

Curent Perspectives on Pronunciation Learning and Teaching

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Abstract

This paper aims at stressing current perspectives on pronunciation learning and teaching. It summarizes the background of pronunciation teaching, emphasizes the need for incorporating pronunciation into foreign language classes owing to regarding pronunciation as a key to gaining full communicative competence, and takes into account present-day views in pronunciation pedagogy like the impact of the discipline of psychology in pronunciation teaching, NLP as a perspective frequently advocated by innovative pronunciation teachers, the idea of approaching pronunciation teaching from different modalities, the relationship between effective foreign language pronunciation teaching and Gardner's MI Theory, Autonomous pronunciation learning and teaching and the use of technology for the teaching of pronunciation.

Keywords: Pronunciation Pedagogy, Applied Phonology, Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

Özet

Bu çalışma telâffuz öğrenimi ve öğretimi ile ilgili güncel bakış açılarını vurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır. Telâffuz öğretiminin geçmişini özetlemekte, tam iletişimsel yeti ediniminde telâffuzu anahtar olarak görmeden dolayı telâffuzu yabancı dil sınıflarına dahil etme ihtiyacını belirtmekte ve ruhbilim alanının telâffuz öğretimine etkisi, yenilikçi telâffuz öğretmenleri tarafından savunulan bir perspektif olarak NLP, telâffuz öğretimine farklı kiplerden yaklaşma fikri, yabancı dilde etkin telâffuz öğretme ve Gardner'ın Çoklu Zekâ Kuramı arasındaki ilişki, Özerk telâffuz öğrenimi ve öğretimi ve telâffuz öğretiminde teknoloji kullanımı gibi telâffuz eğitimindeki günümüz görüşlerini ele almaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Telâffuz Öğretimi, Uygulamalı Sesbilim, Yabancı Dil Öğrenimi ve Öğretimi

Introduction

Pronunciation teaching is a prominent factor in foreign language teaching. Since sounds play an important role in communication, foreign language teachers must attribute proper importance to teaching pronunciation in their classes. However, this fact is very much neglected by many foreign language teachers. It is evident that communication is a mutual relationship between the speaker and the hearer. This means that one must comprehend what he hears in the target language and must produce the sounds of the language he is trying to learn accurately. Unless he has sufficient knowledge of the sound patterns of the target language, he can neither encode a message to anybody nor decode the message sent by another person by learning the sounds of the target language within his mother tongue. Hence, pronunciation teaching is of great importance for successful oral communication to take place since it is an important ingredient of the communicative competence.

This paper provides the background of pronunciation teaching, emphasizes the prominence of pronunciation as a key to gaining full communicative competence, and takes into account trendy views in pronunciation pedagogy like the impact of the discipline of psychology in pronunciation teaching, NLP as a perspective frequently advocated by innovative pronunciation teachers, the idea of approaching pronunciation teaching from different modalities, the relationship between effective foreign language pronunciation teaching and Gardner's MI Theory, Autonomous pronunciation learning and teaching and the use of technology for the teaching of pronunciation.

Background of Pronunciation Teaching

There have been many differences of opinion over the years about the role of pronunciation in language teaching and about how best to teach it. The grammar-translation method and reading-based approaches have viewed pronunciation as irrelevant. In the direct method, pronunciation is very important; however, the methodology is primitive: The teacher is ideally a native or near-native speaker of the target language presenting pronunciation inductively and correcting through modeling. In the audio-lingual approach, pronunciation is likewise very important and there is a great emphasis on the traditional notions of pronunciation, minimal pairs, drills and

short conversations (Celce Murcia and Goodwin 1991: 136). Situational language teaching, developed in Britain between 1940 and 1960, also reflected the audio-lingual view of the pronunciation class (Richards and Rodgers 1986). Morley (1991:484) states, “The pronunciation class... was one that gave primary attention to phonemes and their meaningful contrasts, environmental allophonic variations, and combinatory phonotactic rules, along with ... attention to stress, rhythm, and intonation.”

Since the conventional wisdom of the late 1960's and early 1970's held that native-like pronunciation could not be totally taught anyway, the cognitive code approach de-emphasized pronunciation in favor of grammar and vocabulary. It was during these years that questions were asked about the role of pronunciation in the ESL/EFL curriculum, whether the focus of the programs and the instructional methods were effective or not. Pronunciation programs until then were “viewed as meaningless non-communicative drill-and-exercise gambits” (Morley 1991:485-6). In many language programs, the teaching of pronunciation was eliminated because many studies concluded “that little relationship exists between teaching pronunciation in the classroom and attained proficiency in pronunciation; the strongest factors found to affect pronunciation (i.e. native language and motivation) seem to have little to do with classroom activities” (Suter 1976:233-53, Purcell and Suter 1980:271-87). However, with the emergence of the communicative approach to foreign language teaching, pronunciation has been regarded within the framework of real communication.

The Communicative Approach, which persists today with criticism from some quarters, sprung into prominence in the 1980's. This approach holds that oral communication is the primary use of language and therefore should be central to the mode of instruction. Though pronunciation is not an explicit feature in this mode of instruction, the prominence of pronunciation has been stressed by it (Carey 2002:3). Students can be expected to do well in the pronunciation of English if the pronunciation class is taken out of isolation and becomes an 'integral part of [the] oral communication' class (Morley 1991:496). Moreover, the goal of pronunciation has changed from the attainment of 'perfect' pronunciation to the more realistic goals of developing functional intelligibility, communicability, increased self-confidence, the development of speech monitoring abilities and speech modification strategies for use beyond the classroom (Morley 1991:500). The overall aim of these goals is for the learner to develop spoken English that is easy to understand, serves the learner's individual needs, and allows a positive image of himself as a speaker of a foreign language. The learner needs to

develop awareness and monitoring skills which will pave the way for learning opportunities outside the classroom environment.

Current Perspectives on Pronunciation Learning and Teaching

There has been a prominent shift within the field of language learning and teaching with greater emphasis being put on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching over the last twenty years. In parallel to this new shift of interest, a move from specific linguistic competencies to broader communicative competencies has emerged as goals for teachers and students (Morley 1991: 481-520). The need for the integration of pronunciation with oral communication, a change of emphasis from segmentals to suprasegmentals, more emphasis on individual learner needs, meaningful task-based practices, development of new teacher strategies for the teaching and introducing peer correction and group interaction were emphasized within the field of pronunciation teaching (Castillo 1991:4). Research has revealed that the teaching of segmental phonemes isn't enough for intelligibility in communication (Cohen 1977:71-7).

According to Morley (1991:488), “Intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communication competence”. For this reason, teachers should incorporate pronunciation into their courses and expect students to do well in them. Teachers should pay attention to reassessing learner needs and learners goals, instructional objectives, and learning / teaching methodologies. They should attach importance to current directions in language learning and teaching theory and pedagogy. They should be primarily concerned with how pronunciation fits into communicative language teaching. There should be emphasis on meaningful communication when teaching pronunciation to the students. Without adequate pronunciation skills, the learner's ability to communicate is severely limited. Morley (1991:489) states that not attending to a student's pronunciation needs, “is an abrogation of professional responsibility”.

One empirical study suggests that there is a threshold level of pronunciation in English such that if a given nonnative speaker's pronunciation falls below this level, no matter how good his or her control of English grammar and vocabulary might be, he or she will not be able to communicate orally with native speakers of English (Celce-Murcia and Goodwin 1991:136).

Gilbert (1984:1) states that the skills of listening comprehension and pronunciation are interdependent: “If they cannot hear English well, they are cut off

from the language...If they cannot be understood easily, they are cut off from conversation with native speakers.” Nooteboom (1983:183-94) also has suggested that speech production is affected by speech perception; the hearer has become an important factor in communication discourse. This shows the need to integrate pronunciation with communicative activities; to give the student situations to develop their pronunciation by listening and speaking. The current research and the current trend reversal in the thinking of pronunciation exhibits there is a consensus that a learner's pronunciation in a foreign language needs to be taught in parallel to the communicative practices for the learner to be able to communicate effectively with native speakers (Otlowski 1998:3).

The impact of the discipline of psychology can be seen in current trends in pronunciation teaching. Since pronunciation is very sensitive to emotional factors and that its nature is strongly related to students' ego, identity and the level of self-confidence, new trends in teaching pronunciation put a strong emphasis on the affective domain of learning to counterbalance the traditional focus placed exclusively on intellectual learning. An ideal receptive learning state come into being when a student is physically relaxed, emotionally calm and mentally alert. Research findings show that a relaxed frame of mind and a degree of confidence pave the way for a correct production of target language sounds. Hence, establishing a non-threatening student-friendly environment is amongst main concerns of modern pronunciation instruction. Efficient ways of reducing stress related with pronunciation practice and dealing more efficiently with learners' emotions are based on the use of drama techniques. It is through drama techniques that learners become more expressive and more willing to experiment with sounds or intonation patterns. A commonly used strategy involves assuming an English or American identity and putting on a strong native accent, as if becoming a different dramatic persona (Wrembel 2001:3).

Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) is another perspective frequently advocated by innovative pronunciation teachers since it deals efficiently with affective factors concerning learning pronunciation and facilitates an accurate production of target language sounds. NLP is a collection of patterns and strategies based on a series of underlying understandings of how the mind works and how people act and react. NLP's main concern are neurological processes called states. According to NLP perspective, a desired state of mind, when learning occurs naturally, could be induced through relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises or autogenic training (i.e. guided

imagery activities), which render learners emotionally calm and mentally alert and, at the same time, help break down their ego boundaries.

The NLP perspective gives much prominence to the role of interpersonal relationships between the teacher and the learner. This meta-communication, i.e. rapport, linkage and authority, is believed to be especially conducive to success in pronunciation learning. The process of learning pronunciation of a second language has been demonstrated to be especially sensitive to suggestion. Sometimes referred to as educational hypnosis, suggestion is one of key priorities in NLP. It can be defined as a desire to constantly suggest internal representations that lead someone to facilitative states. Thus, the way teachers talk about acquiring good pronunciation and the messages sent consciously or subconsciously to students include significant suggestive communication patterns. NLP contributes to use language more efficiently so that through sending positive messages and suggestions of success we can generate intended responses (Wrembel 2001:3).

In recent years, the idea of approaching pronunciation teaching from different modalities (i.e. auditory, visual, kinesthetic, tactile) has become very popular within the field of foreign language teaching. To present and practice a sound from several perspectives is just basic stuff of good pronunciation teaching. Language teachers should employ a multi-modal method in the pronunciation class; that is, every sound process should be taught as a totality: visual + auditory + kinesthetic + tactile (though not necessarily in that order). Thus, students can have the chance to strengthen their lesser modalities. For instance, any experienced pronunciation teacher knows that to produce / r / and / l / well may require all modalities be engaged and sequenced. Students should hear the distinction, feel the difference, consciously focus on the movement of lips and tongue, and probably focus on the place(s) where the tongue comes into contact with the palate (i.e. hard or soft) (Acton 1997:5).

Whether there is a sound relationship between effective foreign language pronunciation teaching and Howard Gardner's (1983) Multiple Intelligences Theory has been the primary concern of some researchers. Such researchers have offered various pronunciation teaching techniques and activities related with each intelligence type included within the theory. For example, Thompson, Taylor and Gray (2001:1-6) present various pronunciation teaching techniques and activities so as to help students develop effective target language pronunciation: For example, for students with bodily / kinesthetic intelligence, techniques like tossing a ball, using a rubber band, knee

bending / body language, balloon squealing, etc. can be useful. Another example is that for students with visual / spatial intelligence, techniques like using wall charts, using a mirror, card games, etc. can be used. Moreover, for students with musical / rhythmic intelligence, techniques like using a song, using kazoos and using musical notation may be utilized by the teacher.

In parallel to the emergence of autonomous language learning, many innovative pronunciation teachers have attempted to move towards autonomous pronunciation learning. Such teachers motivate their students to become autonomous learners. Since students cannot always find the chance to ask their language teacher for help in real life contexts, they should be stimulated to come to a stage where they can make their own decisions about their own pronunciation learning. Students can be actively involved in their own learning. If the teacher teaches the students how to transcribe words by using phonetic symbols, students become autonomous to some extent in that they may look up their monolingual dictionaries when not knowing how to pronounce a word in the target language. Moreover, motivating students to use computer-assisted pronunciation teaching programs can lead to autonomous pronunciation learning and hence may contribute to the improvement of the pronunciation of the students in the target language. However, it should not be forgotten that students are semi-autonomous pronunciation learners since it is the language teacher who selects the most appropriate computer-assisted pronunciation teaching program relevant to the needs and expectations of an individual student (Hismanoglu 2004:790-1).

Reflective pronunciation teaching and learning, though neglected by many language teachers, has gained importance in today's pronunciation classes. The teacher's pronunciation lesson can be video-taped or audio-taped. Then, those videotaped or audio taped pronunciation lesson can be evaluated by several colleagues. To put it another way, other colleagues criticize the pronunciation lesson in terms of methodology used by the teacher. They give feedback to their colleague as to pros and cons of the presented lesson. They give helpful advice to their colleagues concerning better ways of presenting the same lesson. The same process can be done with students, too. Students can record their speech and they can criticize their own pronunciation learning and improvement by listening to tapes of their speech. Self-monitoring, reaction, and reflection are among characteristic features of good pronunciation learners. Some pronunciation teachers keep a pronunciation portfolio for each student in the classroom. Keeping a detailed tape or video records of students' speech, teachers can

see the pronunciation development of their students. At this stage, the counseling method can be utilized. Thus, previous and subsequent pronunciation performance of the same student can be evaluated. Moreover, comparison and contrast of pre and post performances of each student with other students can be made (Hismanoglu 2004:791).

In addition to the above mentioned innovations, there has been an increasing interest in the use of technology for the teaching of pronunciation recently. Various types of computer hardware have been introduced and a number of studies show a growing interest among language teachers and researchers in the benefits of computer-assisted pronunciation pedagogy (Albertson 1982, Molholt 1988, Molholt, Lane, Tanner and Fischer 1988, Pennington 1988, Chun 1989, Perdreau and Hessney 1990, etc.). Many empirical studies have stressed the effectiveness of this technology in second / foreign language pronunciation teaching (Vardanian 1964, Richmond 1976, de Bot 1983, Weltens and de Bot 1984, Johnson, Dunkel and Rekart 1991, Schwartz, Markoff and Jain 1991). Because Computer Assisted Pronunciation Teaching (CAPT) provides students with a private, stress-free environment within which they can access virtually unlimited input, practise at their own pace and receive instantaneous feedback through the integration of Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR), it can be accepted to be beneficial to second / foreign language learning.

Conclusion

Current trends in pronunciation pedagogy have been affected by disciplines like psychology, neuro-linguistics, sociology, semiotics and computer technology to a great extent. In our times, the dominant tendency is adopting an interdisciplinary approach which makes use of the findings of neurolinguistics, takes into account personality factors (i.e. promoting or impeding pronunciation mastery, such as age, the student's exposure to the target language, aptitude, the student's attitude and motivation, the influence of the native language, amount and type of prior pronunciation instruction) as well as psychological factors (i.e. anxiety, excitement, etc.), stresses the importance of nonverbal aspects of communication (i.e. auditory, visual, kinesthetic and tactile modalities) and benefits from the use of computer technology.

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