

The Role of Pronunciation in English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

English pronunciation includes sound, stress, rhythm as intonation. Factors which effect pronunciation learning, in view of the teachers opinion about the limitations of learners of English as second language needs proper attention.. The role of the teacher assumes importance as the teacher has to help the learners perceive sounds. Teachers should be careful in teaching pronunciation. It is the duty of the teacher to enable the students develop the ability to identify and produce English key sounds as well as its basic rhythm, stress and intonation patterns in context,increase self-confidence in the way they speak, develop speech-monitoring abilities for use outside of the classroom.

Keywords- stress, rhythm, intonation, pronunciation, sounds, phonetic sounds, speech, syllable

INTRODUCTION

Differentiation between hearings and listening

Teachers should be careful in differentiating between hearing and listening. It has been beautifully pointed by Joanne Kenworthy in the following words, “It is significant that in English and in many other languages we can make a distinction between hearing and listening. Hearing requires more presence on the part of the ears and listening requires work.”¹ In setting goals for the learners, we must consider the effect of mispronunciation on the listener.. The role that our Indian native languages play should make the teacher conscious about the problems of pronunciation (individual sounds) and also a combination of sounds and features such as stress, rhythm and intonation. The factors such as age, nature and duration of exposure, phonetic sensibility, attitude to learn and a strong motivation to learn well are to be noted. In the process of making the learners aware of pronunciation, the English teacher must undertake the following steps.

1. Getting them aware about ‘sound’ two types- vowels and consonants where the latter surrounds the former. Sounds occur in groups, the phenomenal of linkage of sounds adds to the naturalness of the speech. An example, “ Not at all”. When one strings them together into a phrase, he in his natural way does not pause between the words, but moves smoothly from the ‘t’ sound at the end sound like the word tall.
2. Words having more than one syllable have their own governance, for example when one syllable stands out more prominently than others, that syllable is pronounced slightly louder , holding the vowel a little longer and pronouncing the consonants very clearly. This brings in the word stress, example, table, book, spoon. Polysyllabic words have several stresses but one as main.
3. English speech is time stressed; it has a beat as in music. Within each group there are strong and weak beats, the tendency for the strong, the tendency for the strong beats to fall on the nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs (words with principal meaning) and for the weak beats to fall on prepositions, articles, pronouns(words with grammatical function). This builds up the rhythm. When a syllable is stressed in a sentence, its pronunciation is often quite different from when it is stressed. The unstressed position often forms a weak form.
4. Pronunciation of a sentence produces further complications. This is much more evident when it gives rise to a conversational context. Speakers often decide that they want to give more or less prominence to a particular word. This happens when a speaker considers a reference as a repetition and hence he thinks a weak utterance will do, whereas the



other speaker wants to highlight it for the sake of prominence. Thus sentence stress varies from situation to situation say dialogue, discussion, talks, lectures, communicating diverse pitch, as and when needed.

5. Speech is like music, it changes its pitch. Speakers use their voice as they speak, making it higher or lower in pitch at will. Speech thus has a melody called intonation. The two basic melodies are rising and falling. (Rise- fall- rise, fall-rise fall etc). These can be very sudden or gradual and also can be put together in various combinations. Pitch in speech is interesting in the sense that it assists in sending various messages.

6 Listening to proper English speech of native speakers or near native speakers' in our country is very important because the proper stress pattern of a word is the most important part of its identity for the native speaker. Putting stress in the wrong place creates grave misunderstanding. For example if the word "written" was pronounced with the stress on the second syllable instead of the first, the listener would think the speaker had uttered the word retain. Similarly the word productivity, instead of having stress on 'trivity' was uttered with two wrong stresses giving rise to a confusion to the listener as 'productive tea'.

We can now talk of situations/exercises which can promote the listening speaking habit, namely

1. The teacher names familiar objects, places, activities in and around the situation.
2. The teacher describes processes in the performance of a task- gardening, cleaning, setting an experiment, games and sports, watching something, painting and so on.
3. A whole lot of interesting games can be brought in like chanting poems, question answer games and mini dictation.
4. The learners can be asked to write down in normal spelling what they heard. Even poems, rhymes, syllables can be marked to indicate aspects of pronunciation.

Teaching and the foreign language

In the whole language teaching process, spoken language is an important aspect. Correct pronunciation with sounds and rhythm and melody of the language need constant attention and practice from the first day of the course. The process of language learning probably includes three stages. The first stage is called the initial stage, the second, the consolidation stage and the last, the advanced stage.

In the first stage, the student is being introduced for the first time to the sound system, the stress, the intonation tunes and the rhythm of the language he is learning. In this stage, the pupil is given exposure to drills and exercises on individual sounds and sound sequences. The second stage is perceived when the pupil has been presented with the full range of sounds of the language, even though he makes many mistakes. He has moved into a stage where he is consolidating his knowledge and is forming the habit of using that item in the appropriate positions. In this stage, what is needed above all is the opportunity for the pupil to practice, to be corrected and to practice again. It is at the advanced stage that a learner needs to learn about the sound systems. All sorts of sophisticated skills like phonetic transcription and analysis of intonation pattern, acquiring all the skills that belonged to the advanced intellectual study of language need to be stressed. Thus the initial stage can be termed as pronunciation teaching, the second as the stage for speech training and the advanced level refers to the study of phonetics.

What is the difference between phonetics and linguistics?

Linguistics concern a teacher in so far as he ought to know the description of languages spoken as well as written, he may have to study the difference between accent, dialect, style, usage and many other factors. It is agreed that a teacher should at best teach the language than about the language. For teaching, the language one should have a basis of phonetics and linguistics, both to enable him to have the full knowledge of the nature of language. He would derive benefit from a knowledge of the phonetics and linguistics because these are the basics of a proper design of syllabuses and textbooks. His own performance of a language teacher will be better assured.

Developing Oral skills

Practise in the early stages of learning should be limited, however to the sounds, the vocabulary or the structural patterns which are being taught for active production.

1. Practices should not be in isolated periods or of meaningless sounds, words or sentences. This deadens interest in the new language learning.
2. Pupil's initial contact with the flow of speech will come from hearing the sentences.

3. Hearing, imitation and repetition are the key activities to learn correct pronunciation and intonation. Students need practise in groups as well as independently.
4. Sound differences could be carefully handled.
5. The teacher has to keep control; over the learning process by correcting immediately pupil's mistakes. He did not point out the mistakes but he arranges for the correct practise exercises indirectly.
6. Meaning of the words must be allowed to be explored and they are learnt and remembered better. Equivalents, if used often weaken the impression of the new word and thus tend to damage the students interest in learning a language. Certain amount of curiosity to unravel the unknown, though around a great deal of difficulty stimulates learning. It must be guaranteed that the living personality of the teacher makes use of new words in all kinds of contexts and situations.
7. The proper plan is to adapt new sounds, words, and structure patterns into well designed course which ensures gradual yet thorough repetition so that correct forms and constructions are established in the mental habits of the students.
8. Developing speech skills does not amount to practising on the structural elements only(phonology, lexis, and syntax). There ought to be the basis of content or situation or a sort of urgency which should keep the learner of the foreign language motivated all along.

Summation

In order to improve the pronunciation, some visual aids extension practices will be profitable. Even reports of similar experiences narrated by pupils should be encouraged. "Students find it difficult to overcome the great fear of venturing into unknown language situations. By practise they develop an insight into the simple fact that language helps them to string together various ideas expressed in themes and sentences and this can be a never ending fun, a semi creative activity for the learners ." ² Any English language learner knows that often spelling isn't very helpful if we want to know how to correctly say a word. Take a look at this sentence, focusing on the words in bold - do you know how to pronounce them?

"The man didn't feel very comfortable in his gray suit. He didn't enjoy wearing smart clothes, and when he wore them he felt a subtle difference in his personality."

English spelling hasn't evolved much over time, but how we pronounce words has. This makes pronunciation a real challenge for language learners. But good pronunciation is not just 'how words and letters sound'; there are other equally important features to consider, like intonation (how the tone of voice changes during a sentence, going up or down), stress (which words and syllables have more 'weight' when we are speaking), and connected speech - how words can sound different when they are joined together in natural speech. All of these features contribute to good pronunciation - but don't confuse them with accent.

"In the UK, the USA and other English speaking countries there are many, many different types of accents, but people with those different accents can all be considered to have correct pronunciation. When you are learning English you don't have to sound British or American. Good pronunciation means being understood; not necessarily sounding like you were born in New York or London. In fact, many native speakers love hearing English spoken with a Spanish, Italian or French accent!" ³ So, how can you work on your pronunciation so that people from all over the world can understand you easily, even if you retain your native accent?

1 Listen- Listening to examples of authentic speech is the most obvious way to improve your own pronunciation. There are lots of ways to do this - watch a film in its original version, listen to podcasts about a topic that interests you in English even listening to music can help. Try to notice the intonation that people use. You can add to this by 'shadowing'. Shadowing means listening to a short sentence or phrase, and then repeating it afterwards, trying to imitate the sounds, intonation and word stress and noticing how your mouth and tongue move when you speak.

2. Record yourself- Once you have practiced shadowing, you could record yourself speaking - either repeating a short phrase that you have listened to, or doing a longer speaking task from a course book, like describing a picture. Listen back and make a note of any sounds that you have problems with - practice these words / sounds slowly and then record yourself again. Can you notice an improvement?

3. Get to know the phonemic chart.-The IPA is a visual representation of different sounds. It might look strange and it might feel like you are learning a whole new language, but it can really help you with pronunciation. All dictionaries have a phonetic transcription of words so that you know how to pronounce them. This is really helpful with English because as we have already seen, English spelling doesn't always correspond with its pronunciation. Think about the



letters 'ough' in the words 'though', 'through', 'tough', 'ought'. It would be impossible to guess how to say those words without some help. You can click on the different phonemes and listen to how they sound. This can help you to hear differences between similar sounds.

4. Use a dictionary-As well as printed dictionaries which will give you a phonetic transcription of a word, there are lots of online dictionaries where you can click and listen to the word being spoken.

5. Do some exercise -Different languages have different sounds, and our mouths adapt to those sounds. Some sounds are physically very difficult for us to make, as they don't exist in our native language. Just like when you are learning a new sport or dance move, it's important that you train your mouth to know how to form new sounds - the more you practice the easier it gets. For example, lots of Spanish speakers have problems with the difference between the /b/ and /v/ sound. We make the /b/ sound by joining our lips together and then letting go. The /v/ sound is similar but your top teeth should touch your bottom lip before you let go.

6. Get to know your minimal pairs. Minimal pairs are words that have almost the exact same pronunciation, but with one sound that is different - for example, ship and sheep. The difference between the /I/ in 'ship' and the /i:/ in 'sheep' is the length of the vowel. This can be difficult to hear for many language learners, and comes up in lots of different words. The first step is to be able to tell the difference between the sounds when you hear them, them.

Speaking English to foreign speakers of English not only requires a mastery of the linguistic aspects but also a clear perception of the use of language in the English environment. When we emphasize the development of conversational ability, we have to make it clear in our own mind as to the nature of the type of English we teach to our students. To quote C. J Dodson, “ The process involved in second language learning are (i)from knowing nothing about any language situation to complete mastery of this situation, (ii) from a mastery of known situation to a mastery of situations and unforeseeable situations whenever and wherever they might occur.”. The student is therefore not only widening the scope of this foreign language expression but he is also learning to associate newly created sentences to suit new situations.

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