Traditional and Current Perspectives on Pronunciation Teaching

Cirine Zouaidi[1]

[1] Institut Supérieur des Langues de Tunis, University of Carthage, Tunis, Tunisia

Correspondence: Cirine Zouaidi, Institut Supérieur des Langues de Tunis, University of Carthage, Tunis, Tunisia. E-mail: zouaidi.cirine@yahoo.fr

Abstract

Pronunciation is an important factor in the teaching of a second or a foreign language. This paper tries to summarize the traditional methods and approaches used and highlight the modern and current ones for teaching pronunciation. This paper advocates the adoption of an interdisciplinary approach that makes use of psychology, instructional technology, and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). The aim is to encourage English language teachers to use innovative techniques for teaching pronunciation nowadays.

Keywords: pronunciation teaching, traditional, modern approaches, interdisciplinary approach, instructional technology

1. Introduction

Pronunciation is an essential element for the learning of oral speech in second and foreign language learning. Schmitt (2002) defines pronunciation as "a term used to capture all aspects of how we employ speech sounds for communication" (p. 219). It is a linguistic skill that involves learning to articulate and differentiate individual sounds and recognize the features of connected speech. Pronunciation has an important role in the learning process, as it helps the learner to better comprehend native speakers and native-like speakers appropriately. Pronunciation is required not merely for linguistics but for communicating and making meaning. Pica (1994) and Long (1996) argue that learners' L2 development advances while communicating. In fact, teaching pronunciation is important for a successful oral communication to take place where clarity of the speech leads to mutual understanding. Yet, in the worst case, it leads to serious miscommunication and a misunderstanding.

A comprehensive input helps the learner and the speaker achieve mutual understanding. Proper pronunciation increases speech intelligibility. Accordingly, teachers must attribute proper importance to the teaching of pronunciation in their classes. The amount of time and effort allocated to teaching pronunciation depends on the teacher. Yet, teachers forget that English is the language of international and intercultural communication. Yates (2001) has shown that curricula, methodology, and the absence of proper materials, all gave rise to inadequacies of teaching and learning in the field. This paper tries to summarize the historical development of language theory and pedagogy and highlight the contemporary pronunciation teaching approaches and techniques.

2. Traditional Pronunciation Teaching Methods

Language teaching methods of pronunciation have changed relatively to each period. Different approaches and methods were developed by placing pronunciation either at the forefront of teaching or at the back and ignore its weight.

2.1 Pro-Pronunciation Teaching

The Direct Method was the first oral based teaching method that gave a lot of importance to pronunciation. It came to surface during the late 1800's and late 1900's. The proponents of this method realized the importance of oral speech and particularly everyday speech. This method is an intuitive – imitative approach. In fact, the intuitive- imitative approach, as proposed by Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996) is an approach in which second language (L2) learners listen and imitate the rhythms and sounds provided by the teacher or the audiotape used. Following the direct method, the teacher provides L2 learners with a model of native-like speech. By listening and then imitating the modeler, L2 learners improved their pronunciation. Learners were encouraged to use the language (i.e., speak, produce). The teacher was the source of learning and pronunciation

is taught through imitation and repetition. Even though, the direct method put pronunciation on the front, the methodology for teaching pronunciation was not fostered and was considered primitive.

Few years later, the Audiolingual Method was developed in the United States during the 1950's while structuralism dominated language theory. It was referred to as the Oral Approach in Britain and considered the first modern method used in language teaching based on structuralism and behaviorism. The Audiolingual Method is grounded on the structuralist theory. Pronunciation is taught explicitly from the start and learners imitated and repeated after their teachers or the recorded model. Similar to the Direct Method, the focus is on correctness and the practice of the target language. Plus, the teacher is the sage on the stage. Yet, unlike the Direct Method, the teacher makes use of information from phonetics such as the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) chart or charts presenting the articulation of sounds and relying on explicit linguistic information. By the mid of the 1960's, the audiolingual method started to lose ground to Chomsky's (1965) transformational grammar and innateness.

Another approach advocating for pronunciation teaching was the Silent Way. It was introduced during the 1970's. As its name, the teacher does not say much. The approach relies on a specific system that the teacher and the learners established. Proponents believed that the techniques used along this method could improve learners' inner criteria for accurate production. Similar to the Audiolingual Method, the Silent Way gave importance to the accurate production of sounds and structures of the target language. Focus was not only on segmental features, it also combined supra-segmental features as the aim is to sharpen learner's inner criteria for accurate production while relying on a sound-color correspondence system. Yet, unlike the Audiolingual Method, learners' attention is on the sound system without having to learn the phonetic alphabet or any explicit linguistic information.

During the same era, the Community Language Learning (CLL) was developed during the late 1970's to teach second and foreign languages. The approach relied on students' interaction and let the student take the lead in the classroom. Similar to the Direct Method, the CLL is imitative. CLL allows the student to initiate pronunciation practice by selecting the item(s) to s/he wants to practice and deciding on the amount of repetition needed. Plus, the teacher is the provider of knowledge and the counselor for the learners. Correct pronunciation holds a lot of attention to the extent of gratifying learners. Yet unlike the Direct Method, the lessons and the tasks are directed by the learners. Celce-Murcia et al., (1996) explained that the difference between the methods is in the content and amount of practice which is learning-centered and controlled by the learner. The pronunciation syllabus was initially student initiated and designed.

2.2 Con-Pronunciation Teaching

The Cognitive Approach took place during the 1960's and criticized the traditional language approaches used before. This approach was influenced by Noam Chomsky (1965)'s transformational grammar. The Cognitive Approach disregarded pronunciation in favor of grammar and vocabulary mainly because native-like pronunciation was unrealistic and could not be reached. Morley (1991) explained that pronunciation classes were "viewed as meaningless non-communicative drill-and-exercise gambits" (p. 485-486). Pronunciation was de-emphasized and focus was entirely on grammar and syntax. Common classroom tasks were deducing grammatical rules and then understanding them in context.

The Grammar Translation Approach was also known as the classical method. This method relied on the translation of texts and especially literary texts. It was developed during the twentieth century, same as the Reading Based Approaches. These methods considered literary language superior to the spoken language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Reading and writing skills were developed and speaking and listening skills were neglected. Unfortunately, pronunciation received no attention and was considered irrelevant. Oral communication was not the primary goal of L2 instruction. The grammar translation approach was later criticized for being based on written rather than oral language use which led to the inability for students to communicate.

3. Current Pronunciation Teaching Approaches

Each method and approach used to teach pronunciation had its focus and its own characteristics. These approaches were mainly categorized under a focus on language use (i.e., speaking) or under a focus on analyzing the language (i.e., learning grammar). Since the 1980's, the view of language teaching has changed leading to the emergence of new approaches and methods. The position of pronunciation as an orphan (Gilbert, 2010) or as the Cinderella of language teaching (Underhill, 2013) is no longer viable. The focus has been directed towards promoting effective instructions and practices based on the principle of intelligibility rather than the principle of nativeness (Levis, 2018a; O'Brien et al., 2018).

The Communicative Language Approach (CLT) came into surface during 1980's when the view of language broadened to incorporate communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) and language functions (Halliday, 1973). It holds the premise that communication is the primary use of language. Morley (1991) explained that the aim of teaching pronunciation has changed from reaching native-like pronunciation to a more realistic aim of developing functional intelligibility, communicability, speech monitoring abilities, speech modification strategies and self-confidence. CLT is currently still used and considered the dominant method. The purpose of these goals is for learners to develop an understandable spoken English that serves the learners' needs and gives a positive image of the learner as a speaker of a foreign language.

Other forms of the CLT were adopted and advocated by different researchers. The Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an approach to language teaching based on a focus on form and considered to be an extension of the communicative language teaching as it draws on some of its principles. Some of its proponents advocate that TBLT builds teaching and learning around real-life tasks from which knowledge of grammar and features of communicative language use can emerge. TBLT is focused on the concept of tasks that emphasize communication and meaning and is concerned with the process of learning based on tasks. Ellis (2003) defines tasks in terms of; meaning as the task requires learners to produce and understand communicative messages, gaps as learners have to complete either with information or opinion, learners using their own resources to understand and complete the task by relying on their own knowledge, and a communicative outcome as the task needs to have a sort of a communicative outcome.

The Text-Based Instruction (TBI) is an approach that derives from a genre theory of the nature of language and the role that texts play in social contexts. Richards and Rodgers (2014) explain that texts are structured sequences of language, used in specific contexts and in specific ways. These tasks are based on how people communicate in a wide range of social contexts. TBI advocates believe that different text forms are used for different situations and therefore, to master the language learners have to be exposed to different genres. Unlike TBLT, TBI focuses on the product of learning rather than the process involved.

Other approaches like the Content Based Instruction (CBI) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) emerged with a focus on content unlike TBLT and TBI that have a focus on form. Both approaches were developed with a focus on content or the subject that learners will acquire using English as a mean of instruction. In fact, the approaches are built around the principle that people learn a second language more effectively when they use it as a means of understanding content rather than an end result. In other words, understanding the language you are taught in content is better than just perceiving it as a result (i.e., production written or oral). Plus, content activates both the cognitive and interactional processes as they are the starting point for second language learning. While CBI was conceptualized in the United States, CLIL was dominant in Europe. Yet, Pennington and Rogerson-Revell (2019) argue that within these approaches, pronunciation has not been regarded as a main concern of instruction.

Another approach referred to as the Eclectic Approach has mainly one rule; fitting the method to the learner. In other words, the teacher has a grasp of the various methods and approaches and tries to choose the most appropriate one according to the needs of learners. The learner is at the center of the learning process. These various approaches and methods aim to facilitate the understanding of the target language. For example, if the scope of the exercise is accuracy, the teacher corrects the errors immediately. But, if the purpose of the exercise is fluency, then the teacher corrects the errors later on. Unlike other methods, the teacher tries to develop the four linguistic skills of the learner.

3.1 New Directions

The need for new methods led practitioners to take from other fields. One of the most powerful fields that affected pronunciation teaching is information technology. Its impact on the field of teaching generally and teaching pronunciation specifically continuous to flourish. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Computer Assisted Pronunciation Training (CAPT) have major effects on learning and teaching. They provide a private, stress - free environment that learners can use whenever they wish and decide what they want to learn with endless forms of resources. Pennington and Rogerson-Revell (2019) argument that "CAPT can also provide endless opportunities for repetition and imitation, instantaneous responses, and exposure to a wide range of target language speech; it can also facilitate individualized, self-paced learning" (p.235-236). It promotes autonomous learning and provides access to unlimited input, practice, and learners receive instantaneous feedback through the integration of Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR). Chun (2019) names two language learning softwares that use ASR, referred to as Pronunciation Power and Rosetta Stone. For example, the Rosetta Stone can display waveforms of both the native speaker's and the learner's utterances. The learner can see the

difference between his waveform and the native speaker's waveform. By practice, the learner can reach make the same waveform as the native speaker.

Pennington and Rogerson-Revell (2019) argue that several commercial CAPT materials lack solid pedagogical grounds. Yet, some CAPT resources have been developed technologically based on academic collaboration along with pedagogical and language learning grounds. For example, Textware's Connected Speech focuses on connected speech relying on Australian, American, and British English accents. Another resource is the English Accent Coach, based on a feature referred to as the High Variability Pronunciation Training (HVPT). The program plays different audio versions illustrated by various people whose, naturally, pronunciation vary. Pennington and Rogerson-Revell (2019) enumerate other free resources as Sounds of Speech developed by the University of Iowa and the Web Tutorial developed by the University College London.

Even with the extensive number of CAPT softwares, payable and free websites are still as they are functional and reliable. For example, the Learn English Kids website developed by the British council has a specific section entitled "pronunciation activities". Even social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp can be considered pronunciation learning resources. For example, Twitter accounts such as Oxford Words and Cambridge Words tweet "words of the day" and add a direct link where the followers can find the definition and the pronunciation of the word. With the continuous development of CAPT programs, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) offer an amount of convenience that help learners access the teaching app same as any program. Many apps have been developed to suit learners' need. For example, the American Accent on the Go is an app that uses visual articulatory displays. Henrichsen (2020) explains that it features a cartoon character that shows what happens inside the mouth when pronouncing vowels and consonants using an American accent.

Given the various developments that technology has brought into the field of pronunciation teaching and pedagogy, Chun (2019) states that a perfect CAPT program would combine auditory and visualization features, automatic speech recognition (ASR), and appropriate and accurate feedback. She adds that L2 researchers and teachers should collaborate with computer scientists and engineers to resolve such issues. One can say that technology can assist pronunciation teaching, yet teachers can also resort to other technique forms like psychology and drama.

3.2 New Techniques

Apart from information technology, the impact of psychology can be seen in the current trends of pronunciation teaching. These current trends put an emphasis on the affect learning domain. Establishing a non-threatening, balanced classroom is an ideal learning environment. The best receptive learning state can exist when there is a learner-friendly environment and the learner is physically relaxed, emotionally calm, and mentally alert. In order to create such an environment, Celce-Murcia et al., (1960) state that using music (for example working on a song and finishing the words) can reduce stress and put learners in a joyful mood.

Neurolinguistic programming (NLP) is a psychological approach considered to have a potential for language teaching. NLP focuses on the connection between an individual's internal experience (neuro), their language (linguistic) and their behavioral patterns (programming). The NLP approach gives a lot of importance to the interpersonal relationship between the teacher and learners. This link between the teacher and learners is believed to be conductive to success in pronunciation teaching. It is not a mere transmission of information from one another. It is rather a dynamic process in which meaning is constructed through reciprocal feedback and a lot of communication taking place. The communication between the teacher and learners takes place consciously and unconsciously through verbal and non-verbal channels. In fact, teacher's language and behavior affects learners' understanding of the topic, and their beliefs about learning. For example, a teacher can use NLP techniques to identify learners' preferred learning style (visual, auditory or kinesthetic). Once this is known, the teacher can adjust their teaching methods and teaching materials to better suit learners' learning style, such as using visual aids or add more hands-on activities. Moreover, the teacher can affect learners' neuropsychological state. When the teacher can identify the state of learners, change can take place. Different techniques can be used to alter learners' states which later increase learners' motivation and engagement. For example, using soft music at the background when practicing activities in class, employing breathing techniques (i.e., relaxation techniques), and changing instructional routine. Once this state is established, the teacher may "anchor" it; recall this state for the future by having students mark the state in a manner. Another technique that NLP highlights is incorporating multisensory reinforcement to engage learners' awareness on multiple levels. For example, using phoneme cards that have a symbol, a picture and a word containing the sound help teach phonemic alphabet and it is considered a visual reinforcement.

Theater and drama techniques can reduce stress. Celce-Murcia., (1996) emphasize that the dramatic situation fosters communicative competence. Using dramatical techniques can make the learner more expressive and enthusiastic to experiment with sounds and intonation patterns. For instance, the voice modulation technique can be used to help with the control of the articulation, pitch and volume, and can help with good pronunciation of the sounds. Another technique labeled the reframing technique can be used in this context. For example, the learner puts himself in an American or British identity and try to talk by focusing on accent, pitch, and intonation patterns.

4. Conclusion

The teaching of pronunciation underwent different stages and phases that led to the development of different approaches, methods, and techniques. The current pool of approaches that have been tuned in over the years are still being adopted either by a focus on content or a focus on form. The teacher can use the approach that best suits the needs of the students and go from there. These methods and approaches can help teachers today use whatever their learners need as they adopt an interdisciplinary approach. Thus, teachers can overcome whatever difficulties that may arise during the course or even after; a solution can be found. New techniques in information technology are always developing and trying to facilitate language teaching and language learning. Teachers can recur to other techniques as psychological techniques, relying on neurolinguistic programming or even incorporating drama techniques. This plethora of approaches, methods, and techniques is available to every teacher of pronunciation to help him or her suit their pedagogical and teaching needs.

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