The Importance of Phonetics and Phonology in the Teaching of Pronunciation

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Introduction

The teaching of pronunciation has witnessed remarkable changes throughout the history of language teaching and learning. As one of the most neglected aspects of English language teaching, pronunciation has gained attention only in the past half of the 20th century with the rise of Audiolingualism and the Direct Method. Throughout history, teachers and applied linguists have been concerned with the difficulty of teaching this skill. In this respect, they have attempted to develop different methods and techniques with the reliance on other sub-disciplines such as phonetics, phonology and second language acquisition among others. Taking phonetics and phonology as a framework, teachers have tried to make use of the different components of these core disciplines in order to apply them to their classrooms. In this respect, the present essay endeavors to highlight the importance of phonetics and phonology in the teaching of pronunciation. Therefore, it will be initiated by defining and contextualizing the issue of teaching pronunciation. Second, the different components of the study of phonetics and phonology will be highlighted with their relevance to the teaching of pronunciation. Afterwards, some practical techniques and activities, which involve the use of phonetics and phonology in the teaching of pronunciation, will be presented.

I. Definition and Background:

In general terms, pronunciation is defined as “the manner in which speech sounds, especially connected sequences are articulated by individual speakers or by speakers generally” Trask (1996: 291). In the light of this definition, pronunciation seems to be closely linked to the study of phonetics which involves the scientific study and description of speech sounds. From a more technical perspective, Pennington & Richards (1986: 208) define pronunciation, according to language teachers, as follows: “For most language teachers, pronunciation is largely identified with the articulation of individual sounds and, to a lesser extent, with the stress and intonation patterns of the target language”. In this respect, the second definition does not limit pronunciation only to the way in which sounds are articulated but goes further to incorporate other articulatory aspects, namely stress and intonation patterns.

In addition to this definition, Pennington & Richards (1986) subdivided pronunciation into four major components which include:
- Segmental features: minimal units of sound defined in phonetic terms.
- Voice-setting features: General articulatory characteristics of stretches of speech.
- Prosodic features: involve the relative levels of stress and pitch within syllables, words, phrases and longer stretches of speech.

This decomposition of pronunciation into different components is motivated by one simple reason, namely to make the teaching of pronunciation an easy, manageable task.

Throughout the history of language teaching, some teachers asked whether pronunciation can or needs to be taught and others dropped its teaching from their syllabi. However, with the rise of Audiolingualism and the influence of Behaviorism, teachers started to adopt the “listen and repeat” approach. This approach focused on habit-formation whereby the teacher pronounces isolated words to the students to repeat and the more repetition/imitation is reinforced, the more students will become accurate. Later on, with the rise of the communicative movement in the 1970’s and 1980’s, the pronunciation component was given less attention due to the growing dissatisfaction with the traditional approaches to its teaching. Alternatively, in the late 1980’s with the rise of interlanguage studies and the rapid growth in the study of phonology, the teaching of pronunciation regained the attention of teachers and applied linguists. While some of them still continue to adopt the traditional models of drilling and imitation, others have tried to design techniques and methods to integrate the teaching of pronunciation with other basic language skills.

II. The Importance of Phonetics and Phonology to the Pronunciation Component:

For a long period of time, teachers have been concerned with finding out the appropriate way of teaching the sounds of a foreign language, which are different from the native language, without using the orthographic alphabet. Among the most useful solutions that have been suggested is the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

The IPA aims to provide visually distinctive symbols for all speech sounds which are phonologically distinct in any language Trask (1996). Since its development, different versions of the IPA have been adopted by teachers to be included in textbooks for teaching pronunciation (e.g. O’Connor (1967)).

In the same vein, phonetics have brought new insights to the teaching of pronunciation. Concerned with “the study of the physical properties of sounds and their place and manner of articulation in the vocal

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1 The IPA was developed by the International Phonetic Association in 1888 and was revised in 1993.
tract” Broughton et. al. (1980: 50), phonetics forms a tool of paramount importance that is used in the teaching of pronunciation. For instance, in any description of the English sound system, speech sounds are categorized into consonants and vowels. Following Haycraft (1978), consonants can be described depending on the movements of the mouth during the articulation (bilabial, dental, alveolar, palatal, velar) or depending on the nature of the airstream, the place and movement of the tongue, and also whether the voice is used or not (voiced, voiceless, plosive, affricate, fricative, nasal, lateral). On the other hand, vowels are described mainly in terms of the position of the tongue and lip rounding. These detailed phonetic descriptions are not arbitrary since they are of paramount importance to the teaching of pronunciation. According to Haycraft (1978: 58), “Awareness of this is useful as many mistakes made by learners are due to slight differences in sound production”.

Phonology is “the study or description of the distinctive sound units (phonemes) of a language and their relationship to one another” Richards & Schmidt (2010: 433). This branch of linguistics is concerned with how phonemes and their allophones operate in different phonological systems. Throughout history, the study of phonology has witnessed a paradigm shift with the introduction of distinctive features as the smallest units of phonological analysis instead of phonemes. Insofar as the teaching of pronunciation is concerned, this paradigm shift resulted in two views, namely distinctive-feature analysis and structuralist analysis. In his seminal paper on the issue, Prator (1971) attempts to establish a hierarchy of priorities for the teaching of pronunciation. In his treatment, the author presents the two views; A distinctive-feature analysis uses distinctive features as the basic analytical unit while a structuralist analysis makes use of phonemes. For language teachers, Prator (ibid.) claims that the use of distinctive-feature analysis would be disappointing since those features were mainly developed for classificatory purposes to be used by Chomsky and his co-workers in their typologies (e.g. Chomsky & Halle (1986)). In view of this, Prator (ibid.) highlights the importance of going back to a structuralist analysis, as he states: “I believe the phoneme is useful and that teachers of ESL should be familiar with the concept, particularly because it does provide considerable amount of guidance in deciding how to assign priorities in teaching pronunciation” (p. 67). In the same vein, he goes further and justifies his claim in the following statement:

2 “A phoneme is … a unit of sound that can be the sole element whereby one word is distinguished in meaning from another.” Prator (1971: 62)
3 “One of two or more phonetically distinct segments which can realize a single phoneme is varying circumstances.” Trask (1996: 16)
“since phonemic distinctions correlate with meaning, they are important than allophonic distinctions to a student who is learning a language in order to be able to communicate meaning in it” (p. 67).

In this respect, the author develops a hierarchy of priorities that is applicable to the teaching of pronunciation. In the order highest to lowest, priority would be assigned to teaching:

1. Suprasegmental phonemes.
2. Segmental phonemes.
3. Allophones in complementary distribution.
4. Allophones in free alternation.

III. Practical Activities in Teaching Pronunciation:

There has been a great deal of debate on what techniques can be used to teach pronunciation effectively. One of the prominent debates centers on whether to teach pronunciation through imitation or through consciousness-raising. In this regard, Jones (2002) highlights the importance of habit-formation and imitation and its persistence in teaching pronunciation even after the rise of Communicative language teaching. As he states:

"Part of the reason for the focus on habit-formation in acquiring L2 phonology is the special characteristic of pronunciation, which, unlike other language skills, involves both cognitive and motor functions: few would deny that repeated practice of motor functions results in increased dexterity." (p. 180).

One of the prominent techniques used in the teaching of pronunciation is one that makes use of phonemes and minimal pairs. According to Cook (2008), the concepts of phoneme and minimal pair have proved useful in organizing materials for teaching pronunciation. Generally, students are presented with pairs of words like “car” / kaː/ versus “cow” / kəʊ/ or “bra” /braː/ versus “brow” /braʊ/. Then, they are asked whether they are different or not. This allows the teacher to build the whole phonemic inventory from scratch. Furthermore, for students, learning how to distinguish one phoneme from another becomes easy by distinguishing minimal pairs.

Another application of the same technique is discussed in Bowen (1972). According to the latter, a contrast (or minimal pair) is illustrated, explained and then presented for identification by students. For
instance, for the contrast [base/vase], two words will be presented, sometimes alike (base…base), and sometimes different (base…vase). Students will be asked to respond “same” or “different”. Furthermore, the words can also be given one at a time with instructions to raise the left arm if “base” is heard or the right arm if it is “vase”. In this way, the teacher can make use of several contrasts which can be practiced later by students.

Finally, in terms of classroom procedures, Broughton et. al. (1980) advocates a “little and often” teaching sequence. As he describes it: “The teaching sequence must therefore be organized in terms of priorities and degrees of difficulty. The amount of time devoted to specifically pronunciation teaching depends on the larger priorities of the course in general” (p. 62). More specifically, pronunciation practice can be introduced into a lesson at any point where a significant problem is noticed. Broughton et. al. (ibid) further presents some guidelines that can be followed in the teaching of pronunciation, chief of which are the following:

- Recognition practice should precede production practice.
- The sound to be heard and spoken should be clearly highlighted in short utterances.
- Students should be given the opportunity to hear the same things said by more than one voice as the model.
- The English sounds can be demonstrated in contrast with other English sounds or in contrast with sounds from the native language.

**Conclusion:**

All in all, the teaching of pronunciation has witnessed a considerable amount of changes in both approaches and techniques. Since the rise of traditional approaches to language teaching, teaching pronunciation has gained momentum. However, with the increased focus on the learner in learner-centered approaches and with the continuing emphasis on the communicative aspect of language teaching, teachers have sought new ways of incorporating pronunciation with other language skills. This has resulted in pronunciation being linked mainly to speaking and listening. Nevertheless, one should not deny the role of phonetics and phonology in the teaching of pronunciation since the more students are aware of the precepts and underpinnings of these branches of study, the more they will become aware of the idiosyncrasies of the target language and the more they are likely to achieve a native-like pronunciation.
Bibliography


