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Teaching Pronunciation in Current TEFL Practice

Language as 'the immediate actuality of thought' and 'the most important means of human intercourse' exists in two speech forms: oral and written. Speech is a manifestation of language. It is a process of communication by means of language. Both the oral and written speech forms have a material substance. In written form the substance is graphic. In oral speech the substance is phonic; it is the sound substance or the sound matter. A substance is not in itself language, but it is what forms patterns of language. The sound substance gives shape to a spoken message in communication. To underline the importance of the sound medium of language H. Gleason noted that to speak a language a person must know nearly all 100% of its phonetics, while only 50-90% of its grammar and 1% of its vocabulary may be sufficient [1].

Although pronunciation is part of the curriculum in education programs, it is not referred to systematically and is often neglected [2]. Many teachers are comfortable with reading, writing, listening and, to a degree, general oral skills, but when it comes to pronunciation they find it difficult to teach [3].

The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the traditional and time-tested techniques as well as the new directions in pronunciation teaching.

The primary goal of teaching English as a foreign language is that students should be able to communicate effectively. To do this, they do not need a "perfect accent", but they do need good (intelligible) pronunciation: "The goal of teaching pronunciation to foreign learners is not to make them sound like native speakers of English. With the exception of a few highly gifted and motivated individuals, such a goal is unrealistic. A more modest and realistic goal is to enable learners to surpass the threshold level so that their pronunciation will not detract from their ability to communicate" [4].

If intelligibility is the target, then we need to work out what aspects of pronunciation are key. Jennifer Jenkins in her research has analyzed interactions between non-native speakers of English and found out which features of British/American English pronunciation are essential for intelligible pronunciation, and which are not. The findings have been formed into a pronunciation core for teaching which is known as the Lingua Franca Core [5].

The main features of the Lingua Franca Core are: 1) All the consonants are important except for 'th' sounds as in 'thin' and 'this'. 2) Consonant clusters are important at the beginning and in the middle of words. For example, the cluster in the word 'string' cannot be simplified to 'sting' or 'tring' and remain intelligible. 3) The contrast between long and short vowels is important. For example, the difference between the vowel sounds in 'sit' and 'seat'. 4) Nuclear (or tonic) stress is also essential. This is the stress on the most important word (or syllable) in a group of words. For example, there is a difference in meaning between 'My son uses a computer' which is a neutral statement of fact and 'My SON uses a computer', where there is an added meaning (such as that another person known to the speaker and listener does not use a computer).

On the other hand, many other items which are regularly taught on English pronunciation courses appear not to be essential for intelligibility in EIL interactions. These are: 1) The 'th' sounds (see above). 2) Vowel quality, that is, the difference between vowel sounds where length is not involved, e.g. a German speaker may pronounce the 'e' in the word 'chess' more like an 'a' as in the word 'cat'. 3) Weak forms such as the words 'to', 'of' and 'from' whose vowels are often pronounced as 'schwa' instead of with their full quality. 4) Other features of connected speech such as assimilation (where the final sound of a word alters to make it more like the first sound of the next word, so that, e.g. 'red paint' becomes 'reb paint'). 5) Word stress. 6) Pitch movement. 7) Stress timing.

All these things are said to be important for a native speaker listener either because they aid intelligibility or because they are thought to make an accent more appropriate.

John Wells believes that Jenkins is right to insist on mastery of the /i: – ɪ/ distinction (*leave* vs. *live*, *sheep* vs. *ship*), which is made by all native speakers. At the same time he disagrees that the distinctions /u: – ʊ/ and /ɔ:– ɒ/ are equally required. These distinctions have a low functional load and are not needed in EFL/EIL. Besides, Jenkins's wording does not leave it entirely clear whether the vowel oppositions /e-æ, æ-ʌ, ɔ:-əʊ/ are required in the Lingua Franca Core, but Wells assumes that they are, despite constituting a considerable problem for some non-native speakers [6].

The difficulty with English /æ/ is that many languages have only two vowels available for the three English vowels /e, æ, ʌ/ to be mapped onto. The consequence is that Russian/Ukrainian learners disregard either the /e – æ/ distinction and tend to make *bed* and *bad* identical or the /æ - ʌ/ distinction and tend to make *bad* and *bud* identical. In either case misunderstandings can result.

Voiced consonants are not a problem for speakers of Russian or Ukrainian, but producing them in word-final position is. When *bed* is pronounced as /bet/, the native speakers' opposition between final /d/ and /t/ is lost.

Russian and Ukrainian learners of English must pay particular attention to those consonants that are not found in their native language: /θ, ð, ŋ, r, h/; to final consonant voicing, and to aspiration; among English vowels, to /æ, ɜ:, ə, əʊ, eə/, to pre-fortis clipping, to vowel duration and to weakening.

Well's recommendations for the teaching of English pronunciation in an EFL/EIL context are as follows: on the one hand, to concentrate on the matters that most impede intelligibility; on the other one, not to neglect the need to interact with native speakers.

The teacher can teach pronunciation *consciously* (an analytic-linguistic approach) or *unconsciously* (an intuitive-imitative approach).

An intuitive-imitative approach depends on the learner's ability to listen to and imitate the rhythms and sounds of the target language without the intervention of any explicit information. It presupposes the availability, validity, and reliability of good models to listen to.

An analytic-linguistic approach utilizes information and tools such as a phonetic alphabet, articulatory descriptions, charts of the vocal apparatus, contrastive information, and other aids to supplement listening, imitation, and production. It explicitly informs the learner of and focuses attention on the sounds and rhythms of the target language.

Penny Ur believes that unconscious pronunciation training is likely to be more helpful with classes of younger learners and beginners. In this case there is no direct teaching of pronunciation, no explanations, and no instruction. Conscious training is suitable for older and advanced learners. The teacher teaches pronunciation directly by talking about pronunciation rules, explains about place of articulation of different sounds, and different types of sentences and their intonation pattern [7].

Pronunciation can be approached from the *top-down* (that is, starting with attention to larger chunks of language) or from the *bottom-up* (that is, with a focus on the smaller elements, such as phonemes first). If pronunciation teaching is to be strongly integrated with the rest of language teaching, then a *top-down* approach is often useful, because teachers can start with whole chunks of language and work

with these. However, a *bottom-up* approach is also helpful, particularly where a certain sound or sound combinations need dedicated practice [8].

We believe that in TEFL practice the real starting point should be on the level of the phoneme: when teaching on the phoneme level, we take noises and make them significant. The phoneme is defined as 'the smallest unit in a language system capable of distinguishing one word from another word' [9]. For example, in the 'at' family of words (*cat, fat, mat, sat*) the phoneme is the beginning sound (/c/, /f/, /m/, /s/). Using phonemes to teach pronunciation focuses on these distinct units of sound. To produce sounds, the students must train themselves to hear them. So the path to proper English pronunciation starts with *listening* and *identifying*, *not speaking*. Once the students can accurately differentiate between phonemes, and pick out matching ones from tapes and videos, they can progress to forming the sounds themselves [10].

Although the best way of learning to say something is to listen carefully and to imitate, some learners find it helpful to be able *to analyze how a sound is made*, or to see how it may be different from a similar sound in their own language. A good example of where such illustrations can be useful is the practising of the difference between /l/ and /r/. After learners have listened to these sounds in context and in isolation, they may find it helpful to be shown that a crucial difference between these two in English is that the tongue curls back and does not actually touch the roof of the mouth for /r/, but does touch it for /l/. You can demonstrate this by curling one hand to represent the roof of the mouth, and using the other to demonstrate the action of the tongue in each case [8].

Different languages use the tongue, mouth and cheeks differently, so diagrams of how to hold these facial muscles to properly produce the desired sound are extremely helpful. Videos can also be instructive, as the students can mimic the speakers on the screen and improve their vocabulary and English pronunciation.

Here we would like to overview some time-tested as well as innovative techniques in teaching pronunciation.

Drilling, that is listening to a model, provided by the teacher, or a tape, and repeating what is heard, remains a useful technique in the classroom if it is used appropriately. Most learners love drills, as long as they are done confidently and do not dominate teaching. Choral drills, in which the whole class repeats a clear model from the teacher, are useful for anonymous practice. Individual drills, in which the teacher selects a student to repeat the item individually after it has been practised in unison, allows the teacher to assess individual progress.

At all levels we should drill chunks of language that cause pronunciation problems. At low levels students are still getting used to the sounds of English and need plenty of opportunity to get their tongues around them so it is likely that drilling will be used more. At the phrase level intonation, stress, and weak forms often cause

difficulties and at higher levels there may still be problems with these aspects of pronunciation [11].

Visual reinforcement may be especially useful for adult learners who undergo the process of fossilization. While children benefit from oral repetition, drills and taping themselves, adult learners find it difficult to learn the patterns of intonation, stress and rhythm. The reason may be that they simply do not know whether the patterns they produce are acceptable. Real time visual displays are to show learners the relationship between the patterns they produce and those they are required to repeat. One of the possible conventions for making the word stress visible is writing the stressed syllable in capital letters: FASHion, SESSion, beHAVE, or underline the stressed syllable: fashion, session, behave [12].

The interactive aspect of pronunciation as well as other aspects of English can be emphasised by the use of *drama techniques*. In classes where these techniques are employed, they help to reduce the stress that accompanies oral production in a foreign language. They are fun, entertaining and relaxing. Moreover, they also increase learner confidence, because they help learners to speak clearer, louder and in a variety of tones. One means in which drama voice techniques can enter pronunciation classroom is for teachers to employ poetry, tongue twisters and raps [12; 13].

An innovative technique, which is becoming more and more frequently used in pronunciation teaching, are *computer displays*. The advantages of this medium include: visual feedback, entertaining, game like quality of programs, a great amount of individual feedback and the opportunity to compare learner's own production of speech with a native-speaker model. The only limitation of this medium that learners and teachers may come across is the availability of software, since many schools are still not equipped with large enough computer labs to meet users' needs [14].

In conclusion it should be mentioned that, although there are challenges to teaching and learning English pronunciation, it is an area vital to English language learners' communicative competence. Recent research has shed light on pronunciation features to be taught and on learners' goals and motivations for improving their pronunciation. It is hoped that this paper will provide teachers of foreign language pronunciation with practical insights into a variety of innovative techniques and resources, help them expand the repertoire of traditional classroom practices and, consequently, enhance pronunciation instruction.

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