaching the basic knowledge of phonemes, stress, strong/weak patterns, rhythm, intonation, etc., but also pay attention to equip pre-service EFL teachers with pronunciation teaching skills (Ma & Zhao, 2017).

The author conducted a questionnaire survey on the pronunciation teaching beliefs and practices of post-service primary and secondary English teachers in China, and collected 285 valid questionnaires. Only 8.42% of the teachers interviewed thought that the ability to teach pronunciation was acquired by teaching experience, while 91.58% of the teachers interviewed thought that the ability to teach pronunciation could not be acquired by teaching experience alone, and the specialized training was needed. By investigating the syllabi of English pronunciation training courses published by English majors (focus on the training pre-service EFL teachers) of several teacher training colleges and universities on their official websites and the related MOOC resources, it can be found that the teaching objectives of the related courses focus on students' acquisition of standard pronunciation and intonation, and improvement of the accuracy and fluency of speaking skills, and do not pay due attention to the development of students' pronunciation teaching ability as pre-service teachers. Courses such as English Curriculum and Teaching Theory of English offered by English majors (focus on the training pre-service EFL teachers) include the teaching methods and techniques of pronunciation as language knowledge, but its proportion is often extremely limited compared to the teaching methods and techniques of other language knowledge (such as grammar, vocabulary) and language skills (such as listening, speaking, reading and writing).

It is thus clear that the cultivation of pronunciation teaching ability should be included in the English pronunciation training for pre-service EFL teachers. Therefore, it is necessary to reconstruct its teaching objectives under the framework of teacher education and with reference to the requirements of pronunciation teaching in the *Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)* in China as follows:

1) Have a good pronunciation. It includes the good mastery of correct pronunciation of phonetic segments (letters, vowel phonemes, consonant phonemes, common vowel and consonant letter combinations); and suprasegmental segments (accents, alliteration, loss of bursts, weak reading, assimilation, rhythm, intonation).

2) Acquire certain pronunciation teaching skills. It covers the following three aspects.

(1) Correct teaching beliefs. It can be elaborated as knowing the importance of pronunciation teaching and having the awareness of pronunciation teaching; knowing the characteristics of pronunciation teaching at various stages (For instance, the focus of English pronunciation teaching in primary school is to cultivate students' phonological awareness, perceive the basic pronunciation, rhythm and intonation of English. While the focus of English pronunciation teaching in secondary school stage is to be able to spell words according to the phonetic symbols and the rules of spelling, and to understand

the pragmatic functions of stress and intonation so as to achieve effective communication); understanding that the standard of pronunciation teaching has shifted from the pursuit of nativeness to comprehensibility and intelligibility (Tian & Jin, 2015).

(2) Mastery of pronunciation teaching methods. It includes being able to carry out phonological teaching activities that are in line with students' cognitive level (e.g., able to accurately describe and demonstrate the position and pronunciation of phonemes); being able to develop and use phonological teaching resources, such as nursery rhymes, tongue-twisters, rhyming poems, picture books, songs, films, etc.; being familiar with the main problems affecting Chinese students' comprehensibility in English pronunciation, and guiding students to avoid the negative influence of mother tongue on their English pronunciation.

(3) Mastery of methods of assessment in pronunciation teaching. It refers to that pre-service EFL teachers should be able to use proper evaluation methods to assess students' phonological level in teaching, and give appropriate feedback at the right time.

#### **4. Rationale for Applying the Learning-Oriented Assessment to the Pronunciation Training for Pre-service EFL Teachers**

Learning-oriented assessment is a new type of educational evaluation system, which is characterized by the achievement of learning objectives as the core and the learner as its center. And it is an integration of assessment of learning, assessment as learning, and assessment for learning (Li & Gu, 2018).

Assessment for learning first appeared in 1890s. Monitoring and feedback of the learning process are achieved by carrying out starting-point assessment and formative assessment. It emphasizes the facilitation effect of assessment on learning. Jin (2020) pointed out that the purpose of this assessment is to clarify the starting point of learning, set learning goals, target strengths and weaknesses, provide feedback for improvement, and promote the improvement of teaching quality. It attaches importance to familiarizing students with their own learning and making autonomous learning decisions based on evidences.

At the same time, assessment as learning has emerged, which is characterized by integrating the process of student learning and assessment, which means learning from assessment and learning to assess, encouraging students to reflect on and master the process of their own learning through self-assessment, peer assessment, etc., and also allowing students to take responsibility for their own learning and to establish personalized learning methods and strategies.

In addition, efforts have been made to improve summative assessment, which has given rise to assessment about learning. The shortcomings of summative assessment are that it usually presents results in the form of scores, lacking targeted feedback on students' academic performances, making it difficult for students to dynamically monitor their academic performance and know their progress. Assessment about learning, on the other hand, focuses on tapping the formative function of

achievement tests, with the main purpose of examining students' learning achievements, i.e., whether they have achieved the established milestones of teaching and learning objectives.

At a later stage, scholars tried to integrate the three assessment methods mentioned above, thus forming the learning-oriented assessment system. Its most distinctive feature is that it highlights process evaluation and is oriented to promoting learning. As a matter of fact, this assessment system is particularly suitable for pronunciation training for pre-service EFL Teachers. Given that students have different foundations in English pronunciation learning, there is an urgent need to focus on the effectiveness and progress of their phonological learning through dynamic, continuous, personalized and diversified assessment, so as to shape their phonological learning habits and successfully rectify their existed pronunciation errors. At the same time, it helps pre-service EFL teachers to develop phonological assessment skills that can be used in their future career.

### **5. Optimized Assessment Approaches of Pronunciation Training for Pre-Service EFL Teachers**

At the very beginning of the course, assessment training was carried out to enhance students' assessment literacy by establishing their meta-cognition of assessment so as to help students understand "why to evaluate", "what to evaluate" and "how to evaluate" in pronunciation. Specifically, it includes the evaluation system of English pronunciation training course based on the concept of learning-oriented assessment, which consists of assessment of learning, assessment as learning and assessment for learning, and assessment tools in each type of assessment. Emphasis is placed on the fact that the evaluation system is aimed at improving students' pronunciation and pronunciation teaching ability, and that students are the most important subjects in the evaluation. It's necessary for them to master their pronunciation learning through dynamic and continuous assessment so as to formulate personalized pronunciation learning plans. In addition, students need to be reminded to be aware of their status as pre-service teachers and actively use assessment tools to improve their assessment literacy.

Firstly, assessment for learning is carried out to highlight the role of assessment in facilitating learning, which includes pre-course test and formative assessment in the teaching, with the former helping students to make clear the starting point of their pronunciation learning and the latter helping them to grasp the dynamics of their own learning. Common pronunciation test instruments include receptive test and output test (Wei & Pei, 2016). The receptive test of the pre-course test includes listening and discriminating of minimal pairs, word stress, and sentence stress; the output test of the pre-course test includes sentence or paragraph reading-aloud and autonomous speech. *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, a fairy tale adapted by the International Phonetic Association (IPA), can be used as the reading material, because the adapted version covers all the phonemes in the Received Pronunciation (Deterding, 2006); the experimental corpus (simple sentences, declarative questions, general questions, special questions and exclamatory sentences) from the English Dialect Corpus IViE (Intonation Variation in English) can also be used as read-aloud materials to examine the students' mastery of intonation; autonomous speech

can be carried out in the form of topic statements, picture descriptions, etc., to ensure that the subjects have something to say to elicit their spontaneous speech flow. The pre-test of pronunciation training for pre-service EFL teachers can also include a survey of pronunciation teaching beliefs to help students understand their own perceptions of pronunciation teaching, including the goals and methods of pronunciation teaching. Afterwards, instructors of the course should give detailed feedback. Through the pre-course test, students learn about their pronunciation errors and cognitive misconceptions about English pronunciation teaching, find out the gap between the existing level and the expected level so as to make personalized learning plans according to the actual situation under the guidance of instructors. Formative assessment, i.e., teachers' evaluation of students' assignments and classroom performance, enables students to grasp their learning dynamics by providing them with regular feedback so that they can make timely adjustments to their learning methods and strategies.

Secondly, assessment as learning is carried out to make assessment a part of pronunciation learning. It consists of two parts, self-assessment and peer assessment. E-portfolio Assessment embodies the characteristics of assessment as learning (Lam, 2015). In the case of pronunciation training for pre-service EFL teachers, each student can be asked to set up a "pronunciation learning E-portfolio", i.e., to collect and organize their own pronunciation training materials in the form of audios and videos, which includes in-class assignment, after-class practice and classroom presentation etc. The students can be guided to carry out self-assessment and peer assessment of the evidences of their learning, which facilitates them to compare horizontally and vertically, and to reflect on the process of learning in depth, so as to be aware of the progress and gains of their pronunciation learning. The "Pronunciation Learning e-Portfolio" for pre-service teachers can also include a "Pronunciation Teaching Toolkit" to encourage students to collect teaching resources (e.g., audio-visual materials, picture books, etc.), teaching methods and teaching demos that can be used for teaching pronunciation in primary and secondary schools. In addition, in order to deal with the English pronunciation errors that students have already formed, especially some of which are "fossilized" and difficult to be effectively improved through teaching, students can be asked to add "Pronunciation Error Correction Record" to their "Pronunciation Learning e-Portfolio", and consciously record the speech errors corrected by teachers, teaching assistants and peers in this course or other courses, and record the time and reasons for discovering pronunciation errors, descriptions of the errors, how to improve the pronunciation errors etc. In addition, each period of the pronunciation training course has a fixed presentation session, i.e., students take turns to make oral presentations, in which students are asked to comment on their peers' presentations, and then the teacher will make comments so as to help students form the ability of identifying and evaluating other people's English pronunciation, and to consciously develop students' evaluation literacy as pre-service teachers.

Finally, assessment of learning is carried out. Although it has the characteristics of summative assessment, we can try to make it play a formative function to promote learning and enhance the effectiveness of pronunciation teaching. For example, achievement tests can be carried out in different

stages of teaching, including test on vowels, test on consonants, test on connected speech, etc., to facilitate the dynamic monitoring of students' learning status. At the same time, it is important to give feedback to students in the assessment, so as to guide them to take actions to make corresponding improvements. In addition, we can also try to carry out auxiliary pronunciation assessment activities other than regular classroom evaluation, such as organizing English pronunciation contest, English dubbing contest, English micro-course teaching contest, etc., to stimulate students' interest in pronunciation learning and to comprehensively improve their pronunciation and pronunciation teaching ability; we can also regularly offer a "pronunciation clinic" after the pronunciation training course, i.e. to provide students with continuous assessment of their English pronunciation learning beyond the classroom, and to give students personalized guidance on their pronunciation learning, so as to effectively help students correct their pronunciation errors and improve their pronunciation.

## 6. Discussion

In line with the problem-oriented concept, the effectiveness of the evaluation approaches of English pronunciation training for EFL pre-service teachers lies in its ability to solve a series of "pain points" in the teaching. For example, in China, for students majoring in English (especially for those who are training as EFL teachers), even though they have been studying English for many years, there are still real problems such as their uneven foundations of pronunciation, "fossilized" pronunciation errors, and negative influence of their mother tongue, etc. The limited classroom instruction time and the large size of the class make it difficult for teachers to provide students with efficient and personalized guidance. And here is a gap between students' mastery of phonological knowledge and the improvement of phonological competence. In addition, the traditional pronunciation training for pre-service EFL teachers is not included in the framework of teacher education, and it does not pay due attention to shaping pre-service teachers' pronunciation teaching beliefs or cultivating their pronunciation teaching ability and evaluation ability, which may lead them to the dilemma of "not being able to teach pronunciation" as pre-service English teachers.

Specifically, the effectiveness of the evaluation approaches is reflected in the following aspects:

(1) It is a deep integration of assessment and learning, using assessment to empower pronunciation learning. The assessment system is permeated with the learning-oriented concept, focusing on the process of improving students' pronunciation and developing their pronunciation teaching ability. Carless (2003) points out that in learning-oriented assessment, "the standard of learning is the standard of assessment" and "The process of assessment is also the process of learning". This assessment system no longer separates assessment from learning, and by improving teachers' and students' understanding of assessment, assessment can be truly used to improve and optimize pronunciation learning and enhance the effectiveness of pronunciation teaching. For example, the assessment as learning and assessment for learning carried out in the teaching process can truly facilitate students' learning through diversified assessment methods such as e-portfolio assessment, pre-class presentation assessment,

English intonation competition, and pronunciation clinic.

(2) It enhances students' metacognitive ability of pronunciation learning. Here are three questions that learners need to think about. What is the current status of my pronunciation? What are my anticipated pronunciation learning outcomes? What should I do in order to achieve the learning outcomes? In order to answer the three questions, students can be made aware of the purpose, approaches, and criteria of assessment during assessment training. Then, through a pre-course test, students can have a clear understanding of their pronunciation and beliefs about pronunciation teaching, and know the gap between their current level and the target level. Following this, they set individualized pronunciation learning goals, select targeted learning methods, monitor and adjust the learning process. According to the effective feedback in assessment, they reflect on and adjust their previous learning goals and strategies. Given students' "fossilized" pronunciation errors and the varying foundations of pronunciation, and the negative influence of mother tongue, the enhancement and improvement of pronunciation is a long way to go. And it is difficult to reach the ultimate teaching goal only with limited classroom instruction time. Therefore, it is crucial to let students "learn how to learn" in teaching (Schunk, 2008), i.e., "it is better to teach a man to fish than to teach him to fish". This process also helps learners to develop higher-order thinking skills such as critique, reflection, innovation, and problem solving, which have a positive impact on the development of students' lifelong learning ability.

(3) It helps pre-service teachers to enhance their assessment literacy. In the context of educational assessment reform in the new era, it is necessary for prospective teachers to recognize the importance of learning-oriented assessment and to develop the consciousness of using learning-oriented assessment. The learning-oriented assessment of English pronunciation training for pre-service EFL teachers provides an experiment field for practicing the related assessment tools by conducting e-portfolio assessment, self-assessment, peer assessment etc. This will help pre-service EFL teachers to improve their pronunciation assessment literacy and apply it to future pronunciation teaching in primary and secondary schools, and then extend it to other aspects of language teaching and learning.

In conclusion, the learning-oriented assessment of English pronunciation training for pre-service EFL teachers is to make the learners as the center of the evaluation, so as to achieve the learning goal of pre-service EFL teachers, i.e., good mastery of English pronunciation and its teaching. The evaluation system is a good integration of assessment of learning, assessment as learning and assessment for learning, covering all the stages before, during and after teaching, so that the assessment tools permeated with the three assessment concepts can jointly serve the pronunciation training for pre-service EFL teachers.

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