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Pronunciation as a Prerequisite for Linguistic Competence with Special Reference to English

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Abstract:

Pronunciation is an integral part of language learning since it directly affects learners' communicative competence and performance. Clear and correct pronunciation is a prerequisite for effective communication in addition to rich vocabulary and good command of grammar. Good pronunciation requires proper articulation of sounds wreathed in words and phrases. If pronunciation is poor, neither grammar nor vocabulary would be helpful. The main purpose of teaching and learning of any language is to enable students to communicate in the target language as the main purpose of communication is to understand and to be understood. The same is true for pronunciation also. Usually, learners ignore pronunciation in language learning which leads to misunderstanding in communication or ineffective communication. The paper emphasises the importance of pronunciation, identifies the features of English pronunciation, some rules of pronunciation, explains factors affecting the learning of pronunciation, and the strategies for improving correct pronunciation.

Keywords: Pronunciation, effective communication, linguistic competence

Introduction

Correct pronunciation is the basis for effective communication in English, as in any other language. When we talk to people in the real life, our pronunciation is the first thing that the people notice during a conversation. Correct pronunciation is vital to proper communication. Pronunciation is a set of habits of producing sounds with correct stress, rhythm, and intonation of the utterances in spoken language to make meaning. The teaching and learning of pronunciation involves two interrelated skills. The first is listening to and understanding the flow of speech and the second is the production of or fluency of speech. It is only practice in listening and speaking which enables a speaker to pronounce words and sentences correctly. The incorrect use of pronunciation inevitably leads to negative impression, and ineffective communication, and sometimes embarrassing situations.

One of the primary goals of teaching pronunciation in any course is -- intelligible pronunciation-- not perfect pronunciation. Intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence (Morley, 1991). There are several models of English pronunciation and it varies from one geographical entity to the other and from one country to another. It is said that the pronunciation of a language varies every six miles because of geographical and cultural reasons. The pronunciation also varies according to the standards of education and living. While a standard form of written English existed for hundreds of years, there has been even within English-speaking nations like the UK, the USA, Canada, and Australia a great diversity in the pronunciation of people belonging to different regions and different sections of the community. One particular regional accent, over the last five hundred years, however, has acquired social prestige. It is Received Pronunciation (RP), popularly known as BBC English (the kind spoken by British newscasters), Queen's English or Standard English. RP is the pronunciation of the southeast of England, particularly of the London region and is rather a social accent than regional, associated with the educated upper classes (and/or people who have attended public schools) in Britain. This is, in fact, the most 'accepted pronunciation'.

Features of English Pronunciation

In many cases, mispronunciation of a language leads to misunderstanding in communication. So, for effective communication, intelligible pronunciation is a prerequisite. There are two important features of English pronunciation -- the segmental and the supra-segmental features -- the knowledge of which help the learner achieve intelligibility (production of recognisable utterances), comprehensibility (understanding the meaning of the utterances) and interpretability (making listeners able to understand the purpose of the utterances). All languages make use of segmental and supra-segmental features. According to Saferglu (2005), segmental aspects of the sound system include vowels and consonants -- the basic sounds of English. Segmental features relate to sounds at micro level. They include specific sounds within words. For example, *l* as in lamp, *r* as in ramp, *a* as in hat. Supra-segmental features relate to sounds at macro level. The knowledge and use of supra-segmental features like stress, intonation, pitch, juncture, etc. are important for effective communication.

Basic Sounds of English

There are 44 speech sounds in English, with some variations dependent on accent and articulation. These speech sounds are called phonemes. A phoneme may be defined as the smallest unit of sound which makes difference in meaning. The words *bit* and *sit* are composed of three significant units of sounds (three phonemes) and differ only in the first phoneme. The contrast between the phoneme /b/ and the phoneme /s/ signals the difference in meaning between the two words. *Bit* and *beat* also contain three morphemes, differing only in the second phoneme. *Bib*, *bin*, *bid*, and *big* differ only in the final phoneme, a crucial sound distinction which contrasts meaning among the five words. Since sounds cannot be written, so symbols are used to represent

the sounds. The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is a system of phonetic notation devised by linguists to provide a standardized, accurate, and unique way of representing sounds to indicate their pronunciation. Phonetics is the scientific study of speech sounds. It studies how speech sounds are articulated, transmitted, and received. In other words, phonetics is that branch of linguistics which studies the production, transmission, and reception of speech sound.

A basic understanding of the sound system and the ability to produce individual sounds, both in isolation and in combination with other sounds, also plays a significant role in effective oral communication. There are various ways in which English speech sounds can be classified:

Oral and Nasal: All sounds are either oral or nasal. Sounds are produced by the speech organs by forcing the airstream out of the lungs either through oral passage (mouth) or nasal passage (nose). In the production of the oral sound, the air is released through the mouth, whereas, in the production of nasal sound, it is released either fully or partially through the nose. In English, all vowels are oral sounds. The consonants are also oral sounds except the three sounds (/m/, /n/, and /ŋ/), which are nasal sounds.

Voiced and Voiceless: Speech sounds are either voiced or voiceless. During the production of all the English vowels, the soft palate is raised and the vocal cords vibrate. So, all the vowels are voiced. In English, some consonants are voiced and some are unvoiced. There are 15 voiced consonants in English: /b, d, g, v, ð, z, ʒ, dʒ, m, n, ŋ, l, r, w, j/. There are 9 voiceless consonants in English: /p, t, k, tʃ, f, θ, s, ʃ, h/. A sound produced while vocal cords are kept loosely together, vibration takes place and sound produced thus is called voiced sounds. The vibration can be felt by putting the palm of the hands on the Adam's apple (larynx). In the production of unvoiced sounds, on the other hand, the vocal cords do not vibrate as the air passes through the wide-open glottis.

Vowels and Consonants: The 44 speech sounds (Phonemes) can also be classified as vowels and consonants on the basis of manner and place of production. In the articulation/production of vowels the air comes out freely through the mouth. There is no closure or narrowing of the air-passage in the production of the vowel sounds. In the articulation/production of consonants, the flow of air from the lungs through the vocal apparatus is cut off or impeded. As mentioned earlier that there are 44 speech sounds in English in which 20 are vowels and 24 are consonants. The vowel sounds are further classified as pure vowels and diphthongs (also called impure vowels). Some of the pure vowels are short and some of them are long vowels.

Supra-Segmental Features

The supra-segmental features (also known as prosodic features) are the aspects of speech that involve more than vowels and consonants. In the learning of a second or foreign language, individuals need to know not only how to produce phonemes and segmental elements correctly,

but also master supra-segmental features in order to achieve efficiency in oral communication. The supra-segmental features like stress, pitch, intonation, linking, juncture, etc. are important for effective communication. Without these feature human communication is unimaginable. Some important supra-segmental features and their significance in pronunciation are given below:

Stress

Stress or accent is an important feature of pronunciation of English. Stress is ‘emphasis’ or ‘loudness or ‘force’ with which syllables are produced. In linguistics, stress is the relative emphasis that may be given to certain syllables in a word. A syllable is a single unit of speech, either a whole word (I, eye, you etc.) or one of the parts into which a word can be separated, and usually contains a vowel or a diphthong or a syllabic consonant (as in engine, button, etc.). “A syllable must contain a vowel (or vowel like) sound” (Yule 2006 47). One can express oneself clearly and emphatically by placing proper stress on syllables or words. Stress is never absent from any syllable whether it is stressed or unstressed. So it is said that English has a stressed time rhythm.

In English there are two types of stress -- word stress and phrasal or sentence stress. The stress placed on syllables within words is called word stress or lexical stress. The most popular system is to put a vertical line (') before the stressed syllable in the phonetic transcription of the word. For example, the transcription for *become* is /bɪ'kʌm/. A stressed syllable is usually said louder than an unstressed one. It is also often accompanied by a higher pitch. The stressed syllables convey the overall rhythm and the most meaningful part of the utterances.

In longer English words there is always one syllable that is stressed (shown in **bold** in the examples below):

Two syllables: **hun**|gry, **wa**|ter, a|**gain**, ba|**loon**, **en**|ter, etc.

Three syllables: ba|**na**|na, **con**|fe|rence, **di**|ffi|cult, e|xer|cise, **dan**|ger|ous, e|**quip**|ment, etc.

More than three syllables: ob|li|**ga**|tion, te|le|**vi**|sion, etc.

Stress shift in derivatives is quite normal. Often the stress in a multi-syllable word changes according to whether it's a verb, a noun or an adjective. Usually the accent is on the first syllable when the word is a noun or an adjective and on the second syllable when it is a verb.

Examples:

<u>NOUN/ADJECTIVE</u>	<u>VERB</u>
Object	Object
Perfect	Perfect
Produce	Produce
Progress	Progress
Record	Record
Import	Import
Subject	Subject
Increase	Increase

At the phrase or sentence level, some words are given more prominence to foreground whose meaning is important or in focus. As a result of changing pattern of stressing words in sentences, the meaning of utterance is changed. This can be illustrated with the examples given below:

1. **LIZA** is my real sister. (Liza and not any other girl)
2. Liza **IS** my real sister. (Why do you have doubt?)
3. Liza is **MY** real sister. (No one else's)
4. Liza is my **REAL** sister. (Not step-sister)

In the above examples the meaning changes with the change of emphasis on the particular word. Further, here it is to be noted that in English lexical or content words (which contain more information) like nouns, main verbs, adjectives and adverbs are stressed and function words, also called grammatical words (which signify grammatical relationship and contain little information), like determiners (a, the, etc.), pronouns (she, them etc.), auxiliary verbs (do, be, can etc.), prepositions (at, from, etc.) and conjunctions (and, but etc.) are usually unstressed. Examples:

1. **BRING** me a **GLASS** of **WATER**.
2. Did you **GO** to the **MARKET**?
3. The **BOY** in the **CORNER** is **HOLDING** a **BOOK**.
4. A **STITCH** in **TIMES** **SAVES** **NINE**.

Pitch and Intonation

Intonation is a feature of pronunciation and common to all languages. To understand intonation, first we must understand pitch, which is the relative highness or lowness of voice (Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin, 1996). Pitch is the rise and fall of the tone while speaking. The pitch of voice is determined by the frequency with which the vocal cords vibrate. The frequency of

vibration of the vocal cords is determined by their thickness, their length and their tension. As Martha (1996:148) states, one's natural average pitch level depends on the size of the vocal cords. In general, men have thicker and longer vocal cords than women and children do. As a result, the modal pitch of man's voice is generally lower than that of a woman or a child. Linguists have found four relative pitch levels: 1= low, 2= middle, 3= high, and 4= extra high. Only pitches /3/, /2/, and /1/ are used in normal speech. Extra high, however, is used to express strong emotion (for shouting, screaming, to express surprise, enthusiasm, disbelief, etc.).

Some utterances are made with high pitch while others with low pitch. This rise and fall of the pitch of our voice is called intonation. Intonation is the melody of spoken language. At its simplest, intonation could be described as 'the music of speech'. Changing the pattern of intonation of an utterance can change the meaning. There are two important tones in use: Intonation Tone I or Falling Tone which is usually shown with a falling arrow (↘). This tone is used in the case of statement, commands, Wh-questions, in exclamatory sentences etc. Intonation Tone II or Rising Tone is indicated with a rising arrow (↗). This tone is used in the case of a sentence expressing request, questions which can be answered in 'Yes' or 'No. In the examples given below, the change in intonation has changes a statement to a question of doubt or surprise.

1. Trump won the election. (Statement)
2. Trump won the election? (Surprise)

Some other examples of how changing pattern of intonation expresses different shades of emotions:

Yes. (Answer in confirmation or agreement.)

Yes? (Guessing)

Yes. (What do you want?)

Yes. (I see...said evilly)

Linking:

Speech is a continuous stream of sounds, without clear-cut boundaries between them and because of that learners find spoken discourse more difficult to understand than written discourse. Linking refers to the way the last sound of one word is joined to the first sound of the next word in speech. The different aspects of linking or connected speech like assimilation, elision, etc. may help to understand why written English is so different from spoken English. When two sound segments occur in sequence and some aspect of one segment is taken or 'copied' by the other, the process is known as assimilation (Yule 48). Assimilation is the change in pronunciation of a phoneme under the influence of surrounding sounds. For example, "any

vowel becomes nasal whenever it immediately precedes a nasal” (Yule 49). The words I, can, and go are pronounced by themselves as /ai/, /kæn/, and gəu/ respectively, but in the conversation version ‘I can go’ is pronounced as /ajkəŋgəu/. Notice that the vowel in ‘can’ has changed to schwa/ə/ (an unstressed vowel) from the isolated word version /æ/. Similarly, ‘and’ is pronounced as /ænd/ by itself but in the normal use of phrase ‘you and me’, it is pronounced as /ən/, as in /juənmi/.

The term elision describes the disappearance of a sound in the pronunciation of an utterance. The elision is the process which indicates loss of certain elements in rapid speech which are present in isolated utterance or very conscious speech. . In fact, elision is the loss of a phoneme, most commonly the last phoneme of a word, and most commonly the /t/ and /d/ sounds, as in the phrases ‘left back’ /lefbæk/, ‘stand by’ /stænbai/, ‘looked back’ /lʊkbæk/, etc. Similarly, no /d/ sound is pronounced in the everyday speech of a word like ‘friendship’ /frenʃɪp/.

Some other examples of linking where some sounds disappear (elide), change or travel to other sounds in a sentence as given below:

- (i) Next please ----- /nekspli:z/ ----- the ‘t’ at the end of ‘next’ disappears. (Elision)
- (ii) I don’t know ----- /aidəunəu/ -----the ‘t’ at the end of ‘don’t’ disappears. (Elision)
- (iii) Ground plan ----- /graumplæn/ -----the ‘d’ at the end of ‘ground’ disappears and ‘n’ becomes ‘m’. (Elision and Assimilation)
- (iv) Brown bear----- /braumbəə/ ----- the ‘n’ at the end of ‘brown’ becomes ‘m’. (Assimilation)

In connected speech, sounds (vowels or consonants) disappear or change, or travel to the beginning of the next word. So, it is important to understand the difference between individual sounds in words and individual words in sentences in oral communication.

Juncture:

Juncture is ‘the transition from one segmental phoneme to another’. It is a pause or slight delay in a continuous flow of speech. It is the relationship between two successive syllables in speech. In connected speech it is necessary to distinguish within one macrosegment such phonemes whose function is to keep utterances apart. We must, for example, convey to the listener whether we mean a part (a+part) or apart when we use these segments, however rapid our speech may be. The accent feature of course plays a significant part in it; but we must also give a brief pause that would separate ‘a’ from ‘part’ when we wish to say ‘a part’, and remove that pause when we wish to say ‘apart’. Often, juncture helps the listener to distinguish between pairs such as ‘see Mill’ and ‘seem ill’ in ‘Did he see Mill?’ and ‘Did he seem ill?’ Thus, juncture is a type of ‘boundary between two phonemes’. Some other examples of juncture are given below:

A name -- An aim
That stuff -- that's tough
Ice cream -- I scream
A nice man -- An ice man
Night rate -- Nitrate -- Nye-trait
Plum pie -- plump eye
Two lips - Tulips

Some Rules of Pronunciation

From the illustrations given above, it is clear that the production of individual sounds does not follow a set pattern. It has to be learnt through intensive practice. However, the pronunciation of certain words follow a regular pattern and follow set rules which are given below:

The inflectional endings (plurals) –s or –es are pronounced in three different ways:

(a) /iz/ after the consonants /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/ and /dʒ/

Examples: buses, raises, bushes, mirages, benches, judges

(b) /s/ after the consonants /p/, /t/, /k/, /f/, and /θ/

Examples: taps, cats, books, roofs, oaths

(c) /z/ after all other consonants and vowels

Examples: combs, bulbs, leaves, dogs, pens, keys, flies, etc.

(i) The past markers –d or –ed are pronounced in all three different ways:

(a) /id/ after the consonants /t/ and /d/

Examples: wanted, bounded

(b) /t/ after the consonants /p/, /k/, /tʃ/, /f/, /θ/, /s/, and /ʃ/

Examples: topped, talked, matched, coughed, kissed, earthed, and wished.

(c) /d/ after all other consonants and vowels

Examples: grabbed, loved, hugged, erased, called, named, cried, cured, etc.

(ii) There are a few word-endings that are sometimes mispronounced. The correct pronunciations of these endings have been given below:

(a) -age ----- /ɪdʒ/ and not /eɪdʒ/

Examples: language, adage, cabbage, savage

(b) -ate ----- in adjectives ----- /ət/ and not /eɪt/

Examples: intimate, penultimate, delicate

-ate – in verbs ----- /eɪt/

Examples: activate, punctuate, differentiate

(c) -ance/-ence, -ant/-ent-----vowel /ə/ and not /e/ or /æ/

Examples: disturbance, preference, arrogant, agreement

(d) -cian-----/ʃn/ and not /ʃiən/

Examples: musician, politician, technician

(e) -est/-et----- vowel /i/ and not /e/

Examples: finest, coldest, pocket, socket

(f) -cial, -sial, and -tial ----- /ʃl/ and not /ʃiəl/

Examples: social, controversial, preferential

(iii) ‘-ng’ is pronounced in the following ways:

(a) In final position ‘-ng’ is always pronounced as /ŋ/ and never /ŋg/

Examples: hang, ring, lung, speaking, reading, writing

(b) In medial position ‘-ng’ is pronounced in two different ways:

/ŋg/ only in the words formed from verbs, e.g., singer, bringer, ringer

Also, /ŋ/ only when the plural marker –s is suffixed to nouns ending in /ŋ/

Example: kings, things, songs

Factors Affecting the Learning of English Pronunciation

There are several factors that affect the learning of English pronunciation such as inconsistency of English spelling which includes homophones, homographs, and silent letters. Ambiguity of rhoticity in English also pose problem in correct pronunciation. Other factors like attitude of the learners, motivation, classroom teaching, exposure to target language etc. also affect correct pronunciation.

It is very important to understand that spelling and pronunciation are not always the same. In English, there is no one-to-one relation between the system of writing and the system of pronunciation. The English alphabet has twenty-six letters and they represent forty-four distinct sounds. The difficulty is that these twenty-six letters do not represent all the phonemes of English unambiguously. English spelling is not entirely phonemic. So we often do not always pronounce a word in the same way as it is spelt. The inconsistencies of English spelling augment incorrect pronunciation. For example, ‘c’ in ‘car’, ‘k’ in ‘kite’, ‘cc’ in ‘occasion’, and ‘ch’ in ‘chemist’ all represent the same sound /k/. Similarly, different sounds are represented by ‘ch’ in words such as ‘chemistry’, ‘machine’, ‘attach’, etc. There are also letters that represent sounds not even hinted by the graphic sign. For example, ‘gh’ in ‘rough’, represents the /f/ sound, ‘x’ in ‘examine’ stands for /gz/, and ‘y’ in ‘city’ stands for the /i/ sound. Similarly, the sound /ʃ/ is to be found in the following letter combinations: shut, champagne, nation, expansion, conscience, issue, and sugar. So, some words have the same spelling but different pronunciations (homographs), in different categories, for example:

Present – read -- [ri:d].

Past –read -- [red]

Other examples are:

Close -/kləʊz/ (verb) and /kləʊs/ (adjective), live - /lɪv/ (verb) and /laɪv/ (adjective), minute - /mɪnɪt/ (noun) and /maɪnju:t/ (adjective)

Some words have different spellings but the same pronunciation (homophones), for example:

Bare / bear - /beə/, seen / scene - /si:n/, right/write/rite - /raɪt/

Additionally, there are many words in English, where some letters are not pronounced and such letters do not represent any sound. For example, ‘b’ in ‘debt’, ‘e’ in ‘love’, ‘g’ in ‘sign’, ‘h’ in ‘honest’, ‘k’ in ‘know’, ‘n’ in ‘column’, ‘p’ in ‘pneumonia’, ‘t’ in ‘listen’, ‘w’ in ‘write’, etc. do not present any sound – they are silent. This inconsistency is due to the fact that during the

course of its history it has been influenced by numerous languages, especially by German, Latin, French and the Scandinavian languages.

Another reason that a non-native speaker faces difficulty in pronunciation is due to rhotic and non-rhotic pronunciation. In rhotic pronunciation the letter 'R' is pronounced before consonants or word final as in *hard* and *water*. The letter 'R' is nearly always pronounced in many regional British and Scottish accents, and in most American accents. However, in standard British English the pronunciation of letter 'R' is not pronounced when it appears after a long vowel sound or diphthong, or at the ends of words, for example, 'warmer' is /wɔ:mə/, 'girl' is /gɜ:l/, 'early' is /ɜ:li/, 'more' is /mɔ:/ and 'or' is /ɔ:/. Some other factors affecting the teaching and learning of pronunciation are attitude of the learners, motivation, classroom teaching, exposure to target language, etc.

Motivation and attitude provide primary impetus to initiate learning a new language. Brown (1981) defines motivation as "an inner drive, impulse emotion, or desire that moves one toward a particular action". Motivation is regarded as an influential element in the success of any activity. Motivation can play a crucial role in achieving the desired goals of correct pronunciation also. Moyer (2007) found that experience with positive attitude to the language appears to be an important factor in developing native-like pronunciation.

According to Elliot (1995), teachers tend to view pronunciation as the least useful of the basic language skills and therefore they generally ignore teaching pronunciation. Unfortunately, numerous teachers are not aware of the importance of pronunciation and so they emphasize only the role of grammar and vocabulary learning in the acquisition of a foreign or second language. Due to lack of exposure and extensive practice in the classroom, students are not able to pronounce many words correctly.

Strategies for Improving English Pronunciation

If the learners are aware of the factors affecting pronunciation, it becomes easier for them to overcome those factors and improve upon correct pronunciation. For correct pronunciation, one must make use of good dictionaries like *The Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary of Current English* (third edition), *The English Pronouncing Dictionary by Daniel Jones* (15th edition), etc. The use of different media can also be helpful. The most obvious way is to watch and pay close attention to English movies, songs (with their subtitles), news broadcasts or TV shows. Attention should be given on how vowels and consonants are pronounced, which syllables are usually stressed. Also, one should notice the pitch and intonation of the utterances. Reading English books, magazines and newspapers will also be of help as there is use of language of everyday communication in them. Technology is a powerful tool that can make learning of pronunciation easier. One can find a lot of exercises on the internet, for example, on the BBC website, at Fonetiks and other websites.

As mentioned earlier, pronunciation is as important as grammar and vocabulary. So teachers should encourage learners to speak English with focus on pronunciation and accent not only in the classroom but also outside the classroom and provide them with assignments to practise. The learners should be exposed to the pronunciation and use of target language in the form of their day-to-day communication. Learning to spell helps to cement the connection between the letters and their sounds. So, inconsistencies in spelling system should be taught systematically and analytically with reference to a phonemic analysis of sounds. When practicing pronunciation, focus should be made on the sound of the words rather than the spelling of the words. Besides, teaching pronunciation should be integrated into the curriculum also.

Conclusion

Pronunciation is one of the most conspicuous features of an individual's speech, yet so often it is not given due importance in teaching and learning a language. Learning how to pronounce sounds, words and sentences correctly is just as important as learning the grammar and vocabulary of that language. In English, the problem of pronunciation is due to faulty teaching and learning process. Also, the inconsistencies of English spelling pose some problems. English spelling is inconsistent mainly due to homophones, homographs and silent letters. So, it is very important to understand that English spelling and English pronunciation are not always the same. It is also important that children learn correct pronunciation when they are learning a new word so that they store it correctly in their brains and make it their habit. Use of good dictionaries, various electronic and printed media, some useful websites, etc. can also be of great help in learning correct and clear pronunciation.

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