

Notes on Teaching English Pronunciation to EFL Learners: A Case of Iranian High School Students

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Abstract

Some believe that a learner must acquire the ability to produce and recognize all speech sounds used by the speaker of the target language while others think that if the goal is communication it is not necessary to teach all phonemic aspects. In fact in teaching (especially the phonology of) a language, the learners' objectives are to be taken into account. If their goal in the long run is either to teach the language or to use it in radio news broadcasts, they should learn pronunciation accurately, correctly, and authentically; otherwise, when communication is possible, there is no obligation to strive for perfect pronunciation. One way to achieve this purpose is by sensitizing students to the conversational tactics they use naturally when talking in their native tongue: turn-taking, supporting, challenging, questioning, expanding on statements, and so on; they do not tend to use these when interacting in English (Counihan, 1998).

Keywords: Pronunciation, Contextualization, Minimal pairs, Interaction

1. Introduction

Environmental, physical, psychological, instructional, and other factors affect the process of learning and teaching English-- particularly its sound systems. These factors are divided into two groups: *direct* and *indirect*, the former denoting factors directly related to both the teacher and the student, and the latter referring to factors with somehow indirect impact on the teaching and learning task.

Direct factors

A very important factor influencing the value of correct pronunciation arises from the society's needs and attitudes. In the same vein, in Iranian academic contexts, students are advised to read and translate English (technical) materials found in magazines, books, newspapers, etc. to collect necessary information for their specific field of interest; that is, since English is treated as a foreign --and not necessarily a second- language in Iran, the general goal of the system of education regarding English teaching is confined to "reading" and "translation" of the English materials containing scientific information. Moreover, in case of students majoring in English as a foreign language, there is not much emphasis on accurate pronunciation for many reasons among which the students' low proficiency in English and their little knowledge about the importance of pronunciation are highlighted ones.

The inadequate knowledge of some teachers of English about linguistics and methodology has also caused many problems for both teachers and their students. For instance, an English teacher pronounces a word in his/her class but the year after, the same students may hear the same word with a completely different pronunciation. Confused with the two diverse pronunciations, the students suggest that they have been taught to pronounce that word in a different way by their previous teacher. It is obvious that one of the teachers is making a mistake because the difference between the two pronunciations suggested for the same word is so big that it is rarely justifiable by dialectal variations, i.e. British, American, Australian, etc. In such controversial situations, there is sometimes the possibility of presenting a self-accent which is neither English nor Persian (I call it Penglish which is extracted from Persian-English).

Indirect factors

Concerning the indirect factors, firstly, the assigned time for English classes through an academic year is so short that the teachers may not even be able to cover the whole textbook. It is worthy of mention here that English is treated as a foreign language in Iran, so the chances that students use English outside the classroom is almost zero. Secondly, the presence of a large number of students in class does not allow the teacher to control the class effectively. Therefore, the educational result of such 60- or 70-student classes may be either a depressed teacher, who had a complete lesson plan, although such teachers are few in number, or a satisfied one for whom teaching is only a matter of pass-fail. The third indirect factor related to the school environment is the lack of facilities which could help the teacher a lot. Laboratories (at least tape-recorders with a few preliminary instructional tapes), simple

English books in libraries, and some other teaching devices, such as video-players, computers, DVD players, and the like seem to be of great use and help in teaching English, especially in early intermediate classes.

2. The study

In order to examine the significance of teaching English pronunciation to Iranian students, a 38-item questionnaire (see appendix) was distributed among 230 teachers of English throughout Khuzestan, a Province in the southern part of Iran. The participants were asked to select either of the answers (yes, no, no idea) from the list and put a tick in its related box. The results almost verified the problems mentioned earlier in the paper. Specifically speaking, in relation to questions 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24 and 25, the results indicated that the books bear the biggest problems in the process of teaching English pronunciation to Iranian students. Moreover, question number 2 which deals with the sufficiency of the time devoted to teaching pronunciation in particular and English in general helps to assert the existence of the problem of time that the teachers of English experience during their teaching career.

3. Procedures

The common procedures, on the whole, fall into two different categories: one focusing on teaching English sound patterns within short sentences, and the other taking contextualization into account. Each category will be evaluated in the following sections.

Context-free sentences

There have been a variety of techniques suggested to help the students master the correct pronunciation of the target language. Firstly, imitation (some may call it modeling) is believed to play a significant role in learning the English sound system. The second technique mostly used by English teachers is explanation. One helpful device is the simple face diagram in which the various "organs of speech" are shown. Using pictures, drawings, objects, etc., the teacher attempts to teach the place and manner of articulation of difficult sounds.

Another technique is to compare and contrast the phonological elements of the students' native language (L1) and English (L2). Through comparison and contrast, students learn that there are similarities and differences between the sound system of their mother tongue and that of L2. In this way, the teacher tries to convince the students that there would be no serious problems with the pronunciation of the similar-to-L1 sounds; however, it is necessary to spend enough time on the production of difficult sounds. The greater differences between the first and the second language structure, the more difficult the learning task will be (see Hayati, 1997; Yarmohammadi, 2000).

Well-known among all linguists and methodologists and many language teachers, the last technique is mimicry memorization (Mim-Mem). Through mim-mem, the student repeats a word, a phrase, and/or a short sentence several times in order that the sound segment(s) of the word, phrase, or sentence become memorized and established in his/her mind.

To review the above techniques, it is worth mentioning that, as experience has shown, students learn the production of sounds used in the contexts relevant to the real situations. Thus, pure imitation of the phones appears boring to the learners because they are taught the sounds in a vacuum. On the other hand, explanation also seems inefficient and even in some cases unnecessary, e.g. for early language learners. Listening to the teacher's explanations and looking at the confusing mazes on the face diagram simultaneously, students should have some knowledge about the linguistic organs and their process of operation. In fact, it suggests multi-faceted teaching on the part of the teacher and not desirably teaching one point at a time. Pure, Mim-Mem, too, has some disadvantages which lead to monotony and consequently destroy the tempo of the teaching process (See Stevick 1982, p.51).

As well as the explanation technique, making comparison and contrast between the sound patterns of L1 and L2, in which the students are faced with two phonetic categories, does not suffice for learning pronunciation. Explaining to the students, for example, that in English the /i/ sound is pronounced by having the jaws lax, the front part of the tongue moved a little high, lips unrounded, etc. and mentioning that the Persian language lacks such a sound, does not solve the problem of pronunciation. Students may also mix the production of sounds while trying to distinguish and differentiate between the sounds of L1 and L2. Therefore, using the comparison and contrast technique, what can be done to make students pronounce the short /i/ correctly?

Contextualization

The second method, contextualization, seems to a greater extent effective, although it may have some minor shortcomings. According to Bowen (1972, p.58), "One way to effect an improvement would be to find means of better integrating pronunciation instruction with other elements of instruction." Using different situations related to real life or to the students' experience, the teacher can present a pronunciation problem through different techniques. One is to tell the students a brief story in which the teacher can insert difficult sounds in the form of minimal pairs.

The advocates of the audio-lingual method, however, may claim that minimal pairs could also be practical in isolated sentences. It should be noted that there are some criteria for contextualization of minimal pairs. They are as follows (as suggested by Bowen, 1972): (1) meaningful, (2) pictureable, (3) balanced, and (4) if possible, relevant to the experience and/or interest of the students" (p.92). Therefore, the following sentence, for instance, by which the /au/ sound is going to be presented, does not clearly communicate a certain meaning:

He found it rounded.

To whom does "He" refer? What specific object does the word "it" suggest? What is the relationship between "it" and "rounded"? These and other similar questions indicate the situational vagueness of the above sentence. Apparently the concrete words can be taught without serious difficulty through pictures. There are, nevertheless, obstacles in the way of teaching certain sounds within abstract words. Take a short passage as an example, conveying a certain situation in which you have used such words as WISE-RISE, MIND-KIND, HATE-FATE, etc. At this stage, the possible solutions are to define the word in English, or use the students' mother tongue. Whenever the teacher encounters such complications, s/he can give the meaning of the unpictureable word in the students' L1, although there have been controversial ideas regarding the use of mother tongue in teaching English as a foreign language (see Tang, 2002).

4. Discussion

According to the psycholinguistic principles, as Brown (2001) states, "The overwhelming majority of adult learners will never acquire an accent-free command of a foreign language..." (p.268) and of course the young learners will acquire as many languages as they are exposed to. If they understand why a concept is important they will be more likely to remember it (Andrews, 2005). In the same line, Rosenberg (2005) states, "Becoming Bilingual is a special gift parents can offer their children, but the gift must be planned and presented with care for it to be well used and appreciated." Therefore, it is suggested that English be taught at the very *early stages*. Although there is no such course as English at the primary level, it would be quite useful if school children were motivated to keep contact with the language for at least 90 minutes a week or 15 minutes a day.

Most Iranian English classes are still concerned with the traditional methods of language teaching. As an example, one may experience students who have been asked to write the pronunciation of the English words in their own language! The following are some examples:

| | <u>English</u> | <u>Persian</u> |
|---------|----------------|----------------|
| pencil | /pensəl/ | /pensel/ |
| that | /ðæt/ | /zat/ or /dat/ |
| student | /studənt/ | /student/ |

Therefore, teachers of English will be able to collect theoretical and practical information about the "what"s and "how"s of language and teaching if they are provided with some *inservice classes*. These classes, whose least effect is to motivate the English teachers towards further instructional information, can be scheduled for almost three months. However, as Okita (1999) states, "the problem with inservice training is that English teachers, like other teachers, find themselves too busy with daily school chores to attend any of the courses provided, even though teachers are granted the right to attend courses by the ordinance". To solve this problem, then, the teachers should be given enough time to attend the required courses. A one-month course concentrating primarily on practical techniques may be attractive when teaching can be conceived of as the implementation of a particular method or set of procedures (Ferguson & Donno, 2003, p.32).

A three-hours-a-week class is actually not sufficient for teaching English as a foreign language since students do not have enough mutual contacts with the native speakers of English outside the class situation.. This short time is not even enough for the teachers to remember their students' names. The *class hours* therefore must be extended if a teacher is going to work successfully in class.

In the line of the above justification, it is worth mentioning that the **textbook** also plays an important role in course material design. It may function as a safe base for other activities. A textbook can serve different purposes for teachers: as a core resource, as a source of supplemental material, as an inspiration for classroom activities, even as the curriculum itself (Garinger, 2002). However, the English textbooks used in Iranian Guidance Schools and High Schools suffer from shortcomings in the sequence of presentation of materials, text selection, pronunciation exercises, etc. (See the participants' responses to items 36 and 37 of the questionnaire in the appendix.) The fact that textbooks have not accurately reflected authentic interactions in the past is understandable when we bear in mind that materials writers have traditionally tended to use dialogues as a medium to reinforce particular grammar points

or to present vocabulary and functional language (Gilmore, 2004, p.370; see also Burns & Seidlhofer, 2002). In order to remove this problem, it is advised that the material designers move along with the newest theories and methods of teaching a language knowing that the idea of language learning also might be culture-specific. That is, considering topic familiarity in discourse analysis, the materials could be designed based on the students' culture, quietly moving towards the "color purple" which is the boundary between the learners' culture and that of the target language. What is clear from this paper and others, is that the teaching of pronunciation programs must be included in the students' training, yet that training must be country specific, and materials and research must now stop focusing on the 'general' and start considering the 'specific' (Robertson, 2003).

Both the teacher and students should also be conscious of *skill interaction*. For instance, if the students think of "reading" as the only necessary skill for their long term objectives, it should be made clear to them that mispronunciation of a word may occasionally lead them to a wrong semantic interpretation. Below are a few examples:

| | <u>homographs</u> | | <u>minimal pairs</u> | |
|--------|-------------------|--|----------------------|--------|
| object | /ɔbjekt/ | | sheep | /ʃi:p/ |
| | /ʌbjɔkt/ | | ship | /ʃip/ |
| minute | /maɪnu:t/ | | leave | /li:v/ |
| | /mɪnɪt/ | | live | /lɪv/ |

5. Conclusion

In all, in today's world of technological developments, the Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has a great effect on improving the students' mastery of pronunciation (see Hayati, 2005). Therefore, a very important remedial way to stop the effect of those indirect factors which lessen the speed of language learning is to provide the schools with facilities (not necessarily those which call for a large amount of budget). Each high school, for the sake of economy, can and must have at least a tape-recorder and/or a computer to work with in teaching a second language.

On the other hand, there are varieties of communicative procedures and techniques suggested by many methodologists which are applicable in certain environments; they are at least worthy of experiment. Techniques such as "problem-solving", "role-playing", "dramatization", and the like could be of great help to make the students practice the communicative aspect of language (see Cook, 1997; Crouch, 1989; Gil, 2002; Hayati, 2006; Krish, 2001; Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Marilynne, 1999; Mills, 1987; Nunan, 1988; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Rifkin, 2003; Stringer, 1987; Tarone and Liu, 1995; Tompkins 1998). From among these methods and techniques, the teachers should search for the ones by which the language can most easily be presented. Otherwise, the English classes will be nothing but a waste of time.

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Appendix

By answering the following questions you will cooperate with a research project. I appreciate your participation and I hope that this study will minimize the problems we, teachers of English, are facing in teaching English to our students. It is noteworthy that the focus of the present questionnaire is on teaching "Pronunciation"

General information

Teaching level elementary school middle school high school
 Gender male female
 Age 20-29 30-39 40-49 50+
 Total number of years teaching English less than 5 years 5-9 years 10-20 years more than 20 years

Number of participants: 239

| | | yes | no | no idea |
|----|--|-----|-----|---------|
| 1 | Is pronunciation an important feature in teaching/learning situations with prescribed curricula? | 185 | 12 | 5 |
| 2 | Is the time devoted to pronunciation enough within the courses/situations? | 55 | 171 | 6 |
| 3 | Do you think pronunciation should become native-like at the end of the course of instruction? | 114 | 95 | 21 |
| 4 | Is it enough for a language learner to be able to communicate in a second language with little emphasis on pronunciation? | 83 | 143 | 10 |
| 5 | Can you alone, as teacher, decide when to teach pronunciation to your group of students? | 130 | 78 | 21 |
| 6 | Do you emphasize pronunciation in your teaching? | 205 | 26 | 1 |
| 7 | Do you teach pronunciation at all? | 194 | 36 | 2 |
| 8 | Do you like teaching it? | 154 | 31 | 20 |
| 9 | Are you interested in/confident when you teach it? | 176 | 36 | 18 |
| 10 | Do you focus on certain aspects of pronunciation when/If you teach it? | 151 | 61 | 16 |
| 11 | Are you aware of/familiar with pronunciation materials? | 170 | 29 | 24 |
| 12 | Do you use certain methods/materials in teaching pronunciation? | 105 | 111 | 15 |
| 13 | Do you use methods/materials rather than the most well-known ones in treating pronunciation problems? | 51 | 132 | 35 |
| 14 | Do you have experiences as a learner/user of another language? | 104 | 124 | 14 |
| 15 | Have these experiences influenced your teaching of pronunciation? | 116 | 56 | 45 |
| 16 | Do you assess your students' pronunciation? | 166 | 32 | 22 |
| 17 | Do you use extra-activities with students whose pronunciation is poor? | 128 | 92 | 13 |
| 18 | Is there any specific method of teaching pronunciation in the textbook you use in your class? | 48 | 158 | 27 |
| 19 | Do you think, for teaching pronunciation, the method used in the textbooks is fair enough? | 39 | 174 | 20 |
| 20 | Do you think the authors of the books take all necessary aspects (age, level, geographical status, etc) into account when designing an English textbook? | 33 | 179 | 22 |
| 21 | Do you think the books can be used as references independently by the students? | 59 | 159 | 17 |
| 22 | Do you think the books can be helpful for the students to develop skills which can be transferred to other contexts? | 80 | 111 | 22 |
| 23 | Does the book provide self-assessment tasks which require the students to reflect on their progress? | 54 | 138 | 38 |
| 24 | Do you think the book expands your teaching repertoire? | 50 | 132 | 42 |
| 25 | Do you understand all the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) as used in popular English dictionaries? | 168 | 43 | 15 |
| 26 | Are you familiar with any of the phonetic alphabet systems? | 154 | 55 | 20 |
| 27 | During your studies, were you instructed in teaching pronunciation? | 140 | 49 | 33 |
| 28 | Do you use a variety of activities to teach this skill? | 75 | 130 | 21 |
| 29 | Do your students enjoy the pronunciation task? | 129 | 70 | 29 |
| 30 | Do you follow the course-book when teaching pronunciation? | 162 | 42 | 18 |
| 31 | Does the class course-book include sufficient activities for this skill? | 38 | 169 | 16 |
| 32 | Do you devise your own activities for teaching pronunciation? | 116 | 61 | 39 |
| 33 | Has it occurred to you sometimes to neglect this skill when you don't have time? | 71 | 126 | 19 |
| 34 | Do you take pronunciation into account when you grade your students? | 163 | 36 | 18 |
| 35 | Do you devote a lot of time to this skill during a lesson? | 46 | 161 | 18 |
| 36 | Does the Ministry of Education have given guidelines on how to tackle this skill (e.g. what to teach, time spent on it)? | 40 | 146 | 29 |
| 37 | Do you agree with the guidelines given by the Ministry of Education on how to treat pronunciation in English courses? | 74 | 85 | 63 |
| 38 | Do you think the In-service Training will give you sufficient guidelines in teaching pronunciation to your students? | 73 | 87 | 52 |