A Call for Teaching Pronunciation in Iranian Schools

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Abstract

Teaching pronunciation is one of the most complicated but significant features of EFL and ESL teaching. However, although pronunciation is one of the most noticeable features of a person’s speech, it is not explicitly taught. Almost all English language teachers get students to study grammar and vocabulary, yet some of these same teachers make little attempt to teach pronunciation in any overt way and give attention to it in passing (Harmer, 2001). Most teachers do not provide instruction at all and those few that do generally adopt a hit or miss approach, relying on materials that lack grounding and the desired results (Fraser, 2002).

Iranian English teachers are no exception. Despite the importance of pronunciation, the reality is that in many Iranian English language classrooms, little attention is paid to teaching pronunciation. That is because teaching pronunciation involves a variety of challenges, some of which are accounted for in the present article.

The study provides an overview of the status of pronunciation teaching in EFL contexts. It aims at reviewing past and present perspectives on pronunciation teaching. It summarizes the background of pronunciation teaching, emphasizes the need for incorporating pronunciation into foreign language classes because of the importance of the pronunciation as a key to effective communication, and outlines some of the procedures that have been suggested for teaching pronunciation, taking into account present-day views in pronunciation pedagogy.

Keywords:
Pronunciation teaching, intelligibility, segmentals, suprasegmentals, ELT Teachers

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Introduction

Learning English includes learning a number of skills, involving vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics, and so on, and to communicate effectively, language learners need to become proficient in using the semantic, syntactic, morphological and phonological elements of the language being learnt (Hebert, 2002). One of these kill, and perhaps one of the most important is pronunciation, because, despite having a good command of vocabulary and the grammar of the English language, speakers will be unintelligible if they have poor pronunciation. Many learners of English as a second language have major difficulties with English pronunciation, often even after years of English lessons (see Fraser, 2000).

When talking about pronunciation in language learning we mean the production and perception of significant sounds of the language in order to achieve meaning in contexts of language use (Seidlhofer, 2001). According to Seidlhofer (2001), this comprises the production and perception of segmental sounds, of stressed and unstressed syllables, and of 'speech melody', or intonation.

In addition, Eckman, et.al. (2003) assume that, in order to learn a target language, the second language learner must acquire a lexicon (a set of phonemes, morphemes, and words) along with a way of combining the lexical items into larger utterances, and pronouncing them.

Although pronunciation is one of the most noticeable features of a person’s speech, often it is not explicitly taught. According to Harmer (2001), almost all English language teachers get students to study grammar and vocabulary, yet some of these same teachers make little attempt to teach pronunciation in any overt way and give attention to it in passing. Most teachers do not provide instruction at all and those few that do generally adopt a hit or miss approach, relying on materials that lack grounding and the desired results (Fraser, 2002).

Iranian English teachers are no exception. Despite the importance of pronunciation, the reality is that in many Iranian English language classrooms, little attention is paid to teaching pronunciation. That is because teaching pronunciation involves a variety of challenges. For example, Gilbert (2008) argues that teachers often find that they do not have enough time in class to give proper attention to this aspect of English instruction. Gilbert Further states that, when they do find the time to address pronunciation, the instruction often amounts to the presentation and practice of a series of boring and seemingly unrelated topics. Drilling sounds over and over again (e.g., minimal pair work) often leads to discouraging results, and discouraged students and teachers end up wanting to avoid pronunciation altogether (Gilbert, 2008). Another reason, in our opinion, is that Iranian EFL teachers are not provided with suitable course books and materials that help them improve their pronunciation teaching, whereas according to Fraser (2000) teachers need to be provided with materials to help them improve their effectiveness in teaching pronunciation. Hayati (2010) argues that the English textbooks used in Iranian High Schools suffer from shortcomings in the sequence of presentation of materials, text selection, pronunciation exercises, etc. As a result most of Iranian teachers do not prioritize pronunciation instruction in their classes. Only 5 percent of
the teachers who participated in Dahmardeh (2009) regarded teaching phonetic symbols and pronunciation as the main purpose and emphasis of the textbooks.

In short, even though pronunciation is rarely taught in the foreign language classroom beyond the initial introduction to the language’s sound system in the early stages of instruction, it is one of the most difficult challenges that Iranian students face, and needs reappraisal by English teachers.

1-Background

Views on teaching pronunciation changed dramatically over the last half of the twentieth century (Brown, 2001). A review of the way pronunciation has been treated in different approaches and methods reveals that while pronunciation was stressed in some decades, it took a back seat in others depending on the teaching method that was popular during that particular time (see Richards & Rodgers, 2001 & Silveira, 2002).

During the domination of grammar translation method reading and writing and, consequently, grammar and vocabulary were emphasized, but speaking and listening were neglected, and pronunciation received virtually no attention (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). The Reform Movement argued for the primacy of the spoken language over the written language and believed that its primacy should be reflected in an oral-based language teaching methodology. The application of the Reform Movement led to the development of oral-based language teaching methods that elevated pronunciation to the most important area in the language curriculum and employed a variety of techniques to develop students’ pronunciation skills.

The Direct Method and the Naturalistic Approaches regarded the process of learning a L2 as being the same as that of acquiring a L1. Thus, by listening to an appropriate model, L2 learners master the pronunciation. Consequently, pronunciation teaching consisted of imitating a model through repetition, and the imitation could start after an initial “silent period”, during which the learner listens to L2 samples, but was not required to speak.

Audiolingualism and the Oral Approach equally emphasized pronunciation teaching from the start. The main contribution to classroom methodology was the concept of phonemic contrasts, which were believed to contribute to improve learners’ perception and production. The methodology exploited the use of minimal pair drills and the imitation of appropriate models. Besides, learners received some form of phonetic information to help them with the acquisition of the pronunciation component.

After a period of time when pronunciation occupied a relevant place in the language curriculum, it practically disappeared with the development of the Cognitive Approach. This was justified by the belief that language is governed by rules, thus habit formation cannot contribute to L2 acquisition. The conclusion was that teaching pronunciation was a waste of time, since it cannot be learnt (Silveira, 2002).
The pronunciation component reappeared in the language curriculum with the Silent Way approach. Again, pronunciation was taught from the first levels, with the help of tools such as pointers, charts and colorful rods. It was believed that explicit instruction improved pronunciation accuracy.

Pronunciation was still important for the Community Language Learning approach. The methodology followed many steps. The learners decided on the pronunciation aspects in which they wanted further practice and used the instructor as a resource that could be asked to provide data for repetition drills as many times as the learners think necessary.

Finally, the Communicative Approach acknowledges the importance of the pronunciation component. However, it aims at intelligible pronunciation, rather than total accuracy. It states that traditional methods of pronunciation teaching are incompatible with the notion that language teaching should be communication-oriented. Despite recognizing the importance of pronunciation teaching, the Communicative Approach followers tended to ignore it, or focus on the suprasegmentals for some time (Silveira, 2002).

At present, the importance of segmentals and suprasegmentals in the teaching of intelligible pronunciation is recognized. Thus, pronunciation tasks should appeal to all kinds of learners and aim at an interaction between fluency and accuracy (Silveira, 2002). According to Silveira (2002) the methodology is still under constant development, and although the Communicative Approach has recognized the necessity of teaching pronunciation, teachers and material developers who follow this approach have found it difficult to incorporate the communicative feature in the teaching of pronunciation.

2-Should we teach pronunciation?

The usefulness of teaching pronunciation is a widely debated subject in the language teaching context. As mentioned above, 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.

The traditional position of SLA researchers has been that instruction does not lead to native-like levels of ultimate attainment in terms of phonology, and some authors believe that teachers can do little to influence the natural course of English phonological development with its often less than satisfactory results. According to Silveira (2002), pronunciation instruction was absent from the second/foreign language (L2) classroom for a long time due to the conventional beliefs that pronunciation is not important, cannot be taught, and can be “picked up” by learners. Jones (1997) believes that arguments against the explicit teaching of pronunciation rely on two basic assumptions about the acquisition of second language phonology: first, based on the critical period hypothesis, claims that it is virtually impossible for adults to acquire native-like pronunciation in a foreign language; and the second, arising primarily from the work of Krashen, insists that pronunciation is an acquired skill and that focused instruction is at best useless and at worst detrimental.
Pica (1994), too, expresses her pessimistic stance on the teaching of pronunciation. Fraser (2002) lists several false reasons cited by ESL teachers for not prioritizing pronunciation including:

1. Pronunciation is a talent and cannot be taught.
2. Students don’t like to speak out in class
3. Correcting is intrusive
4. There isn’t enough time
5. We don’t know how to teach it (most likely the real reason)

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) 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 (cited in Otlowski, 1998).

Jenkins (2004) cites Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996), Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994), and Morley (1994) who have taken recent research into consideration and aim to promote an awareness of the larger roles pronunciation plays in communication: its influence on speakers’ success (or otherwise) in conveying their meaning in specific contexts, its links with their sense of identity, its signaling of their group memberships, the pronunciation choices available to learners, and the like.

In addition, some believe that teaching can play an important role in helping learners develop ways of improving their pronunciation and shaping their attitude toward the importance of pronunciation (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Harmer (2001) argues that teaching pronunciation not only makes students aware of different sounds and sound features (and what these mean), but also can improve their speaking immeasurably. He also believes that concentrating on sounds, showing where they are made in the mouth, making students aware where words should be stressed- all these things give them extra information about spoken English and help them achieve the goal of improved comprehension and intelligibility. Celce-Murcia and Goodwin (1991) believe that pronunciation can and should be taught at any level.

2-1 What does teaching pronunciation involve?

In the literature, some elements have been recommended to be included in teaching pronunciation. Hebert (2002), for example, believes that learners benefit from having some understanding of the pedagogical basis of classroom activities. Most learners understand the need for a focus on grammatical structure, lexis and particular areas; Hence, Hebert (2002) acknowledges the need to explain the role phonology plays in ESL for the learners, as well. According to Hebert (2002), by introducing learners to some of the prosodic features of English, learners can understand the reasons for activities in the classroom.
In addition, pronunciation teaching methods should more fully address the issues of motivation and exposure by creating awareness of the importance of pronunciation and providing more exposure to input from native speakers (Jones, 1997). It seems that a motivating environment in the pronunciation classroom depends on working with issues that learners might recognize as being important to improve their pronunciation (Silveira, 2002).

In discussing the importance of pronunciation activities, Murphy (1991), describes them as vital in providing the much needed learning experiences to develop accurate control over the sound system within a language (cited in Hall, 1997).

McDonough and Shaw (2003), believe that some of the aspects of pronunciation and the English sound system that a teacher can attend to them are ‘bottom up, dealing with forming and learning sounds as correctly as possible; others are 'top down', where a learner's pronunciation is part of broader communicative approach. They further state that there is a balance between accuracy on the one hand and intelligibility on the other. Brown (2001), too, believes that current approaches to pronunciation take a top-down approach in which the most relevant features of pronunciation—stress, rhythm, and intonation—are given a high priority, rather than attempting only to build a learner’s articulatory competence from the bottom up, and simply as the mastery of a list of phonemes and allophones.

Ur (1996), and McDonough and Shaw (2003) believe that teaching pronunciation may include:

- The sounds of the language, or phonology
- Stress and rhythm
- Intonation
- The relationship between sound and spelling (McDonough & Shaw, 2003)

One of the most prominent features of a language’s sound system is its collection of sounds. Linguists refer to this collection of consonants and vowels as the segmental aspect of language. When we teach sounds, we want students not only to speak correctly but also to recognize sound and spelling correspondence. We want them to be able to discriminate between similar-sounding phonemes (Harmer, 2007). According to Ur (1996) it is useful to list and define sounds, or phonemes, of the language by writing them down using phonetic representations.

Harmer (2001), too, advocates the using of phonemic symbols. He believes that one of the reasons for the use of phonemic symbols is that dictionaries usually give the pronunciation of their words in phonemic symbols, and if students can read these symbols they can know how the word is said even without having to hear it. Also, when both teacher and students know the symbol it is easier to explain what mistake has occurred and why it has happened (Harmer, 2001).

In addition to the sound inventory, languages also have other unique features that surpass the segmental level. With the advent of communicative approaches to language teaching, pronunciation research and teaching has focused both on the sounds of language (vowels and consonants) and on suprasegmental features—such as stress, sentence and word stress, and
intonation. According to Nunan (1999), with the development of communicative approaches to language teaching, the importance of Suprasegmental features involved in such linguistic trends as word stress, sentence stress, intonation and rhythm has been acknowledged.

Seidlhofer (2001) believes that pronunciation pedagogy is undergoing a move from sound manipulation exercises to communication activities and from a focus on isolated forms to the functioning of pronunciation in discourse. Bowen (1975) was one of the first to stress the importance of teaching pronunciation in meaningful context (cited in Celce-Murcia and Goodwin, 1991). The type of exercise Bowen devised set up a contextualized situation in which the learner must distinguish the correct form aurally in order to provide the correct response or produce the correct form in order to elicit the correct response (for examples see Celce-Murcia and Goodwin, 1991).

2-2 Instructional Strategies

Pronunciation teaching typically covers any or all of the following: consonant and vowel sounds, changes to these sounds in the stream of connected speech, word stress patterns, rhythm, and intonation (Jenkins, 2004).

Besides, as Harmer (2001) argues, it has become customary for language teachers to consider intelligibility as the prime goal of pronunciation teaching; This implies that the students should be able to use pronunciation which is good enough for them to be always understood; Therefore as Brown (2001) states our goal as teachers of English pronunciation should therefore be realistically focused on clear, comprehensible pronunciation.

Furthermore, good oral production requires a combination of correct sound articulation, proper stress and pitch, and appropriate intonation, and every lesson should provide the learners with exposure to natural language that is simplified appropriately for their level, opportunities for the students to practice the language in relevant contexts, lots of repetition, and review (Bradley-Bennett, 2007).

Bradley-Bennett (2007) states that the key to improved pronunciation is listening, but listening in a context that is both comprehensible to the students and relevant to their lives beyond the classroom walls. Harmer (2001), too, believes that in order to help students speak correctly, we should help them to hear correctly, or as he puts it "to gradually train their ears". Harmer suggests that there two ways of dealing with this: in the first place we can show students how sounds are made through demonstration, diagrams, and explanation. But we can also draw the sounds to their attention every time they appear on a tape or in our own conversation. Also according to Harmer (2007) the more the students hear and understand English being spoken, the more they absorb appropriate pitch and intonation, stress and the sounds of both individual words and those which blend together in connected speech. Fraser (2000) believes that critical listening can be very useful for enabling students to recognize and correct their own errors in pronunciation; According to Fraser (2000), learners need ample opportunity to listen to their own speech and that of fellow learners in comparison with that of native speakers,
and to learn to distinguish the aspects of learner pronunciation that make comprehension difficult for native speakers, so it is essential for learners and teachers to work with recorded voices, so that the speech they are discussing can be referred to objectively and without distortion.

Students also should be exposed to different voices and through different modes of delivery. Students who only hear the teacher in class may find it very difficult to discriminate sounds or get meaning when they listen to language on a cassette tape (Bradley-Bennett, 2007).

Bradley-Bennett (2007) further argues that oral practice in the ESL/EFL classroom should provide the structure of guided practice and scaffolding, which is gradually reduced and eventually removed, challenging students to retrieve what they’ve practiced before and apply it in new situations and real-life conversations.

Learners at all levels benefit from appropriate oral practice. Don’t underestimate the value of multiple exposures of the target language and repetition, repetition, repetition. [...] as students practice speaking, they’re internalizing the sounds and patterns of the language. Proper stress, intonation and pitch patterns will improve the production of vowels and consonants, as well as the meaning of what’s being said. It requires that the student hear the patterns correctly and reproduce them (Bradley-Bennett, 2007).

According to Schaetzel (2009), there are a number of instructional strategies for teaching pronunciation that can help students meet their personal and professional needs. For example, teachers can do the following:

- Cultivate positive attitudes toward accuracy
- Identify specific pronunciation features that pose problems for learners
- Make learners aware of the prosodic features of language (stress, intonation, rhythm)
- Focus on developing learners’ communicative competence

Seidlhofer (2001) and Burns and Seidlhofer (2002) propose some classroom procedures which they believe move from exercises which draw attention to specifics of the language code, towards communicative tasks. The procedures include:

1. Elicited mechanical production which involves the manipulation of sound patterns without apparent communicative reason. (For examples see Seidlhofer, 2001).
2. Listen and repeat which involves the learners in imitating chunks of language provided by the teacher or a recording.
3. Discrimination practice in which students listen to train their ears.
4. Sounds for meaning contrasts which compared to 'listen and repeat' exercises, are more meaningful for the learner while retaining a focus on sounds.
5. Cognitive analysis in which the students receive some overt explanation and analysis and which includes a range of methodological options as: "talking about it, phonetic
training, teaching learners phonemic script, giving rules, comparison of L1 and L2 sound systems, looking up the pronunciation of new words in a dictionary.

6- Communication activities and games such as mini-plays whose interpretation depends entirely on learners' use of voice quality and intonation.

7- Whole brain activities which are intended to activate the right brain hemisphere, often involving music, poetry, guided fantasies etc.

8- Learning strategies which aim to foster learner autonomy.

Celce-Murcia and Goodwin (1991) argue that the attention paid to structured learning of pronunciation rules depends both on the level of the students and on the amount of time available for pronunciation in the course. They further state that for a course focusing on pronunciation at a more advanced level, it is useful to present a diagram of the organs of the speech, the phonetic alphabet, the consonant chart, and the vowel chart. Celce-Murcia and Goodwin (1991) also advocate integrating some relatively simple yet productive rules into the syllabus. They mention rules such as -ed and -s endings, the rules for stress placement when adding suffixes could be integrated with vocabulary study of word families, the rules for reduced speech and blending. They also believe that students often find it beneficial to read a brief summary of phonological contrasts between their native language and English.

Conclusion and Implications

This article reviews past and present perspectives on pronunciation teaching. It summarizes the background of pronunciation teaching, emphasizes the need for incorporating pronunciation into foreign language classes because of the importance of the pronunciation as a key to gaining full communicative competence, and outlines some of the procedures that have been suggested for teaching pronunciation, taking into account present-day views in pronunciation pedagogy.

The article further reviews the elements to be included in the pronunciation teaching and some of the strategies to be used in the teaching process. For example, some authors believe that one of the most important things we need to teach in order to improve our students’ pronunciation is how the articulatory organs work (see Harmer, 2001 for example). The students have to be able to feel exactly what part of the mouth is used to create each sound, especially those sounds which cause them trouble. This means not only referring to diagrams and pictures but also carrying out exercises and oral practice in order to become acquainted with the vocal organs (see Bradley-Bennett, 2007, and Celce-Murcia & Goodwin, 1991).

In addition, since the advent of communicative approach, the focus of pronunciation shifted dramatically from teaching segmentals to suprasegmentals with a view to improving general comprehensibility. But, according to Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) today’s pronunciation curricula tend to reflect a more balanced treatment of suprasegmentals integrated with segmentals with highly functional load (cited in Wremble, 2001).
The present article also argues that teachers can help students by raising their awareness of elements such as sounds, syllables, stress and intonation. Because once the students understand the functions of these elements, they will know what to focus on and can build upon this basic awareness.

Besides, this article has attempted to raise the teachers' awareness of the necessity of prioritizing a pronunciation teaching component in ELT classes and the need to inclusion of the teaching of the suprasegmentals alongside the time-honored segmentals in teaching English pronunciation to Iranian learners, since awareness of suprasegmentals can contribute to EFL learners' attaining the goal of satisfactory intelligibility.

Another argument in the present article is that setting intelligibility as a goal of instruction can be one of the reasonable options for EFL teachers, because, despite having a good grasp of vocabulary and the grammatical rules of the English language, speakers would be unintelligible if they had poor pronunciation.

Drawing on the literature and personal experience we view the following as essential in teaching pronunciation:

1- Providing the EFL teachers with course books and materials that support their effectiveness in teaching pronunciation
2- Helping the students understand the pedagogical basis of classroom activities for teaching pronunciation
3- Creating a motivating environment in the pronunciation classroom
4- Providing the learners with exposure (through listening) to natural language that is simplified appropriately for their level
5- Providing opportunities for critical listening in order for the students to compare their own pronunciation with that of a competent or native speaker
6- Raising students awareness of stress, rhythm, and intonation pattern of English
7- Providing opportunities for the students to practice the language in relevant contexts, have lots of repetition, and practice individual sounds

Finally, although there are challenges to teaching and learning English pronunciation, it is an area vital to English language learners’ communicative competence. Literature has shed light on pronunciation features to be taught and on learners’ goals and motivations for improving their pronunciation. By incorporating current research and its implications into their teaching practice, teachers can help learners gain the skills they need for effective communication in English.

And, it is hoped that this paper will provide teachers of foreign language pronunciation, especially our colleagues in Iranian schools, with insights and motives to integrate pronunciation teaching into their teaching sequence, and help them expand the repertoire of traditional classroom practices and, consequently, promote pronunciation instruction.
References


