

INTRODUCTION

Preliminary considerations in the teaching of pronunciation

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Let us begin by considering two opposing views on the teaching of pronunciation in the ESL classroom. One view holds that the purpose of teaching pronunciation is to eradicate all traces of a 'foreign' accent through pronunciation drills. The other view holds that the teaching of pronunciation is futile after a certain age due to a decreasing ability among learners to develop native-like pronunciation in a second language. In this section, we will point out that neither of these views is completely accurate by considering biological, socio-cultural, personality, and linguistic factors which are known to affect the acquisition of the sound system of a second language. This will lead to the understanding that while practice in pronunciation may not make perfect, ignoring pronunciation totally can be a great disservice to ESL students.

Biological factors

A common observation made by people involved in the field of second language learning is that adult second language learners almost always have a 'foreign' accent while child second language learners almost always attain native-like pronunciation. One hypothesis that has been proposed to explain this difference between adults and children is the 'critical period hypothesis'. This hypothesis holds that languages are learned differently by children and adults, and that this is a direct result of the maturation of the brain.

As all experienced ESL teachers know, adult learners do have difficulty in acquiring native-like pronunciation in a second language. Thus, there may be some truth to the critical period hypothesis. However, it is also true that some adult learners do achieve native-like pronunciation and, among other adult learners, the degree of pronunciation accuracy varies considerably from individual to individual. The critical period hypothesis, therefore, does not absolve ESL teachers of the responsibility of teaching pronunciation. The very fact that variability exists among adult learners means that ESL classroom time can profitably be devoted to improving students' pronunciation.

Socio-cultural factors

The great variability in pronunciation accuracy of adult learners has led other researchers to conclude that it is socio-cultural factors that largely determine this success or lack of success in achieving native-like pronunciation. More specifically, it has been claimed that the more strongly second language learners identify with members of the second language culture, the more likely they are to 'sound' like members of that culture. Conversely, if it is important for learners to preserve their own cultural identity, they may hold on to their foreign accent as a marker of this identity.

We can see examples of this phenomenon in our own experience with native speakers of English who speak a different dialect (British English, Jamaican English, Australian English, etc.). Such speakers rarely lose their 'accent' primarily because their accent serves as a strong marker of their social identity. This is especially true when the accent is viewed positively by members of the society in which they live. However, even when the particular accent is viewed negatively by members of the culture at large, the accent may be retained because the speaker may feel at a social distance from members of that culture.

For ESL teachers, it is important to be aware of the way in which these socio-cultural factors may influence their students. Students may wish to improve their pronunciation in order to make themselves more comprehensible but, at the same time, they may not be interested in sounding like native-speakers of English. Such considerations become important in setting realistic goals in the pronunciation class.

Personality factors

Other factors affecting the acquisition of the sound system of a second language are related to the personality of the learner. Learners who are out-going, confident, and willing to take risks probably have more opportunities to practise their pronunciation of the second language simply because they are more often involved in interactions with native speakers. Conversely, learners who are introverted, inhibited, and unwilling to take risks lack opportunities for practice.

ESL teachers should be aware that such personality factors can affect progress in a second language and should strive to create a non-threatening atmosphere in their classrooms so that student participation is encouraged. Furthermore, students should not be forced to participate if they are not ready, as the pressure to perform can be paralyzing for some students.

The role of the native language

The nature of a foreign accent is determined to a large extent by a learner's native language. Thus, speakers of English are able to recognize Spanish accents, Russian accents, Chinese accents, etc. This is an indication that the sound patterns of the native language are being transferred into the second language. Every language has a different inventory of sounds, different rules for combining these sounds into words, and different stress and intonation patterns. The pronunciation errors that second language learners make are not just random attempts to produce unfamiliar sounds. Rather, they reflect the sound inventory, rules of combination, and the stress and intonation patterns of the native language.

The sound system of the native language can be seen to influence our students' pronunciation of English in at least three ways. First, difficulties may arise when a learner encounters sounds in English that are not part of the sound inventory of the learner's native language. As we will show in the following sections, the pronunciation of sounds depends on the proper use of the musculature in the mouth. Thus, adult learners may be unable to produce new sounds because they have never exercised their mouth in the particular way required to pronounce certain English sounds. Secondly, difficulties may arise because the rules for combining sounds into words are different in the learner's native language. This type of difficulty can occur even when a particular sound is part of the inventory of both English and the native language. Thirdly, the patterns of stress and intonation, which determine the overall rhythm and melody of a language, can be transferred from the native language into the second language.

The native language not only affects the ability to produce English sounds but also the ability to hear English sounds. Experienced teachers certainly know the frustration involved in having students continually repeat a mispronounced word in the same way. Students may seem impervious to correction but, in fact, the problem often arises because the word is heard through the sound system of the native language. Thus, sounds which occur in the native language will be heard rather than the actual sounds of English which are being produced by the teacher. This highlights a very important point concerning the influence of the native language. It is as if learners hear the second language through a 'filter', the filter being the sound system of the native language.

One question that a teacher might ask concerns the degree of difficulty that different native languages pose for learning the pronunciation of English. For example, because the sound systems of English and Cantonese differ more than the sound systems of English and Polish, is it more difficult for a Cantonese speaker to acquire English pronunciation than for a Polish

speaker? If so, does this mean that it is more important to teach pronunciation to Cantonese speakers than to Polish speakers? The answer to both of these questions is 'perhaps'. Cantonese speakers' pronunciation problems may cause their speech to be more incomprehensible than the speech of Polish learners. This, of course, would suggest that it is more important to teach pronunciation to Cantonese speakers. However, it is not necessarily the case that their English will be more incomprehensible than Polish speakers' English. Socio-cultural and personality factors such as those discussed above will also determine the degree of a learner's pronunciation problems. In other words, the native language of a learner is not the only factor affecting pronunciation ability in a second language. It is one of several factors, suggesting that teachers cannot decide, without first listening to their students, which learners will necessarily need more pronunciation practice.

Setting realistic goals

Given that biological, socio-cultural, and personality factors may prevent a student from ever attaining native-like pronunciation in a second language, it is important that teachers set realistic goals. Attempting to completely eradicate a foreign accent is an unrealistic goal. However, this is not to say that pronunciation should be ignored in the ESL classroom. We know that it is possible for adult learners to improve their pronunciation. And sometimes these improvements can be quite dramatic.

What the teacher must focus on in the pronunciation class are critical errors, features of a student's speech most responsible for incomprehensibility. This requires work in two areas. First, students must be made aware of aspects of their pronunciation that result in other people being unable to understand them. Students will not necessarily have this awareness before entering the classroom due to the 'filter' of their native language. In other words, they may not hear the points at which their pronunciation does not correspond to that of a native-English speaker. Secondly, students must be given the opportunity to practice aspects of the English sound system which are crucial for their own improvement. It is important that this be done in meaningful contexts as students often produce sounds correctly in isolation but are unable to carry this over into their everyday speech.

In the sections that follow, we present a description of the major features of English pronunciation. A knowledge of the English sound system will aid you in identifying and isolating the most important pronunciation problems of your students. In addition, this information will make the pronunciation class both interesting and enjoyable for you and your students.