

## The Effect of Learning-oriented Assessment on Learning Pronunciation among Iranian EFL Learners

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### ABSTRACT

Oral communication is one of the main reasons language learners attend language classes. As pronunciation is among the most significant aspects of oral communication, this study attempted to see how learning-oriented assessment (LOA) could affect pronunciation learning of Iranian EFL learners. To this end, 64 language learners in a private language institute in the city of Amol, Iran, were given NELSON language proficiency test as homogeneity test. A total of 40 learners were selected and assigned to two groups. Both groups were given a researcher-made pronunciation test at the beginning and two pronunciation tests (immediate and delayed tests) at the end of the treatment. The control group participants followed the conventional curriculum of the language center and the experimental group learners went through LOA treatment. The findings of the study revealed that LOA can positively affect pronunciation learning of Iranian EFL learners. In addition, it was observed that LOA has a significant effect on the participants' retention of pronunciation knowledge. This study can have pedagogical implications for language teachers and teacher trainers.

**Key words:** Learning-oriented Assessment (LOA), Pronunciation Learning, Iranian Efl Context, Autonomy, Cognitive Thinking, Collaboration

Pronunciation is an important aspect of the speaking skill. Derwing and Rossiter (2002) note that language learners with various background believe that pronunciation has a key role in their developments to a potent speaker. As a result they employ various strategies to master pronunciations of the second language (L2). Others such as Munro and Derwing (2006) note that instruction plays a role in the quality of language learners' pronunciation. Although intelligible pronunciation is in no uncertain terms a significant issue in English as a foreign and second language (EFL/ESL) contexts, scholars such as Levis and Grant (2003) note that language teachers do not incorporate it into the curriculum as they should do. To solve this problem many language learners and language teacher make use of computer-assisted pronunciations learning programs; however, there is still a gap between what should be taught to the learners and what is currently being implemented (Tanner & Landon, 2009).

This issue is of more significance in EFL contexts such as Iran, as in most cases, the learners are not in contact with native speakers of the language and their pronunciation learning is confined to the boundaries of the classroom. On the other hand, Dahmardeh (2013) asserts that one of the problems of learning pronunciation in Iran is that it is given very scant attention in the educational system. For example, in the high schools, the emphasis is on mastering grammatical

rules and vocabulary (Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010). Thus, very little attention is given to the learners' pronunciation knowledge.

In case of language institutes, Koosha and Yakhabi (2013) note that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the most frequently used method; however, the teachers' approach to teaching pronunciation is very much defined by the course book they used. Most stabled English language teaching series provide the learners with the pronunciations of the words and all the learners need to do is to memorize the pronunciations. As a result, if the practice time is limited to the class time, the learners may forget the correct pronunciation of the words.

Such problems urge the need for approaches to learning which prepare autonomous language learners. Such learners can assess their own needs and find the answers to their problems. Purpura (2016) suggest that Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA) as a cognitive, collaborative and learner-centered approach to learning which is effective in terms of practically of knowledge and its retention. Therefore, the main objective of this study was to know the effect of LOA on pronunciation learning of Iranian EFL learners. In addition, the researcher wished to know if LOA could have any effect on retention of pronunciation knowledge among Iranian EFL learners. The findings of this study can be significant,

as they can reveal whether or not LOA is a suitable approach to pronunciation learning in the context of Iran.

### Research Questions

1. What is the effect of LOA on learning English pronunciation among Iranian EFL learners?
2. What is the effect of LOA on retention of English pronunciation among Iranian EFL learners?

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Theoretical Background

It can be claimed that the main theory used in designing LOA approach is Social Constructivism by Vygotsky (1987, as cited in Dang, Nguyen, & Le, 2013). Reality is not considered as a fixed entity in LOA and is subject to change based on the needs of the learners. Vygotsky (1987) also asserts that reality ought to be accepted as it is shaped in the minds of the individuals in the society. Secondly, LOA is replete with forms of assessment. Teachers interact with the learners to assess their needs. In turn, learners should assess their peers' performance. Such issues indicate that Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is another theory used in the designing LOA. In LOA, learners should enter to the proximal zone of the other learners to learn. The overall belief is that learning without dynamics that guide learners into collaboration, discussion, and investigation is partial (Dang et al., 2013).

### Characteristics of LOA

Unlike many language teaching methods with reacted against one method or approach in favor of another, LOA reacted against assessment in favor of assessment (Jones, & Saville, 2016). In fact, in recent years, there has been a claim that assessment, especially summative assessment, has been distorting language education. It has resulted in negative washback effect and the language learners study to meet the needs of the tests. Carless (2007) asserts that the value of information is neglected and the language learners regurgitate the information to perform well at the exam. Purpura (2016) notes that this issue was among the main reasons the concept of assessment was revisited in LOA. As one of the main reasons contributing to this issue was the competition in criterion-reference tests, LOA was designed as a norm-reference assessment approach in which the performance of all learners could be used as a scoring procedure.

Another significant consideration in LOA was making use of the language learners' cognitive abilities. For this reason, the learners should have been able to think, decode, and analyze the learning content (Savery, 2006), and emphasis should have been on their needs rather than predetermined learning materials (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001). To do so, both the teachers' and the learners begin assessing the learners' needs shortly after the module begins. This also helps them project what the course should be about (Keppell, Au, Ma, & Chan, 2006).

LOA can be considered as post-method approach to language learning. Kumaravadivelu (2006) considered

autonomy of the learners, cognitive load of learning tasks, self-directed learning, and collaboration as features of post-method education. It can be claimed that all these features exist in LOA. For example, autonomy is a key concept in development of LOA approach. The learners should be autonomous in assessing their own performance and also their peers' performance; therefore, the teachers should familiarize them with assessment skills.

Finally LOA is a collaborative approach to learning. In most LOA classes, learning occurs within the groups. As explained earlier, it is important that the learners enter each other's proximal zone. Therefore, learning occurs in forms of groups rather than individually. Keppell et al. (2006) notes that cooperation in LOA results in communication and mutual feedback.

The effect of LOA on aspects of learning English has been investigated by scholars, yet little attention has been accorded to pronunciation learning. For example, Lombard (2008) found out that although it is difficult to guide learners to use their higher order thinking skills after maturity, LOA can play a significant role in utilization of critical thinking skills among the learners. Mok (2012) also posits that the Asian culture is exam-based and educators favor learning as a tool to pass exams. However, LOA has been able to change this culture and use assessment as learning.

## METHODS

### Participants and Setting

The participants in this study were from 3 intact classes in a private language institute in the city of Amol (n=64). The participants were all female language learners, adult, and had over 1 year experience in language learning. The participants were studying at pre-intermediate level at the institute. These participants were given consent forms at the beginning of the study to follow the rules of ethical research.

### Instrumentation

Nelson language proficiency test was used as homogeneity test in this study. In addition, 3 separate pronunciation tests were designed by the researcher to be used as pretest, immediate posttest and delayed posttest (after a two-week interval). As certain words were targeted for this study, the researcher prepared a list of words (N=83). These words were used to make 32 sentences and the participants were asked to read the sentences. The participants' performance was scores by 2 raters who were briefed on how to analytically score the participants' performance. The raters both had master's degrees in teaching English with at least 5 years of experience in teaching and assessing oral English. Not only were the scores used a pretest, but also the researcher targeted the unknown pronunciations to the participants to design the posttest based. As the vocabulary items were selected from the participants' course book, it be assumed that the test had content validity. The researcher also gathered a panel of experts (3 language teachers with at least 5 years of experience) who amended and confirmed the test to be used

in the study. Although 84 pronunciations were targeted in the pretest, 30 of them were targeted in the immediate and delayed posttest.

### Procedure

In the first phase of the study, Nelson language proficiency test was administered to the participants. Nelson test was used as homogeneity test and 40 language learners who fell within the range of  $\pm 1$  standard deviation on the test were selected. These participants were given the first pronunciation test as pretest. The participants in the control group went through conventional approach to teaching pronunciation based on their usual curriculum in the center. The participants in the experimental group went through the LOA approach as suggested by Jones and Saville (2016). In their treatment, the following steps were considered:

#### Stage 1: Personal Development

In this stage, the participants were briefed on the objectives of the course, in addition, the researcher (teacher of the course) interviewed the participants to realize where they may prefer to use English. This could guide the researcher in understanding the real-life problems the participants have in the process of language learning. This data was used by the researcher to incorporate the target words into sentences which were more practical of the learners. As a result of attention to the personal needs of the participants, their cognitive involvement with the content could be enhanced.

#### Stage 2: Construct Definition

Having identified the social and communicative needs of the learners, the researcher defined the constructs of the course. The tests used in the course, the examples given to the participants, and the lessons delivered were all based on the identified social needs.

#### Stage 3: Autonomous learners

As learners should be as autonomous as possible in LOA, they were guided on self-assessment and peer assessment techniques so that they could evaluate their progress.

#### Stage 4: Dynamic Assessment

As learning in LOA does not begin with instruction, the learners took formative tests to be informed of their needs. This also helped the teacher to know what should be taught. Instruction followed the formative assessment.

#### Stage 5: Instruction

In LOA, instruction follows Bloom's concept of higher order thinking skill. Therefore, learning begins by presenting learning problems and learners are asked to assess their own knowledge and their peers' knowledge to find the answer to the learning problem. Therefore, the teacher only guided the

learners after they had attempted to find the answers to their questions.

A step-by-step treatment was developed based on the procedure by Jones and Saville (2016). The treatment consisted of the following steps:

1. Briefing on the objectives
2. Informal interview with the participants to analyze their needs
3. Administration of a formative test
4. Self- and peer analysis of the formative tests
5. Teacher's assessment
6. Instruction based on the learners' needs and mistakes
7. Summative assessment

Having conducted the treatment for 17 sessions, the immediate posttest was administered. After a two-week interval, the delayed posttest was implemented.

### Data Analysis

Prior to any analysis, the distribution of the scores was checked for all tests (Table 1).

As can be seen, ratios of skewness and kurtosis were within the range of  $\pm 1$ ; thus normality of scores can be assumed (George & Mallery, 2003). Therefore, parametric tools were selected to conduct the study.

As suggested by Field (2013) reliability of the scores ought to be checked prior to the main analysis. Having checked the reliability of the scores using KR-21 formula, the reliability index was found to be in the acceptable range ( $.77 \leq \alpha \leq .941$ ) for all tests; as a result, it can be assumed that the tests were reliable. In addition, the inter-rater reliability indices were also checked for the pretest of pronunciation, immediate posttest and the delayed posttest. The results indicated that there were significant agreements between the two raters on pretests of; pronunciation ( $\alpha = .911$ ,  $p = .001$ ), immediate posttest ( $\alpha = .915$ ,  $p = .000$ ), and delayed posttest ( $\alpha = .941$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

Independent samples t-test was run to find the answer to the research question on the effect of LOA on learning English pronunciation among Iranian EFL learners.

As observed in Table 2, the experimental group learners ( $M = 22.45$ ,  $SD = 2.625$ ) outperformed the control group learners ( $M = 19.20$ ,  $SD = 2.687$ ).

As observed in Table 3, the results of immediate posttest,  $t_{(38)} = 1.488$ ,  $Sig = .001$  [-.4505, 2.9505] indicates that the difference between the control group and the experimental group is significant; therefore, LOA has significant effect on pronunciation learning of Iranian EFL learners.

### Research Question 2

In order to find the answer to the second research question, i.e. 'What is the effect of LOA on retention of English pronunciation among Iranian EFL learners?' independent samples t-test was run for the results of delayed posttest.

As observed in Table 4, the experimental group participants ( $M = 22.05$ ,  $SD = 2.417$ ) outperformed the control group participants ( $M = 18.10$ ,  $SD = 2.58$ ).

The results of independent samples t-test,  $t_{(38)} = 1.312$ ,  $Sig = .000$  [-.4119, 2.845] indicate that there is a significant

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of all tests

	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Standard error	Statistic	Standard error
NELSON	64	36.1250	3.49376	-0.373	0.299	0.338	0.590
Experimental pretest	20	18.55	2.52305	-0.153	0.512	-0.869	0.992
Experimental posttest	20	22.45	2.62528	0.169	0.512	-0.746	0.992
Immediate control Pretest	20	18.40	2.74149	-0.331	0.512	-0.681	0.992
Immediate control Posttest	20	19.20	2.68720	-0.164	0.512	-0.607	0.992
Delayed control Posttest	20	18.10	2.58411	0.765	0.454	0.467	0.882
Delayed experimental posttest	20	22.05	2.41738	0.674	0.454	0.745	0.882

**Table 2.** Mean comparison of the immediate posttest

Mean comparison of the immediate posttest				
Groups	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
Experimental	20	22.45	2.62528	0.58703
Control	20	19.20	2.68720	0.60088

and meaningful difference between the posttest scores of the participants in the two groups (Table 5).

In addition, repeated measures ANOVA was used to check the difference between the pretest, immediate posttest and delayed posttest scores in the experimental group. The independent variable in this analysis was time and the continuous dependent variables were the scores. Tables 6 and 7 show the results of this analysis:

By considering time as a variable, it can be seen that there was a difference between the pretest score ( $M=18.55$ ,  $SD=2.523$ ), immediate posttest ( $22.45$ ,  $SD=2.62528$ ), and the delayed posttest ( $M=22.05$ ,  $SD=2.41738$ ).

The results of the ANOVA (Table 7) indicate a significant time effect based on the results of Wilk's Lambda  $F(2, 18)=38.169$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ,  $\eta^2=0.809$ . Thus, there is significant evidence to reject the null hypotheses. Also, the follow-up comparisons (Table 8) indicate that the differences between the pretest and immediate test and the pretest and delayed posttest were all significant.

## DISCUSSION

Learning pronunciation, similar to other language skills and subskills, require cognitive involvement with the learning content (Morley, 1991). Cognitive learning results in thinking about learning rather than memorizing the content and increases chances of both recall and retention of knowledge (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001). In line with post-method era in education, designers of LOA aimed at cognitive involvement of the learners; therefore, they have advocated beginning the LOA process by a need analysis of the learners (Jones, & Saville, 2016). In this study, the researcher attempted to follow principles of cognitive learning. The participants'

real-life problems were diagnosed and their social needs were assessed through a friendly interview with the learners prior to the treatment. Therefore, it can be assumed that one of the factors that contributed to the effect of LOA on both recall and retention of pronunciation is cognitive involvement with the learning content.

Pronunciation is very much associated with the speaking skill and speaking is reciprocal skill. The speaker of a language both produce the language and listen to others' production of language. In this sense, communication can foster pronunciation learning. Engwall and Bälter (2007) notes that language learners automatically assess their own pronunciation as they listen to others' utterances, and this feedback enhances their knowledge of pronunciation. This issue also indicates that learning of pronunciation ought to be collaborative rather than individual. Collaboration is one of the main aspects of LOA so much that ZPD has been mentioned as one of the underlying assumptions of LOA (Purpura, 2016). It is believed that the communications which occurred through collaboration in LOA has a significant effect on the learners' enhancement. This issue can be another reason why LOA has effect on recall and retention of pronunciation among Iranian EFL learners.

Savery (2006) asserts that there is a direct relationship between lack of retention and learning through memory; therefore, it is more suitable to utilize the learners' cognitive thinking abilities in the learning process. This issue was one of the main considerations in this study. The researcher did not expose pre-determined content to the learners, as there is a high chance of reducing cognitive thinking by pre-determined content. The learners were asked to analyze their needs and the content was selected based on the informal interviews and the formative tests. This can justify the increase in the participants' scores on the delayed posttest.

## CONCLUSION

This study was an attempt to find a solution to Iranian EFL learners' pronunciation problems. It was found that LOA can have significant effect on both recall and retention of pronunciation knowledge among Iranian EFL learners. The results of this study can be of significance to language teach-

**Table 3.** Independent samples t-test; immediate posttest

	Levene's test		T-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Standard error difference	95% Confidence interval of the difference	
							Lower	Upper	
Equal variances assumed	0.012	0.913	1.488	38	0.001	3.250	0.84003	-0.4505	2.9505

**Table 4.** Mean comparison of the delayed posttest

Groups	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
Experimental	20	22.05	2.41738	0.57612
Control	20	18.10	2.58411	0.59873

**Table 5.** Independent samples t-test; immediate posttest

	Levene's test		T-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Standard error difference	95% Confidence interval of the difference	
							Lower	Upper	
Equal variances assumed	0.021	0.877	1.312	38	0.000	3.950	0.786	-0.4119	2.845

**Table 6.** Descriptive statistics results of repeated measures ANOVA test

	Mean	Standard deviation	N
EXP_PRETEST	18.55	2.52305	20
EXP_POSTTEST	22.45	2.62528	20
Delayed Posttest	22.05	2.41738	20

**Table 7.** Repeated measures ANOVA results

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial eta squared	Noncent. parameter	Observed power <sup>c</sup>
Time								
Pillai's trace	0.809	38.169 <sup>b</sup>	2.000	18.	0.000	0.809	76.338	1.000
Wilks'lambda	0.191	38.169 <sup>b</sup>	2.000	18.	0.000	0.809	76.338	1.000
Hotelling's trace	4.241	38.169 <sup>b</sup>	2.000	18.	0.000	0.809	76.338	1.000
Roy's largest root	4.241	38.169 <sup>b</sup>	2.000	18.	0.000	0.809	76.338	1.000

a. Design: Intercept. Within Subjects Design: time b. Exact statistic c. Computed using alpha = ,05

**Table 8.** Pairwise comparisons

(I) time	(J) time	Mean difference (I-J)	Standard Error	Sig. <sup>b</sup>	95% Confidence interval for difference <sup>b</sup>	
					Lower bound	Upper bound
1	2	-3.990*	0.216	0.000	-2.468	-1.332
	3	-3.500*	0.219	0.001	-1.375	-0.225
2	1	3.990*	0.216	0.000	1.332	2.468
	3	0.400*	0.197	0.012	0.582	1.618
3	1	3.500*	0.219	0.001	0.225	1.375
	2	-0.400*	0.197	0.012	-1.618	-0.582

Based on estimated marginal means \*. The mean difference is significant at the ,05 level. b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

ers who would like to increase their learners' knowledge of pronunciation and teacher trainers who may want to use recent and effective teaching methods. It also comes suggested to other researcher to attempt to gauge the effect of LOA on other aspects of language such as grammar and coherence, as research in these areas is scant.

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