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MAKING PRONUNCIATION MORE INCLUSIVE IN A COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE CLASS ROOM

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ABSTRACT

In communicatively oriented ESL settings, improved intelligibility is generally identified by pedagogical specialists as the most important outcome of pronunciation instruction. Abercrombie, for example, stated that “language learners need no more than a comfortably intelligible pronunciation” (120). In recent years, several researchers have made strong calls for research on teaching for intelligible rather than native-like pronunciation. They argue that, while maintaining the first language (L1) related accents to a certain degree, students need to fulfil the minimal phonological requirements to be comprehensible in order to achieve the goal of successful communication (Derwing & Munro 2005; Jenkins, 2000; Levis, 2005). Moreover pronunciation teaching has been notorious for its overdependence on decontextualized practice such as mechanical drills and repetition, reminiscent of the audio lingual teaching methods for several decades. Furthermore very few language teachers receive adequate training in the specific area of pronunciation teaching (Foote, Holtby, Derwing, 2011). Learners’ attention should be drawn to form not only in controlled contexts (i.e., when practicing form is the only task) but also in communicative contexts (i.e., when practicing pronunciation form while being involved in meaning –oriented communicative activities).

This paper focuses on the review of the history of English pronunciation instruction; the role of teaching pronunciation in communicative approach and the inclusion and integration of pronunciation training with the teaching of other language skills in a communicative classroom. Finally, this paper makes a number of recommendations as to how the teaching of pronunciation can be made more effective in the ESL communicative classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

The main aim of English language Teaching is to develop communicative competence by providing the learners with creative opportunities for meaningful exchange of language. In a communicative, student-centered classroom students should be provided with authentic language materials and should be engaged in meaningful exchange of language beyond the word

and sentence level. From a broad point of view, teaching of pronunciation needs to lose its isolated character and be treated pedagogically as part of communication and discourse. This would mean focusing on what will help a learner make meaning in communicative situations at the same time as learning about other aspects of language in general language teaching textbooks. However, it appears that such conditions do not seem to apply generally

to teaching pronunciation. Pronunciation teaching has lagged far behind the remainder of ESL teaching in its communicative focus.

A Historical Overview of Pronunciation Teaching and Learning

Chun-Hui Chang notes that pronunciation has a long and distinguished history in second language teaching. Prior to the 1960s, with the rise of Audiolingualism in the United States and the Oral Approach in Britain, teaching pronunciation was considered a priority in the language classroom. In both Audio-lingual and Oral Approach classroom, pronunciation was taught explicitly from the start. According to Audio-lingual theorists, pronunciation instruction was the accurate production of segmental features (Pennington & Richards 207) and achievement of native like accent. Teaching was carried out by addressing phonological rules explicitly, and by using modelling and correction. Learners practiced pronunciation through imitation, repetition, memorization, and drills (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin 4).(3)

From the 1960s to the late 1970s, teaching pronunciation was marginalized for several reasons. The Cognitive Approach viewed language as rule governed behaviour rather than habit formation. It deemphasized pronunciation in favour of grammar and vocabulary because its advocates argued that native like pronunciation was an unrealistic objective and is unachievable (Scovel 246). First, teachers' focus on habit formation received much criticism for its lack of meaning and context. That is, the repetition, memorization, and drills left no room for real and effective communication. Second, based on the Critical Period Hypothesis and the Cognitive Approach, it was thought that adult learners could not attain native-like pronunciation (Celce-Murcia et al. 5). Third, influenced by Krashen's Input Hypothesis, speaking (output) was less required in the language classroom. In addition, Krashen claimed that pronunciation, as an acquired skill, could not be taught overtly (Jones 104-105). These arguments ruled out the value of pronunciation teaching in language classrooms, which resulted in pronunciation instruction receiving increasingly less attention in language teaching and learning. (Chun-Hui Chang 3)

Although pronunciation teaching suffered a setback with the advent of Communicative Language teaching in the later twentieth century, especially in the teaching of English, the basic principles of the Reform Movement, such as prioritising of spoken language over the written, were never altogether lost. And in the most recent years, pronunciation specialists have devised ways of incorporating the teaching of pronunciation within a communicative framework, by moving away from the drilling of discrete language items to communicative activities in which pronunciation contributes to the meaning in the context. This later led to a much greater interest in the teaching of suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation than existed in the earlier years, itself underpinned by copious research in the communicative role of pronunciation (Morley 482-485).

Role of Teaching Pronunciation in Communicative Approach

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) also called the Communicative Approach is currently the dominant method in language teaching. It holds that since the primary purpose of language is communication, using language to communicate should be central in all classroom language instruction. This focus on language as communication brings renewed urgency to the teaching of pronunciation, since both empirical and anecdotal evidence indicates that there is a threshold level of pronunciation for non-native speakers of English; if they fall below this threshold level, they will have oral communication problems no matter how excellent and extensive their control of English grammar and vocabulary might be. Moreover, with an increasing focus on communication, importance has been given to instruction that enables students to become, not "perfect pronouncers" of English, but intelligible, communicative, confident users of spoken English for whatever purposes they use language.

Having established that intelligible pronunciation is one of the necessary components of oral communication, the next question is how teachers can improve the pronunciation of unintelligible speakers of English so that they become intelligible. This is a problem for

Communicative Language Teaching, since most proponents of this approach have not dealt adequately with the role of pronunciation in language teaching, nor they developed an agreed-upon set of strategies for teaching pronunciation communicatively.

Issues in Teaching Pronunciation

It has been established that pronunciation can be one of the most difficult parts for a language learner to master and one of the least favorite topics for teachers to address in the classroom. It also seems that the current teaching materials do not incorporate pronunciation activities in general-skills text books. The lack of materials that are applied to teachers needs in the classroom is also a major problem encountered in current pronunciation instruction. However, it seems that the field is still feeling the effects of the neglect of communicative proponents, first, to account adequately for the role of pronunciation in a communicative framework, and second, to propose strategies for teaching pronunciation communicatively (Celce-Murcia et al. 1996). Currently existing instructional materials on pronunciation do not fit the bill in terms of providing authentic, context-rich activities that provide focused practice for the specific area of pronunciation to be targeted. Nevertheless, it is contended that with careful teacher preparation and developing materials that integrate pronunciation can play an important role in supporting the learners' overall communicative power. Therefore it is important to provide focused training for teachers in teaching pronunciation in ESL settings.

Integration of Pronunciation Training with the Teaching of Other Language Skills in a Communicative Classroom

Teachers can effectively address the pronunciation needs of their students only through comprehensive knowledge of the English sound system and through familiarity with a variety of pedagogical techniques, many of which should be communicatively oriented. Responding to this renewed interest in developing the teaching of English pronunciation, Morley reports that, "The agents of change were a number of ESL professionals who began to raise issues and suggest expansions and changes of emphasis in classroom

practices (486)". These issues included the importance of meaningful and contextualized practice of pronunciation features; the importance of the spelling/pronunciation link; the role of listening practice in developing prosodic features; focus on the link between listening and pronunciation and the need to expand the nature and range of pronunciation-oriented listening activities; focus on sound/spelling relationships and utilizing English orthography as a key tool in teaching pronunciation.

Examining the various dimensions, it appears that several issues are interrelated. For example, employing pronunciation-spelling relationship and emphasizing pronunciation\listening link can take place while integrating pronunciation with the teaching of other language activities such as vocabulary and listening practices.

Focus on pronunciation (segmental) features in isolation

In a broad multi-skills curriculum, there are various ways of developing students' perception and production of critical sounds. For instance, Harmer suggested devoting weekly lessons over an extended time, inserting pronunciation teaching into the lesson sequences, introducing sounds as an integral part of the lesson, and teaching them opportunistically (186-187). For conscious treatment of problematic sounds Celce-Murica *et al.* recommended similar guidelines;

1. select only critical sounds to a particular group of learners to be taught;
2. offer controlled opportunities of practising sounds which include oral identification and discrimination of words, phrases and sentences;
3. offer meaningful opportunities of practising sounds in activities that stimulate the use of target sounds (37-90).

Focus on pronunciation in conjunction with Vocabulary, Grammar and other language skills.

The development of learners' intelligible pronunciation as a natural part of their communicative language proficiency involves integrating it with other language learning activities. If pronunciation is integrated with the teaching of other language skills and aspects, students will feel

that they are learning to communicate which is much more realistic as a goal of instruction than emphasizing native-speaker accuracy. Integrating pronunciation with other language skills helps to overcome insufficient time in the classroom when the curriculum does not offer a course solely dedicated to the teaching of pronunciation. Moreover, it raises awareness of the students and teachers of the connection between pronunciation teaching and effective aural oral communication.

Integrating Pronunciation with the Teaching of Grammar and Vocabulary

Chela-Flores suggests a few related guidelines including:

- a. incorporating the same grammatical structures and vocabulary used in the course as pronunciation exercises.
- b. reacting to immediate phonological needs in language learning activities rather than choosing a phonological feature and then finding multiple occurrences to highlight and practice it (86, 94) .

Kenworthy also recommends that teachers should be 'alive' to the possibilities of finding opportunities for enhancing a particular pronunciation feature when it arises with certain expression and grammatical structure (118).

Integrating Pronunciation with the Teaching of Oral Language Practices

For gaining accurate control over the sound system in speaking activities, Murphy (62-63) suggested a number of activities, such as reading aloud from a written text, tracking with recordings and practising conversational speech. The advantage of such technique is that it raises learners' awareness of prosodic features. As well, since it embraces elements of listening, speaking, and pronunciation, it constitutes an alternative to classroom activities that are relatively more communicative. Reading aloud also was recommended in pronunciation training as it provides exposure and practice, specially, with suprasegmentals such as stress placement, linking, and other phonological processes that naturally occur in speech and contribute to the overall rhythm of the language. The other benefits of using this technique include reinforcing sound-spelling

associations and encouraging autonomous learning as students engage in the task on their own. For the purpose of developing fluent practice of phonological features, Murphy (62-63) recommended engaging learners in various oral practices; including: rehearsing dialogues, discussing topical issues and role playing and alike. In addition to these recommendations on fostering learners' speech production and performance in oral practices, there has been a growing interest in adopting drama techniques in which students repeat simultaneously with the speaker and imitate his/her gestures and facial expressions (Celce-Murica *et al.* 308, 310). The premise underlying the use of these techniques is that they may increase students' ability to achieve control over their articulation and overcome fossilized pronunciation.

Focus on Pronunciation in Listening Practice

When listening to spoken English, learners need to perceive and decode it. Success in perceiving English speech depends primarily on the knowledge of the sound system. This point highlights the natural connection between pronunciation and listening comprehension, and the need to raise learner's awareness of how English is actually spoken. One important issue addressed by researchers in pronunciation acquisition of ESL\EFL concerns the relationship between perception and production. For instance, Bradlow *et al.* (1997 in Derwing & Munro 2005) showed that many L2 production difficulties are rooted in perception, and thereby appropriate perceptual training can lead to improvement in production.

Focus on Sound/Spelling Relationship

Pronunciation teaching often concentrates on developing the two skills that is production (speaking) and perception (listening). A set of special symbols, commonly referred to as a phonetic alphabet is often used to accurately describe the sounds of a language. The use of such a system captures the sounds of a language more accurately since there is a one-to-one correspondence between the symbols used and the sounds they represent.

Hence, Kelly recommended the following approaches to be adopted by teachers:

- a. working on the pronunciation of a word or longer utterance orally before showing students its written form
- b. using phonetic symbols in combination with a written record of the language being practised
- c. drawing students' attention to the most important and frequent spelling /sound relationships
- d. encouraging regular dictionary work(126).

Suggestions to the Teachers

- The teachers themselves need to realize the importance of teaching pronunciation in English Language Teaching. Teachers should provide ample opportunities to the learners in the classroom to apply their knowledge of phonetics to a variety of communicative tasks.
- The teachers need to make a conscious effort to make the students understand the necessity to learn phonetics. Various awareness raising activities would be helpful to start phonetics in English classroom. Moreover, authentic language use from TV, films, YouTube, and radio can be used in innovative ways to teach pronunciation. They can use authentic and pre-recorded texts in order to expose students to different varieties of English.
- The teachers, based on their personal observation of individual classes and their experience, can make changes in their teaching methodology. They need to plan activities offering opportunities for communicative practice.
- The teachers need to organize more activities of listening and speaking than those of reading and writing. Regular evaluation of phonetic knowledge of the students using different testing measures would be necessary to enhance students' interest levels.
- The teachers need to attend teacher training programmes and other such teacher development programmes so that they can effectively put the innovations into practice inside their respective classrooms.
- Preparation of the teacher in carrying out the activities is also important. The teachers need to design the classroom activities well in advance so that they can arrange the teaching

aids and other resources. Classroom observation is also important while carrying out the activities.

- Classrooms should be suitable to the activities so that students can do activities and tasks comfortably. The teachers need to make arrangement in advance for the activities in the class. This will save class time and the students will be tuned to adjust themselves in the class whenever a pair work or group work is suggested by the teacher.

Suggestions to the Learners

- The learners need to understand the importance of the knowledge of phonetics in English so that they can use English both locally and for international intelligibility.
- Learners need to be self motivated and involved, consciously, in the speech modification process as they work to become intelligible, communicative, confident speakers of English.
- Continuous learning and self-evaluation is useful in improving their pronunciation skills in English.
- The students need to adopt effective learning strategies that would maximize their pragmatic competence. It would be helpful to take the teacher's help to learn them.
- Many opportunities and resources are available in the form of media and the internet to listen to authentic language so that the students learn the rules and strategies of real use of language.
- Learners should become observers and researchers of the language they are learning. This will improve the learners' awareness of the target language.

Conclusion

The major challenge to teachers and researchers is to develop an informed expertise directed towards facilitating learners' development of functional communicative speech/pronunciation patterns. The teaching of these aspects will help students not only develop greater expressiveness and fluency in English but also achieve better understanding of some of the subtleties of norms of English sound system. Only after meaningful learning of the pronunciation features can teachers

deal with issues of accuracy and intelligibility. To sum up, there exists a wide range of activities that target pronunciation skills. And, given how pronunciation impacts learning and language use, it is a competency that merits more attention than it currently receives. Students cannot receive proper and adequate pronunciation instruction unless teachers possess the expertise and knowhow which allows them to anticipate and recognize problem areas, identify and impart relevant information, and design and implement appropriate instruction; in other words, teachers need grounding in the phonetic/phonological systems of the L1 and L2 as well as familiarity with teaching techniques. Until such is the case, it is up to the teachers to fill gaps found, not only, in the curriculum but also in their professional formation.

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