

Pronunciation as orphan: what can be done?

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Pronunciation continues to be the EFL/ESL orphan. Here is some history – the dates show the persistence of the problem. The geographic range of the studies (the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the US, Poland and Spain) shows the problem is world-wide. Following the history are some suggested remedies.

IATEFL and TESOL

The PronSIG

From issue #3 to issue #13 of *Speak Out!*, the newsletter had the subtitle: 'The Newsletter of the IATEFL Phonology Special Interest Group', but in 1994 the SIG committee debated changing the name to refer to 'pronunciation' rather than 'phonology'. Some committee members were concerned that this might lessen the seriousness of the newsletter, but others felt that the word 'phonology' might be intimidating to teachers who would thus miss the benefit of the articles available in *Speak Out!* In the end, the committee decided that it was important to encourage teachers to read the newsletter. In issue 13, 1994, Editor Vaughan-Rees wrote that he was reluctant to change the word because 'for many people the term "pronunciation" means simply 'the articulation of vowels and consonants'. But he assured readers that the newsletter would continue to cover all aspects.

The SPLIS

In 1995, inspired by the PronSIG, a group of TESOL members began a campaign to win approval of the Speech/Pronunciation/Listening Interest Section. After three years of genuine struggle, we finally were authorized to have our first meeting in 1998. Commenting on this development, Marks wrote 'In SPLIS, pronunciation is explicitly linked to listening and to speech... [Whereas] In IATEFL, there's no 'listening' or 'speech' SIG-- pronunciation is on its own, which perhaps supports the perception that P is nothing to do with L and S, and/or that

P is special but L and S aren't.' (Personal communication 2009) However, the problem remained. In 2005 Derwing and Munro concluded that

Despite teachers' increased interest in pronunciation in recent years, as evidenced by the establishment of a TESOL interest section and a proliferation of pronunciation materials for learners, it remains a very marginalized topic in applied linguistics. (2005:382)

Marginalized: the spoken language

Clearly, pronunciation has not been integrated into ESL/EFL teaching. In 1986, Marks had commented 'Few teachers, probably, would claim that they do not teach grammar or vocabulary, on the grounds that they are either too difficult or else not sufficiently important. Yet these are the kinds of comments which many teachers make with regard to the teaching of phonology. (p 9) Five years later, Brown said much the same thing: 'Pronunciation has sometimes been referred to as the 'poor relation' of the English language teaching (ELT) world.' (p 1) And eleven years later, Macdonald surveyed teachers about their reluctance to teach pronunciation and listed their reasons:

....the absence of pronunciation in curricula....a lack of suitable teaching and learning materials of a high quality....an absence of a skills and assessment framework with which to map student ability and progress in this area.... In short, pronunciation does not appear to have a central and integrated position within the ESL curricula of the teachers interviewed... (p 7)

Seven years later, one of my colleagues quoted a fellow teacher as saying 'But pronunciation is SO boring!' and added her own conclusion: 'I am quite sure that all she knew about teaching pron was minimal pair sound drills. Yes, quite boring for everyone, because they were on a path to nowhere.'

Teacher training gone missing

In 1991, Bradford and Kenworthy asked 33 British ESL teachers 'How well did your EFL teacher training prepare you for teaching pronunciation?' Over half the responses were negative. The dissatisfaction mainly related to the emphasis on theory instead of practical application. (p 14)

In 1997 Murphy surveyed MA programs in TESL in the US and described considerable variation in course offerings related to phonology. He commented:

In sum, the survey findings illuminate instructors' tendencies to focus on how segmental and suprasegmental features operate within and across phonological systems. Some attention was given to pedagogical considerations, though such efforts seem relatively low on instructors' lists of priorities.

In 1999 Walker conducted a survey of 350 English teachers in Spain. Although 65% of those surveyed were eager for their students to pronounce English well, he reported that 75% of the survey respondents admitted to 'having received little or no specialist training in the teaching of pronunciation' (p 25).

In 2001, Breitzkreutz et al surveyed 67 ESL programs in Canada and found that only 30% of instructors interviewed had any training in pronunciation. (p 56) In 2002 Derwing and Rossiter interviewed 100 adult ESL students in Canada and found that, although half perceived that pronunciation was a contributing factor to their communication problems, only 8 reported ever having taken a pronunciation course. The authors commented that learner's perceptions of their own pronunciation difficulties did not match the current practice in instruction, and concluded: '....this mismatch suggests that they are either not getting instruction or, if they are, they are not benefiting from it.' (p 161) On reading this, Cruz-Ferreira said 'From what I've observed, multilingual learners suffer the same pronunciation fate as their monolingual peers.' (Personal communication 2009) (Also discussed in chapters 3&5)

Over the last ten years many researchers have found that students feel they should have had more help with pronunciation. Significantly, at the same time that many teachers felt they were not given adequate training, they also reported that they didn't like teaching it. (Walker, 1999; Breitzkreutz et al, 2001; Macdonald, 2002; Warren et al, 2009; Kanellou, 2009)

Brown, while lamenting the small amount of attention given to pronunciation in ELT classrooms, suggested reasons why this may be the case, but added,

On a historical note, it could be pointed out that this gap between theory and practice has not always existed. At its outset at the end of the last [19th] century, the membership of the International Phonetic Association (IPA) was essentially language teachers (of English and other European languages) who were concerned with the description of pronunciation. (p 3)

What caused the change in attention? In 2000, Fraser summarized the recent history of pronunciation in her research report for the Australian Adult Literacy National Project, explaining:

In the post-war boom in English language teaching during the 1950s and 1960s, there was a huge focus on pronunciation – in the form of behaviouristic drilling of sound contrasts and word pairs, with a strong emphasis on the articulation of individual sounds and little attention to rhythm and intonation, or the practice of realistic conversations.....This approach came into disfavour in the 1970s with the development of communicative methods. From then on, the focus was on communication and the use of language in real situations. This was in general a good thing, but it had one unfortunate side effect – the almost complete ignoring of pronunciation. Pronunciation was so strongly associated with the 'drill and kill' methods that it was deliberately downplayedPhonetics and phonology courses were gradually dropped from many teacher training programs and pronunciation was, in general, covered briefly if at all. (p 33)

Marks, later remarking on the development of the communicative approach, wrote 'There's a paradox connected with the notion of "communicative"-ness. The communicative approach tended to downplay the importance of accuracy in general, but somehow overlooked the fact that pronunciation is an immediate barrier to communication unless it has a certain degree of accuracy, in the sense of conformity to some recognised/recognisable system. (2009 personal correspondence).

Fraser's analysis then explained that the pendulum has been swinging back in the last ten years, but because of the long neglect, there was less available knowledge and 'Many teachers and educators understandably turned to phonetics and phonology to learn more about pronunciation'. However, information available in phonology textbooks is not easy to make relevant to pronunciation teaching. She concluded, 'It will be clear that there is a burning need for an increase in the amount of serious research at all levels to allow methods and policies to be assessed for their effectiveness'. (p 42)

Useful research

In 2005, Derwing & Munro wrote '.... the study of pronunciation has been marginalized within the field of applied linguistics. As a result, teachers are often left to rely on their own intuitions with little direction.' (p 379) They described the problem of making research useful for these teachers:

An extensive, growing literature on L2 speech has been published in journals that focus on speech production and perception, for example *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*....Yet this work is rarely cited or interpreted in teacher-oriented publications. [ELT] Researchers may not be aware of this literature in part because it is inaccessible to those without specialized knowledge of phonetics. Moreover, some of the research may not be perceived as practical because it has been carried out under strict laboratory conditions, so that it is not immediately clear how the findings apply to the classroom. (p 382)

In 2006, Couper reviewed the lack of practical guidance from research, and concluded that 'This lack of research and consequent lack of training has meant that some teachers have serious misgivings about the effectiveness of teaching pronunciation at all'. (p 47)

Availability of information

In 1991 Brown counted the number of articles on pronunciation in the *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, *Language Learning*, *TESOL Quarterly*, and *ELT Journal* over the period of 1975-1988 and concluded that 'At best, the number of articles constitutes 11.9 percent' (p 3)

Eighteen years later, Deng et al studied the percentage of ESL pronunciation articles of 14 relevant professional journals over 10 years (1999-2008) and wrote 'It's fair to say that pronunciation is still underrepresented in the literature.' Part of their list is shown below (p 2)

| JOURNAL | % |
|--|------|
| Language Learning | 2.63 |
| Modern Language Journal | 0.81 |
| Studies in Second Language Acquisition | 4.35 |
| Applied Linguistics | 2.91 |
| TESL Canada | 1.32 |

Psychology of pronunciation

When teachers manage to find time to address pronunciation, the instruction often amounts to the practice of a series of tedious and seemingly unrelated topics. Drilling sounds over and over often leads to discouraging results; discouraged students and teachers alike end up wanting to avoid pronunciation altogether.

There are psychological factors that affect the learning of pronunciation in ways that are not so true of studying grammar or vocabulary. For one thing, the most basic elements of speaking are deeply personal. Our sense of self and community are bound up in the speech-rhythm of our first language (L1). These rhythms were learned in the first year of life and are deeply rooted. Therefore, it is common for students to feel uneasy when they hear themselves speak with the rhythm of the L2.

A teacher can help overcome this psychological barrier by thinking of the goal of pronunciation instruction not as helping students to sound like native speakers but as helping them to learn the core elements of spoken English so that they can be easily understood by others. In other words the frustrations and boredom often associated with the subject can be avoided by focusing attention on the development of pronunciation that is 'listener friendly.' After all, English pronunciation does not amount to mastery of a list of sounds or isolated words, but to learning the specifically English way of making a speaker's thoughts easy to follow. Teachers should be taught to think of providing 'accent addition' rather than 'accent reduction'. The psychology of this concept is quite different from the 'stain removal' approach.

English teachers also need to be helped to understand that other languages rely on different concepts. For instance, all languages must have a means of showing emphasis, but few depend on the conversational signals of pitch and timing as much as English. These prosodic signals act as 'road signs' for the listener and are crucial to helping the listener to follow. Teachers, who may use prosodic cues automatically, need to understand that these are not natural, but learned. Also, teachers need to know that the abstract conventions of languages are different, so learners have to do more than just listen to the sounds. Couper gives examples of these different conventions, for example, 'It is easy to forget that the concept of what does and does not constitute a syllable varies widely across languages, and is consequently quite difficult to understand.' (p 53)

What could help build teacher confidence?

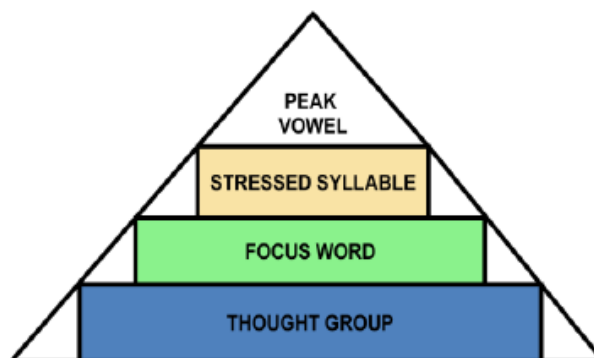
There need to be major changes in teacher training, materials available, appropriate supporting research, and changes in curricula. Most of the studies of teacher reluctance make clear that training should involve a more practical presentation of the subject, rather than what is essentially a catalogue of abstract concepts and terminology. When I taught pronunciation methods classes, I required the students to teach a real lesson to real students the week before each Saturday session. They all taught the same assigned lesson, and then discussed the results-- in this way they learned that the same lesson could go quite differently. This comparison seemed to me the most valuable part of the course. Derwing follows a similar approach, with a tutoring assignment in her Teaching Pronunciation course. She wrote 'I see it as an integral part of the course because I can't teach my students in a vacuum. They need to be working with someone who has intelligibility problems as we talk about how to deal with these problems.' (Personal correspondence 2009). Fraser similarly presents a 'workshopping' method in her training handbook. (2001)

Teacher training books should provide written case studies, such as those in Chapter 7 of the 2nd edition of *Teaching Pronunciation*. (Celce-Murcia et al). This chapter presents the pedagogical challenges of a number of different, and quite realistic, teaching settings. For example, Case Study 2: Italian middle-school students; or Case Study 6: Indian call-centre employees. This approach can help teachers to think about the curricular implications of teaching pronunciation to different student populations. Another resource is in training programs which use actual teaching situations e.g. Meyers & Holt.

A necessary reinforcement would come from increased attention to pronunciation in basal texts. Commonly the subject is addressed in a scattered way, as an "add on". Because it isn't integrated into the course books, it tends to be skipped by teachers who always have a lot to cover. Also, the types of pronunciation activities offered in course books should be less limited. Rossiter et al (forthcoming) recently surveyed the types of fluency activities in 28 learner texts and 14 teacher resources. They conclude that there was too much reliance on free production, and too little explicit instruction—and they describe a variety of activities to promote fluency in the ESL classroom.

Another way to help give teachers confidence is to provide a simple framework to understand how pronunciation is a coherent system, not just a list of abstractions. Learners

first need control of the basic prosodic system. Below is the image I use to explain the most basic interrelationship of rhythm, pitch and individual sounds. 1) The foundation of the pyramid is the thought group/tone group. 2) The peak of information is the main stressed syllable of the focus word. 3) The peak syllable must be clear-- the vowel is lengthened; and there is a pitch change on the vowel. These cues call attention to the peak of information.



(Gilbert, 2009)

Once the concept of the pyramid is understood, the individual elements can then be studied, referring back to a template sentence in which they are naturally embedded. For example, the peak syllable in the sentence below is "ea". The template should be repeated enough so that the whole piece is well fixed in long-term memory. (Kjellin, 1998).



How do you spell 'easy'?

This short sentence can then be used as a memory resource to study individual elements: word stress, pitch change to show focus emphasis, syllable number ('easy' vs. 'ease), and contractions ('d'you' is also a syllable number example). Template sentences can also help to correct persistent word order problems, e.g. *'What means that?'

As for the individual sounds, I think the top priority should be given to the peak /tonic syllable, and to consonants which give cues to grammar, e.g. final /s/or /z/ to indicate plural and third person singular, and to final /d/ or /t/ to indicate past tense. Once those are secure, time can be spent on sounds at the beginning of words.

Conclusion

Teachers generally recognize the social and workplace consequences of poor intelligibility, but are often uncertain about what to do about it. Following are suggestions to help the teachers guide their students.

Teacher educators must help ensure that teachers get the training they need. There are currently too few TESOL programs which offer a *practical* phonology course-- a bridge between linguistics and pronunciation teaching. Understanding which elements are most crucial would help teachers prioritize their efforts instead of using up available time and effort struggling to 'cover' all the independent sounds.

Without a threshold level mastery of the English prosodic system, no amount of drilling individual sounds will increase intelligibility. As one teacher trainee put it after the training course, 'Practicing pronunciation without prosody is like teaching ballroom dancing-- only the students must stand still, practice without a partner, and do it all without music'.

Researchers should consider classroom application in their published reports. This is not easy, since it means that researchers should have had direct teaching experience as a context, and should be able to translate their terminology so that it is accessible for classroom teachers.

Materials developers need to address pronunciation skills in a more integrated way, in order to give teachers the support they need. Teachers rely on basal texts to supply all needs, and if the pronunciation parts are unrelated to the rest of the unit, they are assumed to be optional.

Curriculum designers ought to give the spoken language as central a place as the written form. Once they abandon the idea that pronunciation is a matter of drilling minimal pairs-- and see it as a wider discourse organizer—they can give teachers the scaffolding for integrating pronunciation. That would be a good thing.

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