Suggestions for Beautifying the Pronunciation of EFL Learners in Turkey

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Abstract

This paper firstly stresses that the importance of the spoken form of the language and for that reason foreign language learners should have correct and accurate pronunciation. Additionally, this paper consists of the presentation of the factors affecting the pronunciation of EFL learners in Turkey in language learning and teaching process and also it suggests some necessary techniques for the solution of these factors. Some suggestions are also given for how these techniques should be applied for.

Key words: foreign language, accurate pronunciation, EFL

Özet

Bu makale öncelikle dilin sözel biçiminin önemini ve bu nedenle yabancı dil öğrencilerinin doğru ve akıcı bir telaffuza sahip olmaları gerektiğini vurgulamaktadır. Ayrıca, yabancı dil eğitim ve öğretim süreci içinde Türkiye'de İngilizce'yi yabancı dil olarak öğrenenlerin telaffuzlarının bozulmasına yol açan etkenlerin belirtilmesi ve bu etkenlerin çözümüne yönelik tekniklerin sunuluşunu içermektedir. Bu tekniklerin nasıl uygulanacağı konusunda da öneriler verilmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: yabancı dil, doğru telaffuz, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce

1.0. Introduction

One of the general objectives in the foreign language teaching, maybe the most important one, is to teach the learners to speak the target language accurately and intelligibly since to learn a language also means to produce the sounds, utterances, and the words properly and correctly rather than being able to communicate with the people in the target language community. To reach this goal, speaking activities should be done at every stage of the foreign language teaching process. It must be borne in mind that listening and speaking go hand-in-hand in foreign language teaching because speech is very important medium through which communication is achieved. That's to say,

language is primarily speech and it is more basic to language than the written form. (Larsen-Freeman, 2000:44)

According to Knowles (1987:1) written language has the advantage that it is permanent so that it can be studied conveniently and at leisure, but spoken language is more 'elusive'. In other words, written language looks like an imperfect version of the spoken language. As individuals, we all learn to speak before we learn to read and write; that is to say, people learn the language by hearing the sounds spoken in their environment. Unlimited numbers of sounds, especially speech sounds, in the language help the learner to understand and to produce the language. In addition, in the world there are still languages which have never been written down and also societies have had speech before written forms of their languages. Needless to say, human talk is the oldest form all of the societies.

It should be noted here that language learners always come across some difficulties and problems while learning a foreign language. One of the most remarkable difficulties seen in this process happens to be in the pronunciation of the foreign language vocabulary. So, foreign language learners have lots of problems with pronunciation because of some factors such as native language factor (mother tongue interference), age, environment, personality, etc. affect their motivation in learning. Rivers (1986:125) urges that all persons had experience when listening to a foreigners' speaking language, of having great difficulty in understanding what they are trying to say, not because of their lack of knowledge of vocabulary and language structure, but because the sounds they produce seemed peculiar and the voice rose and fell in unexpected places. This sentence emphasizes a well-known fact that most of the people learning a foreign language encounter some problems of pronunciation of the new language, owing to some contributory factors. Therefore, they fail in oral communication although they are sufficient enough in other skills of the language.

2.0. Factors Affecting the Pronunciation of EFL Learners
2.1. The Native Language Factor

Needless to say, learners of a language speak the target language in a different way: sometimes slightly different and sometimes highly different than the native speakers' do, which we call "foreign accent", the nature of which is determined to a large extend by a learner's native language (Avery &Ehrlich, 1987:9). This is known as mother tongue interference. That is to say, every language in the world has different

varieties and different accents. Therefore, the way we speak is a part of our identity, that is, phonemic differences between language cause a target language which will be spoken with a foreign accent. As a result, there may not be any difference in the pronunciation of [ɪ] and [i], and then a foreign accent carries the sound characteristics of the learners' native language. As known, a language is a part of a culture, thus it is inevitable that there must be mother tongue interference, which is native language influence, in the pronunciation of the target language. This view had been endorsed by Whorfian Hypothesis. According to Sapir and Whorf, peoples' view of world influences their language and also people adopt the view of the world around them through the experience and categories of their language. As a user of Turkish language, we have difficulty in some English words and sounds which are not found in our native language. For example, /θ / and / ð / sounds do not exist in Turkish, and that is why Turkish learners encounter pronunciation difficulties with the words that include those sounds and thus never obtain a native-like accent, so they produce those sound under the influence of their mother tongue.

Since Turkish is not a tonic language, Turkish students have also some problems with stress, intonation, and rhythm which determine the overall rhythm and melody of a language can be transferred from the native language into the target language (Avery &Ehrlich, 1987:10) because Turkish learners think that if they speak or pronounce the words with a strong stress, they will be better understood.

The other problem occurs when the rules for combining the sounds in forms of syllables are different in two languages. English allows some consonant sounds clusters which Turkish does not have such as /spl-/,   /st-/, /str-/ etc. In foreign language learning, the influence of the native language is inevitable; this happens to be malady of language teachers. A well-trained English teacher in phonetics and phonology can diminish the negative transfers of sounds to a greater extent. So, he should use specially prepared pronunciation teaching techniques. Then, the non-native English teachers are struggling with the negative interference from the mother tongue of the students in all their teaching lives, and they should do so for a decent teaching practice.

2.2. The Age Factor

This is one of the most important factors in the learning of the pronunciation of a foreign language. We can say that if someone pronounces a second language with a native-like accent, s/he must have probably started to learn it during their childhood. For instance, children of immigrants may be given as an example. Since these children start their second language learning process in target language speaking people environment, they have more advantages than the children who try to learn the target language in their motherlands because there are indispensable differences between the language a group uses and the language of mainstream classrooms and workplaces. At the same time, if young children are exposed to more than one language before the age of puberty, they seem to acquire all languages equally well since it has been claimed that children are better at learning than adults. As Krashen (1988; 43) mentioned acquirers who begin to exposure to a second language during childhood generally achieve higher second language proficiency than those beginning as adults. He also stated that lateralization may even be complete by age 4, not by puberty.

Some researchers and neurolinguists have claimed that there is a strong connection between language learning and lateralization. Lenneberg hypothesized that lateralization is a slow process that begins around the age of 2 and is completed around puberty. He had also added that right hemisphere in children is more active in the language function but as child develops the two sides of the brain become specialized for different functions and thus lateralization takes place. The critical age hypothesis claims that there is such a biological timetable (Brown, 1987:42). It has been claimed that there is a critical age period for language learning, but it is widely discussed whether there is a critical period for language or not. Obviously, foreign language teaching scholars have outlined many views about the critical age hypothesis. Generally speaking, it coincides with the period when lateralization is taking place and ends when it is complete. This was hypothesized by Lenneberg who was one of the wholehearted supporters of critical age hypothesis.

In sum, since children are better in learning the language in short run, teaching pronunciation process should be started in puberty because it has been claimed that beyond puberty it is quite difficult to teach the learners to acquire a native-speakers like language accent. As a result, the age of the learner is highly important in the pronunciation learning of a foreign language due to the factors mentioned above. The aged learners pick up the correct pronunciation a little bit late, so the foreign language

teachers must be very patient in this sense, and must prepare special pronunciation drills and have the students repeat. They will obtain an acceptable level of good articulation in the long term.

2.3. The Amount of Exposure

Another factor is the amount of exposure to the practice of English. English is not only used in the classroom environment. We can handle this subject from the point of view whether the learner has been living in a country where English has been spoken or not. If the learners have been living in an English-speaking country or community, or a country where English is the second language, then the learners will have many opportunities to listen to and to use the target language; that is they will be surrounded by the target language. But, on the contrary, if the learners have been living in a non-English speaking country, like Turkey, there will be no advantage for them. So these learners will only be exposed to focused-listening, so they will have no chance or opportunity to use the target language in a real environment. This means that there will be no communication and if there is no communication, there won't be language learning. Since those learners won't have any English-speaking environment except their classrooms, they will have to be satisfied with listening, but it is clear that you cannot teach correct and accurate pronunciation by just asking students to listen to artificial listening courses carried out in the classrooms.

It must not be forgotten that there are many people who live in an English-speaking country, but spend much of their time in a non-English speaking environment, maybe any other language is spoken at home or outside. For this reason, it is not merely exposure that matters, but how the learners respond to the opportunities. Briefly, Kenworthy (1987:6) mentions that exposure can be a contributory factor, but it cannot be a whole and necessary factor for the development of pronunciation. If a learner is aware of the necessity of being exposed to the target language, s/he should make use of its opportunities. If the learner does that, s/he will be more successful in case of improving his/her pronunciation. The best ways of being exposed would be native speakers, videos shows, films, cds, radio or TV programs, computer assisted language teaching programs, and etc. Also, the amount of exposure is crucial and it must make the students creative and active, not passive and dull. Therefore, the dose of exposure must be adjusted with caution.

2.4. Phonetic Ability

There is a common view that some people have a better ear capacity for foreign language than some other people. So, they are able to discriminate between the two sounds more accurately than the others and able to imitate sounds better. We can accept these people as those with phonetic abilities. Also, this phonetic ability of the learner affects the development of his/her pronunciation. But it does not mean that people who have a better phonetic ability will be successful but the others won't be successful. So language aptitude ability exists in many people, but its degree is variable, so some people have more ability but some have less.

Besides the factors mentioned above, the influence of age must be stated as an efficient factor for phonetic ability because the beginners start to learn a language, the more they become successful. It is clear that learners may lose some of their abilities when they become older, so it can be difficult for them to pronounce the target language with a native or near native-like accent. At the same time, immigrants, especially their children, have more chance in learning the target language since they have started to their learning process in a target language speaking environment. The poor phonetic ability can be cured again by the foreign language teachers' patient attempts. There are several devices to motivate the poor pronunciation of the learners such as the phonetic labs and remedial pronunciation teaching techniques. Those learners must not be discoursed but must be treated meticulously.

2.5. Personality and Attitude

This is also another important factor affects the pronunciation of EFL learners in a bad way if the learners have negative attitudes for the target language community or they are introvert learners. For instance, shy or introvert students do not want to take part in classroom activities, so they cannot find any opportunities to make practice and to make use of phonological and/or phonetic activities. Besides, courageous or extrovert students have more chance to improve their pronunciation. On the other hand, attitude of the learners toward the new language has an effective role in pronunciation learning. If the learner has good attitudes for the target culture, s/he can easily develop more accurate, native-like accents.

If the learners have some prejudices on the target language and its society, this event will influence his/her approach to the language. For example, some people do not believe in the necessity of learning a second language, and they think that foreign

language will influence the learners' cultural development in a negative way, that is to say, their culture will be imposed on the target language community. In this case, it will not be reasonable to teach or try to teach these learners a foreign language. Thus, personal features and attitudes of the learners are also decisive in the learning of pronunciation. The educational pedagogues may be of great help on this issue. They could give some guidelines to the foreign language teachers.

2.6. Motivation

If the learners are highly motivated to have a better pronunciation, they can develop a concern for pronunciation, and become more eager to take part in the activities and pay more attention to discriminate the sounds of the target language, and they try to produce better utterances. Motivation can be the key to learn the target language, and they try to produce better sounds. Here it must be pointed out what the motivation is and how the learners will be motivated. According to Brown (1997:114-115) the motivation is thought of as an inner drive, impulse, emotion, or desire that moves one to a particular action. He also stated that learning a foreign language requires some of all three levels of motivation which can be global, situational, or task-oriented. For example, a learner may possess high global motivation but low task motivation on the written mode of the language.

On the one hand, some factors such as intelligence, aptitude, and self-confidence have much contribution to the formation of motivation. For example, to motivate the less intelligent people will be more difficult than the intelligent ones because these people cannot appeal to their needs. Motivation, of course, is a number of different kinds of attitudes and can be divided into two basic types: instrumental and integrative motivation (Brown, 1997: 115-117). First one refers to the instrumental goals such as furthering a career, reading some kinds of materials, translation, etc. An integrative motivation is the one which is employed when the learners want themselves to be in the culture of the second language group, to identify themselves with and become part of the society.

Needless to say, teachers may need to discern the source of a student motivation in order to meet particular needs. That is, pronunciation teaching must be directed according to the needs, expectations, attitudes, intelligence, etc. of the learners. If the learners' main goals are to make translation from the native language to the target language, less time may be needed for pronunciation activities, and therefore teachers

will spend less time for motivating them. If the learners are highly motivated to have a better pronunciation, they can develop a concern for pronunciation, and become more eager to take part in the activities, and pay more attention to discriminate the sounds of the target language, so they try to produce better sounds and utterances. At the same time, motivation can be achieved by paying attention to the learners' concern for pronunciation because learners generally are not aware of that the way they speech is full of irritation and misunderstanding for the hearer.

Consequently, some factors that are effective in pronunciation accuracy are examined here. All of these factors exert much influence on the learners. We cannot change and affect some of these factors, for example, it is impossible for us to change the age and phonetic ability of the learners. It is clear that the influence of age is undeniable in language learning process. Children are more successful than the adults. When we take into consideration the children of immigrants, we see the difference between their counterparts. Since they start their learning process in their early ages in the target language spoken country, they can be able to speak the target language with a native like accent. So, if a learner starts his/her foreign language learning period abroad, in other words, in a place where the target language has been spoken, s/he will get a better pronunciation because there are differences between   the language learning environments, that is to say, to learn a foreign language in classrooms is different than to learn it abroad. So, if we don't have any chance to change the conditions mentioned above, cannot we do anything to train our learners with a near-native like pronunciation? Is it impossible to help them to well-trained learners having good pronunciation? Of course the answers of these questions are "No". For that reason, here we will state some useful techniques to eliminate these negative factors over the pronunciation of EFL learners in our country and suggest some possible solutions.

3.0. Techniques for Eliminating Pronunciation Problems of EFL Learners

It is important for the learners to acquire an accurate pronunciation. The obvious argument in favor of pronunciation teaching stems from the techniques adopted by linguists in making a phonological analysis. When we look at the contrast between a minimal pair like *bit* and *beat*, we can see that mastery of the difference between the phonemes / ɪ / and / i / is necessary if the two words are to be adequately differentiated. Thus, the learner must learn the differences in the pronunciation of these two sounds because if he does not learn, he will be misunderstood. For example, 'Hit the ball!' or

'Heat the ball!'. We can increase the number of this type of example. Teaching of pronunciation should be an integral part of an English teaching program from the early stages, and it must not be a luxury to be left to the advanced level studies of the language. It must be borne in mind that during pronunciation teaching, some certain methods or techniques should be applied because teaching of pronunciation is not a simple task, on the contrary it must be the essential part of language teaching program. Here, some methods and types of teaching pronunciation will be handled to determine its importance in language teaching process.

3.1. Initial Teaching Technique

This technique focuses on areas which are the essential to basic communication such as introducing stress and intonation, the fall or rise as the difference between spoken questions and answers, the development of a polite and interested way of speaking. Hubbard et al. (1983:209) explain this: 'It is a PEN' always precedes 'It is a BLUE PEN' and initial presentation of the present continuous tense is often with intransitive verbs, therefore, there is no object, which would mean a second stress (i.e. He's running / She's sleeping, etc.). This example shows this method fits well with a structural syllabus (Demirezen, 1986: 108-125) symbolizes the sustained, rising and falling intonation with the following signs: → , ↑ , ↓, and give some examples and activities for classroom application. He uses [→] for incomplete sentences and statements wherein the speaker intends to say something like (but….). [↑] is used for yes/no questions in statement forms, yes/no questions in interrogative forms, when phrases or clauses precede the main clause as a breath-group often heard in lectures and speeches, special calls for children, and stressed word, phrase or clause in a series. Lastly [↓] is used for questions with 'or', asking questions with question words, declarative statements, in giving commands, and some emphatic statements. Here are some examples and activities.

a. In sum → / Since 1999 → / If you wait → / She is a nice girl → / It is doubtful →

b. What I am trying to say ↑ / Mary ↑ / Are you interested in music ↑ / Do you love her ↑ / I am crazy ↑ / You are unhappy ↑

c. I don't understand you ↓ / Who is it ↓ / She fell into the lake ↓ / Do you want an apple or orange ? ↓ (choose one)   / He looked under the desk in the kitchen and in the closet ↓

3.2. Remedial Teaching Technique

This is a systematic approach and deals with the problems of individual sounds (Hubbard et al., 1983:209-210). It can be considered as consisting of two separate approaches – Instant Remedial and Planned Remedial. For Instant Remedial, the strategy will divide into four parts: 1. Imitation 2. Demonstration 3. Association 4. Explanation. For example, teacher first of all draws attention to the 'offending' sound and pronounces it in isolation to be imitated by the learners. If this becomes inefficient, then teacher shows the students how the sound is formed by putting his tongue between his teeth to produce /θ/ or /ð/ by using demonstration part. However, certain sounds are not easily made visible, so the teacher may adopt the process of association. In this process, sounds must be isolated and attention must be drawn to the similarities between two sounds in terms of whether they are voiced, lateral, dental, etc. Finally, explanation may help as the teacher explains in the mother tongue if necessary, how the sound is formed and gives instruction to the students to move their tongue forward, round their lips, etc. If, despite instant remedial works, the 'offending' sound still causes problems for the learners, then Planned Remedial work is needed. In this section, teacher should not insist, but make a note of the problem and plan a short remedial drill for the lesson. (Some of these drills will be explained in the following sections)

Remedial teaching can easily be applied to individual sounds by using a similar technique used by the TPR Method. Teacher may use a board and colored chalk or rods to indicate a sound which is represented by different spelling. For example, the three possible pronunciation of the regular [-ed] ending / t / and / d / and /əd / can be represented by different colorful chalk or rod, and words can be written in three columns on the board: blue is for / -t / , red is for / -d / , and yellow is for / -id /. The [-ed] ending is the item written in the appropriate color while everything else is written in normal white. For example,

BLUE	RED	YELLOW
jumped	saved	waited
washed	begged	folded

That is to say, the color coding can be used over and over as the teacher can indicate the pronunciation of the [-ed] ending by writing it in appropriate color.

3.3. Drilling Technique

For drilling technique there are many useful drills for purifying and teaching the correct and accurate pronunciation of the utterances and words. Here we will handle some of the common ones.

3.3.1. Word - association Drill

This is one of the easiest ways to give the students practice on specific problem sounds while the manifest purpose of the drill appears to be vocabulary study. Concentrating on the phonemes / æ / and / ɛ / , teacher may ask the students for antonyms of the following words : *sick , sit , thin , more*. The students would respond with *well , stand , fat , less*. In this type of drill it is useful to call the students' attention to the fact that the words they will select all contain / æ / or / ɛ / . For example,

1. In which of the following word, do we have /æ/ sound?
   a. bed   b. bad   c. but   d. bear   e. beer
2. In which of the following word, do we have /e/ sound?
   a. bag   b. mail   c. get   d. lake   e. feet
3. In of the following words do we have two /æ/ sounds?
   a. handicap   b. butterfly   c. breakfast   d. bankrupt e. walkman

3.3.2. Saturation Drill

This type of drill is suitable for all positions of the problematic sound. For example, let's take / s / sound as a problem sound. It can be drilled in its three positions by means of saturation drill.

Initial	*Medial*	*Final*
see	leasing	peace
seep	pistol	niece
seem	classic	purse
seed	faucet	curse
sip	paucity	less

3.3.3. Illustrating A Learned Sound

In this type of drill, students give examples of the sound being studied. For example, to practice the diphthong / æ / first, students listen to the sound pronounced by the therapist. Then, they are challenged to listen to discriminatingly by indicating whether the sound is pronounced but the therapist as ' right ' or ' wrong ' in a series of correct and incorrect pronunciations such as / aɪ / , / ɔɪ / , / a ɔɪ / , / ∧ ɪ / , etc. When the sound has been set, the first student starts a chain with a phrase *'I try '*. The second student repeats the phrase, and adds his own , *' I try but I cry'*. The third one picks up the last part and says *' I cry but I sigh '*, and goes on.

3.3.4. Mobility Drill

As Rochmis and Doob mentioned (l970: 29) achieving lightness of utterance and mobility of the tongue at conversational speech is a very important aspect of drilling. It is often neglected on the general belief that a student can make and hear the sound at the conversational speech. The following drill is an example for flexibility of the / ə / sound.

> Step 1 : Ask your students to suggest 5 simple words beginning with / b / such
> as : bat - boat - bike - ball - boy
> Step 2 : Encourage them to pronounce these words with a strong
> emphasis, and   then add the word ' the ', maintaining the pattern of stress.
> > the bat - the boat - the bike - the ball - the boy
> Step 3 : Substitute the words ' to the .... ' maintaining the pattern.
> > to the bat...... , to the boat......., etc.
> Step 4 : Continue to amplify the phrase, holding the pattern, but
> changing its drill.
> > from the.......................................
> > there is the....................................   bat, etc.
> > with and without the......................
> > because of the...............................

3.3.5. Comparative Drill

In this type of drill, words almost similar in every respect except the one element to be drilled are placed in juxtaposition. Since we tend to confuse sounds that are similar these drills with stimulate accuracy in hearing, performance, and judgment. Most

standard texts in voice and diction are excellent sources of such drill material. For example, this drill may be effective if two sounds are confused such as /f-v/, /p-b/, /θ-ð/, /æ-e/, etc. For example,

1. A sample comparative drill for /f-v/ and /p-b/ sounds

   fee- bee   feat- peat   freeze-breeze   visa-Pisa   fig-pig   freed-breed

   fly-ply   veer-beer   fled-bled   fact-pact   fester-pester

2. A sample comparative drill for /æ-e/ sounds

   sat-set   band-bend   sand-send   bad-bed   pan-pen

It will readily be seen that above drills have certain fringe benefits in that the words are arranged according to the vowel scale. Vowels that are commonly confused are best drilled in this type of drill. The students' own participation in composing such drills is worth the time it takes because he'll drill more intelligently and therefore establish new patterns more firmly and quickly. At the same time, it will give him/her a technique to apply to other areas where drill may be needed (Rochmis and Doob, 1970:27-28)

3.3.6. Substitution Drill

This type of drilling may be applied by substituting any sound instead of the other sound. For example, /t/ instead of /θ/ or /d / in place of / ð / , etc. Here are some exercises for classroom application.

1. This is thin / tin.
2. Did you see her lunge / lunch?
3. Was it a brand / bland reporting?
4. He is our king / kin.
5. It is cheap / chip.
6. Don't tape / tap.

Number of these activities may be increased and it is also possible to apply 'practice …. sounds and 'contrast …. sounds' exercises such as,

1. Exercises to practice /a / sound
a. The dog gave a sharp bark.
b. The argument started when the guard refused them entrance
c. The yard was so dark.

2. Exercise to contrast / a / and / ʌ / sounds.

a. That hut was certainly hot.

b. Did he rub or rob?

c. Hand this cup to the cop.

3.4. Tongue Twisters

This type of activity is known as a word or phrase which is difficult to say quickly. In the literature there are different ideas about the applicability and the usability of this activity. Celce-Murcia(1987:5) states that there is a little transfer from practice to natural communication. But, if it is needed and necessary, they can be used. Here are some sample tongue twisters taken from Dalton&Seidlhofer(1994:132-133).

1. Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.

2. Did peter Piper pick a peck of pickled peppers?

3. If Peter picked a peck of pickled peppers

4. Where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

We can say that the techniques mentioned above may be used to ensure that the EFL learners will be able to pronounce the target language accurately. As mentioned before, teaching pronunciation is one of the significant aspects of foreign language teaching and at the same it is a very serious task. Therefore, it should be studied in the early stages of the language teaching program in order to eliminate the factors affecting the pronunciation of the learners in a negative way and also to overcome the negative influence of mother tongue interference, fear, making mistakes, etc. While doing this, the techniques mentioned above may be applied to language teaching program during the teaching process. As a result, language teachers must be aware of these techniques or methods and should apply any of them while teaching pronunciation. It must be borne in mind that teachers are the models for their learners, so first of all they should have good pronunciation; otherwise, they can harm their students.

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