

Student Voices on the Teaching & Learning of Pronunciation

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Abstract

This research study focuses on the importance of teaching our students pronunciation, on looking at the difficulties students have, and finding solutions for them. In the past, questions were raised about the importance of pronunciation as an instructional focus. Recent discussions have focused on whether or not to teach pronunciation. Today learners too are seen as active learners with needs, not passive recipients. The results from the survey questions in this study show the importance of teaching pronunciation today, difficulties students are facing in this area of English language learning, and some possible solutions. In the past, we knew little about pronunciation, how it was taught or learned, although it was emphasized in language teaching at the time of the audio-lingual approach. Today, students can go online and get pronunciation practice too. Our goal is not to make our students perfect, but it is to make them intelligible and communicative users of English to serve their purposes in and outside the classroom.

Keywords: learning pronunciation, student voices on pronunciation, teaching pronunciation

Introduction

Just how important is pronunciation to learners. This is a question many learners & teachers ask. Many people have a foreign accent and are happy with that, but when pronunciation causes confusion or misunderstanding, this becomes a problem. The problem of teaching pronunciation may not have risen from the lack of its importance, but may have been due to the question of how to teach it (Kelly, 2000). Teachers tend to teach pronunciation only when the need arises, i.e. when students have difficulty pronouncing certain words. Pronunciation needs to be planned and included in lesson plans too. In the past the teaching of pronunciation had taken a back seat, but now many have come to appreciate its importance.

Historical Overview

Pronunciation was viewed as an important part of the English language teaching curricula in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s in both the audio-lingual methodology and the situational language teaching. (Pennington, 1986) show how pronunciation has occupied a central position in theories of oral language proficiency. They refer to the older methods such as audio-lingual method and how pronunciation has been identified with accurate production of isolated sounds or words and how this has also been reflected in contemporary methods such as the Silent Way. Language teaching goals have changed under the impact of communicative views of language and interactive theories of language learning.

In the past, pronunciation accuracy was of high importance. In the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s questions were raised about the importance of pronunciation as an instructional focus. Now pronunciation is viewed as a component of communicative competence rather than of linguistic competence and as an aspect of conversational fluency rather than as an aspect of accuracy.

Brown (1991) opens his important anthology on pronunciation teaching as follows: “Pronunciation has sometimes been referred to as the ‘poor relation’ of the English Language Teaching (ELT) world. It is an aspect of language which is often given little attention, if not completely ignored, by the teacher in the classroom” (Brown, 1991, p. 1).

Pronunciation teachers should encourage their learners to be more involved in real –life situations and be encouraged to interact more with native speakers which will expose students to input-rich contexts. This can also be greatly seen when teachers encourage students to attend and participate in conferences which will provide them with the opportunities to interact naturally without fear.

Hewings (2004) refers to the main components of speech which combine to form the pronunciation of the language. These range from the individual sounds, the vowels and consonants that form speech, to the way pitch is used to show meaning. The individual sounds are the building blocks that form words. There is also a difference between the five letter vowels in the alphabet which are A, E, I, O, U, and sometimes Y, and the 20 different vowel sounds and 24 consonant sounds in British English. There are words with two or more vowels that form only one vowel sound, like *ea* in *head* which is pronounced /e/, and *ch* in *chemist* which is pronounced /k/.

Morley (1994) believes that educators today seem to be focusing on empowering students to become effective, fully participating members of the English-speaking community in which they “communicate.” She adds that, “One part of this movement is a persistent effort to write pronunciation back into the instructional equation but with a new look and a basic premise. Intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence” (Morley, 1994, p. 1).

Levis (2005) refers to research done by Avery & Ehrlich, 1992 & Morley, 1991 who state that pronunciation teachers have emphasized suprasegmentals rather than segmentals over the past 25 years. Derwing (2005) also adds that we need to have empirical studies to improve our understanding of the relationship between accent and pronunciation teaching. Abercrombie (1949), for example, stated that, “language learners need no more than a comfortable intelligible pronunciation” (p. 120) cited in (Derwing, 2005). This of course does not mean that we should prevent students from reaching their desired goals if they want to excel. Gilbert (2005) advises students to practice the rhythm and melody of spoken English. She recommends that they start with short sentences until they can say them easily, then they will eventually learn to guess the pronunciation of words they have never heard of before.

Intonation and Stress

“The term *pronunciation* as it is understood here includes not only the sounds of the language, but also the rhythm, intonation and stress patterns” (Ur, 2012, p.128). Intonation and stress patterns of the English language are just as important as the sounds of the vowels and consonants. This is not only important so that hearers can understand the learners, but so that they can understand what they hear. English has word stress as well as sentence stress.

Although, in the past, it was obvious that stress and intonation were important to teach, yet they sometimes occupied a subordinate place in many classrooms and were taught with less thoroughness as the consonants and vowels. Today, it is impossible to overlook this and students are given samples of stress and intonation features for imitation together with the vowels and consonants and grammatical patterns. Students find the idea of correlating stress with grammatical patterns a helpful starting point in hearing and practicing basic stress and rhythm patterns. Students can learn to recognize differences in stress by clapping out the rhythm of words as a starting point. Teachers can help students distinguish between statements and yes/no questions by reading a series of sentences and modeling the correct stress pattern and intonation. Coombe (2010) states that, “Dynamic speakers use variety in volume, rate, pitch & rhythm.” She adds that, “If you want to become an exciting speaker, learn to use vocal variety to add vitality and excitement to your speeches” (Coombe, 2010, pp.169-170).

Pronunciation Assessment

Clearly since TESOL’s publication of the first theme volume on pronunciation (Morley, 1987, Current Perspectives on Pronunciation: Practices Anchored in Theory), many teachers are focusing more and more on pronunciation teaching. More teachers have empowered students to be participating members of the English –speaking community to communicate more. Morley (1994) in her Pronunciation Pedagogy and Theory, refers to (Goodwin, 1994) in the article “Pronunciation Assessment in the ESL/EFL Curriculum” who focus on pronunciation assessment, diagnostic evaluation, ongoing evaluation with feedback, and classroom

achievement testing procedures. According to them, diagnostic evaluation of pronunciation is a process that yields a global assessment of the learner's comprehensibility. This helps determine the students' proficiency level in pronunciation and analyzes the students' individual needs. This can also be beneficial in planning a syllabus.

Research Study

Method

This present study focuses on the importance of teaching our students pronunciation & their voices on learning it. It was conducted on three groups from 2008 to 2013. A total of 131 female university students took part in this study (Group #1=63), (Group#2=26), and (Group #3=42). The survey was divided into various parts. The following are the most significant for our research study:

- Difficulties with pronunciation
- Dealing with pronunciation in class
- Possible solutions to help with the problem of pronunciation

Results and Discussion

Difficulties with pronunciation

Table [1.A] shows the difficulties with pronunciation as a whole. Results also show that students sometimes have difficulties with various areas of pronunciation like prefixes, suffixes, word and sentence stress, and silent letters. Differences between native and target language also cause difficulties for students. The biggest difficulty is with stress. This is due to the fact that English syllables can be made of one syllable, two syllables or many syllables. Students have difficulties distinguishing between the strong syllables that should be stressed and the weaker syllables that should be unstressed. We analyzed the data using SPSS. The Independent samples Kruskal & Wallis Test compares the three groups to see if there are any significant differences. Table [1.B] results show that the distribution dealing with pronunciation difficulties is the same across the groups, thus retaining the null hypothesis.

Table 1.A. Difficulties with pronunciation

Pronunciation Difficulties	Group %	Always %	Very often %	Sometimes %	Never %
I have difficulty_ with_ pronunciation.	G 1	4.8	33.3	49.2	12.7
	G 2	15.4	15.4	65.4	3.8
	G 3	11.9	45.2	35.7	7.1
I_ have _ difficulty _with_ word_ or_ sentence_ stress.	G 1	11.1	28.6	49.2	11.1
	G 2	11.5	23.1	57.7	7.7
	G 3	7.1	38.1	47.6	7.1
I_ have_ difficulty_ with_ sound_ pairs.	G 1	9.5	22.2	49.2	19.0
	G 2	7.7	15.4	38.5	38.5
	G 3	7.1	38.1	38.1	16.7
I_ have_ difficulty_ with_ words_ that_ have_ silent_ letters.	G 1	6.3	27.0	39.7	27.0
	G 2	11.5	11.5	50.0	26.9

	G 3	19.0	19.0	42.9	19.0
I have difficulty with pronunciation because of the difference between my native language & the target language.	G 1	9.5	15.9	52.4	22.2
	G 2	15.4	15.4	50.0	19.2
	G 3	11.9	26.2	45.2	16.7

Table [1.B] *The Independent samples Kruskal & Wallis Test*

Hypothesis Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The distribution of difficulty_with_pronunciation is the same across categories of 2013 Pronunciation_Difficulties.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.112	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of difficulty_with_word_or_sentence_stress is the same across categories of 2013 Pronunciation_Difficulties.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.834	Retain the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of difficulty_with_sound_pairs is the same across categories of 2013 Pronunciation_Difficulties.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.095	Retain the null hypothesis.
4	The distribution of difficulty_with_words_that_havesilent_letters is the same across categories of 2013 Pronunciation_Difficulties.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.369	Retain the null hypothesis.
5	The distribution of pronunciation_difference_native_language_and_target_language is the same across categories of 2013 Pronunciation_Difficulties.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.449	Retain the null hypothesis.

Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.

Dealing with pronunciation in class:

Table [2.A] shows the results show that most students strongly agree & agree that pronunciation:

1. Should be taught as an isolated skill, but there are differences between the groups.
2. Should be like that of native speakers.
3. Should be corrected by teachers, but there are differences between the groups.
4. Is important for both listening & speaking.
5. Should be integrated in the total learning experience.
6. Should be assessed.

Students want their pronunciation to be corrected because they want to express themselves clearly. The majority of students also strongly agree & agree that pronunciation is important for both listening and speaking because they need to understand the speakers as well as be understood. They also need to distinguish between features of pronunciation before producing them. We analyzed the data using SPSS. The Independent samples Kruskal & Wallis Test compares the three groups to see if there are any significant differences. Table [2B] Results show that the distribution dealing with Dealing with pronunciation in class is the same across the groups except in the fact that pronunciation should be taught as an isolated skill and that teachers should correct students' pronunciation, thus rejecting the null hypothesis

Table [2.A]: Dealing with pronunciation in class

Dealing with pronunciation in class	Group	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
I think pronunciation should be taught as an isolated skill.	G 1	47.6	46.0	4.8	1.6
	G 2	50.0	19.2	26.9	3.8
	G 3	33.3	40.5	21.4	4.8
I think my pronunciation should be like that of native speakers.	G 1	41.3	41.3	12.7	4.8
	G 2	38.5	50.0	11.5	0.0
	G 3	23.8	47.6	26.2	2.4
I think teachers should correct students' pronunciation.	G 1	68.3	25.4	6.3	0.0
	G 2	76.9	23.1	0.0	0.0
	G 3	50.0	11.9	11.9	4.8
I think pronunciation is important for both listening & speaking.	G 1	71.4	22.2	4.8	1.6
	G 2	76.9	23.1	0.0	0.0
	G 3	64.3	28.6	7.1	0.0
I think pronunciation should be integrated in the total learning experience.	G 1	52.4	33.3	9.5	4.8
	G 2	57.7	38.5	3.8	0.0
	G 3	45.2	38.1	16.7	0.0
I think pronunciation should be assessed.	G 1	44.4	42.9	9.5	3.2
	G 2	30.8	57.7	7.7	3.8
	G 3	38.1	42.9	14.3	4.8

Table [2.B] *The Independent samples Kruskal & Wallis Test*

Hypothesis Test Summary				
	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The distribution of pronunciation should be taught as an isolated skill is the same across categories of Dealing with pronunciation in class .	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.010	Reject the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of my pronunciation should be like that of native speakers is the same across categories of Dealing with pronunciation in class .	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.110	Retain the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of teachers should correct students pronunciation is the same across categories of Dealing with pronunciation in class .	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.041	Reject the null hypothesis.
4	The distribution of pronunciation is important for both listening and speaking is the same across categories of Dealing with pronunciation in class .	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.470	Retain the null hypothesis.
5	The distribution of should be integrated in the total learning experience is the same across categories of Dealing with pronunciation in class .	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.438	Retain the null hypothesis.
6	The distribution of pronunciation should be assessed is the same across categories of Dealing with pronunciation in class.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.557	Retain the null hypothesis.

Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.

Possible solutions to help with the problem of pronunciation:

Table [3.A] shows what students think will help them. The results indicate that the majority of the students strongly agree and agree that the following will help them:

- Learning sound pairs
- Using a recorder or CD
- Listening to tapes or CDs
- Watching movies
- Practicing exercises with the use of tongue twisters online
- Having knowledge of intonation of English

This clearly shows that the use of technology can greatly help students improve their pronunciation. Many students are now looking at various websites to aid them. We analyzed the data using SPSS. The Independent samples Kruskal & Wallis Test compares the three groups to see if there are any significant differences. Table [3.B] Results show that the distribution dealing with possible solutions to help with the problem of pronunciation is the same across the groups, thus retaining the null hypothesis.

Table [3.A]: Possible solutions to help with the problem of pronunciation

Possible solutions to help with the problem of pronunciation	Group	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
I_ think_ learning_ minimal_ pairs_ will_ help_ me_ with_ my_ pronunciation.	G 1	57.1	33.3	6.3	3.2
	G 2	69.2	19.2	7.7	3.8
	G 3	40.5	45.2	14.3	0.0
I_ think_ using_ a_ recorder_ or_ CD_ will_ help_ me_ with_ my_ pronunciation.	G 1	60.3	27.0	11.1	1.6
	G 2	38.5	42.3	19.2	0.0
	G 3	42.9	33.3	23.8	0.0
I_ think_ listening_ to_ tapes/CDs_ will_ help_ me_ with_ my_ pronunciation.	G 1	57.1	34.9	6.3	1.6
	G 2	34.6	57.7	7.7	0.0
	G 3	52.4	33.3	11.9	2.4
I_ think_ watching_ movies_ will_ help_ me_ with_ my_ pronunciation.	G 1	61.9	23.8	11.1	3.2
	G 2	46.2	50.0	3.8	0.0
	G 3	52.4	33.3	11.9	2.4
I_ think_ practicing_ exercises_ with_ the_ use_ of_ tongue_ twisters_ will_ help_ me_ with_ my_ pronunciation.	G 1	49.2	33.3	17.5	0.0
	G 2	23.1	61.5	15.4	0.0
	G 3	38.1	50.0	9.5	2.4
I_ think_ knowledge_ of_ intonation_ of_ English_ will_ help_ me.	G 1	47.6	39.7	12.7	0.0
	G 2	34.6	53.8	7.7	3.8
	G 3	38.1	45.2	16.7	0.0

Table [3.B] The Independent samples Kruskal & Wallis Test

Hypothesis Test Summary				
	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The distribution of Learning_minimal_pairs is the same across categories of Possible_solutions.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.099	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of Using_a_recorder_or_CD is the same across categories of Possible_solutions.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.095	Retain the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of Listening_to_tapes_or_CDs is the same across categories of Possible_solutions.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.253	Retain the null hypothesis.
4	The distribution of Watching_movies is the same across categories of Possible_solutions.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.636	Retain the null hypothesis.
5	The distribution of Practicing_exercises_with_the_use_of_tongue_twisters is the same across categories of Possible_solutions.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.241	Retain the null hypothesis.
6	The distribution of Having_knowledge_of_intonation_Samples_of_English is the same across categories of Possible_solutions.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.512	Retain the null hypothesis.

Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.

Recommendations

After looking at the results, it seems that it would be a great idea to not only include pronunciation teaching in our syllabus, but also start by identifying student problem areas or diagnose students’ pronunciation weaknesses. Then, it would also be very beneficial to introduce pronunciation activities to make the process more stimulating and fun. The following are some practice activity types according to (Hewings, 2004):

- Developing awareness
- Information transfer and minimal pairs
- Games
- Building consonant cluster towers
- Analysis
- Prediction
- Reflection
- Using reference sources

The Following Are Other Useful Ways To Improve Pronunciation:

1) Using tongue twisters found online:

This is a useful strategy for improving English pronunciation. These tongue twisters found online are also great assessment tools. Tongue twisters could help improve students’ production of consonants and vowels. We are not saying that this will work for everyone, but

only that it is one kind of strategy. An example of a popular tongue twister is Betty Botter's better batter. (About Education, n.d.)

This tongue twister also serves many teaching opportunities. The "b" sound can be used to emphasize the minimal pairs / b/ /p/ in addition to the teaching of many vowels. Another popular tongue twister is Peter Piper. (About Education, n.d.)

- 2) (Kelly, 2000) looks at three main types of lessons: integrated lessons, where pronunciation forms an essential part of the language analysis; remedial or reactive lessons, where difficulties that arise should be dealt with immediately; and practice lessons, where particular features should be the main focus of the lesson. Recommendations for useful pronunciation assessments:\

- Targeting pronunciation
- Using minimal pairs
- Checking Phonetics website:

<http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics/anatomy.htm>

Examples of pronunciation activities:

<http://www.soundsofenglish.org/tips.htm>

http://www.caslt.org/resources/english-sl/classroom-resource-links-speaking_en.php

- Using Apps for pronunciation practice like that for voice check & voice training.
- "Learn American English Pronunciation" App.
- "How to speak English" App Kaplan International Co.

Conclusion

In the past the focus on pronunciation teaching and assessment was very limited, but today many have come to realize its importance. Students need to be given the opportunity to speak and have updated methods and activities used in the classroom. More research is needed to teach and assess students' pronunciation and address any theoretical issues that may arise to help students communicate more accurately in and outside the classroom. Constant mispronunciation causes difficulties in understanding, embarrassment for the speaker, and frustration especially when the speaker has good command of grammar and vocabulary. Teaching pronunciation is not only necessary when responding to students' errors, but it should also be planned as an integral part of the lesson planning. The question to ask now is whether intelligibility rather than native-like pronunciation is what we need to focus on for our learners. Lightbown (2013), refer to research done by (Derwing, 2005) that shows that, "the presence of a strong foreign accent does not necessarily result in reduced intelligibility or comprehensibility" (Lightbown & Spada (2013: 71).

When looking at the problems students encounter in their pronunciation and how these can inhibit their successful communication, we see the significance of teaching pronunciation to meet our students' needs. Jang (2014), states that, "Students' oral proficiency is not a sufficient indicator of their language abilities" (Jang, 2014:154). Yet, we cannot ignore its importance. Finally, we realize and believe that students' pronunciation needs can no longer be ignored and their voices must be heard. We do not want our learners to be reluctant to speak because of their foreign accent, but we want them to explore the world and express their opinion. Again, our focus is not on getting learners to produce native speaker accents, but it is to enable them to

produce intelligible and comprehensible speech to communicate and open doors before them. Today learners get online assistance and practice pronunciation activities by using online websites and Apps.

“More and more people are learning English today. Also today we have an instructional technology revolution which has been quite advantageous to pronunciation, with all the audio, video, and computer capabilities in the classroom” (Ali, 2010).

“Students’ educational, occupational, language, and reasonable intelligible spelling and pronunciation needs must be addressed to give them the empowerment they need to succeed. Here, we have seen the spelling and pronunciation link and have come to the conclusion that we sometimes need to refer to spelling and pronunciation together to indicate differences and similarities. Our goal is not to make our students perfect, but it is to make them intelligible and communicative users of English to serve their purposes (Ali, 2010).

About the Author

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