

The Significance Of Pronunciation In English Language Teaching At The University

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Abstract: In many English language classrooms, teaching pronunciation is granted the least attention. When ESL teachers defend the poor pronunciation skills of their students, their arguments could either be described as a cop-out with respect to their inability to teach their students proper pronunciation or they could be regarded as taking a stand against linguistic influence. If we learn a second language in childhood, we learn to speak it fluently and without a ‘foreign accent’; if we learn in adulthood, it is very unlikely that we will attain a native accent. In this study, the researchers first review misconceptions about pronunciation, factors affecting the learning of pronunciation. Then, the needs of learners and suggestions for teaching pronunciation will be reviewed. Pronunciation has a positive effect on learning a second language and learners can gain the skills they need for effective communication in English.

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1. Introduction

Pronunciation instruction is a prominent factor in foreign language teaching. Since sounds play an important role in communication, foreign language teachers must attribute proper importance to teaching pronunciation in their classes. It is evident that communication is a mutual relationship between the speaker and the hearer. This means that one must comprehend what he/she hears in the target language and must produce the sounds of the language he/she is trying to learn accurately. Unless he has sufficient knowledge of the sound patterns of the target language, he can neither encode a message to anybody nor decode the message sent by another person by learning the sounds of the target language within his mother tongue. Therefore, pronunciation instruction is of great importance for successful oral communication to take place since it is an important ingredient of the communicative competence (Hismanoglu, 2006).

This paper emphasizes the prominence of pronunciation as a key to gaining full communicative competence, and takes into account the important issues in pronunciation pedagogy such as the history of English pronunciation instruction, the aim of English pronunciation instruction, pronunciation and communication, the previous research about the effectiveness of pronunciation instruction on learners’ achievement, and the English pronunciation and the target of comfortable intelligibility.

2. What Is Pronunciation?

Pronunciation is a set of habits of producing sounds. The habit of producing a sound is acquired by repeating it over and over again and by being corrected when it is pronounced wrongly. Learning to pronounce

a second language means building up new pronunciation habits and overcoming the bias of the first language (Cook, 1996). Pronunciation refers to the production of sounds that we use to make meaning. It includes attention to the particular sounds of a language (segments), aspects of speech beyond the level of the individual sound, such as intonation, phrasing, stress, timing, rhythm (suprasegmental aspects), how the voice is projected (voice quality) and, in its broadest definition, attention to gestures and expressions that are closely related to the way we speak a language. A broad definition of pronunciation includes both suprasegmental and segmental features. Although these different aspects of pronunciation are treated in isolation here, it is important to remember that they all work in combination when we speak, and are therefore usually best learned as an integral part of spoken language. Traditional approaches to pronunciation have often focused on segmental aspects, largely because these relate in some way to letters in writing, and are therefore the easiest to notice and work on. More recent approaches to pronunciation, however, have suggested that the suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation may have the most effect on intelligibility for some speakers. Harmer (1993) stresses the need for making sure that students can always be understood and say what they want to say. They need to master “good pronunciation”, not perfect accents. That is, emphasis should be on suprasegmental features of pronunciation—not segmental aspects—to help learners acquire communicative competence (Seferoglu, 2005).

Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson, and Koehler (1992) compared the relative contributions made to

intelligibility by prosody, segmentals, and syllable structure. Within 11 different language groups, they found that the score for prosody was most significantly associated with the overall score for pronunciation. A similar finding was reported by Anderson-Hsieh and Koehler (1988), who concluded that “prosodic deviance may affect comprehension more adversely than does segmental deviance” (p. 562). In a related finding, Derwing, Munro, and Wiebe (1998) studied the effects of both segmental and suprasegmental instruction on learners’ comprehensibility ratings and concluded that the latter had a greater effect on performance in communicative contexts. Usually learners benefit from attention to both aspects, and some learners may need help in some areas more than in others. One considerable practical advantage of focusing on suprasegmentals is that learners from mixed L1 backgrounds in the same class will benefit, and will often find that their segmental difficulties improve at the same time (Fraser, 2001).

3. The Aim of Teaching Pronunciation

Being able to speak English in a global society is helpful. What constitutes ‘acceptable’ English pronunciation? Acceptable pronunciation can best be understood if we divide the problem into three parts. A learner’s pronunciation has three basic levels (James, 2010).

Level 1: People often do not understand what the speaker is saying. The speaker uses the wrong sounds when making English words or uses the wrong prosodic features when making English sentences. For example, Hinofotis and Bailey (1980, as cited in Celce-Murcia & Goodwin, 1991) suggest that there is a threshold level for pronunciation; that is, if a speaker has a level of pronunciation that falls below this threshold, he/she will be unable to communicate regardless of his/her knowledge of grammar and vocabulary.

Level 2: People understand what the speaker is saying, but the speaker’s pronunciation is not pleasant to listen to because he/she has a distracting and/or heavy accent. As Morley (1994) noted, when a speaker’s pronunciation performance is heavily accented, it can affect how the speaker is perceived. As Morley (1994) notes, “Speakers are judged to lack credibility and do not inspire confidence in either their knowledge or their persona” (p. 69).

Level 3: People understand the speaker, and the speaker’s English is pleasant to listen to. Scovel (1988) refers to this as comfortable intelligibility, and he suggests that this, rather than native-like accuracy, should be the goal of pronunciation.

4. How to learn to pronounce English words

1. **Learn to recognize all the English sounds** and learn their IPA symbols. Recognition is important because it lets you learn the pronunciations of words

from spoken English. Suppose you’re listening to a podcast and you hear the word dock. In order to remember the pronunciation correctly, you need to realize that you just heard /dɒk/ and not /dʌk/. You can’t do this if you can’t tell the difference between /ɒ/ and /ʌ/. You can’t learn English pronunciation if you can’t tell the difference between English sounds, just like you can’t learn spelling if you can’t tell the difference between letters.

2. **Get in the habit of checking the pronunciation of English words in a dictionary.**

When you’re speaking and you’re not 100% sure how to pronounce something, **don’t guess**— if possible, check the correct pronunciation before you say it. If not, then at least check it soon afterwards.

While you’re reading in English, keep asking yourself: “**Do I know how this word is pronounced?** Can I transcribe it with phonetic symbols?”. If you’re not sure, look it up in a dictionary. This should happen very frequently when you’re a pronunciation beginner.

You have to be a little obsessive, especially in the beginning. Remember that English pronunciation is unpredictable. Don’t think you just have to check the “difficult” words like determine or process. Common English words can have very surprising pronunciations.

3. **Listen and notice.** Get some spoken input: TV, podcasts, movies, audiobooks, recordings in dictionaries, etc. When listening, pay attention to how sounds and words are pronounced. Think about what sounds you hear.

4. **Practice pronouncing English words from time to time.** Practice can take many forms. You can practice in a systematic way (e.g. a 15-minute session with a dictionary or online pronunciation exercises), or you can just repeat a couple words while you’re doing something else (e.g. watching a movie or taking a shower). The important thing is to do it regularly — that way, you will make steady progress.

Getting it right in your head

It can take months or even years before your brain gets used to new sounds. In the beginning, you probably won’t be able to produce a perfect /r/ or make a clear distinction between /eə/ (where) and /ɜ:/ (were), to take just two examples.

It is certainly important to pronounce English sounds clearly. If you don’t, people will have difficulty understanding you. But it is far more important to “get it right in your head”. What do I mean by “getting it right in your head”? When you say an English word, you should know how it **should** be pronounced, i.e. what sounds you are **trying** to pronounce, even if you can’t actually pronounce them very well.

For example, when you say full, you should know you are trying to say the same/ʊ/ sound that is used in put or could, and you should know that it is a different sound than the one in rude or school. You should know

that it **should** sound different than /u:/ (rude), even if it sounds the same coming out of your mouth. Why is it more important to “get it right in your head” than to produce the sounds correctly? English has 44 sounds: even if you mispronounce every single one, that’s only 44 mistakes. Fixing 44 mistakes is a problem, but it is not a huge problem. Eventually, you will get better at producing the sounds, and your pronunciation will get good. It is far worse if you don’t know how English words should be pronounced — for example, if you mistakenly think that museum is stressed on the first syllable (~~Museum~~—instead of muSEum) or that desperate rhymes with rate. In that case, you may have **hundreds** of mistakes to deal with! Fixing such a mess could take you a very long time. So your first goal in learning English pronunciation should be to “get it right in your head”. First, learn to recognize all the English sounds. Second, learn which sounds occur in which words, even if you can’t pronounce them very well yourself. If your knowledge is right, your physical skills will surely follow.

5. Conclusion

Pronunciation must be viewed as more than correct production of individual sounds or isolated words. Instead, it must be viewed as a crucial part of communication that should be incorporated into classroom activities. English pronunciation instruction should be viewed in the same light as the other aspects and skills of the English language, such as vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing since it is an important part of communication, particularly through listening and speaking. Therefore, pronunciation components have to be incorporated in the materials, classroom activities and testing tools; and the teachers have to be trained in English pronunciation instruction. The teaching of English pronunciation has to aim at intelligible pronunciation considered as an essential component of communicative competence. Teachers can help students by highlighting elements such as sounds, syllables, stress and intonation. Teachers can actively encourage the students’ actual production, build pronunciation awareness and practice through classes. They can encourage them repeatedly to monitor their own pronunciation and practice their speaking skills as much as possible in and outside the classroom. Pronunciation instruction is very important because of the following reasons:

1. Teaching pronunciation should be a priority

because language is primarily a means of communication and this communication should be understood by all. If one doesn't strive for a common pronunciation one runs the risk of not being understood by the target audience.

2. Teaching pronunciation is crucial since this is the main source of understanding. If people cannot utter the correct version of a word/expression then they are not able to communicate properly. It would lead to difficulties.

3. Teaching pronunciation is a priority in learning English. A good pronunciation brings you closer to the native accent of English. A good pronunciation provides a speaker with confidence to communicate.

4. Awareness on pronunciation not only does bring about a comprehensible output but also leads to better listening comprehension.

5. Teaching pronunciation is essential for our students. It leads them to a better understanding of native speakers and improves their ability to communicate. Pronunciation work gives the students more knowledge of how the language works because after all if the students know the language but can't communicate with it then it is a great pity.

6. Being able to speak English with proper pronunciation not only makes our speech intelligible, but also builds up proper rapport with the listeners.

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