

# ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

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## *Abstract*

Little attention is paid to the acquisition of English pronunciation and therefore EFL learners are not aware that it should be one of the first things to be mastered if they want to speak the language well. Because of their pronunciation ignorance, learners more or less fail to understand their interlocutors as well as to make themselves precisely interpreted in daily communication no matter how excellent their grammar is. The paper pinpoints the significance, possibilities and principles in pronunciation teaching as well as reviews a number of techniques that could be practically applied in teaching for the sake of improving EFL learners' pronunciation. Also, it is essential to note that the application of the teaching techniques is expected to be an effective way not only to better learners' English pronunciation but also to empower them with some listening and speaking skills. Expectedly, the reviewed techniques are beneficial to certain aspects of teaching and learning English pronunciation to a variety of Vietnamese learners of English.

## *Significance of pronunciation in English language teaching and learning*

Due to the speaker's mispronunciation, the content of a speech will be altered; therefore, the results of poor pronunciation are beyond tragic. Even when one selects unique vocabulary and impressive structures in speaking, his/her counterpart may simply not understand or misinterpret what he/she really means if words are pronounced incorrectly. Practically, communicative competence has recently been considered the first priority of most EFL teachers as well as learners. From this perspective, it is pronunciation that significantly shapes the speaker's success. Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin [1996:1] state that "successful communication cannot take place without correct pronunciation". That means pronunciation produced by a speaker and that recognised by a listener have great influences on the quality of communication for both parties. Furthermore, Chomsky [1972: 29] points out that anyone who acquired knowledge of a language has perceived a system of rules that connect sound and meaning; accordingly, the relation between sound and meaning is close. Therefore, it can be concluded that pronunciation deserves to receive significant concern from both trainers and learners and it should take its first priority in the process of teaching and learning.

## *Possibilities of pronunciation training*

As far as teaching English as a second /foreign language is concerned, pronunciation teaching, as discussed in an article at <http://www.antimoon.com/how/pronuncwhy.htm>, has been relegated to as a subsidiary role of broader language performance skills such as speaking and listening, but in the past few years instructions on specific features of the spoken language have been reassessed and consequently fostered in many programs. A lot of teachers remain skeptical about the teachability of pronunciation, though, and in consequence continue to consider explicit pronunciation instructions of relatively little importance in their practice. This is not to be supported, however, because it is clear that the primary purpose of all languages is communication, and therefore using the language to communicate should be central in all classroom language instructions. The focus on language as communication brings renewed urgency to the teaching of pronunciation, according to Avery and Ehrlich (1995) since both empirical and anecdotal evidence indicates that there is a threshold level of pronunciation for non-native speakers of English. If EFL learners fall below this threshold level, they will certainly have oral communication problems no matter how excellent and extensive their control of grammar or vocabulary might be. From such a viewpoint, the researcher personally believes that poor English pronunciation can certainly be improved as the result of both the

teachers' and the learners' adequate attention and great efforts paid to such a demanding field in second language acquisition.

### ***Principles in pronunciation teaching***

Discussing the principles in pronunciation teaching, Avery and Ehrlich [1995: 164] assert that “a separate class should be devoted to pronunciation teaching, or pronunciation did not get taught at all.” Following the two linguists, the writer strongly believes that pronunciation, when taught communicatively, is both interesting and fun for any Vietnamese learners of English. More importantly, at the time of realizing how much more they understand and are understood by their interlocutors, the learners see the importance of pronunciation teaching and actually will cry out for more. Hence, “pronunciation can and should always be integrated into all aspects of language teaching and reinforced in all classes...” [Avery and Ehrlich, 1995: 164]

As far as the procedure of presenting a new sound is concerned, Doff [1988: 114] suggests the following steps:

- Say the sound alone;
- Say the sound in a word;
- Contrast it with other sound;
- Write words on the board;
- Explain how to make the sound;
- Get students to repeat the sound in chorus;
- Get individual students to repeat the sound.

The basic steps, of course, are for the teacher to say the sound clearly in isolation so that the students can first focus on it. When they can manage to recognize the sound, ask the students to repeat the sound in chorus and individually in one or two words. If students confuse two similar sounds, it is obviously useful for the teacher to compare and contrast the two confusing sounds in order for the students to hear the difference clearly. Writing on the board words accompanied by their phonemic transcriptions is necessary so that the students are able to realize the letter or letters representing the sound in question. If the students find it hard to produce a particular sound (usually because it does not exist in their own language), the teacher is recommended to describe how the sound is pronounced, as long as this can be done in a clearly understandable way by using simple English or even by explaining it in their mother tongue.

### ***Techniques in pronunciation teaching***

A technique in language teaching is “implementational — that usually takes place in a classroom. It is a particular trick, stratagem, or contrivance used to accomplish an immediate objective. Techniques must be consistent with a method<sup>1</sup>, and therefore in harmony with an approach<sup>2</sup> as well.” [Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 15] From their own viewpoint, Richards *et al* [1992: 20] define a technique as “different kinds of classroom activity.”

As far as the teaching of pronunciation is concerned, there is a variety of techniques that have been applied in language classes. Below are ten kinds of techniques that have been used to teach pronunciation, reviewed by Celce-Murcia *et al* [1996: 8-9].

1. Listen and imitate: This technique sounds like the way a child learns his/her mother tongue.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Richards *et al* [1992: 20], “different ways of teaching language...” are referred to as the method.

<sup>2</sup> An approach is “different theories about the nature of language and how languages are learned.” [Richards *et al*, 1992: 20]

When the child hears a certain word in a given setting, he/she will listen to it and tends to imitate. This technique has been enhanced by the use of tape recorders, language labs, and video recorders.

2. Phonetic training: The teacher uses articulatory descriptions, articulatory diagrams, and the phonetic alphabet to provide their students with oral skills.

3. Minimal pair<sup>3</sup> drills: This technique helps students distinguish similar and problematic sounds in the target language through listening discrimination and spoken practice.

4. Contextualized minimal pairs: The teacher establishes the setting (e.g., a blacksmith shoeing a horse) and presents key vocabulary; students are then trained to respond to a sentence stem with their appropriate meaningful response.

*Sentence stem:*

The blacksmith (a. *hits* / b. *heats*) the horseshoe.

*Cued student response:*

a. with the hammer / b. in the fire

5. Visual aids: For the enhancement of the teacher's description of how sounds are produced, he/she may use different kinds of visual aids such as pictures, rods, sound-color charts, realia, etc.

6. Tongue twisters: Students are required to pronounce the same or similar sounds that repeatedly occur in a sentence. For example, usually applied when students are involved in the practice of /S/, /s/, and /z/ is the sentence "*She sells seashells by the seashore, but the shells she sells are not seashells.*"<sup>4</sup>

7. Developing approximation drills: Students are taught to retrace the steps that many English-speaking children follow as they acquire their mother tongue. For example, as stated by Celce-Murcia *et al* [1996: 9], since children learning English often acquire /w/ before /r/ or /j/ before /l/, adults who have difficulty in producing /l/ or /r/ can be encouraged to begin by pronouncing words with initial /w/ or /j/, and then shift to /r/ or /l/, respectively:

/w/	→	/r/	/j/	→	/l/
<i>wed</i>		<i>red</i>	<i>yet</i>		<i>let</i>
<i>wag</i>		<i>rag</i>	<i>yes</i>		<i>less</i>
<i>witch</i>		<i>rich</i>	<i>young</i>		<i>lung</i>

8. Practice of vowel shifts and stress shifts related by affixation: The teacher uses the technique to point out the rule-based nature of vowel and stress shifts in etymologically related words to raise awareness; sentences and short texts that contain both members of a certain pair of words may be provided as oral practice material.

*Vowel shift:*

*mime* (long /i:/) *mimic* (short /ɪ/)

*Sentence context:*

Street *mimes* often *mimic* the gestures of passersby.

*Stress shift:*

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<sup>3</sup> "When two different forms are identical in every way except for one sound segment that occurs in the same place in the string, the two words are called a minimal pair." [Fromkin and Rodman, 1993: 218] According to Avery and Ehrlich [1995: 207], minimal pairs are pairs of words "which have different meanings and which differ in pronunciation on the basis of one sound only."

<sup>4</sup> phonemically transcribed as / ʃɪ selz 'si:ʃelz baɪ ðə 'si:ʃɔ: | bət ðə ʃelz ʃɪ selz ə nɒt 'si:ʃelz /

**PHO**tograph      pho**TO**graphy

*Sentence context:*

I can tell from these *photographs* that you are very good at *photography*.

9. Reading aloud/recitation: Passages or scripts are provided for students to read aloud, focusing on stress, timing, and intonation.

10. Recordings of learners' production: The teacher uses the students' audiotapes and videotapes of rehearsed and spontaneous speeches, free conversations, and role plays for the evaluation and correction of students' pronunciation. This technique certainly motivates students much more as it can arouse the students' curiosity. In fact, as an EFL learner, most students feel curious to listen to their own voice in producing another language.

Contributing more to the current tendency of teaching English pronunciation, Kelly [2000: 15] claims that the teaching of pronunciation involves the teaching of productive skills and receptive skills<sup>5</sup>. In terms of reception, students study how to identify the differences between phonemes, especially when there is no contrast in their mother tongue. Then students will apply what they have learnt in their production of sounds. To support this idea, Kelly [2000: 16-20] suggests the following techniques in teaching pronunciation.

1. Eliciting and drilling: Students are requested to raise a certain word, phrase or structure they know so that the teacher can say it aloud and then gets the whole class to repeat it. Prompts, pictures, mimes, etc. are usually employed to encourage the students to get involved in the process.

2. Chaining: The teacher gives students part or half of a sentence then requests them to complete that sentence, practicing poly-syllabic problematic words.

3. Substitution: Students are required to substitute successive items for the sounds given by the teacher.

4. Using minimal pairs: Students are guided to focus on the sounds that they find the most difficult. Students then identify and pronounce pairs of words that are identical in every way except for one sound segment which occurs in the same place in the string.

5. Tongue twisters: The teacher provides a number of sentences consisting of similar sounds that students have difficulty pronouncing. In fact, this kind of technique can help students exercise their mouth in order to properly produce distinguishing sounds and even sounds that do not exist in language one<sup>???</sup> and can reduce classroom pressure since students find it hilarious when their peers confusingly produce the similar sounds in the twisters. It is then time for the teacher to correct the students' mistakes and to draw their attention to the contrast of those sounds.

6. Pronunciation and spelling activities: Students are required to identify the correlation between a sound and its spelling representatives. Then they are supposed to produce the sound correctly.

7. Homographs and homophones<sup>6</sup>: These can be used as the basis for pronunciation and spelling activities. Students listen to a sentence while looking at a given list of words in order to choose which one is actually heard. Woolard [1996: 6] demonstrates the following example so as to clarify

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<sup>5</sup> "Language skills are the mode or manner in which language is used. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are generally called the four language skills. Sometimes, speaking and writing are called the active/productive skills and reading and listening the passive/receptive skills." [Richards *et al*, 1992: 205]

<sup>6</sup> "Homographs are words which have the same spelling, but with different pronunciations. Homophones are words which have the same pronunciation, but with different spelling." [Kelly, 2000: 20]  
According to Richards *et al* [1992: 168], homographs are "words which are written in the same way but which are pronounced differently and have different meanings"; homophones are "words which sound alike but are written differently and often have different meanings."

this technique.

Situation: *A teacher saw two boys fighting in the playground.*

Teacher: *Stop! You know the school rules – No fighting \_\_\_\_\_*

Student: *But, sir, we're not fighting \_\_\_\_\_. We're fighting quietly.*

Cues: a. allowed / b. aloud

### **Conclusion**

In recent time, learners have been unconsciously making little efforts in pronunciation practice; therefore, it is time the teacher did his best to bring to his students' notice that successful communication cannot take place if utterances are incorrectly pronounced and that poor pronunciation may lead to discomforts between speakers and listeners. Only by raising learners' awareness of the importance of English pronunciation and by applying the above-reviewed techniques can the teacher highly motivate his students and help them actively get involved in the learning process. Then, teaching English pronunciation does substantially contribute to learners' advancement in oral skill.

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