A Study of Factors Affecting EFL Learners' English Pronunciation Learning and the Strategies for Instruction

Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of English Language Translation
Islamic Azad University
Lahijan Branch, Lahijan
Iran

Abstract

Pronunciation is an integral part of foreign language learning since it directly affects learners' communicative competence as well as performance. Limited pronunciation skills can decrease learners' self-confidence, restrict social interactions, and negatively affect estimations of a speaker's credibility and abilities. The current focus on communicative approaches to EFL pronunciation learning and the concern for building communication skills are renewing interest in the role that pronunciation plays in EFL learners' overall communicative competence. The goals of this paper are to identify the features of pronunciation, explain factors affecting the learning of pronunciation, elaborate the integration of pronunciation into the curriculum, discuss the strategies for teaching pronunciation that can help EFL learners meet their personal and professional needs. The review of literature shows that with careful preparation and integration, pronunciation can play a significant role in supporting the learners' overall communicative skill.

Key words: pronunciation; features; factors; integration; strategies

1. Introduction

One of the key requirements for language proficiency is to secure understandable pronunciation for the language learners. Fraser (2000) stated that ESL/EFL teachers need to be provided with courses and materials to help them improve their effectiveness in teaching pronunciation. She adds that there is also a need for high quality, effective materials, especially computer-based materials with audio demonstrations, for learners of ESL/EFL pronunciation, both for self-access and for use in classes where the teacher needs support of this kind. She also concluded that research in second language education should not be concerned with the importance of teaching pronunciation but with the methodology of teaching pronunciation (Fraser, 2000). Both teachers and learners must change roles and teaching methodologies must change objectives. Teachers must act as "pronunciation coaches" and learners must be proactive learners taking the initiative to learn. The methodologies of teaching must change from emphasizing segmental elements of pronunciation to supra-segmental elements of pronunciation and from linguistic competence to communicative competence (Morley, 1991).

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). The attainment of perfect pronunciation should no longer be the objective. Instead, Morley calls for setting more realistic goals that are reasonable, applicable and suitable for the communication needs of the learner. To her, the learner needs to develop functional intelligibility (ability to make oneself relatively easily understood), functional communicability (ability to meet the communication needs one faces), increased self-confidence, and the speech monitoring abilities and speech modification strategies. Therefore, it is vital that students learning English for international communication learn to speak it as intelligibly and comprehensibly as possible – not necessarily like natives, but well enough to be understood (Morley, 1991).

It is equally important that they learn to understand it when spoken by people with different accents speaking in natural conditions. In this respect, and as Rajadurai (2001) suggests, part of the underlying philosophy of including listening and speaking courses in any syllabus is to teach pronunciation as an integral part of oral communication. The rationale is that it is counterproductive to remove pronunciation from communication and other aspects of language use.

So, with the emphasis on the importance of meaningful communication and intelligible pronunciation, it is not enough to leave pronunciation teaching and training to pronunciation classes only or even to listening/speaking classes in some programs. Teachers can almost always squeeze pronunciation into their classes by sheer cunning (Rajaduari, 2001) in order to reinforce the concepts that might have been taught before in pronunciation classes, increase awareness of the significance of pronunciation as an integral part of the teaching of English as a second language, provide opportunities for practice, and give encouragement and advice to learners as they work towards intelligibility for use beyond the classroom. The aims of this paper are to review the features of English pronunciation, elaborate factors affecting the learning of English pronunciation, explain the integration of pronunciation into the curriculum, and discuss the strategies for teaching pronunciation.

2. *Features Involved in English Pronunciation*

As English increasingly becomes the language used for international communication, it is vital that speakers of English, whether they are native or non-native speakers, are able to exchange meaning effectively. In fact, in recent discussions of English-language teaching, the unrealistic idea that learners should sound and speak like native speakers is fast disappearing (Burns, 2003).

According to Burns (2003), it is more important that speakers of English can achieve:
• Intelligibility (the speaker produces sound patterns that are recognisable as English)
• Comprehensibility (the listener is able to understand the meaning of what is said)
• Interpretability (the listener is able to understand the purpose of what is said).

For example, a speaker might say *It's hot today* as *IS ho da*y. This is unlikely to be intelligible because of inaccurate sound, stress and intonation patterns. As a result, a listener would not find the speaker comprehensible, because meaning is not available. Because the speaker is incomprehensible, the listener would also not be able to interpret the utterance as an indirect request to open the window. Clear pronunciation is essential in spoken communication. Even where learners produce minor inaccuracies in vocabulary and grammar, they are more likely to communicate effectively when they have good pronunciation and intonation (Burns, 2003). The various features that make up the production of sounds in English are illustrated in figure 2. 1.
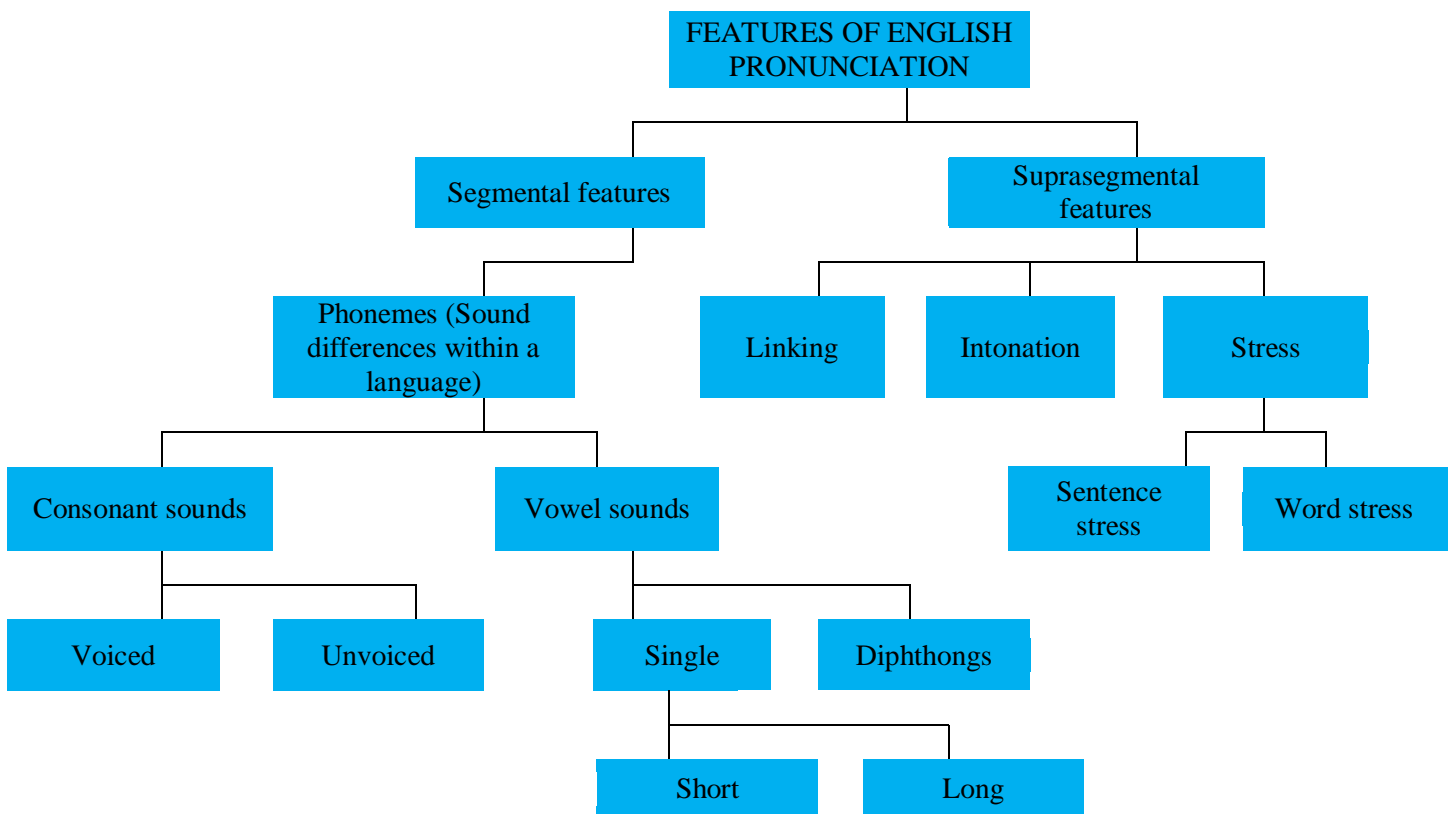

Figure 2.1 Various Features of English Pronunciation

As the figure above illustrates, pronunciation involves features at:
• The segmental (micro) level
• The supra-segmental (macro) level.
In former ESL approaches, segmental features were the major focus for pronunciation teaching (for example, minimal pairs such as *ship*/*sheep*). While these features are important, more recent research has shown that when teaching focuses on supra-segmental features, learners' intelligibility is greatly enhanced. It is important, therefore, to provide activities at both levels (Burns, 2003).

2.1 Suprasegmental Features

Suprasegmental features relate to sounds at the macro level. Advances in research have developed descriptions of the suprasegmental features of speech extending across whole stretches of language *(prosody)*. Unlike languages such as Vietnamese or Mandarin which are tonal, English is stress-timed and syllable-timed (for example, *WHAT's his addRESS?*). Jenkins (2002) emphasizes that effective communicative pronunciation competence can be achieved more through improving supra-segmental production in preference to segmentals. Linking, intonation and stress are important features for effective pronunciation at the suprasegmental level (Burns, 2003).

2.1.1 Linking

Linking refers to the way the last sound of one word is joined to the first sound of the next word. To produce connected speech, we run words together to link consonant to vowel, consonant to consonant, and vowel to vowel. We also shorten some sounds and leave others out altogether.
• consonant to vowel *an _Australian _animal*
• consonant to consonant *next _week; seven _months*
• vowel to vowel. Some sounds such as *r*, *w* and *j (y)* are inserted to link adjacent words ending and beginning with a vowel:
where (r_) are you?; *you (w_) ought to*; *Saturday (y_) evening*
• sounds that are shortened. When words begin with an unstressed sound they are often pronounced as a short schwa ( ) sound:
when do they arrive?; *five o'clock*
• sounds that are left out. Some sounds are so short that they virtually disappear (become elided): *does (_h)e like soccer?*
we might as well (h_a)ve stayed at home

2.1.2 Intonation

Intonation can be thought of as the melody of the language – the way the voice goes up and down according to the context and meanings of the communication. For example, note the differences in:
• Can you take the scissors? (rising pitch) – request
• Can you take the scissors (falling pitch) – command

2.1.3 Word stress

Word stress relates to the prominence given to certain words in an utterance. These focus words are stressed (made long and loud) to convey:
• the overall rhythm of the utterance
• the most meaningful part of the utterance.

At the meaning level, some words are given more prominence than others to foreground which meaning is important. For example, compare:
• Can YOU take the scissors? (not someone else)
• Can you take the SCISSORS! (not the knife)
Recent approaches to teaching pronunciation in computer-based contexts follow the communicative approach in teaching pronunciation. Harmer (1993) stresses the need for making sure that students can always be understood and say what they want to say. They need to master "good pronunciation", not perfect accents. That is, emphasis should be on suprasegmental features of pronunciation—not segmental aspects—to help learners acquire communicative competence (Seferoglu, 2005). Bott (2005) asserts, "In recent years, increasing attention has been placed on providing pronunciation instruction that meets the communicative needs of non-native speakers (NNSs) of English.

Empirical research and pronunciation materials' writers suggest that teaching suprasegmentals before segmentals to intermediate and advanced NNSs could be more beneficial in a shorter period of time" (p. 5). Seferoglu (2005) aimed to find out whether integrating accent reduction software in advanced English language classes at the university level results in improvements in students' pronunciation at the segmental and suprasegmental levels, finding that the experimental group that followed instruction which integrated the use of accent reduction software in a multimedia language laboratory outperformed the control group which followed traditional instruction. Based on the results of this study, it was found that technology has a lot to offer in pronunciation learning, and EFL learners may be provided with exposure and practice/interaction opportunities in the target language through specifically designed software programs.Cheng (1998) reported that teachers should choose meaningful material to be used as models for practicing pronunciation aspects such as stress. Morley (1991) also recommended giving detailed attention to supra-segmental features of pronunciation and their functions in interactive discourse and stressed their application in communicative approaches to pronunciation learning and teaching.

2.2 Segmental Features

According to Seferoglu (2005), segmental aspects of the sound system include individual vowels and consonants. Because segmental phonology is relatively more easily explained and taught than the supra-segmental features (Coniam, 2002), some studies focus on studying segmental phonology in preference to suprasegmental features. Segmental features relate to sounds at the micro level. They include specific sounds within words (for example, *l* as in *lamp*, *r* as in *ramp*, *a* as in *hat*). The sound systems of consonants, vowels or their combinations are called *phonemes*. Phonemes are sounds that, when pronounced incorrectly, can change the meaning of the word (Burns, 2003). Compare the changes of meaning in:

pet pat
lamp ramp
about abort

Consonant sounds can be voiced (a part of the mouth is closed and the air behind it is released suddenly – for example, *v* as in *van*, *b* as in *bun*) – or unvoiced (air is pushed through a narrow part of the mouth – for example, *f* as in *fan*, *th* as in *thin*). Vowel sounds are articulated as single sounds. They can be short (for example, ae as in *cat*) or long (a as in *cart*). Diphthongs are two vowel sounds put together (for example, ei as in *Kate* or as in *boy*) (Burns, 2003).

3. Factors Affecting the Learning of English Pronunciation

In this section, the researcher mentions some of the important factors that affect the learning of pronunciation. They are as follows:

3.1 Attitude

It seems as though some learners are more adept at acquiring good pronunciation. Even within one homogenous classroom, there is often a large discrepancy among the pronunciation ability of the students. This phenomenon has lead many researchers to study the personal characteristics of the learners that contribute to their success in foreign language acquisition. In a study on pronunciation accuracy of university students studying intermediate Spanish as a foreign language, Elliot (1995) found that subjects' attitude toward acquiring native or near-native pronunciation as measured by the Pronunciation Attitude Inventory (PAI), was the principal variable in relation to target language pronunciation. In other words, if the students were more concerned about their pronunciation of the target language, they tended to have better pronunciation of the target allophones (Elliot, 1995). This study echoed earlier research done by Suter (1976), which found that students who were "more concerned" about their pronunciation (p. 249) had better pronunciation of English as a Second Language (Elliot, 1995).

When discussing the attitude of the second language learners in relation to their pronunciation and second language acquisition, it is necessary to note the work done by Schumann (1986) on acculturation and its role in the process of language learning. His acculturation model defines that learners will acquire the target language to the degree that they acculturate (Celce-Murcia, et al., 1996). According to Schumann, acculturation refers to a learner's openness to a target culture as well as a desire to be socially integrated in the target culture. His research (1976, 1986) on acculturation examines the social and psychological integration of immigrant students as a predictor of the amount of English language they acquire and use (Tong, 2000).

Schumann maintains that the acquisition and use of English is a measure of the degree to which students have become acculturated to the host culture. Acculturation, according to Schumann (1986), refers to the social and psychological contact between members of a particular group and members of the target culture. The more interaction (i.e., social/psychological closeness) a group has with the target group, the more opportunities will result for the group to acquire and use English. Conversely, less interaction (i.e., social/psychological distance) results in less acquisition and use of English. The group's amount of contact with the target culture has an effect on the amount of English acquired and used.

Sparks and Glachow's work (1991) on personality found similar results. They state that students with motivation to learn with positive attitudes towards the target language and its speakers were more successful than were students with less positive attitudes. They refer to Gardner and Lambert's research on motivation wherein two types are highlighted. The first type of motivation is instrumental, which is motivation to learn the L2 for the value of linguistic achievement. Second is integrative motivation, which describes the desire to continue learning about the second language culture. According to Gardner and Lambert students with integrative motivation would be expected to work harder to develop communication skills in the second language because they are more likely than their less interested counterparts to seek out native speakers of the language.

3.2 Motivation and Exposure

Along with age at the acquisition of a language, the learner's motivation for learning the language and the cultural group that the learner identifies and spends time determine whether the learner will develop native-like pronunciation. Research has found that having a personal or professional goal for learning English can influence the need and desire for native-like pronunciation (Marinova-Todd et al., 2000; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Bernaus, Masgoret, Gardner, & Reyes, 2004; Gatbonton et al., 2005). The review by Marinova- Todd et al. (2000) of research on adult acquisition of English concluded that adults can become highly proficient, even native-like speakers of second languages, especially if motivated to do so. Moyer (2007) found that experience with and positive orientation to the language appears to be important factors in developing native-like pronunciation. In a study of learners of Spanish, Shively (2008) found that accuracy in the production of Spanish is significantly related to age at first exposure to the language, amount of formal instruction in Spanish, residence in a Spanish-speaking country, amount of out-of-class contact with Spanish, and focus on pronunciation in class. Therefore, in addition to focusing on pronunciation and accent in class, teachers should encourage learners to speak English outside the classroom and provide them with assignments that structure those interactions.

3.3 Instruction

Foreign language instruction generally focuses on four main areas of development: listening, speaking reading and writing. Foreign language curricula emphasize pronunciation in the first year of study as it introduces the target language's alphabet and sound system, but rarely continues this focus past the introductory level. Lack of emphasis on pronunciation development may be due to a general lack of fervor on the part of the second language acquisition researchers, second language teachers and students, that pronunciation of a second language is not very important (Elliot, 1995). Pennington (1994) maintains that pronunciation which is typically viewed as a component of linguistic rather than conversational fluency, is often regarded with little importance in a communicatively oriented classroom (Elliot, 1995).

According to Elliot (1995), teachers tend to view pronunciation as the least useful of the basic language skills and therefore they generally sacrifice teaching pronunciation in order to spend valuable class time on other areas of language. Or maybe, teachers feel justified neglecting pronunciation believing that for adult foreign language learners, it is more difficult to attain target language pronunciation skills than other facets of second language acquisition. Teachers just do not have the background or tools to properly teach pronunciation and therefore it is disregarded (Elliot, 1995).

Teachers have taught what they thought was pronunciation via repetition drills on both a discrete word or phrase level, or give the students the rules of pronunciation like the vowel in a CVC pattern, when given an e at the end, says its name. For example, when an *e* is added to the word *bit* (CVC) the pronunciation of the "short i", becomes long and therefore "says its name". This type of instruction is meant to help students with decoding words for the purpose of reading rather than pronunciation.

For example, students are rarely given information about the differences between fricatives and non-fricative continuants, or the subtleties between the trilled or flapped /r/ between Spanish and English (Elliot, 1995). This particular information is often left up to the students to attain on their own. Researchers have explored the question of whether explicit instruction helps these second language learners. Such studies have generated inconsistent   results. Suter (1976) reported an insignificant relationship between formal pronunciation and students' pronunciation of English as a Second Language (Elliot, 1995). Murakawa (1981) found that, with 12 weeks of phonetic instruction, adult L2 learners of English can improve their allophonic articulation (Elliot, 1995). Nuefield and Scheiderman (1980) reported that adults are able to achieve near native fluency and it can be developed in a relatively short time without serious disruption to the second language teaching program with adequate pronunciation instruction (Elliot, 1995). It is necessary to note at this point that even though there seems to be quite a contradiction in the range of results presented, the diversity of those results may be due to the differing designs of the particular experiments.

Some pronunciation studies focus specifically on the instruction of supra-segmental. Derwing, Munro and Wiebe (1997) conducted research in which ESL learners who had been studying for an average of ten years, participated in a speaking improvement course that focused on the supra-segmental features of pronunciation (e.g. stress, rhythm, intonation). Thirty-seven native listeners transcribed speech samples (true/false sentences) taken at the beginning of a 12-week course in order to assess the learners' intelligibility. Each sample was rated in order of comprehensibility and degree of accentedness. In the end, there was a significant improvement in the intelligibility, and better ratings over time of comprehensibility and accentedness. They showed that 30 language learners could alter their pronunciation in a reading task (Derwing & Rossiter, 2003).

3.4 Exposure to Target Language

When we speak of the exposure that a learner has to the target language, it may come in the form of their current day-to-day life as well as the amount of prior instruction a learner received in the target language. According to the language learning theories, learners acquire language primarily from the input they receive and they must receive large amounts of comprehensible input before they are required to speak. Adult learners may have little opportunity to surround themselves with the native target language input. Whereas children who are possibly in English-speaking schools for hours during the day, their adult counterparts are likely to live and work in what these theorists call "linguistic ghettos" where they again have little meaningful exposure to the target language thus inhibiting their acquisition. Learning a new language and speaking it is especially difficult for foreign language learners because effective oral communication requires the ability to use the language appropriately in a variety of interactions (Shumin, 1997).

Verbal communication also affects the supra-segmental features of speech such as pitch, stress and intonation. Such features are often not learned from reading a textbook or dictionary. Beyond the supra-segmental features, are the non-linguistic elements involved in language such as gestures, body language, and facial expressions that carry so much meaning yet are not learned through explicit instruction, but rather through sheer experience in a language and culture. Due to minimal exposure to the target language and contact with native speakers, adult English language learners often do not acquire a native-like level of pronunciation, regarding fluency, control of idiomatic expressions and cultural pragmatics (gestures, body language, and facial expressions) (Shumin, 1997).

4. Integration of English Pronunciation into the Curriculum

Because pronunciation is everywhere it is possible to deal with pronunciation through what is already in the curriculum. This involves two basic ideas. First teachers need to be aware of what is in the curriculum and what will be doing with the learners and how this relates to sound structure. So in order to do this, teachers need to have quite a good idea of what sound structure entails. The decisions that the teachers make on what particular aspect of pronunciation recovered within a certain phase of a curriculum need to be based on their overall knowledge of sound structure. The second major idea is that of learner centeredness. Using this type of approach, it might be best to do this based on what's observed in the classroom. Teachers can focus their attention on areas learners need particular help on as demonstrated by their own performance. This is more efficient than basing what teachers are doing on assumptions that may or may not be right. At the same time it means that the teachers need to be very flexible in their approaches to dealing with the class. What is important here is implementing a task-based model more than a presentation based model of language teaching.

This type of integration for pronunciation means that the basic approach the classroom needs to be founded on learners actually doing things with language, not listening to presentations from their teachers all day (Walker, 2010). A long range oral communication goals and objectives should be established to identify pronunciation needs as well as speech functions and the context in which they might occur (Morley, 1998). These goals and objectives should be realistic, aiming for functional intelligibility (ability to make oneself relatively easily understood), functional communicability (ability to meet the communication needs one faces), and enhanced self-confidence in use (Gillette, 1994; Jordan, 1992). They should result from a careful analysis and description of the learners' needs (Jordan, 1992; Moley, 1998). This analysis should then be used to support selection and sequencing of the pronunciation information and skills for each sub-group or proficiency level within the larger learner group (Celce-Murcia, Bringon, & Goodwin, 1996).

To determine the level of emphasis to be placed on pronunciation within the curriculum, programs should consider the following particular variables:
1. the learners (ages, educational backgrounds, experiences with pronunciation instruction, motivations, general English proficiency levels)
2. the instructional setting (academic, workplace, English for specific purposes, literacy, conversation)
3. institutional variables (teachers' instructional and educational experiences, focus of curriculum, availability of pronunciation materials, class size, availability of equipment)
4. linguistic variables (learners' native languages, diversity or lack of diversity of native languages within the group)
5. methodological variables (method or approach included by the program).

5. *Strategies for English Pronunciation Instruction*

There are a significant number of strategies for English pronunciation instruction that can help learners meet their personal and professional needs. They are as follows:
   • Identify specific pronunciation features that cause problems for learners
   • Make learners aware of the prosodic features of language (stress, intonation, rhythm)
   • Focus on developing learners' communicative competence

5.1 Identify Specific Pronunciation Features That Cause Problems for Learners

Contrastive analysis is used by linguists to identify potential pronunciation difficulties of nonnative speakers of a language. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis suggests that by contrasting the features of two languages, the difficulties that a language learner might encounter can be anticipated (Crystal, 2003). Features of many languages were catalogued by linguists, but it was not possible to systematically predict which areas of English would be difficult for speakers of particular native languages. A less predictive version of the hypothesis was eventually put forth that focused on cross-linguistic influence, which claims that prior language experiences have an impact on the way a language is learned, but these experiences do not consistently have predictive value (Brown, 2000). From this work, linguists have been able to develop lists of sounds that native speakers of particular languages may find problematic in learning English. For example, speakers of Asian languages may have difficulty producing /l/ and /r/ sounds; speakers of Spanish may have difficulty distinguishing between and producing /sh/ and /ch/ sounds. These lists for specific language backgrounds are now featured in pronunciation texts, such as Sounds Right (Braithwaite, 2008), and pronunciation software programs, such as American Speech Sounds (Hiser & Kopecky, 2009).

Teachers can also learn a great deal by observing the English learners in their classes as they communicate with each other. By noting the places where communication breaks down and determining the pronunciation features that caused miscommunication to occur, teachers can identify pronunciation features that they should focus on in class. When students are giving presentations or working together in pairs or groups, the teacher might use a checklist similar (Grant, 2010) to note when a student is not understood or when several students make the same pronunciation mistake. This information can become important for subsequent pronunciation lessons. The checklist can also be used to make learners aware of particular features of speech that have the potential to cause problems for intelligibility and to help them develop their own pronunciation goals. Teachers and learners can work together to complete a learner pronunciation profile that includes (a) an inventory of the sounds and stress intonation patterns that the learner does well and those the learner wants to change and (b) a questionnaire about when and how the learner uses English (Grant, 2010).

This profile can help learners develop pronunciation goals and check their progress toward achieving those goals.

5.2 Make Learners Aware of Prosodic Features of Language

Word stress, intonation, and rhythm are the prosodic features of language. They are extremely important to comprehensibility. Teachers should include prosodic training in instruction (O'Brien, 2004; Bailly & Holm, 2005; Gauthier, Shi, & Yi, 2009). They might begin with listening activities. For example, they can ask students to listen for rising intonation in yes/ no questions, compare question intonation in English with that of their native languages, and then imitate dialogues, perform plays (O'Brien, 2004), and watch videos in which yes/no questions are used (Hardison, 2005).

5.2.1 Focus on Word Stress

There are a number of activities teachers can do to help learners use word stress correctly. Lead perception exercises on duration of stress, loudness of stress, and pitch. These exercises will help learners recognize the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables (Field, 2005). For example, learners can be taught to recognize where stress falls in words with two or more syllables by learning the rules of parts of speech and word stress (e.g., the primary stress is on the first syllable in compound nouns such as *air*plane, *lap*scape). Learners can also use a pronunciation computer program, such as American Speechsounds (Hiser & Kopecky, 2009), to learn the duration and loudness of stress. Do exercises on recognizing and producing weak, unstressed syllables (Field, 2005). For example, one exercise helps learners identify computer voice recognition mistakes that have occurred because of mispronunciation of weak vowel forms (e.g., "Alaska if she wants to come with us" instead of "I'll ask if she wants to come with us" [Hancock, 1998, p. 80]).

Present pronunciation rules for stress (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994). For example, teach learners that in reflexive pronouns, the stress is always on the syllable -self (e.g., her*self*, them*selves* [Grant, 2010, p. 57]). Teach word stress when teaching vocabulary (Field, 2005). For example, any time that new words are introduced, point out to learners where the major stress falls. Use analogy exercises (Field, 2005). Words sharing similar stress patterns are easier for listeners to remember (Aitchison, 2003). For example, give learners a list of words with similar stress and ask them to state the rule (e.g., in compound adverbs of location, such as out*side*, down*town*, and in*doors,* the stress is on the final syllable [Hancock, 1998, p. 69]).

5.2.2 Focus on Unstressed Syllables

There are many exercises that a teacher can use to focus on unstressed syllables, or weak vowel forms, in connected speech. Liang (2003) discusses three strategies to teach weak vowel forms.

Use function words. Introduce weak forms through the grammatical category of function words, such as articles, pronouns, auxiliary verbs, and prepositions.

Present sentence drills where both strong and weak forms appear. For example, the teacher can read a passage while learners underline the weak forms in the passage.

Allow learners to practice using weak forms in conversations in order to simulate real-life speech encounters. For example, the teacher might focus the lesson on the ability to do things. Student A can play the role of an interviewer, and student B can be the interviewee. Student A asks a list of questions regarding student B's ability to do things. For example, student A asks, "Can you swim?" Student B uses both the strong and weak form of the vowel in can and can't in an answer such as this, "I can't swim very well, but I can try."

5.3 Focus on Developing Learners' Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is the aim of pronunciation teaching and learning (Savignon, 1997; O'Brien, 2004; Gatbonton et al., 2005; Low, in press). Savignon (1997) stressed the need for meaningful communicative tasks in the language classroom, including those that focus on pronunciation. Pronunciation exercises that relate to daily use of English include, for example, role-plays of requests that learners have to make (e.g., to ask a boss for a day off or to ask a bank teller to cash a check) (Grant, 2010).

Learners can become careful listeners in their own conversations. Pitt (2009) shows that learners need exposure to conversations so they can hear variation in pronunciation. By using audiotapes and videotapes, teachers can give learners meaningful exposure to variation in pronunciation and increase their communicative competence.

6. Conclusion

Pronunciation can be one of the most difficult parts of a language for EFL learners to master and one of the least favorite topics for teachers to address in the EFL classroom. All learners can do well in learning the pronunciation of a foreign language if the teacher and learner participate together in the total learning process. Success can be achieved if each has set individual teaching and learning goals. Pronunciation must be viewed as more than correct production of phonemes: it must be viewed in the same light as grammar, syntax, and discourse that is an important part of communication. Research has shown and current pedagogical thinking on pronunciation maintains that intelligible pronunciation is seen as an essential component of communicative competence. With this in mind, the teacher must then set obtainable aims that are applicable and suitable for the communication needs of the learner. The learner must also become part of the learning process, actively involved in their own learning. The content of the course should be integrated into the communication class, with the content emphasizing the teaching of suprasegmentals, linking pronunciation with listening comprehension, and allowing for meaningful pronunciation practice. With the teacher acting as a 'speech coach', rather than as a mere checker of pronunciation, the feedback given to the student can encourage learners to improve their pronunciation. If these criteria are met, all learners, within their learner unique aims, can be expected to do well learning the pronunciation of a foreign language.

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