RETHINKING THE TEACHING OF PRONUNCIATION IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

Ramesh Nair
Rajasegaran Krishnasamy
Geraldine de Mello
Universiti Teknologi MARA

ABSTRACT

Being able to speak English includes a number of skills, involving vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics, and so on. It can be argued that by far, the most important of these skills is pronunciation. Despite having a good grasp of vocabulary and the grammatical rules of the English language, speakers would be unintelligible if they had poor pronunciation. Though pronunciation is an aspect of language that is difficult to acquire, the reality is that 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 imperialism. This paper begins by discussing these views and will then outline the current status of pronunciation teaching from the viewpoint of several experienced English language teachers. Some information regarding the nature of second language pronunciation and the needs of the ESL teacher for teaching pronunciation, with particular focus on material selection and teaching methodology will be provided. Finally, this paper makes a number of recommendations as to how the teaching of pronunciation can be made more effective in the ESL classroom.

Introduction

Fraser (2000a:1) observes that many learners of English as a second language have major difficulties*f* with English pronunciation even after years of learning the language. This often results in them facing difficulties in areas such as finding employment. Hinofotis and Baily (1980:124-5), cited in Okita (1999), notes that up to a certain proficiency standard, the fault which most severely impairs the communication process in EFL/ESL learners is pronunciation*f*, not vocabulary or grammar. This is true despite the fact that research by the likes of Davis (1999), for example, reveals that an area of concern and indeed one of the top priorities of ESL students after completing elementary English courses is pronunciation.

It is important at this point in time to make a distinction between speaking and pronunciation as it is sometimes wrongly applied interchangeably. Simply put,

pronunciation is viewed as a sub-skill of speaking. Fraser (2000a:7) explains that being able to speak English includes a number of sub-skills, of which pronunciation is by far the most important*f* (other sub-skills of speaking include vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatics). She argues that with good pronunciation, a speaker is intelligible despite other errors; with poor pronunciation, a speaker can be very difficult to understand, despite accuracy in other areas*f* (Fraser, 2000a:7). Despite this, the teaching of pronunciation remains largely neglected in the field of English language teaching.

Teaching Pronunciation: A Brief History
In discussing the importance of pronunciation activities, Murphy (1991), cited in Hall (1997), describes them as vital in providing the much needed learning experiences to develop accurate control over the sound system within a language. While pronunciation activities were stressed in some decades, they took a back seat in others depending on the teaching method that was popular during that particular time.

Florez (1998) notes that in the grammar-translation method of the past, pronunciation was almost irrelevant and therefore, seldom taught. Then in the 1950s and 1960s, pronunciation took centre-stage with the introduction of the audio-lingual method. This was a method that emphasised the behaviouristic drilling of sound contrasts and word pairs, and the articulation of individual sounds. However, the drawback to this method was the failure to recognise the need to focus on rhythm and intonation, the construction of useful sentences, or the practice of realistic conversations*f* (Fraser, 2000a:32). Instead, learners spent hours repeating sounds and sound combinations in the language laboratory.

With the development of the communicative method in the 1970s, Fraser (2000a) and Bray (1995) observe that pronunciation was downplayed to disassociate itself with any link to the drilling practices of the audio-lingual method. It appeared to many teachers then that they had to make a choice. They could either teach about articulatory phonetics, with pictures of the human mouth and tongue in various positions*f* or they could choose not to offer any explicit instruction in English phonology at all*f* (Bray, 1995:2). As a result, there appeared to be no avenue for the teaching of pronunciation within the communicative method. As the communicative method grew popular within many ESL communities, little focus was given to training would-be teachers in the finer points of teaching pronunciation.

Fraser (2000a:32) notes that many ESL teachers today struggle with teaching pronunciation, and conclude that their training gave them an insufficient basis to work from*f*. As part of a preliminary investigation, we interviewed three teacher

trainers to learn of how trainee teachers in Malaysia were being prepared for teaching pronunciation. The interviews revealed that even today, little is done in preparing teachers for teaching pronunciation even though our review of literature reveals that over the last ten years or more, there has been a gradual increase in interest in pronunciation, as people acknowledge the importance of pronunciation to learners experience of their new language, and to their progress in other aspects of language learning.

With the emergence of more holistic, communicative methods and approaches to ESL instruction today, calls are being made for pronunciation to be addressed within the context of real communication. In this respect, Morley (1991), cited in Otlowski (1998), argues that ESL students can expect to master the pronunciation of English if pronunciation lessons are made an integral part of the oral communication class.

Research Procedure

Our aim in this paper was to gather a group of experienced English language instructors to openly and frankly discuss current practices with regard to the teaching of pronunciation in Malaysian schools and also at institutions of higher learning. Twelve ESL instructors participated in our discussion that was held during a single one and a half hour session. They were all acquaintances and colleagues of the researchers and represented a diverse group in terms of their teaching experience, academic qualifications, and personal teaching philosophy. The most experienced was a secondary school teacher with over 30 years of teaching experience while the least experienced was a primary school teacher who had 3 years of teaching experience. In terms of qualifications, they ranged from college diploma holders to those with masters degrees. The three researchers served as mediators during the discussion.

Findings

The following sections report on the discussion that took place with the participants on issues related to the teaching of pronunciation. Conclusions and recommendations are also made based on what was discussed.

ESL Teachers and the Teaching of Pronunciation

The discussion began with our request for the participants to reflect on their teaching experiences at schools and university. One of the first things that was quickly admitted was how poorly equipped they were for teaching pronunciation. Looking back at the training they received to become ESL teachers at teacher training colleges

and university, the participants recalled lessons on phonology. They described the lessons as having been designed to aid them, as teachers, to interpret the phonetic transcriptions that were found in advanced dictionaries and then to transcribe isolated words and sentences into phonetic symbols. In that way, the phonology lessons were essentially aimed at helping would be teachers to improve their proficiency in the English language. However, very little attention was on how to teach pronunciation. The only thing that came to the minds of the participants was the language drills that involved the use of minimal pairs.

The discussion then turned to what Fraser (2002) describes as false reasons *f* often cited by teachers for not teaching pronunciation. The mediators basically read out Fraser s (2002) list of false reasons and requested feedback from the participants.

Fraser (2002) lists several false reasons cited by ESL teachers for not prioritising pronunciation:

1. *Pronunciation is a talent and cannot be taught.*
All the participants, with the exception of one, shared the same opinion on this point. They contended that while it was true that ESL learners would face specific problems with certain sounds in the English language because of the absence of such sounds in their mother tongue, they were confident that pronunciation could be taught if a concerted effort was made. However, another participant, a young teacher from an urban primary school had a different view. She was confident that her students were learning pronunciation all the time by listening to her as she serves as the model for learning how words should be pronounced. Being students in an urban environment, she was confident that her students were also learning pronunciation from their environment which including English programmes on television and radio. She generally felt that there was little need for a conscious effort to teach pronunciation.

2. *Students don't like to speak out in class*
The participants opined that pronunciation can only improve if the learners used the language. However, they stressed that practice with pronunciation needed to occur within a communicative context in which language use appeared in a realistic environment. This conclusion was drawn after a lengthy discussion on the usefulness of practices with pronunciation drills that they felt students could not connect with. Therefore, they concluded that pronunciation had to form an integral part of speaking activities in the ESL classroom and it needed to be packaged in a way that offers encouragement and guidance.

3. Correcting is intrusive

While the teachers from primary schools did say that correcting their students pronunciation was an important part of teaching them English, it was interesting to note that teachers of students in upper secondary classes and also at universities often chose not to draw attention to flaws in pronunciation. They felt that correcting pronunciation would only frustrate their students more. The discussion then led to the debate on the need to follow standards with respect to pronunciation. Was there, for example, a need to follow standard pronunciation spelled out by native speakers of English? Some participants felt that making such demands of ESL learners amounted to discrimination on the basis of accent. What was important was that teachers ensure that their students are generally able to speak in a way that is easy for others to understand, though not necessarily like a native speaker. One participant felt that teachers had to make an effort to correct the pronunciation of their students but cautioned that it had to be done in a respectful and positive way. Ignoring problems with pronunciation was not the answer to boosting the confidence of students to speak in English.

4. There isn't enough time

On this point, the participants unanimously agreed. They concluded that the curricula and assessment tools in primary, secondary and even at institutions of higher learning downplayed pronunciation. One teacher who teaches in a national-type Chinese primary school in a small town acknowledged that pronunciation was indeed a problem for her students. However, completing what was in the syllabus was already a daunting task and introducing her young students to phonetics would only serve to make the learning of English more stressful for them.

The participants remained divided on the question of whether teaching pronunciation would necessarily take too much extra time. Only 3 participants felt that pronunciation could be integrated into the current ESL syllabus without requiring much extra time.

5. We don't know how (most likely the real reason)

The participants admitted that they avoided teaching pronunciation because they did not know how to teach pronunciation effectively. The participants were given the findings of a study in Australia by Macdonald (2002) which revealed that 20% of teachers admitted to not liking to teach pronunciation, 14% considered themselves not good at teaching pronunciation, and nearly 40% said they did not teach it enough to meet the needs of their students (for various reasons). When commenting on this finding, the participants found it interesting that pronunciation was a problem

even in a country where English was a native language because ESL learners there should actually have access to a better environment for mastering this skill. It was concluded that the lesson for ESL teachers in Malaysian then was that there had to be a concerted effort to teach pronunciation if we are genuine about our desire to help our ESL learners with mastering the language.

The researchers also studied the curriculum specifications for the teaching of English in primary and secondary schools and found that pronunciation was included under the topic of Sound System*f* with specific sounds being highlighted for specific years. When this observation was made during the discussion with the participants, they admitted that this was largely ignored in the classroom. The general assumption was that if a student was fairly good in English, then he or she would most likely have little or no problems with pronunciation. In the case of weak students, pronunciation was the least of the teachers concern because they needed to focus on the more important*f* aspects of language such as grammar, reading and writing.

We were not alone with respect to ignoring the teaching of pronunciation. Fraser (2000b:4) posits that in the case of Australia, and many other countries, many ESL instructors lack the confidence to teach pronunciation, and do not give it as much class time as it needs*f*.

Standing Against Linguistic Imperialism?

An issue that often cropped up during our discussion with the participants was accent. We discussed the models that the instructors used in the classroom for teaching pronunciation. The participants were divided on this issue. While some talked of Standard Malaysian English*f* and the accent that went with it, others made references to British English*f* or RP. One instructor from an institution of higher learning remarked how she has had some students in the past who appeared to adapt an American accent*f* which she was uncomfortable with but never corrected ˘ because there was nothing to correct. The teachers from the Chinese, Tamil and rural primary schools were particularly critical of their students accent that they felt was greatly affected by their mother-tongue. However, they maintained that there was no need today to look towards British*f* or American*f* English as the standard variety*f* that Malaysians spoke could serve as a model for Malaysian students.

We cannot evade the issue of linguistic imperialism when we address the issue of accent. Modiano (2001:339) cautions language instructors from becoming practicing linguistic imperialists*f* who could have a negative impact on the cultural integrity*f* of the learner. As an example of linguistic imperialism, he refers to teachers insisting on near-native proficiency from ESL learners, including encouraging the use of RP as a model for pronunciation*f* (Modiano, 2001:340). Supporting this view, Keys and Walker

(2002:298) submit that because of the widespread use of English in the world, the native speaker of English can no longer be considered the sole or superior reference*f*. In fact, Keys and Walker (2002) suggest that the current standard Native Speaker (NS) model such as RP does do a lot of harm. To support their point, they cite one study in which NNS (non-native speaker) teachers admitted to avoiding pronunciation teaching because of a sense of inadequacy with respect to their own accent, and the as yet unattained (and for many unattainable) NS standard (Keys and Walker, 2002).

However, the stand a teacher takes with respect to accent could in one way be viewed as an excuse for not teaching pronunciation. It certainly takes a load off teachers by arguing that an accent is something everyone has, and perhaps everyone has a right to. However, the danger is blaming everything on accent. For example, we contend that ignoring an ESL learner s inability to making a distinction between the words three*f* and tree*f* and simply saying that one can figure it out in context would be wrong. As ESL teachers, we owe it to our students to help them with pronunciation problems that affect meaning.

We need to make a clear distinction between accent*f* and poor pronunciation*f* and we need to be equipped to handle such problems. Someone with a foreign accent can speak the language perfectly intelligibly, and carry on all kinds of communication without hindrance. All the participants in our discussion group were unanimous in agreeing that we have moved away from attempting to get our students to achieve native-like pronunciation*f*. The consensus was that we needed to produce students who could communicate effectively on a global platform. Therefore, our desired aim should be to design lessons that promote what Morley (1991:489), cited in Hall (1997), describes as reasonably intelligible pronunciation*f* so that learners are bestowed communicative empowerment*f*.

We need however to be careful in defining reasonably intelligible pronunciation*f*. Keys and Walker (2002:298) submit that if a strong accent essentially means unintelligible*f*, regardless of the listener s background, then we have a problem. Referring to the teaching of English in Nigerian schools, Ufomata (1996) stresses that the accent taught in schools should be one that enjoys maximal social acceptability within the country, and which is internationally intelligible. Ufomata (1996) also stresses the need to keep accents of English spoken all over the world similar as failure to do so would defeat one of the major advantages of acquiring an additional language. Towards this end, core intelligibility features should be identified and focused upon so that the various accents remain mutually intelligible (Ufomata, 1990a, cited in Ufomata, 1996).

In relation to mutually intelligible pronunciation, Keys and Walker (2002) discuss the development of the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) which is or rather will be the result

of empirical data that emerges from small or large-scale investigations into actual language use, with the focus on two speakers who use English as an L2. They submit that LFC is not an end-point, but a solid foundation that will serve as an alternative for learners who have to attempt to reach the unattainable goal of native speaker (NS) standards.

> *LFC does not legislate for language change, and it is not trying to replace NS accents. Rather, it is an indication of the minimum requirements for international intelligibility, whether between two L2 users of English, or between an L2 and L1 user. Further research will fine-tune the key elements of the LFC, whilst local knowledge will almost certainly generate a far more detailed interpretation of the system for a given student's L1.*

<div align="right">Keys and Walker (2002:299)</div>

For the LFC to become a reality, research projects are needed to gather data on the spontaneous speech of English L2 ˘ English L2 interactions taking place over time and teachers, for example, can play a very important role in recording classroom exchanges between students as a source of data.

In terms of intelligible pronunciation, research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) indicates a need to develop an awareness of the importance of suprasegmentals in conveying meaning.

Segmental and Suprasegmental Features

Florez (1998) defines segmentals as the basic inventory of distinctive sounds and the way that they combine to form a spoken language*f*. She notes that pronunciation instruction has often concentrated on the mastery of segmentals through discrimination and production of target sounds via drills. Suprasegmentals on the other hand, transcend the level of individual sound production, extend across segmentals and are often produced unconsciously by native speakers*f* (Florez, 1998).

Hall (1997) contends that one cannot deny the importance of phonemic discrimination but goes on to cite several researchers who contend that suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm and intonation are if anything, more important than segmental features. Wong (1993:45), cited in Okita (1999), reminds us that the most relevant features of pronunciation ˘ stress, rhythm, and intonation ˘ play a greater role in English communication than the individual sounds themselves. Suprasegmentals include the following:

- Stress ˘ a combination of length, loudness, and pitch applied to syllables in a word

- Rhythm ˘ the regular patterned beat of stressed and unstressed syllables and pauses
- Adjustments in connected speech-modifications of sounds within and between words in streams of speech
- Prominence ˘speaker s act of highlighting words to emphasise meaning or intent
- Intonation ˘ the rising and falling of voice pitch across phrases and sentences

McCarthy (1991) observes that pronunciation teaching in the past has drawn on the works of linguists who have been able to segment the sounds of language into discrete items called phonemes*ƒ* which, when used in constructing words, produce meaningful contrasts with other words*ƒ*. Fraser (2000a:11) describes it as unfortunate*ƒ* when segmental and suprasegmental features of pronunciation are separated and cautions that it is not the way to go when taking a communicative approach to teaching pronunciation.

Hall (1997) cites a study by Evans (1993) in which Japanese learners benefited from suprasegmental practice through marking texts for thought groups, shifting emphasis in sentences, and changing the moods of scripts by exploring different intonational patterns*ƒ*. Lambacher (1999:138) adds to this point and submits that with communicative ability (and not native-like pronunciation) as the main goal of learning, the prevailing view is that improvement in the prosodic features has a closer correlation with improved intelligibility of L2 learners.*ƒ*

Recommendations

Fraser (2002) opines that rethinking the way we teach pronunciation is challenging as it involves questioning obvious facts about speech and pronunciation.*ƒ* In looking at recommendations for teaching pronunciation, we will outline them within the context of the communicative method of teaching English that is employed in most ESL classrooms around the world today.

Curriculum Design

Referring to curriculum and syllabus designs, Morley (1998), cited in Florez (1998), submits that ESL programs should start by establishing long range oral communication goals and objectives*ƒ* that help identify pronunciation needs as well as speech functions and the contexts in which they might occur. Florez (1998) adds that these goals and objectives should be realistic, aiming for functional intelligibility (ability to make oneself relatively easily understood), functional communicability (ability to meet the communication needs one faces), and enhanced self-

confidence in use*ƒ* and they should be the result of a careful analysis and description of the learners needs.

Focus on the Suprasegmentals

Bray (1995:3) observes that beginning in the late 1970s, several teachers/theorists took a stand by suggesting that at a very basic level if communicative competence was the goal of language learning, then it would have as one of its essential components, intelligible pronunciation. Hence, intelligibility rather than the native-like competence valued in traditional approaches became the goal of phonological instruction. Therefore, teaching speech from the perspective of suprasegmentals seems indispensable within the communicative approach to teaching ESL. However, Bray (1995:3) adds that although many theorist began to make a case for the role of suprasegmental phonology in communication on paper, many teachers continue with a limited conception of the role of explicit phonological instruction in the language classroom*ƒ*. We therefore submit that curriculum and syllabus designers need to focus on the suprasegmental features of pronunciation.

In making their case for emphasis in teaching rhythm to ESL learners in China for example, Chen *et al.* (1996) discovered that Chinese students were not aware of the difference between the rhythm of the syllable-timed Chinese language and the stress timed English language and therefore drawing their attention to this suprasegmental feature helped significantly in improving their communicative ability.

Academic Research and Classroom Experiments

Fraser (2000b:5) notes that there is currently a dearth of reliable research-based information about what works and what doesn t in pronunciation teaching.*ƒ* She adds therefore that there is a need to increase the amount of academic research on these topics, as well as to increase the research orientation of teachers, and their opportunities to contribute to serious research because teachers are in a position to provide essential information to linguistics*ƒ* (Fraser, 2000b:5). One particular area that needs attention is in the area of assessing ESL pronunciation. Without reliable assessment and diagnosis tools, it is very hard to quantify the effectiveness of methods or materials and get beyond opinion-based debate.

Teachers are always experimenting with a variety of teaching methods and adapt, improvise and even improve on previous techniques. This tradition has to continue especially in relation to teaching pronunciation. Methods that have been tried and tested should be converted into research papers that can be shared with others. Through such methods, Bray (1995) for example describes the use of limericks in the ESL classroom and provides an effective technique for using

limericks to help address problems related to suprasegmental features such as stressed, unstressed, and stress-timed rhythm.

Chen *et al.* (1996) present several techniques and tools for teaching word rhythm including the use of visual effects for teaching word stress, auditory techniques such as clapping to differentiate between stressed and unstressed syllables, the use of rubber bands as a visual image for length variation in syllables and stress matching games.

Makarova (1996) addresses the question of teaching pronunciation to large groups of students when ideally it requires close individual interaction between teacher and students. She contends that it is possible to get feedback from large number of students and enhance student motivation by applying some less traditional techniques like using phoneme cards, pronunciation-based quiz games, utilising sign language*f* and employing materials prepared by students such as tongue twisters and limericks.

Methods and Materials Development

Fraser (2000a:2) posits that ESL teachers need to be provided with courses and materials to help them improve their effectiveness in teaching pronunciation.*f* She adds that there is also a need for high quality, effective materials, especially computer-based materials with audio demonstrations, for learners of ESL pronunciation, both for self-access and for use in classes where the teacher needs support of this kind.*f*

Fraser (2000a:34) opines that teacher training and professional development need to take into account developments in the area of second language phonology driven partly by an interest in psycholinguistics and theory of speech, and partly by a need to know more about how to teach pronunciation to learners of a second language.*f* Teachers need a greater appreciation of the pronunciation difficulties faced by learners of ESL and the reasons for these difficulties, and a simple framework for understanding the situation of the second language learner.

Lambacher (1999:138) notes that research in pronunciation has revealed that difficult L2 contrasts (not just suprasegmentals) can interfere with intelligibility and a need therefore exists within the pronunciation curriculum to address the problems of L2 learners in identifying and producing difficult L2 speech contrasts.*f* Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) for pronunciation can be an effective tool as it provides electronic visual feedback (EVF), which can help meet this essential need by showing the exact sound features that learners produce and thereby drawing attention to changes that they need to make*f* (Lambacher, 1999:138).

Teacher Training

Fraser (2002) notes that it is hardly surprising that so many teachers are not confident with teaching pronunciation because training that is available often does not cover the most essential aspects of knowledge about speech and pronunciation relevant to teaching adult ESL learners.

Most teachers have been equipped with information about English phonemics: the IPA symbols, the articulation of English phonemes and sometimes with some basic English intonation patterns. However, what is much more useful is some understanding of the psycholinguistics of speech perception and production, and the effects of a person s native language and literacy on their interpretation of speech (Fraser, 2002).

Conclusion

The teaching of pronunciation has been addressed within a broad framework in this paper. We have established that pronunciation can be one of the most difficult parts for a language learner to master and one of the least favourite topics for teachers to address in the classroom. Nevertheless, we contend that with careful preparation and integration, pronunciation can play an important role in supporting the learners overall communicative power.

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