HOW COULD ESL PRONUNCIATION TEACHING BE MORE EFFECTIVE

Dana Carmen Zechia
Lecturer, PhD, „Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy of Constanţa

Abstract: In many English language classrooms, teaching pronunciation is granted the least attention. When ESL teachers defend the poor pronunciation skills of their students, their arguments could either be described as a cop-out with respect to their inability to teach their students proper pronunciation or they could be regarded as taking a stand against linguistic influence.

Keywords: pronunciation, learning, teaching, misconceptions, factors, needs

Pronunciation plays a crucial role in mastering the English language, impacting communication, comprehension, and overall language proficiency. For English language learners, achieving clear and accurate pronunciation is essential for effective communication in various contexts, including academic, professional, and social settings.

1. Do we need to teach pronunciation?

Most ESL teachers agree that explicit pronunciation teaching is an essential part of language courses. On the one hand, confidence with pronunciation allows learners the interaction with native speakers that is so essential for all aspects of their linguistic development. On the other hand, poor pronunciation can mask otherwise good language skills, condemning learners to less than their deserved social, academic and work advancement.

While there is little doubt about teachers' appreciation of the importance of pronunciation instruction, there is even less doubt about learners' own demand for effective pronunciation teaching: almost all learners rate this as a priority and an area in which they need more guidance. For any remaining sceptics, it may be worth briefly rehearsing the following responses to reasons sometimes given for not teaching pronunciation explicitly in an ESL program.

a) It is true that learners are very unlikely to attain a native-like accent - but their intelligibility can be greatly improved by effective pronunciation teaching;

b) It is true that pronunciation improves most through the gradual intuitive changes brought about by real interaction with native speakers - but for a large proportion of ESL learners the skills that enable this type of interaction do not come naturally; most need explicit pronunciation teaching.

c) It is true that it is offensive to prescribe an 'accent norm' to which learners must assimilate, and it is true that people should be free to express themselves in whatever accent they choose - but it is not true that this freedom is given by withholding pronunciation teaching. On the contrary, it is effective pronunciation teaching that offers learners a genuine choice in how they express themselves.

2. The problem: not whether to teach, but how to teach, pronunciation

Despite widespread agreement about the importance of pronunciation teaching, in ESL courses around the country pronunciation is the aspect of language that receives least attention. The reason is not unwillingness to teach pronunciation, but uncertainty as to how best to help learners. This is of course not to discount the contribution of significant numbers of gifted pronunciation teachers. The problem is that the effectiveness of these teachers is based largely on individual experience and insights.

The question, then, is not whether to teach pronunciation, but how to teach pronunciation. I have been developing a theoretical approach to phonology that I like to think is useful in this regard. It sees phonology not as computational processing, as is common in generative models, but in a **communicative** and **meaning-based framework**. Without going into technical detail here, I would like to consider some implications for pronunciation teaching.

3. How not to teach pronunciation

The demonstrated ineffectiveness of drilling phonemes, minimal pairs and stilted dialogues was a large part of the reason that pronunciation was all but dropped from language classes with the introduction of the communicative methods. Basing lessons around detailed descriptions of the articulation of sounds, intensive IPA transcription, or lectures on English phonology are also minimal in their effectiveness, while at the same time placing high knowledge demands not just on learners but also on teachers. Many teachers consider their own expertise in these areas to be inadequate, preferring to delegate pronunciation classes to those with more knowledge. It is more important is for teachers to have insight into the kinds of problems learners face in pronouncing English, and tools to provide for their needs at different stages.

4. Why is pronunciation so difficult to learn?

Pronunciation is one of the most difficult areas for learners, as well as for teachers. In quest of effective teaching, it is worth diagnosing carefully the nature of the difficulties that they face.

There is a significant skill component for learners. Pronunciation is not just a cognitive 'knowing-that', it is also a physical 'knowing-how', similar to playing a sport or musical instrument. Learners need *motivation* and *time* to really practise pronunciation. It is very much worth spending class time discussing with learners their own ideas about what is involved in learning pronunciation. They are often surprised by the suggestion that they should practise speaking. Learners need help in overcoming both their wishful idea that pronunciation is a subject like, say, history, which can be learned merely by listening to a teacher, and the psychological and social barriers that make it difficult for them to practise effectively.

This skill component however is only a component. There is also a significant cognitive part in pronunciation learning, which is much less often acknowledged. It is useful to think of learning to pronounce a new language as involving a kind of concept formation, about which there is a large literature in psychology and education, rather than as a purely physical skill. Both teachers and learners themselves generally assume it is the latter, and can benefit greatly from a better understanding of the conceptual aspects of pronouncing a new language. For example, very often a sound that causes great difficulty to a learner is one that they can produce quite acceptably in a different context. Helping them to realise this, and to reallocate the sounds to more appropriate phonemes might well be more use than instruction in the articulation of the palate-alveolar affricate.

The nature of phonological systems means that there is very often a radical difference between what people (learners) think they are saying, a phonetic description of the sounds they are actually producing, and how someone from a different language background (eg. a teacher) describes their speech.

This creates scope for significant miscommunication between teachers and learners regarding the nature of any errors they are producing. Many teachers are only partially aware of how unlike their students' perception of speech is from their own. An over-emphasis on the notion of 'transfer' in the literature on second language acquisition can increase teachers' sense that what learners are doing is mixing up some sound or letters.

What is actually needed is for teachers to change this interpretation of what is going on. It suggests that learners are using the same descriptions of sounds as teachers are, whereas in fact the problem is that the learners are unaware that there is any distinction between the sounds. To them, they are the same sound.

Another area in which miscommunication between teachers and learners is evident is in discussion of syllables and word stress. The number of syllables people think they are producing can be quite different from the phonetic reality. The gulf between what people think they are saying and what they are actually saying means that the level of insight people have into the phonetics of their pronunciation is generally very poor. Giving learners a phonetic description of the target sound is often not helpful, even if it is done accurately. To do this is akin to coaching a tennis player with instruction on which muscles of the shoulder to use. In other cases, especially for vowels, it is much more useful to concentrate on training the learner's perception, and helping them develop better ways of thinking about the sounds of the new language rather than in giving anatomy lessons.

The interesting thing is that people act, in pronunciation as in many things, not on the basis of the phonetic reality of sounds they hear, but on the basis of their description or concept of the sounds. A nice example of this comes from the case of word boundaries. Many learners speak in a jerky disconnected way, because they separate the words, rather than running them together. This is hardly surprising - most speakers of whatever language believe that their words are separated by short pauses. In fact of course, all languages run words together in connected speech. When people learn a new language, they will naturally try to keep the words separate. Overcoming their misconception that separating the words makes their speech clearer, and encouraging them to really listen to how words are run together in the new language, can be more effective than instruction in the rules of English co articulation.

5. How to teach pronunciation

5.1 Set pronunciation in a communicative context

Learners benefit greatly from explicit explanation of how pronunciation fits into the overall process of communication. A very simple model of communication, showing a listener trying to interpret a message on the basis of cues in the speakers' speech, is sufficient. This gives learners a framework within which to understand what goes wrong when they are not understood or are misunderstood, and to gain a clear, practical idea of the nature of linguistic contrast - not just a classroom drill but the living basis of our ability to communicate in real life contexts.

The advantages of working with this type of framework are:

a) It takes learners' focus away from their own 'performance' and places it more clearly on the listener's experience of their speech. This can be very helpful in reducing nervousness and the expectation of failure. Discussion of learners' experience of listening to foreign speakers of their own language can help them see how tolerant listeners are (in terms of understanding accented speech), and give them a sense that accents are nice - it is incomprehensibility that is bad, not the accent as such. These considerations can help give learners enough confidence in their segmental production to allow them the fluency and rhythm so important to intonation.

b) It changes the goal of pronunciation from one of mimicking a native accent (extremely difficult to achieve), to one of creating intelligible messages (perfectly possible). Errors can be defined in terms of intelligibility rather than in terms of non-attainment of a perfect model. The rules of English can be defined in terms of what listeners need in order to understand a message correctly and easily, which makes them more meaningful and easier to relate to real speech.

c) It allows a blurring of boundaries between segmental and suprasegmental aspects of speech. Following from the emphasis on the listener's experience of their speech, they can learn that in English we use stress to highlight the information the speaker considers will be unpredictable to the listener. Many other languages of course do not use stress for this function – the fact that English does needs to be explicitly taught and demonstrated. But spending time on this can give learners a 'handle' on understanding stress and intonation in terms of the meaning of the message, rather than as a set of classroom rules.

5.2 Take a learner-centred approach

This type of teaching naturally encourages the use of naturalistic exercises and practice of real communicative situations. Classes must be learner-centred in the sense that learners should be able to practise speech that will be directly useful to them in their real lives. It is essential that the basis of all classroom exercises should be phrases and sentences. Learners should be encouraged to bring examples of communication failure to class for workshopping – much can be gained from discussion of why a learner got a cup of tea instead of the cappuccino they ordered after lunch.

They should also be encouraged to anticipate situations they will encounter after the class, and practise speech that will be useful in those situations. In these ways, the material learned in class will have maximum transferability to the learner's real world. But there are more profound respects in which pronunciation teaching must be learner-centred. We have seen already that teachers need to be aware that learners actually hear speech very differently from the teachers themselves do. This seems to be a natural and essential extension of efforts in all other areas of language teaching to be culturally sensitive in communication with students. Teachers can be learner-centred by developing skills in communicating with learners about speech and pronunciation in ways that make sense to the learners - as opposed to giving them phonetically accurate descriptions. This ability to start from where learners are in order to lead them to new understanding is the basis of all effective teaching. Even more important is for learners to be 'learner-centred': the ability to notice, diagnose and repair their own errors, and those of their fellows, rather than always relying on the teacher's feedback. Many indications suggest that it is these that are the foundation of improvements in second language pronunciation.

6. Conclusion

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. Developing materials for teachers and students, as well as theoretical ideas along the lines suggested above is of utmost importance. Teachers can actively encourage the students' actual production; build pronunciation awareness and practice through classes gradually building skills in listening and speaking in both formal and informal situations. It can be concluded that with careful preparation and integration, pronunciation can play an important role in supporting the learners' overall communicative power.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Burns, A. & Joyce, H. (1997). Focus on Speaking. Sydney: NCELTR.

2. Crystal, D. (2003). A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics. Oxford: Blackwell.

3. Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. & Goodwin, J. (1996). Teaching Pronunciation: A reference for teachers of English to speakers of other languages. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

4. Jenkins, J. (2000). The phonology of English as an international language. Oxford: Oxford University Press.