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Analysis over Some Important Issues of English Pronunciation Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Pronunciation is one of the most important skills in English language instruction because it impacts learners' communicative competence and performance. If speakers have very bad pronunciation, their speech will not be understandable to the listeners. This paper examines some of the important issues of English pronunciation instruction. The goals of this paper are to review the history of English pronunciation instruction, discuss the aim of English pronunciation instruction and explain the importance of English pronunciation instruction. The review of literature indicates that teachers should be aware of the aim and significance of pronunciation instruction and if they want to teach pronunciation well they should be taught in EFL pronunciation instruction.

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Introduction

Fraser (2000) stated that teachers need to be provided with courses and materials to improve their pronunciation instruction. She said that research in second language education should not be concerned with the importance of pronunciation instruction but with the methodology of pronunciation instruction (Fraser, 2000). Teachers must act as "pronunciation coaches" and learners must be "proactive learners" taking the initiative to learn. The methodologies of teaching must change from emphasizing segmental elements of pronunciation to suprasegmental elements of pronunciation and from linguistic competence to communicative competence (Morley, 1991).

Intelligible pronunciation is an important aim of pronunciation instruction. It is a necessary component of communicative competence (Morley, 1991). Learners need to develop functional intelligibility (ability to make oneself relatively easily understood), functional communicability (ability to meet the communication needs one faces), increased self-confidence and the speech monitoring abilities and speech modification strategies.

Teachers should increase awareness of the pronunciation as an integral part of the teaching of English as a second language, provide opportunities for practice, and give encouragement and advice to learners as they work towards intelligibility for use beyond the classroom (Rajaduari, 2001). In this paper, the researcher reviews the history of English pronunciation instruction, discusses the aim of English pronunciation instruction and explains the importance of English pronunciation instruction.

The History of English Pronunciation Instruction

According to Busa (2008), the amount of importance that has been ascribed to L2 pronunciation instruction has changed considerably the views that non-native pronunciation mistakes should be corrected. Lambacher (1996) said that in the 50's and 60's, the aim of L2 pronunciation instruction in audio-lingual method was to obtain a native-like accent. Pronunciation instruction was based on the discrimination and production of sounds as a way of developing the recognition and articulation of L2 particular sounds.

From the late 1960's to 1980's, the importance of pronunciation in the L2 classroom was questioned by many researchers. Some stated that native-like pronunciation cannot be achieved in a second language (Preston, 1981). Unfortunately, pronunciation instruction was omitted in many language programs. In the late 1980's, the importance of pronunciation was again emphasized (Morley, 1991). In place of mimicry, people paid attention to suprasegmentals, sound articulation and voice quality of learning a new language (Esling & Wong, 1983).

The aim was to obtain communicative competence, an L2 learner's ability to not only use grammatical rules, but to produce pragmatically correct sentences and utilize them appropriately in different contexts. Although meaningful interaction was increased through this new idea, there had been less attention on true production of L2 particular sounds (Morley, 1991; Pennington & Richards, 1986).

Because of the effectiveness of pronunciation to a large group of international people in both ESL and EFL situations after 1980's, it got a new meaning (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Gatbonton, 2005; Shimamune & Smith, 1995). Immigrant residents, refugees, students, academic professionals and other professionals throughout the world needed to improve their pronunciation because they left their native countries to stay in English speaking countries to include cultural, economic and financial opportunities (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Chaudhary, 2009; Derwing & Munro, 2009; Wong, 1986).

Because of having foreign accents, many of these L2 learners, particularly immigrants and international students in the U.S. and Canada, faced many problems in finding jobs (Ferrier, et al., 1999) and this caused greater demands for learning English pronunciation. New perspectives on pronunciation teaching and learning emerged due to the needs of L2 learners' pronunciation (Haslam, 2010).

Pronunciation became a significant part of communication in the 90's. The emphasis of pronunciation instruction was on suprasegmentals and how they were used to communicate meaning and meaningful practice. Understanding the learner-centered speech and self monitoring were important in the learning of pronunciation (Morley, 1991). Views about the

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learning of pronunciation were changed from the teachers playing the key roles in the learning process to the students doing those roles (Brown, 2003; Oxford, 2003).

Pronunciation instruction is not integrated in teachers' classes while they integrate grammar, vocabulary and four language skills in their classes. Many teachers think that their students learn the pronunciation through exposure to more input in the second language and many other teachers say that it is not important to spend time and energy to teach the segmental and supra-segmental features of L2 pronunciation (Lord, 2008).

All of us know that the phonological system of a language is the most important features in the speech of a foreigner. Due to the increasing demand for international communication, obtaining proficiency in a second or foreign language is a need and this proficiency should cover vocabulary, grammar and intelligible pronunciation (Lord, 2008).

The Aim of English Pronunciation Instruction

We live in a global society and English has become the true international language. Therefore, being able to speak English in this global society is a need. But what forms acceptable English pronunciation? Acceptable pronunciation can be understood based on the following basic levels (James, 2010).

Level 1: What the speaker is saying is not understandable for people. The speaker utilizes the wrong sounds when producing English words or uses the wrong prosodic features when producing English sentences. According to Hinofotis and Bailey (1980, as cited in Celce-Murcia & Goodwin, 1991), there is a beginning level for pronunciation. If the pronunciation of a speaker falls below this level, he/she will be not be able to communicate without considering his/her knowledge of grammar and vocabulary.

Level 2: What the speaker is saying can be understandable for people, but the speaker's pronunciation is not acceptable to listen to because he/she has a strange and heavy accent. When a speaker's pronunciation is heavily accented, it can influence the speaker's understanding (Morley, 1994).

Level 3: People understand the speaker and the speaker's English is acceptable to listen to. According to Scovel (1988), this is called comfortable intelligibility and it should be the goal of pronunciation not native-like accuracy.

What shapes acceptable pronunciation? A speaker has acceptable pronunciation when other people can understand him/her and the speaker's English values to listen to. For some learners, the goal of learning pronunciation is the native-like accent. This maybe a valuable goal, it cannot be the ideal goal of teachers who want to improve their students' pronunciation and their confidence. Having an American or British accent is not the same as acceptable pronunciation. Therefore, a teacher cannot force his/her students to pronounce like the Queen of England or the President of the United States (James, 2010).

An accent that is too different from a known standard can become confusing so it is recommended that the learners' accents become close to a standard variety. If a speaker has a heavy English accent, this may bring about negative judgments about his/her personality and competence (Morley, 1994). Then, this question may be raised. If one's students need not to pronounce like the Queen of England or the President of the United States, but they also need to have an accent that is near to a known standard, then what English models can one utilize with one's students?

Different kinds of models can be found for English pronunciation. One can turn on his/her TV and find channels such as CNN International, BBC or Sky News. Through using

these channels, one can hear many different people from Germany, France and other non-English-speaking countries. All have acceptable pronunciation and this will facilitate the process of understanding (James, 2010).

There is no necessary for learners to have a specific English accent. They can develop their own accent that is very near to a standard variety. If learners try to gain the standard variety, they will be able to communicate easily and this can be an ideal purpose for learners to pursue. If learners are too far from the standard variety they will not be able to communicate successfully and will be judged negatively (James, 2010).

The Importance of English Pronunciation Instruction

Pronunciation learning is sometimes neglected by many learners. Numerous teachers do not pay enough attention to it. There are different reasons for this negligence. A lot of English learners state that they do not need to study pronunciation. Many learners claim that learning pronunciation is a waste of time. They say that just communication in English is enough and when they are understood, nothing else is important (Harmer, 2001).

We know that the main goal of teaching and learning in any language is to enable students to communicate in the target language and if this is the case, communication is a valuable term to explain. Communication means to understand and be understood. A lot of learners think that they can communicate in English because they can talk to their teachers and other students. But they make a big mistake (Harmer, 2001).

There are a lot of reasons for their mistakes. Firstly, teachers can understand their students much more easily than an average person because their ears are used to 'bad English.' Secondly, other students are the speakers of the same language have the same pronunciation patterns and make the same mistakes so it is easy for them to understand each other. Thirdly, the classroom is not a real situation and it just takes place at school and students do not have an opportunity to talk to native speakers (Harmer, 2001).

Therefore, going to a foreign country and talking to ordinary people can be the best way to practice speaking skills. If foreigners can understand them, they can claim that they are able to communicate in English and this can be an important success for them (Harmer, 2001).

Many teachers are not aware of the significance of pronunciation. Teachers pay enough attention to grammar and vocabulary in learning of a foreign language and they help students become skillful in listening and reading. Secondly, the majority of teachers think that pronunciation study is too difficult and monotonous for learners (Harmer, 2001).

The lack of high quality, suitable teaching and learning materials, and the lack of time to practice pronunciation are the important reasons that cause teachers not to pay enough attention to pronunciation. Teachers think that they have too much to do and pronunciation instruction just wastes their time. Some teachers state that their students can learn correct pronunciation in their studies without particular pronunciation teaching (Harmer, 2001).

There are some factors for the learning of good pronunciation by some students without depending on their teachers. They are learners' phonetic abilities, integrative motivation and achievement motivation. There are just some students who know the value of good pronunciation. Teachers should persuade their students to study pronunciation severely and help them learn to pronounce English sounds accurately (Kenworthy, 1987).

Teachers should tell their students that their very first English lesson is pronunciation. If students do not practice good pronunciation at the beginning of their learning process, they may learn wrongly. Therefore, words should be learnt with respect to their pronunciation. Otherwise, this may damage their overall success (Kenworthy, 1987).

The first thing that native speakers notice during a conversation is pronunciation. Grammar and vocabulary are important elements of language and they can be useless if the speakers cannot pronounce those elements or words accurately. Native speakers can understand people, despite their grammatical errors, if they use accurate pronunciation (Harmer, 2001).

When people do not pronounce correctly, even the simplest words can stop speakers from effective communication. Communicative efficiency can be guaranteed by correct pronunciation. Pronunciation is an essential part of communication and without correct pronunciation nobody can say that he or she knows the English language perfectly (Harmer, 2001).

Through pronunciation instruction, students not only learn different sounds and sound features, but also improve their speaking skill. Concentrating on sounds cause students aware of where words should be stressed and they give students more information about spoken English and help them get the aim of comprehension and intelligibility (Harmer, 2001).

Some teachers state that pronunciation instruction cannot be useful because only a few learners will be able to get native-like pronunciation. We should know that native-like pronunciation may be an ideal goal only for some learners and not for all learners. Intelligibility is a logical aim for the majority of learners (Kenworthy, 1987).

Students can rarely achieve 'perfect' pronunciation. Some of them do not like to pronounce like native speakers and they like to retain their foreign accent because it is a part of their identity (Harmer, 2001). Native-like pronunciation may be an inappropriate goal for most learners. Understandable pronunciation should be one of the basic aims of language learners. Pronunciation instruction has some realistic goals that need to be emphasized in order to develop communicative competence.

According to Morley (after Wrembel, 2002, p. 175), these goals are the following:

- *functional intelligibility* - developing spoken English that is easy to understand for listeners;
- *functional communicability* - developing spoken language that meets communicative needs;
- *increased self-confidence* - developing a positive self-image;
- *speech-monitoring abilities and speech-modification strategies* - that will allow students to develop intelligibility, communicability and confidence outside the classroom."

Learners should develop spoken English that will meet their individual needs and permit them to shape a positive image of themselves as speakers of a foreign language.

Conclusion

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. Pronunciation must be viewed as more than correct production of individual sounds or isolated words. Instead, it must be viewed as an important part of communication that should be incorporated into classroom activities. Teachers can encourage students to monitor their own

pronunciation and practice their speaking skills as much as possible in and outside the classroom. All learners can do well in learning the pronunciation of a foreign language if the teacher and learner participate together in the total learning process. Success can be achieved if each has set individual teaching and learning goals. Pronunciation must be viewed as more than correct production of phonemes: it must be viewed in the same light as grammar, syntax, and discourse that is an important part of communication. Intelligible pronunciation is seen as an essential component of communicative competence. With this in mind, the teacher must then set obtainable aims that are applicable and suitable for the communication needs of the learner. With the teacher acting as a 'speech coach', rather than as a mere checker of pronunciation, the feedback given to the student can encourage learners to improve their pronunciation. If these criteria are met, all learners can be expected to do well learning the pronunciation of a foreign language. Pronunciation instruction has to aim at intelligible pronunciation considered as an essential component of communicative competence. Teachers can actively encourage the students' actual production, build pronunciation awareness and practice through classes. Pronunciation instruction is very important because it 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. Pronunciation instruction is essential for our students. It leads them to a better understanding of native speakers and improves their ability to communicate.

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