

## Towards Better Teaching of Pronunciation: Review of Literature in the Area

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### Abstract

*The present paper aims at establishing the need to focus on the importance of teaching pronunciation to language learners. The study is descriptive in nature. It traces out the body of research concerning the weightiness of pronunciation within linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural domains as well as through the eyes of the language learners. The findings highlighted the knock-on effects of pronunciation on the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). In addition, pronunciation instruction was found to be the learners' priority and a field in which they need more coaching. As an illuminating study, the paper is useful to teachers, researchers, and material writers to consider the language learners' needs in the English language teaching and learning context.*

**Keywords:** Learner attitudes; Linguistic effects; Pronunciation; Psychological effects; Socio-cultural effects

### 1. Introduction

Pronunciation, the neglected area in English language teaching (ELT), is regarded as the 'Cinderella' of language teaching family (Kelly, 1969). Currently, foreign language teaching emphasizes on the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In this regard, Gilbert (2010) entitles it as "an orphan" in English language classrooms around the world. It is only focused in the first year of study through the introduction of the target language alphabet and sound system, but it is given least importance after the introductory level. However, pronunciation must be considered as more than the correct production of phonemes or isolated words at any language proficiency level. Rather, teachers must view that as an essential part of communication which must be implemented in classroom activities.

Pronunciation is the basis of communication and should be valued in the same weight as other components and skills of language, such as vocabulary, grammar, reading, and writing (Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2012b). The paper intends to discuss the 'Cinderella' status of pronunciation instruction in ELT context and shed light on the significance of pronunciation instruction within linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural domains.

### 2. Pronunciation as the Cinderella of Language Teaching

Kelly (1969) regarded pronunciation as the "Cinderella of language teaching" (p. 87). It has been an area of neglect compared to other language skills and sub-skills. According to Kelly (2000), it is neglected because of its complexity, dearth of scientific foundation, insufficient teaching materials, absence of non-native teachers with formal expertise in pronunciation, and opposing ideas concerning the teaching of pronunciation, to name but a few.

The very fact of neglecting pronunciation in language classrooms, as Kelly (2000) put it, arises from the teachers' doubt of how to teach it rather than their lack of interest in the topic. He continued further to pose a paradox between the mutual enthusiasms of both teachers and learners concerning pronunciation and the dearth of theoretical foundations for

the topic; explaining that while teachers feel it quite essential to upgrade their practical skills in pronunciation teaching, language learners are also inclined towards pronunciation as a tool for better communication.

### 3. Pronunciation, an Area of Neglect in English Language Teaching (ELT)

According to previous studies (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Gilner, 2008; and Baker & Murphy, 2011), teaching pronunciation is ignored within the English as a foreign / second language (EFL/ESL) classroom context, teacher training programs, course materials, and applied linguistics studies. However, pronunciation instruction is regarded as extremely beneficial from learners' perspective (Barrera Pardo, 2004). It plays a prominent role in EFL/ESL learners' perception and production of oral communication skills (Macdonald, 2002).

At this stage, it is crucial to explain why pronunciation is either totally overlooked or treated dubiously in many language programs. Within the current of ELT, teachers determine to utilize pronunciation teaching in their classrooms (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Jenkins, 2002). However, due to the absence of formal training as well as the dearth of program directives, teachers are left unguided so as to prepare themselves on how well to address their learners' needs (Gilner, 2008; Macdonald, 2002). Therefore, they intentionally skip pronunciation because "they lack confidence, skills and knowledge" (Macdonald, 2002, p. 3).

Pronunciation teaching entails three serious risks for both teachers and students. First and foremost, the limited time of the classroom does not allow teachers to devote appropriate attention to pronunciation (Gilbert, 2008). Second, researchers and educationalists have failed to guide teachers on how to teach pronunciation or even to teach it at all (Couper, 2006). Third, choosing to teach pronunciation, untrained instructors may mainly focus on pronunciation textbooks and software programs regardless of their students' needs. As Derwing and Munro (2005) further elaborated, this strategy is not beneficial because many of such materials lack theoretically sound grounds. In this regard, teachers' limited understanding of the rationale behind the suggested activities does not allow for appropriate matching to students' requirements. Moreover, such instruction "amounts to the presentation and practice of a series of tedious and seemingly unrelated topics" (Gilbert, 2008, p. 1) which is disappointing for both teachers and students (Gilbert, 2010).

### 4. Pronunciation and Language Skills

According to Underhill (2012), while listening, pronunciation ability is being assessed all the time. In other words, audio and auditory skills are interlinked. Therefore, improving pronunciation enhances listening ability.

Pronunciation is considered as "an integral part of oral communication" (Morley, 1991, p. 496) since good pronunciation facilitates communication and enhances intelligibility (Varasarin, 2007). Accordingly, pronunciation anxieties of learners may have an obstructive effect on other domains of one's language learning.

Linking pronunciation with grammar and vocabulary, Underhill (2011) maintained that while the two cerebral activities (i.e., grammar and vocabulary) give language its structure and meaning, pronunciation is its embodiment through speaking and writing.

Spelling is an integral part of writing and a significant cause of pronunciation errors. Kelly (2000) points out that "English spelling is not as irregular as it seems" (p. 123) because simply one out of every thousand words has irregular spelling. In addition, a number of these words are amongst the most common ones such as *are*, *said*, *come*, *how*, *what*, and *could* (Kelly, 2000). Thus, teachers should draw learners' attention to the most crucial sound/spelling patterns.

Like writing, the ability to read is bound up with phonological skills (Goswami, 1993, 2000; Hulme, Snowling, Caravolas, & Carrol, 2005). Recently, Birch (2011) declared that knowledge of phonology and phonemic processing strategies are both required for reading skill. In her view, "Children who have a deficit in phonological knowledge or processing will have impairments or delays in learning to read, especially in learning to read opaque writing systems" (p. 491). Assuming such a well-established link, Goswami (1993, 2000) concluded that rich phonological awareness skills mark good readers while poor phonological awareness skills mark poor readers. Thus, training children's phonological skills would yield better readers.

Researchers (Goswami, 1993, 2000; Wood & Farrington-Flint, 2002) point out that there exists a relationship between pronunciation, spelling, and reading. Justifying such relationship, they referred to orthographic analogies that one employs while reading. In their view, orthographic analogy is the ability to read new words based on known words (e.g., using "light" as a guide for reading "fight"). As evidence for advanced readers, Goswami cited the results of a study done by Marsh, Friedman, Welch, and Desberg (1981, as cited in Goswami, 1993) in which younger children were found to pronounce nonsense words by applying grapheme-phoneme (i.e. letter-sound) correspondence rules while older children employed analogies.

Moreover, being able to notice the similarities and differences in the sounds and rhymes of words, one may understand how these similarities and differences are represented alphabetically. In other words, phonological skills improve spelling abilities (Goswami, 1990). In a similar line but from a different perspective, Kamhi and Hinton (2000) reported a strong correlation between phonological awareness and spelling skills explaining that spelling errors are phonetically accurate. Similarly, Griffith (1991, as cited in Weinrich & Fay, 2007) found that children with high phonemic awareness skills are better spellers than those with low phonemic awareness skills. Consequently, better pronouncers are better readers, better spellers, and more successful in making orthographic analogies.

According to Goswami (1993), dyslexic children (i.e., children with reading difficulties) cannot use orthographic analogies as a reading strategy since "they lack the phonological knowledge necessary to use similarities in spelling patterns as a basis for making predictions about shared sound" (p. 307). They are likely to read words through holistic recognition; that is, they employ their visual memories to pronounce known words (Catts, Adlof, Hogan, & Ellis Weismer, 2005; Goswami, 1993).

Recently, Walter (2008, 2009) claimed a direct relationship between pronunciation ability and reading comprehension. She believed that comprehension skills are independent of language, and thus they cannot be *transferred* to the second language (L2). Rather, well-comprehended L2 readers can do it since they have accomplished to a degree that they can *access*, from the L2, their already acquired skill in building mental structures.

Next, referring to the phonological loop and visuo-spatial sketchpad as two underlying systems of working memory, Walter (2008, 2009) declared that the text is immediately decoded and stored phonologically (in the phonological loop), not visually. In addition, due to the limited capacity of working memory, material in the phonological loop is in danger of loss if one fails to quickly distinguish the L2 phonemes from one another when they differ by a phoneme. Such failure, she believed, makes it difficult to link the sounds with meanings (i.e., pre-existing acquired mental representations). In this regard, she assumed that poor graspers tend to overload the working memory with phonological aspects of text since they lack a fully elaborated phonological inventory of L2. Consequently, such overloading of the working memory impedes reading comprehension. Trying to prove this, Walter conducted a research with two groups of learners (i.e., L1 French and L2 English) to whom she read sequences of four words that were either phonologically *similar* (e.g., *white, wine, wet, met*) or phonologically *dissimilar* (e.g., *job, fine, yes, soup*). Participants were then asked to recall each sequence in order. The recall task was done both in L1 and in L2.

The results showed almost perfect performance of the two groups in the L1 dissimilar sequences, and significantly less well performance in the similar sequences. In L2 English, the well-comprehended group performed partly less well, but in the same vein as L1 (i.e., they performed better in dissimilar rather than similar sequences). Nevertheless, the poor-comprehended group performed significantly less well in L2 (especially in the similar sequences) than the other group.

## 5. Psychological Effects of Pronunciation

Pronunciation should be considered as a priority since language is fundamentally a medium of communication which should be understood by all. A person with an unintelligible pronunciation may run the risk of not being understood by others (Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2012a). Moreover, proper pronunciation not only makes our speech intelligible, but also establishes rapport with the listeners. Brawn (2010) noted that while trying to be understood, elementary learners experience pronunciation as the first paramount impediment ruining their confidence.

Exploring the effect of pronunciation difficulties on communication, Derwing and Rossiter (2002) interviewed one hundred migrants who were taking intermediate level courses in an ESL program in Canada. Their results showed that more than half of the participants (55%) marked pronunciation problems as one possible area of communication difficulty in English, among whom 42% regarded pronunciation problems as the main cause of such difficulties. According to Zielinski (2012), holding such attitudes concerning the impact of pronunciation difficulties on interactions, ESL learners may run the risks of losing confidence and willingness to speak.

One of the prominent and promising outcomes of a good pronunciation is the feeling of self-confidence since "poor pronunciation degrades good language skills and condemns learners to less than their deserved social, academic and work advancement" (Varasarin, 2007, p.45). In addition, language learners' communicative competence is extremely limited without sufficient pronunciation skills. According to Morley (1998), limited pronunciation skills are likely to threaten learners' self-confidence, impede social communication and negatively affect estimations of a speaker's credibility and abilities. On the other hand, good pronunciation tends to make the communication easier and more relaxed and thus more successful (Varasarin, 2007).

Looking from a different perspective, Gilbert (1984) stated the interdependency of listening comprehension and

pronunciation skills. Therefore, as she claimed, learners' failure to hear English well along with their failure to be easily understood make them isolated from conversation with native speakers. In other words, without good pronunciation ability, one can neither express himself/herself nor fully understand others (Varasarin, 2007). Taken together, perfect pronunciation aims at functional intelligibility, communicability, increased self-confidence, the development of speech monitoring abilities and speech modification strategies (Morley, 1991).

Aiming for a perfect pronunciation may exert detrimental effects upon language learners. For instance, in a study conducted by Pishghadam and Akhondpoor (2011), perfectionist English language learners were said to experience great anxiety since they aimed at a flawless and immaculate speech (i.e., without pronunciation errors). Setting unachievable standards of performance, such learners may prefer to remain silent and not participate in group discussions unless they are certain about the meticulous accuracy of their speech.

## 6. Sociocultural Effects of Pronunciation

It is of no doubt that language and society are interdependent. As Levis (2005) pointed out, accent is a crucial marker of social belonging since speakers speak in a way to conform to the ethics of the social groups they belong to or desire to belong to. In addition, accent and phonology can shape part of individual's identity (Dyer, 2007). In other words, it is possible to partly recognize one's language identity through his/her accent, dialect or pronunciation.

Likewise, Zuengler (1988) clearly stated that "pronunciation is a domain within which one's identity is expressed" (p. 34). Block (2007) defined identities as "socially constructed, self-conscious, ongoing narratives that individuals perform, interpret and project in dress, bodily movements, actions and language" (p. 27). Considering this definition, Pullen (2012) perceived the adoption of a specific language as a crucial element by which one presents and views himself/herself.

Hietanen (2012) regarded identity as having connection with willingness to acquire a specific accent or to keep one. According to Kirkpatrick (2007), "accents are closely bound up with feelings of personal and group identity" (p. 37). According to Jiang, Green, Henley, and Masten (2009) social and cultural identity influence the degree of foreign accentedness in the production of a second language. Within an EFL context, Pishghadam and Kamyabi (2009) reported a positive relationship between the degree of accentedness and deculturation. In addition, based on evidence obtained from the analysis of successful and unsuccessful language learners in accent mimicry, they concluded speaking with a native-like accent deculturates learners from their own culture. That is, such language learners will lose their local identity since they consider that accent to be the best one. According to Rubin (2012), listeners commonly attribute social identity to speakers and consistently make a number of judgments about them based on how they pronounce words and phrases. In his view, such judgments may be about speakers' ethnicity, social class, enthusiasm, confidence, intelligence, academic success, and even about their physical height.

## 7. Attitudes of the Language Learners towards English Pronunciation

More than half of the learners regard pronunciation as a priority and feel they need more coaching (Willing, 1993, as cited in Varasarin, 2007). Although researchers and teacher trainers pay considerable attention to pronunciation instruction in language classes, with an emphasis on prosodic elements, the L2 learners' comments suggest that they are either not receiving proper instruction or, if they are, they are not gaining advantage from it (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002). According to Elliott (1995), teachers tend to sacrifice pronunciation in favor of other language skills since they perceive pronunciation as the least beneficial of the basic language skills. The logic behind such scarification may be their belief in the difficulty of acquiring a native-like accent, at least for the adult EFL learners. However, Neufeld and Schneiderman (1980, as cited in Elliott, 1995) found that adults can achieve native-like proficiency in the segmental and suprasegmental features of a second language. In addition, such native-like proficiency occurs in relatively short time causing no obstruction to other areas of the second language teaching program.

Underlining the significance of learners' attitudes on their accomplishments, Oller, Baca, and Vigil (1977) found a strong positive correlation between learner attitudes and motivation on the one hand, and achieved L2 proficiency on the other. In their study, higher achievers had positive attitudes towards L2 while lower achievers adopted negative attitudes concerning the L2. Moreover, motivation was found to account for the essential skills in face-to-face interactions with integratively motivated students outperforming the instrumentally motivated learners. On the report of Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) classification of needs into '*necessities*', '*lacks*' and '*wants*', the latter (*wants*) applies to the subjective needs of the learners. In this respect, owing to the close relationship between learners' wants and their level of motivation, English pronunciation teachers should not impose their own perceived needs upon their students (Hosseini

Fatemi & Shahriari Ahmadi, 2010).

## 8. Conclusion

In reviewing the previous body of research concerning the significance of pronunciation in language learning process, one may feel the crucial need for learners to be equipped with phonological skills since a neglect of pronunciation instruction would have knock-on effects throughout the whole language learning process. The bulk of scientific proofs provided in this study, gives support to the application of learners' needs analysis in education. English language teachers should provide learners with a body of knowledge concerning the phonological awareness skills. In fact, developing such skills is crucial in the flourishing of other language competencies including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For instance, according to Morley (1991), teachers may employ pronunciation-oriented listening practice and spelling-oriented pronunciation practice in order to raise learners' awareness in speech modification processes as they work to become intelligible, communicative, confident speakers of English.

The present study also recommends teacher trainers to stress the significance of pronunciation instruction to teachers and supply them with thorough background knowledge of phonetics and phonology, as well as suprasegmentals and voice-quality features that are needed for intelligible communication. Possessing such phonological science enables language teachers to design a learner-friendly syllabus that truly meets learners' needs. In the light of the current study, material developers need to consider incorporation of materials for thought to consider language learners' wants in order to produce more reader-friendly materials and books that systematically build phonological awareness skills in language learners. Such materials may make use of a host of authentic drills and activities after introducing each lesson in order to facilitate the learning process.

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