

The Superiority and the History of English Language Pronunciation Teaching

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ABSTRACT

In fact, pronunciation in language learning is the production and perception of the significant sounds of a particular language in order to achieve meaning in contexts of language use. Pronunciation is the most important and difficult problem that non-native English speakers have to face when studying English. Improper pronunciation can lead to negative impression, misunderstanding and ineffective communication. This study provides a brief summary on the history of English pronunciation teaching, and tries to present some practical questions most prevalent in the study of ESL especially in pronunciation teaching. We try to reveal some reasons in the superiority and the importance of pronunciation teaching and also, we suggest some practical ways in pronunciation teaching at the end of this paper.

Keyword: *Pronunciation, Superiority, L2= second language, ESL= English as a second language; EFL= English as a foreign language.*

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that pronunciation plays a central role in both our personal and our social lives: as individual, we project our identity through the way we speak, and also indicate our membership of particular communities. At the same time, and sometimes also in conflict with this identity function, our pronunciation is responsible intelligibility: whether or not we can convey our meaning. The significance of success in L2 pronunciation learning is therefore far-reaching, complicated by the fact that many aspects of pronunciation happen subconsciously and so are not readily accessible to conscious analysis and intervention. **(Barbara Seidhofer, 1992, p 39)**

All this may explain why teachers frequently regard pronunciation as overly difficult, technical or plain mysterious, while at the same time recognizing its importance. The consequent feeling of unease can, however, be dispelled relatively easily once a basic understanding has been achieved.

As it is mentioned before, Pronunciation is the most important and difficult problem that non-native English speakers have to face when studying English. Improper pronunciation can lead to negative impression, misunderstanding and ineffective communication. A common

mistake made by many international students studying English as a second language is not paying adequate attention to English pronunciation. This underestimation of the importance of pronunciation is mainly because students tend to think mistakenly that pronunciation is less important compared to other aspects of the English language such as grammar, lexicology and vocabulary. **(Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994), p164)**

Pronunciation is vital to proper communication because the incorrect use of pronunciation inevitably leads to the message being misunderstood by the recipient. Pronunciation of the letter sounds in words as well as syllable emphasis on parts of words will more often than not change the words meaning and context drastically thereby irreversibly altering the meaning of the sentence being communicated. A good example of this is the word present. If one were to say "I am present" with an emphasis on the first syllable of the word, one is referring to one's presence at a particular place or time. On the other hand, if one were to say "I wish to present..." Then one refers to a statement or article one wishes to announce.

Another important aspect is, the proper use of English pronunciation inclines to highlight and add value to an individual speaking English.

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Consider the following: in a situation where a student's grammar and vocabulary is exceptionally good, he or she may be able to write good English. But, if that same student lacks a fundamental knowledge of pronunciation despite having an excellent knowledge of grammar, etc. his or her communication in English will be severely impeded. He or she will be able to write in English, but will not be able to construct a meaningful sentence when speaking and thus fails at communicating a message.

Firstly, this study tries to present a brief summary of the history of pronunciation teaching and then the importance of English pronunciation teaching especially for ESL and EFL learners. Secondly, we try to present some practical hints to develop your pronunciation skill. Now, we deal with a brief summary of pronunciation skill in ELT. (Pennington, (1992), p253)

THE HISTORY OF PRONUNCIATION TEACHING IN BRIEF

Modern language teaching has developed two general approaches to the teaching of pronunciation:

- a. **Intuitive-imitative:** It depends on the learner's ability to listen to and imitate the sounds of the target language; It also presupposes the availability of good models to listen to, first good model, then tape recorders and CD's.
- b. **Analytic-linguistic:** it utilizes information and tools such as phonetic, articulatory descriptions, charts of the vocal apparatus...etc.

Pronunciation Teaching in Different Methods and Era

Grammar translation and Reading-based approaches: In these methods, teaching of pronunciation is largely irrelevant; Grammar or text comprehension is taught through the medium of the learner's native language, and oral communication in the target language is not a primary instructional objective.

Direct Method and Naturalistic approaches: In Direct Method, pronunciation is taught through intuition and imitation; students imitate a model and do their best by repetition. This was grounded on observations of children and adults first and second languages learning in non instructional setting. Successors are Naturalistic methods including comprehension methods.

The Reform Movement: The first analytic contribution emerged as the part of reform movement in which phonations formed the International Phonetics Alphabet (IPA) to make it possible to accurately represent the sounds of any language for the first time.

The 1940s and the 1950s: In Audio-lingual and Oral Approach classrooms, pronunciation is very important and is taught explicitly from the start. The teacher models a sound, or an utterance and the students imitate or repeat. The teacher also uses information from phonetics, charts and the minimal pair drill.

The 1960s: The Cognitive Approach influenced by transformational-generative grammar and viewed language as ruled-governed rather than habit formation. It emphasized pronunciation couldn't be achieved, and time would be better spent on teaching more learnable items.

The 1970s: The languages teaching profession changed position many times with respect to the teaching of pronunciation. Various methods and approaches placed this skill either at the forefront of instruction or in the back wings. Other methods and approaches either ignored or taught pronunciation through imitation and repetition. During 1970, the silent way and community language learning become popular in teaching the pronunciation.

The Silent way: It paid attention to accuracy of production of sounds of the target languages from the very initial stage of instruction; this enables learners to sharpen their own inner criteria for accurate production. The teacher speaks as little as possible indicating through gestures what students should do. The Silent way teacher also uses tools such as a sound-color chart, and the Fidel wall charts. It helps to establish a true feel for the language.

Community Language Learning: In typical CLL classroom, students sit around a table with a tape recorder, the teacher asks the student to say something in the native language, then he provided it the target language and the student repeats, once the student can produce the whole utterance fluently, it is recorded on the tape and then the utterances are played back, the computer can work as the teacher, too.

Today's pronunciation teaching: Nowadays, the main purpose of pronunciation teaching is to enable learners to surpass the threshold level so that their pronunciation will not detract from their ability to communicate. Therefore, we can use activities like listening and imitation,

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phonetics training, and minimal pair drill to accomplish the goals. (Barbara Seidhofer, 1992, p 37-38)

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRONUNCIATION TEACHING

In fact, most ESL teachers now agree that explicit pronunciation teaching is an essential part of language courses. On the other hand, confidence with pronunciation allows learners the interaction with native speakers that is so essential for can mask otherwise good language skills, condemning learners to less than their deserved social, academic and work advancement. While there is little doubt teachers' appreciation of the pronunciation instruction, there is even less doubt about learners' own demand for effective pronunciation teaching: almost all learners rate this as a priority and an area in which they need more guidance for any remaining skeptics, it may be worth briefly rehearsing the following responses to reasons sometimes given for not teaching pronunciation explicitly in an ESL program.

Is It Just Enough to Communication or Not?

If you can communicate in English with people from other countries, congratulations! It's a big achievement. Now you should ask yourself two questions:

- Is my English easy to understand?
- Is my English pleasant to listen to?

Some people communicate successfully in English, but have a strong foreign accent. Although you can understand what they are saying, it is not easy. You have to listen to them really carefully, which takes effort. In addition, some foreign accents are simply unpleasant to listen to.

If you speak English with a strong foreign accent, you are making things difficult for people who listen to you. If understanding your English takes effort or your accent is unpleasant, people will avoid talking to you if they have the choice. (Tomasz P. Szynalski, 2012, p.67)

Why Do We Teach Pronunciation?

- a. Although learning is very unlikely to attain a native-like accent, their intelligibility can be greatly improved by effective pronunciation teaching.
- b. Although pronunciation is improved mostly through the gradual intuitive changes brought about by real interaction with native

speakers, for a large proportion of ESL learners the skills that enable this type of interaction do not come naturally and mostly they need an explicit pronunciation teaching.

- c. Although it is offensive to prescribe an "accent norm" to which learners must assimilate and it is true that people should be free to express themselves in whatever accent they choose, we should be aware that effective pronunciation teaching offers learners a genuine in how they express themselves.

How important is Good English Pronunciation?

- A common mistake made by many international students studying English as a second language is not paying adequate attention to English pronunciation. This underestimation of the importance of pronunciation is mainly because students tend to think mistakenly that pronunciation is less important compared to other aspects of the English language such as grammar, lexicology and vocabulary.
- Pronunciation is vital to proper communication because the incorrect use of pronunciation inevitably leads to the message being misunderstood by the recipient. Pronunciation of the letter sounds in words as well as syllable emphasis on parts of words will more often than not change the words meaning and context drastically thereby irreversibly altering the meaning of the sentence being communicated. A good example of this is the word present. If one were to say "I am present" with an emphasis on the first syllable of the word, one is referring to one's presence at a particular place or time. On the other hand, if one were to say "I wish to present...." Then one refers to a statement or article one wishes to announce.
- Another important aspect is, the proper use of English pronunciation inclines to highlight and add value to an individual speaking English. Consider the following: in a situation where a student's grammar and vocabulary is exceptionally good, he or she may be able to write good English. But, if that same student lacks a fundamental knowledge of pronunciation despite having an excellent knowledge of grammar, etc. his or her communication in English will be severely impeded. He or she will be able to write in English, but will not be able to construct a meaningful sentence when

speaking and thus fails at communicating a message.

- At the very least, students studying English as a second language, should give all the aspects of English an equal importance. At best, however, those who wish to excel at the English language will always have to give the knowledge of pronunciation a higher priority. They should also endeavor to learn this aspect of the English language more thoroughly if they wish to be recognized as effective communicators. Students who prefer self-learning should visit sites such as TV-English. club, which offers a myriad of programs to help students learn proper pronunciation. Programs such as “Art of Conversation” and “Speak Up” are excellent resources for those looking to improve their English pronunciation. **(Ronald Carter, 2004,p176)**

Is It Necessary to use Phonemic Symbols in Order to Teach Pronunciation?

It is, of course, possible to identify the different sounds without using phonemic symbols. However, knowing the symbols will, almost certainly, assist in learning how to pronounce words. Here are some situations which illustrate the usefulness of phonemic symbols:

- Dictionaries usually give the pronunciation of words by using phonemic symbols. Being able to recognize these will help learners to become independent as they will not have to rely on asking their teacher how to pronounce a new word they may have come across.
- Correcting pronunciation becomes much easier if both teacher and learner are familiar with the symbols, making it much easier for mistakes to be identified and corrections illustrated.
- When learning new words, learners can write down the pronunciation as a reminder of how the word should be said, thus avoiding what can easily become perpetual pronunciation errors.
- Symbols are a visual aid which can illustrate to learners how the sounds of two words differ or that they are similar. For example, they can see that ‘know’ and ‘no’ sound the same, whereas, ‘put’ and ‘putt’ are different.
- Just as learners use a dictionary as a tool for vocabulary, and a grammar book for grammar, they should be able to use a phonemic chart as a reference for pronunciation. **(Angie Conti, 2009.PP.34-35)**

What is/are the Main Problem(s) in Pronunciation Teaching?

In fact, the problem is not *whether* to teach pronunciation or not, but *how* to teach pronunciation is our problem. The problem is that the only effectiveness of our teachers is based largely on individual experience and insights. I suppose that we should set pronunciation in a communicative and meaning based framework rather than seeing it as computational processing. (Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994),p144)

Why is Pronunciation so Difficult to Learn?

As a matter of fact, pronunciation is one of the most difficult areas for learners, as well as for teachers. Pronunciation is not just a cognitive "Knowing-that" but it is also a physical "Knowing-how", similar to playing a sport or musical instrument. Moreover we should be aware of this precise fact that learners need really motivation and time to practice pronunciation. It is very much worth spending class time discussing with learners their own ideas about what is involved in learning pronunciation. We really know that pronunciation is not just a component but, it is a subject on which there is a large literature in psychology and education rather than as a purely physical skill.

A big Question is how to teach Pronunciation.

Given these considerations about the nature of pronunciation, let me now make some recommendations about pronunciation teaching, although through this short space available here I can only outline some good ideas of teaching pronunciation.

Set Pronunciation in a Communicative Context

We know that learners benefit greatly from explicit explanation of how pronunciation fits into the overall process of communication. A simple model of communication showing a listener trying to interpret a message on the basis of cues in the speakers' speech is sufficient. This gives learners a framework within which to understand what goes wrong when they are not understood or are misunderstood.

The advantages of working with this type of framework are:

- a. It takes learners' focus away from their own 'performance' and places it more clearly on the listener's experience of their speech.

- b. It changes the goal of pronunciation from one of mimicking a native accent (extremely difficult to achieve), to one of creating intelligible messages (perfectly possible).
- c. It allows a vague, blurring of boundaries between segmental and super segmental aspects of speech, and as easy way in to teaching learners about the information structure of speech, which is highly useful in teaching English prosody.

Teach Pronunciation through Interferences with English Pronunciation

A student's first language often interferes with English Pronunciation For example; /p/ is aspirated in English but not in Spanish, so when a Spanish speaker pronounces "pig" without a puff of air on the /p/ an American may hear "big" instead. Sometimes the students will be able to identify specific problem sounds and sometimes they won't. You ask them for suggestions, but you will also need to observe them over time and make note of problem sounds. Another challenge from differences in the first language is the inability to hear English sounds that the native language does not contain. Often these are vowels as in "ship" and "sheep" which many learners cannot distinguish.

Here are some Tips for you to improve your Pronunciation.

- With every new word, you should look it up in the dictionary to find the correct pronunciation.
- Listen to native speakers to get used to their accent. Instead of boring listening lessons, you can listen to English songs, watch movies or listen to your native English speaking friends and relatives.
- Practice in front of a mirror and make sure you move your mouth in the correct way.
- Do a lot of practices. Remember that practices make perfect.
- Be patient and determined. The journey may be tough, but the result will be worth.

CONCLUSION

Pronunciation involves far more than individual sounds. Word stress, sentence stress, intonation, and word linking all influences the sound of spoken English, not to mention the way we often slur words and phrases together in casual speech. English pronunciation involves too many complexities for learners to strive for a complete elimination of accent, but improving pronunciation will boost self esteem, facilitate communication, and possibly lead to a better job or a least respect in workplace. Effective communication is of greatest importance, so choose first to work on problems that significantly hinder communication. Remember that your students also need to learn strategies for dealing with misunderstandings, since native pronunciation is for most an unrealistic goal.

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Citation: Dr. Mohammad Reza Afroogh. "The Superiority and the History of English Language Pronunciation Teaching". *Annals of Language and Literature*, 2(3), 2018, pp. 33-37.

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