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THE TEACHING OF PRONUNCIATION

Abstract

Various authors among them Harmer (2004) and Kelly (2004) point out that there are two key problems with pronunciation teaching. Firstly it tends to be neglected. And secondly when it is not neglected, it tends to be reactive to a particular problem that has arisen in the classroom rather than being strategically planned.

The aim of this paper is twofold: a) to raise teacher's awareness of the need to teach pronunciation in the language classroom b) to provide information with regard to the implications of teaching pronunciation in the language classroom.

Teaching Pronunciation in the language classroom

According to Richards (1992), pronunciation is the way a certain sound or sounds are produced. Unlike articulation, which refers to the actual production of speech sounds in the mouth, pronunciation stresses more the way sounds are perceived by the hearer. Various authors, among them Harmer (2004) and Kelly (2004) point out that there are two key problems with pronunciation teaching. Firstly it tends to be neglected. And secondly when it is not neglected, it tends to be reactive to a particular problem that has arisen in the classroom rather than being strategically planned.

Kelly (2004) believes that the fact that pronunciation tends to suffer from neglect may not be due to teachers lacking interest in the subject but rather to a feeling of doubts as to how to teach it. Many experienced teachers would admit a lack of knowledge of the theory of pronunciation teaching and they may therefore feel the need to improve their practical skills in pronunciation teaching. Whereas, trainees and less experienced teachers might be very interested in pronunciation teaching, but their concern with grammar and vocabulary tends to take precedence. Language learners, on the other hand, often show considerable enthusiasm for pronunciation. They feel it is something that would help them to communicate better. So, paradoxically, even though both teachers and learners are keen on the subject, it is often neglected. In order to avoid the previous problems, according to Kelly (2004) teachers need:

- A good grounding in theoretical knowledge for the teaching of pronunciation
- Practical classroom skills
- Access to good ideas for classroom activities

From reactive to planned teaching

A lot of pronunciation teaching tends to be done in response to errors which students make in the classroom. Such reactive teaching is, of course absolutely necessary, and will always be. However, when it comes to planning a lesson or devising a timetable of work to be covered, teachers tend to make grammar their first concern. Lexis follows closely behind, with items of vocabulary and longer phrases being 'slotted in' where appropriate. A look at the contents pages of most coursebooks will show that we tend to think of the organization of language in terms of grammatical structures, although some recent publications claim to have a lexically arranged syllabus. Hence, it is quite natural to make grammar the primary reference when planning lessons.

Yet pronunciation work can, and should, be planned for too. Teachers should regard features of pronunciation as integral to language analysis and lesson planning. Any analysis of language that disregards or sidelines factors of pronunciation is incomplete. Similarly, a lesson which focuses on particular language structure or lexis needs to include features of pronunciation in order to give students the full picture, and hence a better chance of being able to communicate successfully. While planning, teachers should decide what pronunciation issues are relevant to the particular structures and lexis being dealt with in the lesson. They can also anticipate the pronunciation difficulties their students are likely to experience, and plan their lesson accordingly. There will still, of course, be reactive work to be done in the classroom, just as there is with grammar and lexis, but by anticipating and planning, the teacher can present a fuller analysis to learners, and give them the opportunity for fuller language practice. Integrating pronunciation teaching fully with the study of grammatical and lexical features has the further incremental benefit that learners will increasingly appreciate the significance of pronunciation in determining successful communication.

As a result, lessons should be divided into three main types:

- **Integrated** lessons: in which pronunciation forms an essential part of the language analysis and the planning process, and the language presentation and practice within the lesson.
- **Remedial** or reactive lessons, where a pronunciation difficulty which arises in class is dealt with there and then, in order to facilitate the successful achievement of classroom tasks.
- **Practice** lessons, in which a particular feature of pronunciation is isolated and practised for its own sake, forming the main focus of a lesson period.

What pronunciation model to teach?

The growth in the use of English together with the ease of communication worldwide means that English is increasingly being used as a medium of communication between speakers for whom it is not a first language. In the past the preferred pronunciation model for teaching in Britain or among British teachers abroad, was Received Pronunciation of RP. RP is concerned with social standing rather than geographical. It is still perceived as signifying status and education and “the Queen’s English” or “BBC English” is often used as synonyms. However, the number of people who speak with an RP accent in Britain is currently estimated at about only 3% of the population and declining (Harmer, 2004).

As a teacher the model to use in the classroom will usually be close to the language used in the real world outside the classroom. However, language teachers need to be aware of variations and differences, and the more knowledge one has with regard to different accents and varieties of English, the more informed one’s teaching is likely to be. In addition teachers should expose their students to a wide range of varieties and accents while allowing them to choose their own target model as long as it is widely comprehensible. The best advice for teachers is to teach what they know and use, and be as informed as they can be about other varieties.

Implications of Teaching Pronunciation in the Language Classroom

Several authors among them Ur (1997), Harmer (2005) Kelly (2004) point out that there are three areas a language teacher should know about in the pronunciation of English in addition to speed and volume which are intimately connected with meaning:

- The sounds of the language, or phonology
- Stress and rhythms
- Intonation

Sounds

Words are made up of individual sounds or phonemes. A phoneme is the smallest sound in a language which can differentiate words. It is useful to be able to list and define the sounds or phonemes of the language by writing them down using phonetic representations. The term “phonetic” is used to refer to transcriptions of the sounds of all human languages which make distinctions between sounds that may not be distinguished in a given language system. “Phonemic” is used to refer to transcriptions of a particular sound system (Ur: 1997). For example “beat” = /b + i: + t/ (i: is the symbol for the sound “ee”) “coffee” = /kɒfi/ and “cease” = /si:s/.

Sounds are represented by phonetic symbols because there is no one to one correspondence between written letters and spoken sounds. Thus the “c” of “cat” is pronounced differently from the “c” of “cease”, but is the same as the “c” of “coffee”. “Though”, “trough” and “rough” all have the “ou” spelling but it is pronounced differently in each case. Different spellings can have the same sound too: “plane” and “gain” both have the same vowel sound, but they are spelt differently. By changing one sound the word meaning can be changed. For example if we replace the sound /b/ with the sound /m/, we get “meat” instead of “beat” (Harmer, 2005). It is vital to remember that the symbols do not “spell” words but represent their pronunciation in phonetic script.

According to Davies and Fraenkel (2003) the phonemic system of English is generally considered to have up to 12 vowel phonemes, plus 8 diphthongs (vowel combinations) and up to 21 consonant phonemes, plus 3 semi-vowels (vowel-like consonants). The variation in number is due to differences among varieties of English, for example, standard American and standard British English, and slightly different analyses by linguistics

Stress

The second area of importance is stress, in other words where emphasis is placed in words and sentences. It has been claimed that certain languages, for example English and Arabic among others are stress-timed. That is to say stresses occur at regular intervals within connected speech and the duration of an utterance is more dependent upon the number of stresses than the number of syllables. As a result English speech rhythm is characterized by tone-units: a word or group of words which carries one central stressed syllable, other syllables, if there are any, is lightened (Ur,1997). Harmer (2005) claims that the stressed syllable, the syllable which carries the main stress, is that part of a word or phrase which has the greatest emphasis because the speakers increase the volume or change the pitch of their voice when saying that syllable e.g “important” , “complain”. And in many longer words, there is both a main stress and a secondary stress, eg “interpretation” where “ter” has the secondary stress and “ta” the main stress. In addition, different varieties of English can often stress words differently. For example British English speakers usually say “advertisement” whereas some American speakers say “advertisement”. The placing of stress can also affect the meaning of a word. For example, “import” is a noun, but “import” is a verb.

According to Davies and Fraenkel (2003) there are some general patterns of word stress. Two-syllable nouns and adjectives tend to have stress on the first syllable

and two-syllable verbs on the second, but there are exceptions. Compound nouns are even more likely to have the stress on the first syllable and some compound nouns, like blackboard and briefcase, contrast with adjective-noun combinations, like black board (any board that is black) and brief case, (a case, e.g. a law case that is brief).

There are a number of nouns and verbs that are spelt the same but with first-syllable stress for the nouns and second-syllable stress for the verbs, for example:

Noun	Verb	Noun	Verb
<u>C</u> ontrast	Con <u>tr</u> ast	<u>R</u> ebel	Re <u>b</u> el
<u>E</u> xport	Exp <u>o</u> rt	<u>R</u> ecord	Re <u>c</u> ord

Although there are again exceptions, three-syllable words tend to have the stress on the first or second syllable, not the last one, for example:

Photograph, beautiful, cultivate Computer, important, develop

In some cases, when suffixes are added to words the stress moves forwards:

Photograph ----- photography ----- photographic

Psychology / psychologist ----- psychological

There are a number of suffixes that attract the main stress to the syllable immediately before the suffix. They include:

-ity, -ial, -ic, -ical, -ically, -ious, -ian, -ion, For example:

Public ----- publicity Drama ----- dramatic / dramatically

The use of stress in speech helps us both deliver and understand meaning in longer utterances and it is closely linked with intonation. Within utterances, therefore, tonic syllables are emphasized in order to highlight the most significant new information. Onset syllables are used to initiate a pitch which continues up to the tonic syllable.

With regard to sentence stress Kelly (2004) outlines a three-stage process which enables the speakers of English to say the same thing in different ways:

- When the speakers say words of more than one syllable in isolation the stress is on one of the syllables.
- When words are arranged together in a sentence or utterance, certain syllables will be stressed in order to convey the most important new information. This may cancel out normal word stress.
- Intonation is used to give further subtleties of meaning to the syllables we have chosen to stress.

According to Kenworthy (1992) correct word stress patterns are essential for learner's production and perception of English. If a non-native speaker produces a word with the wrong stress pattern, an English listener may have great difficulty in understanding the word, even if most of the individual sounds have been well pronounced. In listening, if learners of English expect a word to have a particular stress pattern, they may not recognize it when a native speaker says it. In other words, what they hear does not match with what they have in their mental dictionary. That is to say from just sounding right or wrong, word stress can be important for intelligibility and comprehension.

Intonation

The term intonation refers to the way the voice goes up and down in pitch when we are speaking. It is a fundamental part of the way we express our own thoughts and it

enables us to understand those of others (Kelly, 2004). The rises and falls in tone that make the “tune” of an utterance is an important aspect of the pronunciation of English, often making a difference to meaning or implication. Stress, for example, is most commonly indicated not by increased volume but by a slight rise in intonation. A native speaker usually has little difficulty in hearing intonation changes in his or her own language: others however, may not find it so easy. The different kinds of intonation are most simply shown by the symbols \ / over the relevant syllable or word in order to show falling and rising intonations; and the symbols V Λ to show fall-rise and rise-fall (Ur, 1997). Intonation according to Harmer (2005) is often described as the music of speech. It encompasses the moments at which we change the pitch of our voices in order to give certain messages. It is absolutely crucial for getting our meaning across. The word “Yes” for example, can be said with a falling voice, a rising voice or a combination of the two. By changing the direction of the voice we can make “Yes” mean “I agree” or “Perhaps it’s true” or “You can’t be serious” or “Wow, you are o right” or any number of other things. Teachers often use arrows or wavy lines to show intonation tunes –pitch change-. Pitch describes the level at which one speaks. Some people have high-pitched voices; others say things in a low-pitched voice. When we pitch the words we say, we may use a variety of different levels: higher when we are excited or terrified, for example, but lower when we are sleepy or bored.

According to Kenworthy (1992) rhythm is a product of word stress and the way in which important items are back grounded by their occurrence on a weak beat. The rhythm of English is, then, mainly a function of its stress patterns; these may also affect such aspects as speed of delivery, volume and the use of pause.

Conclusions

It could be concluded that the main implications of dealing with the teaching of pronunciation in the language classroom are:

- Teachers should possess a sound knowledge of the theoretical aspects involved in the teaching of pronunciation
- Classroom-work needs to be focused on practice rather than on theory. Teachers need to show learners how the choices they make serve to determine the meaning of utterances.

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