

Using Proper Pronunciation

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Abstract

Pronunciation is the most ignored area of a language, especially English as foreign language in Pakistan. The paper intends to look at the place of pronunciation in accordance with the student's needs and pronunciation in practice with reference to the multi-ethnic background of Pakistani students and role of pronunciation in Pakistan. It also intends to discuss the issues involved in keeping pronunciation as a separate sub-skill and teaching it as part of listening and speaking skills.

The current paper is a descriptive study and aims to explore the impact of including pronunciation as compulsory component in a six months language course. The study was conducted by taking a pretest of students on observation sheet marking areas of pronunciation. Later on the detailed input was given and a post test was conducted.

It was noted that there was significant improvement in pronunciation of students. As a follow up, the students were interviewed. It was noted that they were also satisfied and maintained that this should be compulsory so as the students of multi ethnic backgrounds may overcome the difficulty in learning right kind of pronunciation. However they believed that learning pronunciation involves fullest willingness.

Introduction

Pronunciation aspect of a language has been called as "The Cinderella" of Language teaching and learning. (Kelly, 1969; Dalton, 1997). Perhaps it is the most ignored sub skill of English language. Besides there is a hyped discussion whether or not it should be part of learning/teaching language. On building awareness and concern for pronunciation, Joanne Kenworthy (1987) states that, "learner needs to develop concern for pronunciation. They must recognize that poor

unintelligible speech will make their attempts at conversing frustrating and unpleasant both for themselves and for their listeners”. For many people, goal of learning English also includes pronunciation as a must, i.e. for those learners who will want to be able to interact with both native speakers and non native speakers of English. The learner of English language will definitely wish to apply it by participating in communication wherever English is used (John Wells, 1999). The learner’s personal aim is mostly higher than just passing examination. With this in mind, learning pronunciation of English is synonymous to better communication skills. It also holds its value as per the accent of jobs, business and education. A survey carried out by Dr Tariq Rehman (2000) of the students of class ten indicate that most students want to be taught English at least as a subject if not the only language taught at school or as a medium of instruction.. And surely this feeling for English as international language has increased with the passage of time.

What is Pronunciation?

In its simplest sense, pronunciation is defined as:

“A way of speaking a word, especially a way that is accepted or generally understood)

“A word can be spoken in different ways by various individuals or groups, depending on many factors, such as:

1. the area in which they grew up
2. the area in which they now live
3. their ethnic group.
4. their social class
5. their education.”

(www.answers.com)

“...English pronunciation has various components such as sounds stress and variation in pitch, and the learner needs to understand the function of these as well as their form, once the learner are aware that English words have a stress pattern, that, words can be pronounced in slightly different ways, that the pitch of the voice can

be used to convey meaning then they will know, that to pay attention to and can build upon this basic awareness.” (Joanne Kenworthy, 1987:27)

BACKGROUND

Role of pronunciation in Pakistan

Pakistan is a multicultural, multi ethnic and poly- glottal country. For many EFL and EIL learners English is third or even fourth language. 96% of its population speaks six major local languages e.g. Panjabi, Sindhi, Shina, Urdu etc. “Pakistan is a multilingual country. Its national language, Urdu, is the mother tongue of only 7.57 per cent of the population though it is very widely used in the urban areas of the country. Pakistan’s official language is still English as it was when the British ruled the country as part of British India. In addition to this, the country has five major indigenous languages given below.

Pakistani languages

Languages Percentage of speakers

| | |
|---------|-------|
| Punjabi | 44.15 |
| Pashto | 15.42 |
| Sindhi | 14.10 |
| Siraiki | 10.53 |
| Urdu | 7.57 |
| Balochi | 3.57 |
| Others | 4.66 |

(Dr Tariq Rehman, Source: Census 2001)

Its population is mainly rural. And beyond doubt educational system is not uniform (madrassa, Urdu medium, cadet system, private elitist school and so on). It has thus speakers of English heading from madrassa system, Cambridge system, government school system and so on. Resultantly phonetic disparity is huge. Communication is done among all types of groups but the best lucid speaking way is called “educated accent”. For many speakers, English is still a foreign language. Only a small number of its speakers learn it naturalistically,

the major part speaks it only academically. There is only Cambridge system or the elitist schools that pay attention to intelligible communication system, the rest pay no heed to speak intelligibly and are spoken with extreme shade of local languages.

Besides learning, proper pronunciation holds major importance for Pakistan because fortunately Pakistan is one of those countries that can easily adopt neutral accent. Economically, different professions namely call center is emerging which requires neutral better English or neutral accent. Lastly Pakistan's strategic worth demands proper speech production and reception.

The objective of the current study is to explore the impact of including pronunciation as compulsory component in a six months language course. It is based on a survey study. The study was carried out at National University of modern languages. The subjects are diploma level students i.e. students having at least intermediate degree. The students' variables show that they came from multi-ethnic and multicultural backgrounds. They represented major areas of Pakistan and major local languages. Majority of them were false beginners. Their age was 18 to 32. The need for learning English was mainly economic i.e. job purpose, and academic. Also they attached English with prestige and aspired to speak more communicatively. The languages they speak are:

- Sindhi (rural)
- Urdu (urban)
- Panjabi (rural and urban)
- Pashto (rural)
- Bulti (rural)
- Shina (rural)

Therefore they had strong tendency to intermingle the pronunciation of their mother tongue with English. Also they had poor articulatory training and many of them only could learn English academically so had least exposure to it. Resultantly a good number of them were unfamiliar with very common English words and their pronunciation.

Methodology and findings

The methodology chosen for this study was class observation and a post test followed by students' interview as feedback. Through the class observation at the beginning of the six months session following problem areas were identified:

The students were confused to understand the discrepancy between spelling (orthography) and pronunciation.

Production: They had very poor articulatory practice.

Reception: They had least practice to understand a "foreign" sound.

Recognition: They could not see the difference between certain sounds.

Phonotactics: Many of them could not speak in connected sounds resulting in stuttering.

STRESSED timed character of English was unknown to them. They had no idea of stress and sentence stress which bears a lot of responsibility of carrying meaning.

Intonation: the movement of pitch for them was very difficult to learn.

Weak syllables posed extreme problem and hindered their perception.

The taxonomy of students' weaknesses was noted down as "generalization data" in class observation. Then it was related to students' variables and through this knowledge students were given targeted lessons of pronunciation and aspects of pronunciation.

It was observed that almost all students spoke syllabic timed English, the students having Panjabi or Urdu spoke fluently but exaggerated certain vowel sounds. Speakers of Sindhi had problems of articulation training and certain consonant and vowel sounds were unintelligible. Consonant/ vowel insertion was observed. Hardly anyone could understand the functions of intonation such as attitudinal, accentual, grammatical and discourse. Because of lack of exposure many words were mispronounced.

Target Study

The lessons were based on the observation that the students pronunciation habits exhibited two kinds of errors: 1 that were mother tongue or regional language. 2: were those that were common to all the speakers that were because of lack of exposure and negligence. It also included commonest mispronounced words.

Keeping in mind that the phonetics of English language is idiosyncratic, the target study was designed in order to lesson the bad pronunciation tendencies. The course was based on six months' duration and included segmental and suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation. It had drills, minimal pair, picking the odd one out, listening to identify, transcription etc. it also had public speaking and enunciation in order to practice the features such as stress. The listening was done to understand the speaker's intentions and moods through intonation variations.

According to the importance of the phonological feature the time was distributed to each one of them. Most of the time was allotted to stress and target individual sounds because both of these areas hampered the intelligibility most. Transcription was taught to them in order to make them able to tally or see the word pronunciation on their own i.e. to make them self reliant for learning pronunciation and to take responsibility of their own learning. It also was taught for the non phonetic and inconsistent character of English orthography.

In reception, the students faced more difficulty because of technical problems and because the English language and its features of assimilation and elision hindered proper understanding of the language.

PRE TEST CLASS OBSERVATIONS**Segmental aspects**

The observation made through class observation showed that:

Speakers of all native languages got confused between "v" and "w" thus unable to understand unknown words such as "VAIN" and

“WANE” or “VISOR” and “WISER”. They maintained strictly the vowel insertion before “s” thus confusing between “SCOLD” and “CALLED”. They spoke certain diphthongs as pure vowels thus speaking “go” as “go” and late as either “lat” or “le:te”. They maintain vowel reduction as in “truth” uttering it with short vowel sound. They insisted on orthographical pronunciation reading “row” (the line) and “row” the quarrel as same. They retroflexed “t” and “d” that sound exaggerated. They shortened the vowel in “burns” and read it as “buns”. They mispronounced the word “heart” as “hurt”. The speakers of native languages such as Sindhi Pashto and Panjabi showed the tendency of fixed segmental pronunciation mistakes. They read “rate” as “rat”, “lord” as “lard”, “said” as “se:d”, “that” with initial “th” as the “th” of “thank”. They confused the vowel of “mate” with the vowel of “mat”. They sounded the “h” of “honor” and uttered “very” with raising the tongue height. The Balochi speakers had a problem in differentiating between “b” and “v” and so on.

Suprasegmental aspects

It was observed that the students had no idea of stress timed language therefore uttered “come for table” and “comfortable” as same. They were unable to see the difference between “content” as adjective and “content” as noun with same word stress. Besides, only few of the students could understand the function of contrastive stress which they learned quite easily. They could not see the stress shift according to words e.g. in photo-photography. The students were appreciated to speak stress timed rhythm of English. Some native language speakers had the tendency to often stress the second syllable of the word without knowing its effect e.g. important. The features of assimilation, elision and intonation which carry the most burden of intelligibility were unknown to the students.

The changes

It was observed that the lessons proved to be successful. The lessons were also based on the consideration that the areas that are most important for improving intelligibility must be included. Most importantly it was kept in mind that imitating the native British or

Native American was not the purpose because according to students' requirement intelligibility was the actual goal. At the same time the students were encouraged to adopt RP or American way of pronunciation. Their accent reduction was part of the read aloud exercises.

Post Test Observation

It was observed through a "loud reading" post test that following changes have occurred to the subjects:

Though they still make mistakes such as saying "tha" before vowels, they can auto correct. Most of the students have worked on stress quite fairly for example they can utter and tell the stress pattern of "iTALian", speGHETi and chiNESE. They maintained the balance between sense groups and rhythmic groups. Some students have improved in intonation and emphasis while some eager students have improved laterally. The students' feedback was taken after the post test. It was a survey questionnaire. In the answer to the question: "What were your problems in learning to pronounce properly?"

They mentioned the following areas:

Recognizing the stress pattern, diphthongs and triphthongs, sound-spelling discrepancy, little or no exposure and problems in recognizing the difference in individual sounds.

In the answer to the question that: "Did pronunciation learning help your ability to listen to English accurately?"

The answers were the following:

It helped a lot in pronouncing the words that were unknown to me.

Now I can easily understand wrong pronunciation and am able to correct it.

It gave us ability to understand native speakers too.

I think without pronunciation practice we cannot understand listening.

Right pronunciation means understanding the right meaning of words.

It made me able to correct wrong individual sound pronunciation.

It gave ability to recognize words.

The answer to the question if they are able to read phonetic transcription, 100% students said “yes”.

To the question if they are able to identify a sound that is not English, 69% students said “yes” and 31% said “no.”

They were also asked while reading, what aspect they concentrated on most. Following are the replies:

1. “I have concentrated on words, the sense that the speaker is telling a story.”
2. Pronunciation: the feeling that I do not speak any thing in a wrong way.”
3. “The basic theme of the story and the rise and fall of a sentence.”
4. “I can properly pronounce a word.”
5. I concentrated on conveying the proper feelings of the mother for her daughter.”
6. Expressions, stress and the sounds.
7. Weak forms and strong forms of syllables.
8. Previously, I used to listen words and used to pronounce them like mimicking, but now I pronounce them what is the main structure behind it i.e. the way they are. I am able to implement them.”

It can be made out from the above mentioned result that students have successful improvement in their sense of accurate pronunciation. They can self correct and have a good feel for enunciation. Though their mother tongue interferes at certain levels and points, their overall performance has improved.

Recommendations

There are several points to be kept in mind:

The students especially false beginners should not be bothered about native like accent since it is not their sole need.

The students should not be expected to follow the aspects such as assimilation and elision since it is the aspect of careless speech.

The most defective points that result in a lot of misunderstanding such as vowel reduction, raising a lowered vowel, lengthen a vowel unnecessarily they must be corrected. (The question of QUANTITY AND QUALITY of vowels). (Jennifer Jenkins, 2000)

Much emphasis should be laid on stress timed quality of English. Because speaking English with regional or strong mother tongue interference is surely considered substandard.

/r/ as being the distinction of rhotic and non rhotic should be avoided because it is very confusing and does not really hamper intelligibility.

Similarly allophonic variations in sounds such a non aspirated /p/ or the distinction between dark and clear /l/ should be overlooked.

In order to reduce mother tongue accent, intonation should be practiced which is life blood of emotions.

Tongue twisters and minimal pairs should be normal exercise for improving bad articulators.

It is seen throughout the semester that pronunciation learning and speaking and listening skills make best integration. In listening, the students can listen for practical manifestation of pronunciation sub-skill in different corpus ranging from informal speedy language to formal declamation style. In speaking, however, the concentration on fluency hampered the pronunciation accuracy. The gap is filled if the pronunciation component becomes the integral part of assessment criteria.

There must be awareness of importance of function words.

Teaching phonetic transcription is also of great help. Gomes de Matos (2002) listed transcription reading skills as one of the basic abilities that every foreign language learner should master and certainly most books for EFL learners include phonemic symbols in vocabulary sections. According to Wells (1996), phonemic transcription provides an intermediate stage which should make learners more aware of the phonemic level of language. Improved

phonemic awareness in turn is assumed to aid learners' pronunciation skills.

Conclusion

Through more communicative methods and extensive practice pronunciation should be taught. It should be compulsory so as the students of multi ethnic backgrounds may overcome the difficulty in learning right kind of pronunciation and participate in the vast English language speaking scenario. It is essential to concentrate on the matters that most impede intelligibility and fluency and confidence must be encouraged. It should not be ignored that there may be the need to interact with NSs (native speakers) so the need to educate the NNSs (non native speakers) of English is necessary. And by comprehensive study the difficulty areas can be addressed. (Jenkins, 2000)

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