Pronunciation errors: is it possible to eliminate them?

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Pronunciation is an important aspect of any language as well as a skill to acquire by anyone who starts studying a foreign language. Must a teacher put up with students' mistakes in an ESP environment or should he develop some methods and techniques to combat them? I support the latter point of view and try to prove that students of economics can obtain good pronunciation skills with a certain effort on their part.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to justify the role of pronunciation in teaching English as a foreign language at a non-linguistic university. Since English has been adopted as "the medium of international communication" (Scheuer 2007 : 17), the only purpose of teaching pronunciation in this context has become to ensure that a student should be understood but not taken for an Englishman. "Communicative efficiency supposes that a student can say (and be understood to say) what it is he wishes to communicate" (Harmer 1991 : 25). On the other hand, accurate pronunciation is important if students want to be understood clearly. Pronunciation errors may cause misunderstanding and lead to breakdowns in communication. If students' pronunciation is good enough to be understood, the aim of communication can be achieved with ease.

Intelligibility versus accuracy ?

As Robin Walker states, the goal in teaching pronunciation in ELF setting is to be intelligible to other non-native speakers (Walker 2008). A list of features that help to contribute to this intelligibility, according to this

author, includes four main points and is known as Lingua franca core (LFC):

1. The quality of consonants, except / Ɵ /, /ð/, aspiration of /p/ , /t/, /k/.

2. Vowel length

3. Consonant cluster simplification

4. Nucleus stress

<div align="center">(Walker 2008 : 8)</div>

In other words, foreign learners can reduce their accents acquiring LFC elements ('Lingua franca core' being "a minimal set of features claimed to be essential to safeguarding international communication" (Scheuer 2007 : 17)) and adding them to their accents. On the other hand, the kind of English its learners possess from the point of view of accuracy will differ considerably between "conversational" English and academic or technical English (Norrish 2008 : 4). What is acceptable for one environment, is unacceptable for another. Besides, people who use English not only in everyday speech but professionally would wish to sound not only intelligible, but also accurate from a phonetic point of view. This is why many students who realise that they will need English for professional communication would welcome to be taught Standard English or RP which is still appreciated as internationally intelligible, "the language of "culture", of British broadcasting, and in general of the arts" (Harmer 1991 : 26-27). A majority of learners will still find it to be "a norm" for educated people and an accent not "to be laid to rest".

Why Standard English?

Even though most teachers of English worldwide do not speak English as their first language and are usually called 'non-native teachers', they are professional teachers and were probably taught the British

Standard which is quite common for Pedagogical universities in Russia. The Standard model of pronunciation has some very obvious advantages: it is very neutral and easy to imitate (if you have a good ear); most often it is also the one to hear on radio, television and in British films. In teaching it is usually compared with other varieties of English. Under these circumstances students are also taught to accept the diversity of accents and are told not to rely on RP as a superior one.

The nature of pronunciation errors

If students in English language acquisition rely only on secondary school and do not attend any additional evening classes, they will probably have pronunciation errors. Students' mistakes in pronunciation in my teaching experience can be grouped in the following way:

1.Mistakes in consonants:

both, growth /s/, *divide, convenience* /w/, *chemistry* /ʧ/, *legislation, gel, register* /g/, *jurisdiction* /ʃʊ/, *the* /z/, etc.

2.Mistakes in vowel sounds:

commodity, cost, knowledge, deposit /əʊ/, *significant, examine* / aɪ /, *international* /eɪ /, *act, pattern* / ʌ /, *result* /ʊ/

3.Mistakes in word stress:

'deposit, in'dustries, 'control, 'effect, va'riable, 'percent, 'reports, pur'chase, con'sequently, 'insurance, Eu'ropean, 'perspective

4.Mistakes in intonation:

No general idea of intonation in English, wrong nuclear stress placing.

The nature of these mistakes is to a large extent in the interference of their own language: very few of them are aware of the fact that in order to sound more or less English one must not only imitate native speakers but also adjust their organs of speech to tense articulation of sounds. The majority

of students will be under the influence of Russian articulation, which is generally flabby, vowel sounds are reduced in an unstressed position and intonation sounds monotonous due to a rather narrow pitch range.

Methodology

Sounds and phonetic script

Since there are two major classes of sounds - consonants and vowels – each of them must be explained to the students. The distinction is based mainly on auditory effect. As in the production of consonants various obstructions are made, they combine voice and noise; vowels consist of voice only. In the process of mastering sounds students are given basic information about the nature of sounds and their articulation. For example, in mastering the sound /æ/ they are told to keep the tongue in the front part of the mouth and low, the lips should be rather tense; for the sound /ɜ:/ the lips ought to be neutral and unrounded. It is always good to relate English sounds to the corresponding Russian ones and point out the difference in the production. When students are equipped with this knowledge they are offered to do exercises to practice sounds in separate words and pairs of words to differentiate between /v/ and /w/, / Ɵ / and /ð/, /t/ and /d/, / ɑː /, /ɜ:/, / i: /, /ɒ/, / ɔ: /, / ɪ /, /e/, for example:

vat – wet, vest – west, veil – whale; thin – this, thud – thus; tin – dean, taught – dot; arm, art, ask; sir, serve, verse; see, seed, seat; sit, sick, kiss; all, august, ought; dot, lot; ten, pen, men, etc.

The main technique to be used to achieve good results is to listen and repeat the pattern of pronunciation. A certain amount of mechanical drilling (imitation and repetition) usually helps to produce sounds more accurately. Under these circumstances when students do not have phonetics as a

subject in the curriculum, special attention must be given to sounds that cause a difficulty but not for the whole range of sounds.

A knowledge of phonemic script can help students to differentiate between long and short vowels, diphthongs and triphthongs, consonant clusters and also to be able to read new words. All work on mastering the system of *transcription* as a set of symbols representing speech sounds must be done step by step and should not be demoralizing. The broad transcription that is normally explained to the students is based on D. Jones' one, which was later developed by some Russian scholars, for example, V.A. Vassilyev. This one was recommended for teaching purposes. To simplify the acquisition of transcription students are usually advised to learn it on examples of familiar words like:

/ ɪ / - *risk*

/ ʊ / - *goods*

/e/ - *sector*

/æ/ - *tax*

/ɑ:/ - *market*

/e/ - *inflation*

/əʊ/ - *bonus,* etc.

Word stress and rhythm

Under word stress we mean prominence. The syllables of the word as the smallest pronounceable units which "stand out from the remainder are said to be accented, to receive the accent" (Gimson 1981 : 221). According to this author, in English the main accent falls regularly on the first syllable in such words as *finish, answer, afterwards*; on the second syllable in *behind, result, together*; on the third syllable in *understand, education* or later in *articulation, palatalisation*, etc. It is worth adding to this that the so-called

'long words' in English possess the auxiliary stress as well which falls on the first syllable.

Mastering the word stress appears to be a problem for some students. In some cases the reason is interference of the native language as in the word *European* because in Russian the 2nd syllable is stressed in this word, in other cases – there seems to be no reasonable explanation (like in the word *deposit* – in Russian the last syllable is stressed). Again, the most effective technique to be used for better results is imitation of correct variants. The teacher can expect students to remember them but with limited practice there can hardly be good results. What students must be aware of is that stress can perform the semantic function of different lexical units, parts of speech, grammatical forms. It is also essential in word-building:

'contrast – to con'trast

'contact – to con'tact

.recog'nition – to 'recognise

Rhythm which is usually understood as "variations of long and short or accented and unaccented syllables" (Concise Oxford Dict. 1988 : 895) is a notion and a skill which is very much supportive in language acquisition. Since students are aware of the existence of stressed and unstressed syllables, they are expected to stress the former and not to stress the latter. With time they can build up their skills gradually, without much interference from the teacher.

Intonation

Intonation is viewed as "a complex of features, such as tone, pitch-range and loudness, with rhythmicality and tempo closely related" (Crystal 1969 : 195); other scholars restrict it to "variations of pitch (rises and falls)" (Gimson 1981 : 264), "pitch variations" (Ashbey and Maidment 2007 : 172). J. Wells defines intonation as "the melody of speech. In studying intonation

we study how the pitch of voice rises and falls. … It also involves the study of rhythm of speech" (2007 : 1). Russian linguists view intonation on a perception level as "a complex, a whole formed by significant variations of pitch, loudness and tempo (i.e. the rate of utterance and pausation). Some Russian researchers regard speech timbre as the fourth component of intonation" (Theoretical Phonetics of the English Language 1991 : 114). For some purposes the former definitions are more appropriate, for teaching purposes – the latter can be referred to. We can only add to it that intonation helps to define the meaning and attitude by raising or lowering the pitch of the voice.

For the purposes of analysing intonation a unit, which is usually greater in size than a syllable, is used, *a tone-unit* (Roach) (*tone group* – Crystal, *sense-group* – O'Connor and Arnold, *intonation group* - Cruttenden). Every syllable in connected speech has a pitch colouring. It has also a certain amount of *loudness*. It is characterized by some *tempo.* All the three together form an *intonation pattern,* which may be one word or a syllable, a clause, a sentence or part of a sentence. Within every intonation pattern analysts usually define *a nucleus* which is the most prominent stressed syllable and conveys the most important part of the message. It can contain other stressed or unstressed syllables preceding or following the nucleus. In the phonetic school of the Pedagogical University of Moscow, which I graduated from, 8 nuclear tones are defined:
1.The Low (Mid) Fall
2.The High Fall
3.The Rise-Fall
4.The Low Rise
5.The High (Mid) Rise
6.The Fall-Rise
7.The Rise-Fall-Rise
8.The High, Mid, Low Level

Alan Cruttenden (1997) mentions the Fall-Rise as the common tone in English though in order to acquire the Fall-Rise tone it is absolutely essential to master the Low-Fall and the Low-Rise (the former being most difficult for Russian learners since the Mid-Fall is more common for them). A sentence (or a phrase in oral speech) can contain one or several intonation groups, which results in one or several intonation patterns. The majority of researchers include also the Head (the Pre-Head) and the Tail in the intonation pattern:

1.Descending Heads:
- the Stepping Head
- the Falling Head
- the Sliding Head

2.Ascending Heads:
- the Rising Head
- the Climbing Head
- the Scandent Head

3.Level Heads:
- the High Level Head
- the Low-Level Head
- the Mid-Level Head

In teaching, intonation usually comes last, firstly, because it seems to be less important in comparison with the articulation of sounds, and, secondly, because it is very difficult to acquire. It was also stressed by P. Roach: "Though it is of great importance, the complexity of the total set of sequential and prosodic components of intonation and of paralinguistic features makes it a very difficult thing to teach" (Roach 1991 : 168). In a non-linguistic institution probably two functions of intonation must be explained to the students: grammatical and attitudinal, the former associated with sentence type (statement, questions, interjections, exclamations) and the latter – helping the speaker to express different

"attitudes and emotions – shock or surprise, pleasure or anger, interest or boredom, seriousness or sarcasm, and many others" (Wells 2007 : 11). As P. Roach believes, "the attitudinal use of intonation is something that is best acquired through talking with and listening to English speakers" (1991 : 169). If there is no chance for students to communicate with native speakers, they should be explained that, for example, the Low-Fall usually sounds *cool, categoric and reserved*; the High-Fall sounds *light, airy and surprised*; the Low-Rise – *wondering, mildly puzzled and skeptical*; the High-Rise sounds *echoing;* the Fall-Rise – *concerned, astonished and hurt*; the Rise-Fall – sounds *impressed, awed or hostile*; the Mid-Level – marks *non-finality* (O'Connor and Arnold 1973).

Correction and feedback

Feedback is usually based on a piece of oral work which students produce and which is both motivating further learning and demonstrating their progress in pronunciation. It would be true to say that students experience difficulties in acquiring English pronunciation which can be lessened by proper direction. Without accurate explanation of articulation of sounds and basic intonation patterns, practice based on imitation and encouragement from the teacher pronunciation skills can hardly be obtained. A student is free to choose the level of competency in pronunciation he would like to obtain: for some students it hardly has any difference and they tend to speak their own variant of English being under the influence of their own language; others, highly motivated to get good grades and continue studying abroad will choose to achieve "a performance of the native speaker" (Gimson 1981 : 303). The majority of students will have a very practical purpose: not only to be able to pass the exams successfully, but also to be able to use English while travelling, communicating with people all over the world.

It is obvious that a teacher, even though a University teacher, can hardly meet all the students' requirements. He, being usually a foreigner, presents students with a decent model of English, corrects their mistakes and explains how to avoid making them. This can be easily done during regular classes and it is ideal for the first group of students. As for the 2nd and the 3d groups, meeting these students' expectations can be rather difficult within a fixed curriculum, there ought to be additional classes or even a "Special course in pronunciation" offered by the teacher. This course could base on segmental and suprasegmental issues, a lot of listening, imitation and practice. It is sure to give good results given students' motivation is high enough to deal with new sounds and various intonation patterns. The course must also be challenging and encouraging at the same time.

Conclusion

In this paper I tried to attract teacher's attention to the role of teaching pronunciation at a tertiary level. Students in non-linguistic universities have a right to speak good English and sound intelligible and normative. Whichever way they choose after graduating, they will possess learning skills and will be equipped with knowledge and direction on how to progress. Teachers hope that their students will soon feel strong enough to move forward and be confident in what they do and how they do it.

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