

Review Article

TEACHING PHONETICS TO ENHANCE PRONUNCIATION IN AN ESL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This paper highlights the importance of English pronunciation for an ESL learner while speaking the language to a native speaker as well as understanding the context of another English speaker. This paper also throws light upon the importance of phonetics in teaching pronunciation. The researcher attempts to find out the factors affecting English pronunciation of ESL learners by conducting an experiment on Indian university level students as samples. The selection of student sample is done through 'purposive sampling technique'. Based on the observations obtained from the experiment conducted by the researcher, the necessary methods and techniques that is feasible and adaptable for the learners to enhance their English pronunciation based on CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) theory is suggested. Acquiring native like pronunciation is not a short-term process. A few effective methods like drilling and minimal pair techniques will help language teachers to gradually give the learners an insight about the English sound system and support in the development of spontaneous speaking.

Keywords: Phonetics, CLT (Communicative Language Teaching), Pronunciation, Stress and Intonation, Drilling, Minimal Pairs, Chaining, ESL (English as Second Language).

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INTRODUCTION

Henry Sweet, a well-known phonetician and scholar, states that, "Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts." 'Language' and 'thought' are intertwined. We think in a specific language to communicate with others. Sometimes, even for self-communication we need a language. We think in one language and translate to some other language in order to communicate with the other person, who doesn't know the language in which we think. Generally, the language we think will be our mother tongue or L1, and the translated thought will be in L2, the target language or the language other than mother tongue. The most common second language or foreign language, today in India is none other than English. In the recent years, the aggrandizing growth of English language and the demand for efficient teaching of the language is obvious. Language is interconnected with all the fields. English has its power and dominion because of this characteristic feature. This forms the base for the proliferating evolution of English Language Teaching in recent years. Speaking skill gives the grade of knowing a language. It fulfils the basic need for using a language. Generally, in schools, teachers concentrate on writing skills when concerned to English language. If at all there is a chance to teach speaking skills in the classroom to the students, who learn English as their second language, they concentrate on grammar, forms and vocabulary.

Despite some usage of practical resources in teaching pronunciation, there is always a negligence among the ESL teachers to teach pronunciation. As Murphy points out, the foremost reason of this negligence pertains to the willingness of the teachers to teach pronunciation. To be specific, most of the language teachers think that they are less qualified to teach pronunciation because of the lack of efficient knowledge in teaching pronunciation and comparatively lesser pedagogical focus in phonology related courses of their study. The most second language dream to own native-like pronunciation. One is obliged to have a thorough knowledge of the English sound system: the sound of letters and words, the difference in tone

important reason to learn a language is for communicative purpose. Correct pronunciation forms the basis for a better communication. The versatile nature of English language is due to its quality of easily borrowing words from other foreign languages. For example: Loot (Hindi), Cigar (Spanish), Cartoon (Italian), Cookie (Dutch), Ketchup (Chinese), Utensil (French), etc. The twenty-six alphabets of English don't have a reliable sound. Not all words in English can follow a certain pattern of pronunciation. A vowel letter represents different vowel sounds. For example: the vowel 'u' in the words 'cut' and 'put' has different pronunciations. The pronunciation of a letter differs from word to word. Some letters have more than one sound. Sometimes in a word a letter is not pronounced at all. Similar sounds may have different alphabets. Such complexities make English pronunciation difficult. Added to this the stress and intonation of the words and sentences also matters. A wrong pronunciation or a wrong word stress and tone can render the meaning of the thought to be communicated.

IMPORTANCE OF PRONUNCIATION

According to the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) theory, the main motive to learn a second language is just to improve 'communicative competence', a term coined by Dell Hymes, a linguist. The term refers to the ability of a language learner to not only know the grammatical rules in making correct sentences but also to be aware of the correct pronunciation (phonology) and when and where to use the words appropriately (sociolinguistic competence). Even after several years of formal education in learning the language, many ESL learners face certain difficulties in English pronunciation. Generally, to bring a change in learner's pronunciation of words, their thought about the component sounds of the words must be changed. This is also applicable also for the other important elements of speech like syllables, tone, stress and intonation. People who learn English as a while speaking (intonation), and the emphasize given to certain words in a sentence (stress). The basic purpose of phonetics is fluency in speech and accuracy in pronunciation.

Henry Sweet, an English philologist and phonetician, says that "Phonetics is the indispensable foundation to all studies of language". He considered that "Knowledge of phonetics was the first essential step in learning a foreign language, and that no attempt should be made to advance in grammar and vocabulary until the sounds of the language have been mastered".

In India, among 125 million English speakers, majority of them learn English as their second language, either at school or during higher education. To the Anglo-Indian population, a small number of more than 200 thousand, it is their first language. The English pronunciation of Indians vary according to the region of the people, their educational medium, their mother tongue, etc. for example: Hindi English, Tamil English, etc. This variation in pronunciation has been greatly reduced due to the higher education and English medium education. This has led to the emergence of a general variety that is accepted as a standard variant across the subcontinent known as the General Indian English. (GIE)

Pronunciation being a sub-skill of speaking becomes the topmost priority of ESL students. Baily and Hinofotis (1980) state that "up to a certain proficiency standard, the fault which most severely impairs the communication process in EFL/ESL learners is pronunciation", it is neither grammar nor vocabulary. It probably depends upon the categorization or conceptualization of 'raw sound' in speech. It is difficult to get adapted to another sound system of a foreign language, when there is already a dominating sound system of the mother tongue, influencing the major part of the thoughts.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recent researches in pronunciation teaching had shown that the speaking part of the language can be mastered through effective teaching on phonetics. Liu and Fu (2011), in their experimental study on Chinese foreign language learners, exclaimed the effectiveness of teachers' instruction and continuous monitoring technique used to improve their accurate pronunciation of English. Thompson (1991), conducted an experiment on thirty-six Russian native speakers by making them read sentences and prose texts and examining their responses towards spontaneous speech. The inference from this experiment was that, those tasks positively influenced the learners' performance in gaining pronunciation accuracy. Jilka M. et al (2007), say that acquiring a new sound system of an unfamiliar foreign language largely depends upon the 'individual aptitude' of a learner. Yokomoto (2016), investigated on the recent trends in teaching pronunciation, especially on 'Teachers' instructional decision-making' in Tokyo Universities and found that the technique of giving effective instruction and peer feedbacks can exclusively support the teaching of pronunciation. Meskhi (2002), highlighted on the fact that in learning a second language, 'phonology' must be given preference, as it renders a 'systematic approach' to ESL teaching. This idea was emphasised by conducting a comparative study on Georgian and English native speakers (adult) learning English and Georgian, respectively and analysing the phonetic mistakes made by the learners during the process. The paper also suggests a systemic approach to vowel acquisition. Researches on different native language speakers and their optimistic outcomes couldn't serve the best for Indian English speakers. The drawback of all these researches is been rectified in this paper. Ikhsan, M. (2017) has observed only on the main factors manipulating ESL learners' pronunciation by experimenting on the students of 'STKIP PGRI', West Sumatera. Pronunciation, being the toughest part in speaking English, has more to do with teaching and practicing other than just diagnosing the factors and misconceptions. This paper attempts to provide few necessary techniques and methods in teaching pronunciation for Indian speakers. Taufiq (2016), conducted a 'case study' by investigating an international ESL student about the difficulties and issues faced while learning

English in an English-speaking country and offered some approaches like 'The theory of social identity in second language acquisition' (Peirce, 1995). This research is effective, but it is not feasible for every learner to go to an English-speaking country and practice English to obtain correct pronunciation.

FACTORS INFLUENCING ESL PRONUNCIATION

Factors affecting English pronunciation depend upon the sample that is taken for the experiment. Celce-Murcia & UCLA (2013) suggest few major factors that influence ESL learners' pronunciation. Age factor is inversely proportional to the quick acquisition of a new sound system. According to the "Critical Period Hypothesis" by Lenneberg (1967), the neurological or the biological period of a human being would end at the age of 12. Due to this, the acquisition of second language pronunciation becomes difficult. Most of the learners do not get an opportunity to converse with the native speakers of the target language. In India, people have a separate diction to speak English. General Indian English accent is different from a native English speaker's accent. Prior learning of pronunciation of the target language according to the Input Hypothesis, formulated by Krashen and Terrel (1983), would be easier for a learner to learn pronunciation with a knowledge of the target language's sound system. Each learner may have their own experiences over the language, like the number of years the learner has been with the native speaker, the number of other languages that the learner knew, etc. Different kinds of attitude towards the learning in a single classroom can affect the learning of a new sound system. Some people have an innate "talent" for grasping the unique differences of the new pronunciation. The learning pace of the learner also matters. As the learner becomes more familiar with the second language sound system, the change in pronunciation will be acquired faster. (Major, 1987). "The sound pattern of the learner's first language is transferred into the second language and is likely to cause foreign accents. The mispronunciations of words by non-native speakers reflect the influence of the sounds, rules, stress, and intonation of their native language". (Avery and Ehrlich, 1992). While teaching pronunciation, apart from individual sounds of words, stress, intonation, rhythm, and changes in tone in connected speech are also essential. It is said that even strongly stressed speech is at times coherent and that 'prosodic errors' like the errors made in stress, tone and rhythm, seem to interrupt the comprehensibility than the errors made in single sounds. (Munro and Derwing 1999). These factors will help ESL teachers to contemplate and analyse the difficulties and needs of the learners and accordingly plan the teaching-learning materials and methods with effective instruction.

EXPERIMENT

A group of Indian students were selected as a sample for the experiment. The students of VIT, Vellore, studying "English for Engineers" course in the winter semester (2018-2019) were given a few worksheets, "Essentials of Pronunciation" (Martin Hewing's (2004)) and were asked to pronounce the words given in the sheets. In total, 60 students of age group seventeen to eighteen (6 girls and 54 boys), with different Indian languages as their mother tongue, were chosen for the experiment. After their several years of formal education in English medium, there is a struggle in their fluency while speaking. To rectify the problem in their pronunciation, the proceedings were recorded and observed to help the researcher know the needs of the learner and the factors affecting their English pronunciation and devise some effective methods and techniques based on Communicative Language Teaching theory to enhance English pronunciation for Indian ESL students. The worksheets consisted of words that are often mispronounced by an Indian English learner. For example: pronunciation of -s and pronunciation of -ed.

RESEARCH FINDINGS BASED ON THE OBSERVATION

S.No.	Indicators	Observation
1	Education	The students' former education was helpful to them to some extent in comprehending the English sounds while. When the instruction was given, students were enthusiastically involved in the learning process. Knowing the key factor to render their English pronunciation through phonetics helped them to master few sounds.
2	Age	Almost everyone belonged to the same age group. They were put into situations where they were compelled to speak English without confidence. Most of them lack fluency due to mispronunciation of words. This age was appropriate for them to change their thinking about the English sound system and apply it in their everyday conversation, since their need to speak in communicable English is higher as they climb up the stairs of their career.
3	Accent/Mother tongue	The number of alphabets in Indian languages is more and each alphabet in a word is stressed and pronounced clearly without any omission whereas in English few letters are not pronounced at all. In connected speech many letters lose their prominence. All these difficulties highly influence the students' English pronunciation. But the knowledge of English sounds gives them the ability to change with some training.
4	Aptitude	Each learner's aptitude differs. Every individual learner would have their own pace of grasping things. This group of people can be divided into three parts. One part of the group consists of students who easily comprehend to the change another part needed some time to apprehend change and finally the third part of the group needed some more instruction in explaining the differences in sounds and the observation side tells they were little slow to produce change in pronunciation.
5	Attitude	Overall the students' attitude was good. It showed a sense of interest towards learning something new to render what was already learnt. As the class started, some were confused, some were completely away from the classroom atmosphere but soon they gained interest and started to observe the sounds and tried finding differences among similar sounds.
6	Exposure	Students were from different regions of India. They all had different mother tongue. Their exposure to the spoken language might be different because of their diverse regional accents, etc. But almost everyone had an exposure of the language in school. So the researcher felt easy in addressing the students on teaching pronunciation.
7	Motivation	One of the major motivations is that to speak English, a language known to them for almost 12 years, fluently with confidence and correct pronunciation in order to enhance communicative excellence.

Based on these results, the students' pronunciation of some commonly mispronounced words is observed keenly and to improve their pronunciation skill, a few methods and techniques are suggested.

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES THAT CAN BE USED TO TEACH PRONUNCIATION

Once a teacher decides to make pronunciation an essential part of teaching, these techniques and activities can be used. Teaching pronunciation usually has two parts. One is teaching receptive skills and the other is productive skills. When comes to the listening part of the pronunciation teaching, learners are instructed to keenly observe the changes and differences in phonemes and sounds of the words from a listening text or a sample. The more listening of the language would help the learner to transfer the thought of knowledge to apply in productive skills. To enhance pronunciation of productive skills, various activities and trainings are required.

Drilling: To practice pronunciation in classroom, drilling serves as a chief technique. The origin of this technique comes from the behaviourist psychological theory where drilling helps in memorizing the form of the word and the sound of pronunciation. Drilling is also associated with 'audio-lingual' approaches to teaching pronunciation. The responsibility of the teacher is high in order to help the students pronounce the words correctly. Prompts, mime, pictures are also used by the teachers. Among the two types of drilling, choral drilling and individual drilling, the former one is normally used in the beginning by the teachers to evoke some confidence among the students and then the latter technique is used to help the teachers analyse the individual results of teaching pronunciation. Selecting randomly to do the drilling would keep the class attentive and the students at their toes.

Substitution drilling: Substitution drilling is nothing, but the activity involves a drilling structure that substitutes few items with different vocabulary but with same form of the sentence.

Associating sounds with ideas: This technique of associating different sounds with some creative related ideas can help the learners to remember them easily. For example: the vowel

sound [i:] can be referred to as a 'smiling' sound. A wide smile can hold this sound. By doing so the learner also remembers that it is a 'long' vowel too.

Using a phonemic chart: It helps the learners to enhance their pronunciation independently, outside the classroom. Initially some instructions can be given to the learners by the teachers in how to use the phonemic chart, etc. This chart can be used to teach the learners some new sounds and also for correcting the already known sounds.

Chaining: To teach some difficult sentences like long sentences or sentences with some complex words, the chaining technique is used by the. There are two ways to use this technique: back chain and front chain. If the teacher helps the learners by drilling the sentence from the end and progressively adding up with the complete sentence, then it is called as 'back chain'. For example: "...ruled the world.; would've...; ...would've ruled...; ...I would've ruled the world.; if I were a king...; If I were a king, I would've ruled the world". If the teacher drills from the beginning to the end while teaching pronunciation of a difficult sentence, it is referred to as 'front chain'. For example: "if I were a king...; if I were a king, I would've...; I would've...; I would've ruled the world.; if I were a king, I would've ruled the world.

Minimal pairs and related activities:

Working with minimal pairs to support the learning of pronunciation in the latter stages helps a learner to identify the differences in pronunciation of similar words. The teacher must make some required planning and research before giving instruction of minimal pairs. Activities like identifying the correct sounds from the given words can be introduced too. For example: hat, hot, hut.

Pronunciation and spelling activities: Pronunciation and spelling are interconnected. Homographs and homophones can provide some basic ideas in explaining relationship between pronunciation and spelling. Homographs refer to certain words that have same spelling but different

pronunciation based on the context. For example: Will you 'read' this book? I 'read' the book yesterday. Whereas homophones refer to certain words which have same pronunciation but different spelling. For example: 'fair' and 'fare', 'write' and 'right' etc. Students can be provided with a listening content and asked to identify few words and their correct spelling that they heard in the sentences.

Taping students' English: In the process of teaching and learning pronunciation, the students' progress is keenly noted and must be recorded or taped for future reference purposes. This can help the students to go back and recheck their enhancement of pronunciation and proficiency level of fluency. Sounds, stress and intonation can be effectively analysed by this technique.

Listening and Reading Activities: Providing authentic listening and reading materials to the learners to practice pronunciation would widely support their need. Listening comprehension exercises can provide the students an insight to recognize words and their distinct sounds in the native accents and try to reproduce the sounds. When it comes to reading activities, students are exposed to read aloud in order to pronounce the words in a correct manner to get familiar with the spellings and its corresponding sounds.

CONCLUSION

Teaching pronunciation is always kept in dark. Recently, pronunciation teaching has gained momentum by making some changes in the approaches and techniques of teaching methods. ESL teachers must concentrate on the need of the learner and diagnose the level of communicative competence of the learner. This helps them to structure the syllabus and methods to be followed to enhance English pronunciation. The main purpose of the research is to analyse the factors affecting ESL pronunciation of Indian students and suggesting some teaching methods and techniques to rectify the problem and improve pronunciation skill in speaking English. This paper has attempted the need of the hour and the purpose is justified. It can be concluded that with the necessary implementation on teaching English pronunciation, learners can obtain the utmost power of communication.

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