

Role of Pronunciation in the Facilitation of Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language in Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The role of pronunciation in teaching and learning English as a second language (ESL) has garnered increased attention in recent years, as educators recognize its significant impact on students' language acquisition and communication skills. This paper x-rays the place of pronunciation in actualizing effective teaching and learning of English as a second language (L2) in Nigerian secondary schools. The need for pronunciation teaching for effectiveness of English language is discussed in terms of intelligibility in pronunciation, the need for pronunciation in the effective teaching of English as an L2, factors influencing the learning of pronunciation and activities to improve learners' pronunciation. It also identifies the impediments to the effective teaching of pronunciation such as: the native language versus second language factor, linguistic homogeneity and heterogeneity, exposure, motivation and attitude, and age of the learners. Ultimately, offers recommendations for addressing these issues and underscores the critical role of pronunciation in facilitating effective teaching and learning of English among ESL learners in secondary schools.

Key words: Pronunciation, teaching and learning English pronunciation, English as a second language.

Introduction

One of the most difficult problems for English as second language (ESL) learners is learning pronunciation. It is commonly the greatest obstacle to overcome when trying to achieve fluency. It is not only important to study grammar and vocabulary but it is also essential to acquire a correct pronunciation. Moreover, knowing grammar and vocabulary is useless if someone is unable to pronounce them correctly. Pronunciation is the first thing that listeners notice during a conversation, and speakers who make pronunciation mistakes are less likely to be understood than those who make grammatical mistakes. Even a single mispronounced word can keep you from an effective communication with another speaker (Banjo, 2016).

It is obvious, then, that pronunciation is important and cannot be underestimated and it must be one of the most important priorities when learning English. English teachers must give the same time and attention to pronunciation as they do to grammar and vocabulary.

In teaching pronunciation the main goal is not acquiring a native-like pronunciation but it is to be comfortably intelligible, and this means that people understand what you are saying at the first time. The main goals related to pronunciation are: consistency: pronunciation should become fluent and natural; intelligibility: pronunciation should be understandable to the listeners, and communicative efficiency: pronunciation should help convey the meaning intended by the speaker. One of the objectives of English language curriculum in Nigerian secondary schools is for the promoting and enhancing the various language skills and competences for effective national and international communication. Its use is not only limited to the classroom but also to the immediate community, nation and the world in general (Banjo, 2016).

Generally, in schools, teachers concentrate on writing skills in the course of teaching English language. If at all there is a chance to teach speaking skills in the classroom to the students,

who learn English as their second language, they concentrate on grammar, forms and vocabulary.

Despite some usage of practical resources in teaching pronunciation, there is always negligence among the ESL teachers to teach pronunciation. The foremost reason for this negligence pertains to the willingness of the teachers to teach pronunciation. To be specific, most of the language teachers think that they are less qualified to teach pronunciation because of lack of efficient knowledge in teaching pronunciation and comparatively lesser pedagogical focus in phonology related courses of their study.

Correct pronunciation forms the basis for a better communication. The versatile nature of English language is due to its quality of easily borrowing words from other foreign languages. For example: Alias (Latin), Bonanza (Spanish), Fiasco (Italian), Ketchup (Chinese), Camouflage (French), etc. The twenty-six alphabets of English do not have a reliable sound. Not all words in English can follow a certain pattern of pronunciation. A vowel letter represents different vowel sounds. For example: the vowel 'i' in the words '*stipend*' and '*stick*' has different pronunciations. The pronunciation of a letter differs from word to word. Some letters have more than one sound. Sometimes in a word, a letter is not pronounced at all - the 'b' is silent in the words '*plumber*' and '*comb*'. Similar sounds may have different alphabets. Such complexities make English pronunciation difficult. Added to this, the stress and intonation of the words and sentences also matters. A wrong pronunciation or a wrong word stress and tone can render it meaningless that is the meaning of the thought to be communicated (Kumari, 2014). This means poor pronunciation can cause problems in oral communication, no matter how good a speaker has control on English grammar and vocabulary.

Comprehensible Input Hypothesis

This is a key concept in second language acquisition theory proposed by linguist Stephen Krashen in the 1980s. It suggests that learners acquire language most effectively when they are exposed to the input that is comprehensible

and slightly beyond their current level of proficiency. The hypothesis is based on the idea that language acquisition occurs through exposure to meaningful language input that learners can understand, rather than through explicit instruction or grammar drills.

According to the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (CIH), language input becomes comprehensible when it is presented in context and accompanied by non-verbal cues, visual aids, gestures or explanations that help learners understand its meaning. The input should be challenging enough to stimulate language acquisition but not so difficult that it overwhelms or frustrate learners. This paper borrows the concept of CIH and confers it on teaching and learning of pronunciation which has the capacity of providing learners with rich and meaningful language input in natural communicative contexts, rather than focusing solely on explicit grammar instruction or rote memorization of vocabulary.

The Need for Pronunciation for Effective Teaching and Learning of English Language

Pronunciation refers to speaking a language with appropriate stress, rhythm and intonation and it should be taught scientifically. Good pronunciation in a speech is an ornament of a person and a passport to the cultured society. The reasons of defective pronunciation of the learners of English as Foreign Language are – pronunciation discarded curriculum, absence of well pronounced teachers, and dearth of audio-visual aids, least listening environment and few difficult sounds (Sachdeva, 2011).

Over the years, styles of language teaching have changed greatly, and the same is true of teaching pronunciation. In some periods, teaching pronunciation has been considered extremely important, while at other times it has not been given much attention at all. Trends in teaching pronunciation are like a swinging pendulum - the emphasis goes from one extreme to the other (Lane, 2010).

Until recently, the focus in pronunciation teaching was almost entirely on producing individual sounds and words correctly; not much attention was given to features such as **stress, intonation** and **rhythm**. In the last 20 years or so, however, teachers and researchers have begun to realize the importance of these

“musical” aspects of pronunciation and to emphasize them more strongly in teaching (Celce-Murcia, 2016; Goodwin, 2021). Some scholars have gone so far as to claim that teaching individual sounds is not so important, and intonation, stress, prominence, and rhythm should be emphasized above all (Lane, 2010; Celce-Murcia, 2016; Gilbert, 2020).

It seems more practical, though, to realize that no single aspect of pronunciation can stand on its own. Our students can benefit from learning about both individual sounds and the musical aspects of pronunciation, and we need to find a balance between these two areas. The pendulum of teaching trends might keep swinging, but we do not have to let it knock us down. Choose methods and activities that combine both aspects of pronunciation so that the combination works best for you and your students (Celce-Murcia, 2016).

Principles of Teaching Pronunciation

According to Sachdeva (2011), the principles of teaching pronunciation are:

- (i) Pronunciation is learnt through imitation; therefore, the teacher should be a role model in pronunciation. He should be well versed in stress, rhythm and intonation practically.
- (ii) The teacher should have the ability to compare the mother tongue of the learners with the sounds of English so that s/he can handle the peculiarities of English language teaching.
- (iii) The style of English language teaching should be natural.
- (iv) The speed of teacher’s pronunciation should be moderate in English language teaching class.

English as a Second Language

A good knowledge of the socio-political history of Nigeria will enable one understand how the English language came into Nigeria and occupied a colossal position in the Nigerian Educational system. Our country is made up of multilingual and multi-ethnic nationals wielded together for the benefit of the colonial administration. English language was then adopted as a language of necessity to enable the British run their colonial government. Clerks

and interpreters were trained and those who wished to work with the colonial masters strived to learn English.

The missionaries were the first to establish schools in Nigeria. The main aim then was to train people who would propagate the gospel. When the British government took over the running of the schools in Nigeria, they harmonized the subjects taught in the different missionary schools. They also came up with a policy that made English Language a core subject as well as the language of instruction in the 1882 and 1887 education ordinances (Ogu, 2019).

From this point, many Nigerians strove to learn English as competence in it was a meal ticket. In fact, it was a yardstick for employment during the colonial era. After independence, the Nigerian system of education did not change much from what it was during the colonial era. English language remained the pivot of education in Nigeria. It is the language of instruction from upper primary education through secondary, to tertiary education in Nigeria. It is the language through which all other subjects in the curriculum are taught. Not only is English language a compulsory subject in secondary education, a credit pass in it is a compulsory condition for securing admission into Nigerian tertiary institutions. Competence in English is seen as an index of academic excellence. Thus, it is a yardstick for measuring learners’ academic performance. More so, before any student can graduate from the tertiary institutions in Nigeria, they must pass the course: Use of English.

From the fore going, it would be said that English language is the bedrock upon which education in Nigeria is hinged, thus English is indispensable to education in Nigeria.

What Affects the Learning of Pronunciation?

Native Language versus Second Language Factor

The British have acquired the phonemic system of English as their first language. They have been used to the sounds of English right from infancy, when they began to acquire the language (Gimson, 2010). The Nigerian learners come to learn English after they have

already become linguistic adults in their own mother tongue. The learner has two codes to contend with. His speech apparatus is already used to the sounds of the L1 and has been tuned to them for some six years before the introduction of the new set of English sounds. Therefore, in the Nigeria's pronunciation of English sounds, the sounds of the L1 keep intruding because the same speech apparatus is being used for both sound systems. The learner's pronunciation is therefore bound to be different from that of the British native speaker of English. On the other hand, the same will apply to the British if he were to begin to learn the L1 of the Nigerian.

Linguistic Homogeneity and Heterogeneity

Human codes draw from a common pool of the sounds of language; thus many similarities exist between the sounds of one language and the other. However, each language selects only a limited number of sounds from the common pool and organizes the sounds in accordance to its own phonological rules (Charles, 2018). A number of languages may have some sounds that are similar in phonetic features to the target language. For example, English has the sound /p/ and Nigerian languages also have it. However, the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ in English do not exist in Nigerian languages. English learners replace the dental fricatives with /t/ and /d/ because they exist in both English and Nigerian languages. Also, English uses consonant clusters but many Nigerian languages do not have such clusters. Therefore, learners tend to insert vowels between the consonants according to their L1 pattern of syllable structure. Words like **milk** and **technically** are typical examples.

Exposure to Target Language

The length and intensity of exposure to the sounds and the sound combinations in the L2 could also influence pronunciation. The benefit

Phonemic Awareness Activities

Engage students in activities that raise their awareness of individual sounds in English. This can include minimal pair exercises, where

/t/
Tick
Tank

of immersion in the second language learning setting is that the learner is compelled by the environmental circumstances and survival needs to listen and get returned to the language in all his waking moments (Cook, 2018). A Nigerian learner of English in the streets of London is more exposed to English than the same learner who spends only a few hours in the Nigerian classroom listening to English and the rest of each day reverts to his L1.

Motivation and Attitude

Motivation again is an important factor that influences the success in pronunciation learning. It is a form of energy that is responsible for the memorisation of new information and fundamental to the acquisition of a second language. There is a strong relation between motivation and attitude (Balboni, 2012),

Age of the Learners

This is another strong determining factor influencing foreign language pronunciation. Through observation, babies and young children easily learn languages. They easily pick up the sounds and words they hear around them and, gradually learn to imitate them correctly. It is closely connected to the theory of Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967).

What Improves Effective Pronunciation?

Effective strategies for teaching pronunciation in ESL (English as a Second Language) instruction are essential for helping students develop clear, accurate and intelligible speech. Here are some strategies that educators can implement:

Pronunciation Drills

There are two types of pronunciation drills – recognition drills and reproduction drills. The learners are firstly given a chance to recognise the sound and then they are asked to produce the sounds. Audio aids like record player can also be used for this purpose.

students identify and distinguish between similar sounds that may be challenging for non-native speakers. For example,

/θ/
Thick
Thank

Tree
Tie
Teem
Tick
Tin

Three
Thigh
Theme
Thick
Thin

Reading Aloud

This activity provides listening to the learners. The teacher selects such a text which is likely to be mispronounced by the learners. First students rectify the mistakes and if not, it will be done by the teacher. Good models of listening by L1 experts through tape record may be forwarded to students. Sufficient listening to good reading will help the students acquire excellent pronunciation (Suchdeva, 2011).

Phonetic Alphabet Usage

This technique, involves doing phonetic transcription and reading phonetically transcribed text. According to Harmer (2011), “the clearest way of promoting awareness” of sound and spelling correspondence “is by introducing the various symbols”.

Articulatory Descriptions

The teacher demonstrates to the pupils how to correctly place their tongue, teeth and lips in order to produce the correct sound. In order to enhance the teacher’s description of how sounds are produced, Celce-Murcia (2016) suggests that it is possible to use the support of visual aids, such as articulatory diagrams.

Songs and Rhymes

Carefully selected, songs, rhymes and chants can offer a rich source of authentic input. Slattery and Willis, (2015) said that rhymes and singing songs are great ways to practice pronunciation, stress, and intonation. Young learners enjoy repetition, songs and rhymes which are generally repetitive and easy to remember.

Pronunciation Games and Activities

Games are excellent tools for teaching pronunciation to children. As Brewster, (2012) claims, “They are not only motivating and fun but can also provide excellent practice for improving pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and the four language skills”. When children play games, they use repeatedly the

same language structures that they eventually memorize.

Modeling and Imitation

Model correct pronunciation and intonation patterns for students and encourage them to imitate your speech. Provide ample opportunities for students to practice pronunciation in a supportive and non-judgemental environment.

Multimedia Resources

Utilize multimedia resources such as audio recordings, videos and interactive pronunciation software to provide students with authentic examples of English pronunciation. Encourage students to listen to native speakers and mimic their pronunciation.

Word Stress and Sentence Stress

Teach students about word stress patterns and sentence stress in English sentences. Highlight the importance of stress placement in conveying meaning and emphasise stress patterns in multisyllabic words and sentence structures.

Peer Feedback and Self-Assessment

Encourage students to peer assess each other’s pronunciation and provide constructive feedback. Also, provide opportunities for students to record themselves speaking and reflect on their own pronunciation errors and progress (Slattery and Willis, 2015).

Contextualized Practice

Integrate pronunciation practice into meaningful and authentic language tasks, such as role-plays, debates and discussions. This allows students to practice pronunciation in real-life communication situations and reinforces the connection between pronunciation and meaning.

Error Correction

Provide timely and specific feedback on student’s pronunciation errors, focusing on accuracy and clarity. Encourage students to

self-correct their pronunciation errors and monitor their progress over time.

Phonetic Transcription

Introduce students to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to help them understand the sound-system correspondence in English. Use phonetic transcriptions to highlight pronunciation patterns and clarify the pronunciation of words.

Barriers to the Effective Use of Pronunciation in Teaching English as an L2

Sotiloye (2007) said the challenges encountered in teaching English pronunciation range from those posed by learners, lack of equipment, interference from the learners' first language, the structure of English language itself, the nonchalant stance adopted by the government towards educational system to the evaluation of proficiency in the skill. Williams (2004) agreed with Sotiloye (2007) by saying that pronunciation should be tackled by systematic teaching in second language context. He advanced three reasons, first, the age at which they began to speak the second language, Second, Interference from the mother tongue and thirdly, noise which, is produced when one sound system is superimposed on another, like the static which makes regular radio signals difficult to hear.

However, Ortese, Yawe and Akume (2005) maintained that the learner, the learning environment, the teacher, the strategies used and the learning materials are other challenges of teaching English pronunciation.

In a similar vein and through observation, it is evident in Nigeria that attention is not given to learning environment. It does not matter how good the teacher is or how intelligent the pupils are, if the environment is not conducive, learning will not be at its best. Therefore, the effectiveness of English pronunciation learning is dependent on the environment, teacher's ingenuity and the method he adopts in the teaching.

Conclusion

This paper is of the view that having examined the various aspects of pronunciation teaching,

factors affecting the learning of pronunciation, methods used by teachers in the teaching of English pronunciation and barriers faced by teachers in teaching English pronunciation, incessant effort is needed in this direction from the teachers and learners and that teachers especially should be given training in pronunciation. Also, this is a call to action for educators, stakeholders and policymakers to prioritize pronunciation instruction in ESL pronunciation curricula.

Recommendations

Based on that opinion, it would be recommended that:

1. The syllabus should focus on the skill of speaking and pronunciation.
2. Teachers of English should make pronunciation lessons practical and for most students, even adults, theory and technical explanations should be given to avoid them being easily forgotten.
3. Collaboration with speech-language specialists and pronunciation coaches should be prioritized to include communicative practice whenever possible.
4. Students need to work toward using their new pronunciation in real speech.
5. During class, teachers should practice the activities that are similar to real communication.
6. Students need to be trained to become independent and autonomous learners, so that they will be able to face pronunciation puzzles on their own.
7. Teachers should help them build up their own skills in listening, imitating, and monitoring their own pronunciation which will be of great help to them in their future learning.
8. There should be deliberate implementation of technology-enhanced pronunciation tools and resources in secondary schools and professional development opportunities for language teachers.

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