

# Pronunciation: What Are the Expectations?

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The usefulness of teaching pronunciation is a widely debated subject in the language teaching world. Some of the current research would suggest that teachers can make little or no difference in improving their students pronunciation. In contrast, there is research that indicates that the teacher can make a noticeable difference if certain criteria, such as the teaching of suprasegmentals and the linking of pronunciation with listening practice, are fulfilled. If the above views indicate the split in opinion about the teaching of pronunciation, can pronunciation be successfully taught, and if so, what are the pedagogical implications for the classroom teacher and the learner? This article, in light of the current research and opinions, asks the question 'Is it reasonable to expect all students to do well in learning the pronunciation of English?' The article consists of an examination of the role of pronunciation in current and past language programs, recent research on pronunciation and the learner, current pedagogical thinking on pronunciation and learning, and some proposed new roles for the teacher and student in the communicative classroom. It is hoped that this short overview of the role of pronunciation in EFL/ESL programs will prompt more teachers to reconsider the relationship between the learner and pronunciation.

## Introduction

This paper examines whether it is reasonable to expect all students to do well in learning the pronunciation of a foreign language. For the purpose of this paper 'foreign language' will be deemed to be English and 'pronunciation' is defined as 'A way of speaking a word, especially a way that is accepted or generally understood.' (American Heritage Dictionary, 3rd.,1992) The paper looks at the role of pronunciation in language programmes, the recent research on pronunciation and the learner, current ideas on pronunciation and learning, and the proposed new roles pronunciation, the teacher, and the student should have in today's communicative language programme.

## Background

The role of pronunciation in the different schools of language teaching has varied widely from having virtually no role in the grammar-translation method to being the main focus in the audio-lingual method where emphasis is on the traditional notions of pronunciation, minimal pairs, drills and short conversations. (Castillo, 1990:3) Situational language teaching, developed in Britain, also mirrored the audio-lingual view of the pronunciation class (Richards and Rodgers,1986). Morley (1991:484) states, 'The pronunciation class...was one that gave primary attention to phonemes and their meaningful contrasts, environmental allophonic variations, and combinatory phonotactic rules, along with ...attention to stress, rhythm, and intonation.' During the late 1960's and the 1970's questions were asked about the role of pronunciation in the ESL/EFL curriculum, whether the focus of the programmes and the instructional methods were effective or not. Pronunciation programmes until then were 'viewed as meaningless noncommunicative drill-and-exercise gambits' (Morley,1991:485-6). In many language programmes the teaching of pronunciation was pushed aside, as many studies concluded 'that little relationship exists between teaching pronunciation in the classroom and attained proficiency in pronunciation; the strongest factors found to affect pronunciation (i.e. native language and motivation) seem to have little to do with classroom activities' (Suter,1976: 233-53,Purcell and Suter, 1980:271-87).

## Recent Research

The above view that 'little relationship exists between teaching pronunciation in the classroom and attained proficiency in pronunciation' was supported by research done by Suter (1976:233-53) and Suter and Purcell (1980:286) on twenty variables believed to have an influence on pronunciation. They concluded that pronunciation practice in class had little affect on the learner's pronunciation skills and, moreover 'that the attainment of accurate pronunciation in a second language is a matter substantially beyond the control of educators'. They qualified their findings by stating that variables of formal training and the quality of the training in pronunciation could affect the results, as would the area of pronunciation that had been emphasized, that is segmentals ( individual

sounds of a language) or suprasegmentals. ( The "musical patterns" of English, melody, pitch patterns, rhythm, and timing patterns [Gilbert, 1987:33-39].) Pennington (1989:203-227) questioned the validity of Suter and Purcell's findings as the factors of formal pronunciation training and the quality of the teaching, if not taken into account, could affect any research results. He stated that there was 'no firm basis for asserting categorically that pronunciation is not teachable or that it is not worth spending time on...' (p.20). It is quite clear from the research mentioned above that the role of pronunciation training in the learner's language development is widely debated, with researchers such as Suter, Purcell, and Madden (1983:69-80) all thinking that pronunciation training is relatively ineffective, and in opposition researchers such as Pennington believing that teachers, with formal training in pronunciation and teaching suprasegmentals in a communicative language programme, can make a difference. Between these opposing views, Stern (1992:112 ) says 'There is no convincing empirical evidence which could help us sort out the various positions on the merits of pronunciation training'. If the above views represent the split in the teaching of pronunciation, what can the teacher do to improve their students' pronunciation, if improvement can be obtained?

## **Current Ideas on Pronunciation and Learning**

Changing outlooks on language learning and teaching have influenced a move from teacher centred to learner centered classrooms. Concurrently, there has been a shift from specific linguistic competencies to broader communicative competencies as goals for teachers and students (Morley,1991:481-520). Morley states the need for the integration of pronunciation with oral communication, a change of emphasis from segmentals to suprasegmentals, more emphasis on individual learner needs, meaningful task-based practices, development of new teacher strategies for the teaching, and introducing peer correction and group interaction. (Castillo,1991:4) Research has shown that teaching phonemes isn't enough for intelligibility in communication (Cohen,1977:71-7). With the emphasis on meaningful communication and Morley's (1991:488) premise, that 'Intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communication competence' teachers should include pronunciation in their courses and expect students to do well in them. Without adequate pronunciation skills the learner's ability to communicate is severely limited. Morley believes that not attending to a student's pronunciation needs, 'is an abrogation of professional responsibility (1991:489)'. Other research gives support to Morley's belief in the need for 'professional responsibility' when the results show that 'a threshold level of pronunciation in English such that if a given non-native speaker's pronunciation falls below this level, he or she will not be able to communicate orally no matter how good his or her control of English grammar and vocabulary might be' (Celce-Murcia, 1987:5). Gilbert (1984:1) believes the skills of listening comprehension and pronunciation are interdependent: 'If they cannot hear English well, they are cut off from the language...If they cannot be understood easily, they are cut off from conversation with native speakers.' Nooteboom (1983:183-94) also has suggested that speech production is affected by speech perception; the hearer has become an important factor in communication discourse. This illustrates the need to integrate pronunciation with communicative activities; to give the student situations to develop their pronunciation by listening and speaking. The current research and the current trend reversal in the thinking of pronunciation shows there is a consensus that a learner's pronunciation in a foreign language needs to be taught in conjunction with communicative practices for the learner to be able to communicate effectively with native speakers.

## **Pronunciation and Communicative Teaching**

Students can be expected to do well in the pronunciation of English if the pronunciation class is taken out of isolation and becomes an 'integral part of [the] oral communication' class (Morley,1991:496). The goal of pronunciation should be changed from the attainment of 'perfect' pronunciation (A very elusive term at the best of times.), to the more realistic goals of developing functional intelligibility, communicability, increased self-confidence, the development of speech monitoring abilities and speech modification strategies for use beyond the classroom (Morley, 1991:500). The overall aim of these goals is for the learner to develop spoken English that is easy to understand, serves the learner's individual needs, and allows a positive image of himself as a speaker of a foreign language. The learner needs to develop awareness and monitoring skills that will allow learning opportunities outside the classroom environment. The communicative approach to pronunciation teaching requires teaching methods and objectives that include 'whole-person learner involvement' (Morley,1991:501). Morley states there are three important dimensions the teacher should catered for in any pronunciation programme; the learner's intellectual involvement, affective involvement, and physical involvement. The learner's involvement in the learning process has been noted as one of the best techniques for developing learner strategies, that is, the measures used by the learner to develop his language learning (Morley, 1991:506). It is the teacher's responsibility to develop the learning process so the learner has the greatest chance to develop the learning strategies that are unique to each individual learner. The teacher also has a special role to play in the communicative learning programme, a role that Morley describes as one of 'speech coach or pronunciation coach' (1991:507). Rather than just correcting the learner's mistakes, the 'speech coach' 'supplies information, gives models from time to time, offers cues, suggestions and constructive feedback about performance, sets high standards, provides a wide variety of practice opportunities, and overall supports and encourages the learner' (Morley,1991:507). It can be seen the

teacher's role is not only to 'teach' but to facilitate learning by monitoring and modifying English at two levels, speech production and speech performance.

## Conclusion

All students can do well in learning the pronunciation of a foreign language if the teacher and student participate together in the total learning process. Success can be achieved if each have set, respectively, 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 a crucial part of communication. Research has shown and current pedagogical thinking on pronunciation maintains that 'intelligible pronunciation is seen as an essential component of communicative competence' (Morley, 1991:513). With this in mind, the teacher must then set achievable goals that are applicable and suitable for the communication needs of the student. The student must also become part of the learning process, actively involved in their own learning. The content of the course should be integrated into the communication class, with the content emphasizing the teaching of suprasegmentals, linking pronunciation with listening comprehension, and allowing for meaningful pronunciation practice. With the teacher acting as a 'speech coach', rather than as a mere checker of pronunciation, the feedback given to the student can in itself encourage learners to improve their pronunciation. If these criteria are met, all students, within their learner unique goals, can be expected to do well learning the pronunciation of a foreign language.

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