

**The problems of teaching pronunciation to young learners**

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the critical problems of pronunciation while teaching, especially to the types of methods of teaching foreign language and how the pronunciation is important to young learners. Pronunciation is one of the main skill that a learner must acquire during the process of learning English. English language is in most cases familiarized to learners at the primary school, however, pronunciation is mostly neglected and this is one of the causes why this issue can be considered as a challenge. Until the last decades, little attention paid for teaching pronunciation. Educators mostly take into consideration grammar and vocabulary while teaching and they do not aware of techniques of educating pronunciation.*

**Key words:** *pronunciation, teaching, language learning, learners, problems, intonation, phonology.*

**Introduction:**

Teaching pronunciation is no less important than reading, writing and other skills. Even though person's grammar is perfect, without clear pronunciation the meaning of the speech would not be understood. Burns claims: "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".<sup>1</sup> There are numerous definitions of pronunciation. First of all, it is significant to point out that there is an alteration between phonology and pronunciation. In fact, as John Burgess and Sheila Spencer claim, "the phonology of a target language contains theory and knowledge about how the sound system of the target language works, including both segmental

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Burns "Clearly speaking: pronunciation in action for teachers" (2003)

and supra-segmental features. Pronunciation in language learning, on the other hand, is the practice and meaningful use of the target language phonological features in speaking, maintained by practice in interpreting those phonological features in a target language discourse that one hears”.<sup>2</sup> So many educators encounter the problem of teaching correct pronunciation during the process of education. There are so many dialects that can serve as an obstacle for teaching correct pronunciation.

Every teacher of English language should naturally know or have some ideas about how to teach English pronunciation to the learners and how to help them to develop this subskill. Before starting to discuss suitable pronunciation techniques or activities, it is useful to focus also on the topic of pronunciation teaching approaches.

As Richards and Renandya<sup>3</sup> say, concerning the pronunciation approaches we can gradually see significant changes in the movement from putting the stress on the accurate production of individual sounds of speech to the concentration more on broader communicative aspects of connected speech throughout the history of language teaching. Jones adds that pronunciation teaching grew in the importance with the rise of the Direct and Audio-lingual methods which were pushed again to the sidelines with the dominance of Communicative Language Teaching and the Natural approach. Nowadays a new resurgence, driven largely by the increasing awareness of the communicative function of supra-segmental features in spoken discourse, is experienced in pronunciation teaching.

In order to find the answer to this question, Dalton and Seidlhofer's<sup>4</sup> suggestion of the “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches can be followed. These authors say that “bottom up” approach is viewed as the approach which start with “the articulation of individual vowels and consonants” and continue to work up towards intonation. Therefore, this approach is based on the idea that if the segments are taught, the supra-segmental features will be then acquired without necessity to provide formal instructions. The “top-down” approach, on the other hand, refers to

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<sup>2</sup> Burgess and Spencer, 2000: 191-192 In-service Teachers' Intelligibility and Pronunciation Adjustment Strategies in English Language Classrooms

<sup>3</sup> Jack. C. Richard and Willy A. Renandya. Methodology in language teaching: An Anthology of Current Teaching. Cambridge: University Press (2000)

<sup>4</sup> Dalton and Seidlhofer “Teaching English Pronunciation to Young Learners - Focus on Accuracy” (2011)

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the “beginning with patterns of intonation and bringing separate sounds into sharper focuses as and when required.” In other words, in this approach, we assume that once the supra-segmental features are in place, the important segmental discriminations will follow of their own accord. As McDonough and Shaw add, the “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches can be viewed as the balance between accuracy and intelligibility. In short, these aspects are as follows:

- Individual sounds which include areas of difficulty for learners.
- Word stress exhibiting a number of key patterns in English language.
- Sentence stress and rhythm.
- Intonation which is significant in conveying messages about mood intention.
- Sound and spelling.

Moreover, Rodney Jones<sup>5</sup> states that in recent past there was the call for a more “top-down” approach to pronunciation teaching, emphasizing meaningful and broader phonological aspects of connected speech rather than practice with isolated sounds. Last but not least, based on many beliefs, there is no clear answer concerning the question of which phonological aspects should be considered the most prominent and most important for teaching pronunciation. As Hewings says, it is a matter of balancing general considerations and learners’ particular- 34 - difficulties. To show this on the example, although it might be generally believed that working on consonants or vowels represent a high priority, it is also essential to know which consonants or vowels cause problems or difficulties and which are not problematic for the pupils, so that the teachers can focus work accordingly. Moreover, it can be also useful for some learners that some features with generally lower priority, for example linking or assimilation, can be given a higher priority. Last but not least, it is evident from this statement that what phonological aspects to pay more attention in lessons will largely depend on the learners and teachers and also on the conditions and learners and teachers’ needs, wishes and goals. One of the most important goals in current pronunciation teaching is acquiring comprehensible and intelligible pronunciation and not the native-like pronunciation as it was common in the past, it

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<sup>5</sup> Rodney H. Jones in Jack C. Richards, Wily A. Renandya (2002, 178).  
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is also important to enable children to get over the threshold level to avoid the risk that their pronunciation will detract from the ability to communicate.

### **The role of teachers in educating pronunciation.**

The role of teachers is very crucial when teaching pronunciation. Some teachers utilize audio-lingual methods where children play a passive role and only listen what educators are talking. In this case class is teacher-oriented and learners have little participation. On the other hand, in communicative activities teacher conduct the lesson with role-plays and make learners active, by giving them fully free atmosphere to talk. The teacher's main roles are "to facilitate the communication process between pupils in the classroom and to act as independent participant within the learning-teaching group". Kenworthy<sup>6</sup> states that "the learners' role in learning pronunciation is to take responsibility and be willing to learn." Learners need to take part active position in order to engage with others and make sounds to correct their pronunciation. In her point of view, teacher plays the role of the person who:

a) helps learners to hear – some learners will have a tendency to hear the sounds of English in terms of the sounds of their native language and so it is necessary for teachers to check that their pupils hear sounds.

b) helps learners to make sounds – although there are many English sounds which do not appear in other languages, some pupils will be able to imitate some of them. In case they cannot, some hints are needed to be given them by the teacher to help learners to make the new sounds.

c) provides feedback and correction – each teacher should inform learners about how they are doing during lessons and provide them information about their performances because learners very often are not able to tell whether they managed it in the right way or not.

Learners should imitate the teacher in the lesson in order to pronounce words in correct pronunciation. Findings various activities and games during the lesson is significant way of correcting pronunciation. Giving constructive feedbacks to

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<sup>6</sup> Joanne Kenworthy "Teaching English Pronunciation (Longman Handbooks for Language Teachers Series)" (1987-08-01)

learners by teachers during particular communication activity can have a clear idea of what learners need to concentrate on. At the same time, it gives them that teachers are interested in fluency and accuracy which is very important in learning language.

### **Learners' mistakes in spoken English.**

Making mistakes by learners is usual, since it opens them correct path to the pronunciation. Scrivener<sup>7</sup> mentions that mistakes often show teachers that a pupil “is experimenting with language, trying out ideas, taking risks, attempting to communicate and making progress” Most learners struggle to pronounce some sounds and by pronouncing them incorrectly they absolutely change the meaning of the word. For instance, /s/ and /z/ is considered confusable in usage. The learners pronounce /s/ instead of /z/, so that a word such as peas is pronounced as peace. Consequently, the meaning will also be changed. And some consonants are written but not pronounced. This is either because they were once pronounced (knock) or come from a foreign language (psychology). Initial position — kn — knock, knee, knife — ps — psychology, psychiatry End position — mb — lamb, climb, thumb — mn — condemn, autumn, column Besides, we have a lot of pronunciation mistakes in the consonant sounds /θ/ and /ð/. Differing these sounds are very difficult for Uzbek learners too. Speakers often create a heavily voiceless stop /t/ instead of a voiceless fricative /θ/ in a word like thank. Apparently, they vocalize the sound /t/ based on their language since in elementary level learners the letter th is combined by a heavily aspirated /t/. So, the word three can be pronounced exactly like tree.

Elementary level learners of English commonly produce /d/ or /z/ for /ð/ sounds, so the word than may sound like /dæn/ or /zæn/. In the Uzbek language, the voiceless stop /p/ does not occur in initial position of words. And our speakers can substitute a voiced stop /b/ or a voiceless fricative /f/ for /p/. As a result, the word pool may sound like fool, and pop may sound like bop.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, in the final positions, these consonants often provoke confusion for learners. For example, lab might sound like lap. Except that there is a problem with grammatical ending s. When

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<sup>7</sup> Scrivener Jim – “Learning teaching” 3rd edition – (2011)

<sup>8</sup> Nguyen Tien Dung, Faculty of Foreign Languages, the professor of Ba Ria — Vung Tau University, from his lecture.  
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words end in s in forms of consonant-vowel-consonant, the /s/ sound is frequently omitted. For examples, sits may turn to /sit/ and wants may become /wan/. Sometimes, our speakers tend to omit both /t/ and /s/ sound in the word wants. Some other final consonant clusters such as /kt/ as in walked, /t/ as in washed, /d/ as in judged, and /ld/ as in filled are very difficult for our elementary level learners to pronounce. To clarify, the words world may be pronounced as /w/, myself may be pronounced as /mayse/. These mistakes can be very difficult for our learners to overcome.

Learning the pronunciation of some words is divided to the degree of difficulty. The pronunciation of some words is easily corrected, however, for some phrases it can be better step by step based on some well-known theories and practices. There are diverse range of games and activities which improve learners' pronunciation. These activities can be utilized during the lesson and give effective way of developing pronunciation. For instance:

**1. Story telling.** Effective activity for imitating the voice of a native speaker and at the same time correcting own pronunciation.

**2. Silent letters.** Productive game for practicing sounds. The teacher will choose words which contain silent letters (e.g. comb, queue, wrist, knitting, lightning, lamb, knife, cushion, etc.) and will illustrate them by means of flashcards or pictures. Working individually or in pairs, the players must spell these words;

**3. Rhyming twins.** This activity is essential to recognize the similar sounds of a different words. The teacher lists various words that sound similar and students should find the exact word that is pronounced in the audio.

This kind of activities make learners more engaged and involved to the lesson. So they unconsciously improve their own pronunciation. Teachers themselves will not meet any obstacles in correcting the sound performances.

**Conclusion:**

Language starts with the ear. Teaching correct pronunciation help learners not to confuse during the conversation. Most learners find that their mother tongue influence to other foreign languages. However, there are techniques that help learners

overcome this challenges and speak like a native speaker. The above mentioned rules are aimed at increasing the level of pronunciation. Pronunciation is also one of the skill that should be acquired along with writing, reading, speaking and listening. So educators should take into account and teach learners the way od conversing correctly every sound and phrases.

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