

DIFFICULTIES IN TEACHING PRONUNCIATION IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

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Abstract: *Teaching pronunciation is often a neglected or ignored in English language. Nevertheless, correct pronunciation is without doubt a fundamental feature of successful communication in the English language. For this reason, attention should be paid to teaching pronunciation right from the beginning of English language teaching. However, preschool learners require different approaches and techniques and these are addressed in this paper.*

Keywords: *Teaching English pronunciation, children, young learners, teaching techniques.*

English pronunciation is very difficult for foreign learners and it is due to the fact that spelling and pronunciation are two different matters. On the top of it, speech sounds of English are unlikely to be identical to the speech sounds of the mother tongue of the learners. There might be differences in placement of word stress, quality and intensity of syllables, speech rhythm, intonation, etc. It is quite common to assimilate English sounds to the mother tongue sounds and to apply other suprasegmental features of the native language to pronunciation of English. However, in teaching English pronunciation, such assimilation should be avoided and learners need to be taught correct segmental and suprasegmental features of pronunciation.

According to researches, those who start learning English after their school years have greater difficulties in acquiring intelligible pronunciation and the degree of difficulty increases with age. However, learners of any age are able to create additional phonetic categories for new language sounds which do not correspond to the mother tongue sounds. The fact is that there are learners of English at all ages and that teaching pronunciation should not be concerning only children but also adults.

Role of teaching pronunciation is very unfavourable next to teaching grammar or vocabulary. This is a problem of English teaching in many countries. Experienced teachers are not keen to teach pronunciation and they claim that there is not clear guidance in textbooks and that the isolated exercises do not bring the wanted effect. Teachers often claim that there is not enough time for teaching pronunciation in their classes and they are more confident to teach grammar and vocabulary. Teachers also complain that they do not receive enough training in methodology of teaching pronunciation. For the fact how difficult the English pronunciation is, there is very little attention paid to teaching and developing it. Foreign teachers of English ignore teaching pronunciation because they themselves do not have enough confidence. However, teaching pronunciation is inevitable in English language teaching and it needs to be integrated right from the beginning, taught regularly and included in to daily classroom procedures.

Factors influencing learning pronunciation.

A foreign language competence (including pronunciation competence) cannot be limited to the contrastive analysis of two language systems. An individual's pronunciation competence depends on relations to the language systems (phonic interference) and extralingual environment. Extralingual factors include the type of language contact (direct, mediated, occasional, permanent), the form of contact (natural, artificial), the type of bilingualism (individual, group) and the type of bilingualism (learnt one of the languages as an adult, learnt both languages as a child, learnt both languages as a child, one being suppressed).

Following factors are named that affect pronunciation in a foreign language. Native accent influences pronunciation in a foreign language. The older the learner gets, the stronger is the effect of native accent. Stress, intonation and rhythm effect intelligibility more than errors in single sounds. Exposure and motivation for learning the foreign language also determine learners' development of pronunciation. Personal or professional motivation for learning English can result in desire for native-like pronunciation. Some learners are more adept at requiring correct pronunciation than others. Pronunciation Attitude Inventory measures learners' relation to the target language pronunciation. Students who are more concerned about their target language pronunciation usually gain better pronunciation. Motivation, positive attitudes, exposure to the target language, and openness to the target culture influence the success in foreign language proficiency and pronunciation.

Pronunciation is viewed as a component of linguistics rather than conversational fluency. Teachers regard pronunciation very little importance in conversational classes and they view it as the least useful out of language skills and therefore sacrifice teaching pronunciation in order to spend time on other areas of language. There is a question whether explicit instruction can help in learning foreign pronunciation. It was found out that phonetic instruction to adult learners of English can largely improve their allophonic articulation.

Age is a strong determining factor influencing foreign language pronunciation. It is closely connected to the theory of Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967) which states that children between 2 and 13 can achieve native-like proficiency in acquiring a foreign language, especially pronunciation. According to this theory, older learners of a foreign language can rarely achieve native-like fluency and pronunciation. Ability to create separate categories for foreign language sounds similar to the sounds of the mother tongue is decreasing from the age of six years.

According to Avery and Ehrlich (1992) sound patterns of the mother tongue are transferred into the foreign language. When the sound is absent in the native sound inventory, the learners might not be able to pronounce the sounds. Combining sounds rules in native language might be different to the target language. Stress, rhythm and intonation patterns of the native language might be transferred to the target language. All these factors might cause problems for learners because the rules are language specific and can vary from one language to another.

Teaching pronunciation to preschool children can be a challenging task for educators and parents alike. Pronunciation is a crucial aspect of language development, as it affects how children communicate and interact with others. There are some pronunciation teaching techniques.

The Common European Framework for Languages (2001) recommends teaching pronunciation right from the beginning of foreign language learning. According to the CEFR, pronunciation should be developed via contact with authentic spoken language. The recommended techniques are listening and repeating, drilling, minimal pair drills, ear training, phonetic training, reading aloud, imitation, tongue twisters, sound-colour charts, phonics, songs/rhymes, recording learners' pronunciation, etc. Also clapping, clicking, tapping, gestures, mirrors, visual aids, etc. can be used for teaching pronunciation. It is advised to combine different teaching techniques. Most popular and common pronunciation teaching techniques recommended by AMEP (2002), Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin (2002), Reid (2014), Morley (1991), O'Connor (1993), Baker (2006), Hancock (1995), Hudson (2012) with the focus on age suitability are analysed below.

Listening and repeating

In this technique, a teacher or recorded native speaker are set as models for imitating sounds. It is one of the most traditional ways of teaching pronunciation, but it can be made more interesting with using CDs, interactive boards, internet activities, etc. Pupils could also record themselves and listen to their own pronunciation. This technique is suitable for all ages from young learners to adults.

Drilling

It went out of fashion with introduction of the audio-lingual method, because it was associated with a repetitive approach. However, drills do not have to be mindless, as they can offer a chance to learners to practice saying new words and phrases without an extra strain of trying to communicate. This technique is very useful with beginners even though it is a strictly controlled activity. Drills can be practiced individually, in pairs or chorally. There can be repetition drills, transformation drills, substitution drills, chain drills and probably the most attractive are the Jazz Chants. Jazz chants are great not only for practicing segmental, but also suprasegmental (rhythm, intonation) levels of pronunciation. As it was mentioned earlier, drills are suitable especially for beginners and are recommended for all age groups too. Adults might be reluctant to do playful activities due to their shyness.

Minimal pair drills

Words which have the same pronunciation except one phoneme are called minimal pairs (man/men, bright/bride, tin/thin, sin/sing, etc.). This technique helps learners to recognize differences between sounds and it helps them to articulate individual sounds. In practicing minimal pair drills, learners should first differentiate, then recognize the sounds and finally to imitate the minimal pairs with correct sounds. This technique should be also used with all age groups, but probably more suitable for young learners who have the elasticity of the brain to recognize and imitate sounds they hear. Adult learners might struggle with such activities without explicit explanation.

Ear training

It is a very effective teaching technique, where learners focus their attention on hearing. In pronunciation there is a close relationship between speech perception and speech production. Ear training is also a teaching technique in music. Traditionally, the ear training technique was connected to identification of individual sounds. However, it can be just as efficient in teaching suprasegmental features, such as word stress, rhythm or intonation.

Recognition of individual phonemes can be done using minimal pair tests. Listening for a specific task can be used for both segmental and suprasegmental features. Ear training should be used with all age groups, but it is more efficient with young learners, who have the ability to hear different or new sounds, rhythm of the speech and intonation. Adults lose this ability and it can be frustrating for them not to be able to hear the differences in speech.

Tongue twisters

Tongue twisters are purposefully created sentences or rhymes aiming at certain sounds which are difficult to pronounce. Tongue twisters are in all languages and are created for pronunciation training of the mother tongue. However they are very useful in foreign language learning too. They are useful for all age groups, can bring a lot of fun to the class and learners usually enjoy saying them. To avoid frustration, they should be practiced once the required sound has been learnt.

Pronunciation in Games

There are lots of traditional children's games that use songs and chants. For example, the playground game "What's the time Mr Wolf?" involves a group of children asking this question repeatedly to another child - 'the wolf'- who answers back with different times - "It's 5 o'clock". The children take the corresponding number of steps forward in the direction of The Wolf, waiting to hear "Dinner time!!" upon which they must run all the way back to the beginning and not get caught. This game, and many other games like this one, provide a natural and fun context for the drill-like repetition of formulaic language. This makes them the perfect vehicle for teaching/learning of chunks of language and features of pronunciation like connected speech and sentence stress. Other classic children's games like "Duck-duck-goose" can be adapted to be played in many different ways. Some of these can focus on specific problems - either in response to or in anticipation of pronunciation problems. You all know this game, I'm sure. The students sit in a circle and another child walks around the outside, gently tapping each of their peers as they chant 'duck, duck, duck...' when they say the word 'goose' that child who was tapped must jump up and chase the first child around the circle, trying to catch her before she sits down in the now empty space. By adapting this game, it could be used to work on any pair of words that contain challenging sounds for the learners. Think about minimal pairs or long and short vowel sounds or even singular and plural nouns! As you can imagine, this activity provides lots of opportunities for both production AND recognition. Presenting this in the format of a game makes it a whole new level of fun...more engaging and consequently more memorable.

Songs and rhymes

Using songs and rhymes is considered to be a very effective way of teaching English. They are rhythmical, learners can dance, move or do TPR while singing. By singing or saying rhymes, learners practice pronunciation drills, rhythm or intonation. Songs and rhymes are especially useful and loved by young learners who love singing and do not like static exercises. They are very motivational too. Songs and rhymes can be used for all age groups, but older learners and adults can be more shy and reluctant to sing.

"Rhymes introduce children naturally and effectively to the complete sounds of English as well as to stress and intonation". Songs and chants are used with children even BEFORE they begin to speak! This type of pre-linguistic play (Cook) is said to be invaluable for babies

to perceive phonemic contrasts. There is no doubt that they are a wonderful way to develop L1 and have so much potential for the L2 classroom. In the book *Language Play, Language Learning*, Cook gives two wonderful examples of children's rhymes that I have used time and time again with my Very Young Learners: "This Little Piggy" and "Round and Round the Garden". Both of them are examples of rhymes that, although may not carry much semantic meaning for the language learner initially, they provide rich exposure to features of English pronunciation which the language teacher can exploit. Even with older learners, who have a larger vocabulary and can perhaps understand parts of what they are chanting or singing, most of these rhymes are full of nonsensical language and yet they are still highly beneficial for language development. Without any need to grade language or translate anything to Portuguese, you can use these kinds of rhymes, finger-plays, skipping and clapping games confidently - knowing that your students will respond enthusiastically and reap the benefits. Other examples to use with older learners are *Eeny Meeny Miney Mo* (makes little sense but has a functional purpose) and *Miss Mary Mack* (a hand-clapping game that has lots of repetition and rhyme). The words and instructions to these are also in the free download at the bottom of this post.

But as you well know, songs and chants can also be used to work more explicitly on language which appears in your curriculum such as isolated vocabulary items and lexical chunks. You have probably already used songs with your young learners before so tonight I'd like to make a suggestion for a way to do it that you might not have tried...

Getting your young learners to create their own songs and chants

When we allow students to use English creatively like this, we are giving them a sense of ownership of the language. They can experiment, take risks and personalise the language so it is meaningful and more memorable. They are also perfect for teaching features of pronunciation such as strong and weak forms, sentence stress, the pronunciation of challenging phonemes and rhythm and stress. So to do this activity, you will need to bear in mind that this is a task for children who are already reading and writing in English but may not have had exposure to writing in this genre - even in their first language. They will need long of support and more than one opportunity to try it out over the course of a school year.

You can provide support for this activity by:

- ☞ making sure you are teaching lots of vocabulary **IN CONTEXT**, not just word lists.
- ☞ teaching them - explicitly - about syllables and rhyming words
- ☞ giving them access to tools for finding rhyming words (like this website: <http://www.rhymezone.com>)
- ☞ scaffolding the activity by modeling how to create a chant, then creating one together before getting them to try on their own or in pairs.

Here are the steps for creating your own jazz chant or song (adapted from Carolyn Graham's great book)

- ☞ Write a list of key words you'd like to work on these might be words related to a theme you're working on, useful classroom language you want to teach or even the Ss' names (around 10 words)
- ☞ Make a list of rhyming words - you can send the Ss to rhymezone

- ☞ Write a list of individual words or phrases to describe or add info to your list of key words, e.g: fresh, frozen, delicious
- ☞ Divide the words into groups according to the number of syllables
- ☞ Use the melody from a traditional or popular song.

Reading aloud

This technique is not as popular as it was in the past, because not everybody feels confident to read aloud and it does not always reflect the way people speak. It includes reading passages of texts and it can focus on problematic sounds, stress, rhythm, intonation, etc. Choosing the right text can make this technique interesting and it is suitable for older learners, who can read well in their mother tongue. The young learners are still learning to read well in their mother tongue and forcing them to read in English might be confusing and frustrating.

Pronunciation with Stories

Storytelling is one of my FAVOURITE things to do with youngsters and it is a skill I believe that every YL teacher should develop. When choosing a story and preparing to read it aloud to your Ss there are some very specific things that you can do that will make storytime useful for teaching pronunciation.

Here are my top tips:

- ☞ Look at the language of the book and make sure it hasn't been graded so much that it has become unnatural (I see lots of these Big Books for language learners that don't use contractions and then when the teacher reads them aloud, she sounds like a robot! terrible model for the YL)
 - ☞ Look for stories with a lot of rhyme and/or repetition
 - ☞ practice the story by reading it aloud to yourself first to make sure you find a certain flow as you read. You'll want to be consistent with how you read it. It should feel like it flows.
 - ☞ Modify the length or the language if you need to but take note of how you are going to do that. Once again, you must be consistent.
 - ☞ Read the book many times! Young children especially LOVE this.
- Give children opportunities to read on their own (free reading time).

Recording learners' pronunciation

This technique involves audio-recordings of learners' speech, free conversations, role plays, tongue twisters, reading, etc. It is a very useful technique, which is time consuming, as the follow up listening takes a lot of time. It is valuable though to get a feedback on own pronunciation. However, it is suitable for older learners who can hear and analyse their own mistakes.

Visual aids

They are not a technique, but aids which help in teaching pronunciation of individual sounds. They can be pictures, sound-colour charts, mirrors, etc. Pictures of articulator, position of articulators in production of individual sounds, phonemic symbols could be used for description of how sounds are produced. Such pictures help especially adult learners to understand articulation of individual sounds. A mirror can be a very useful tool for a learner observing his/her own articulation of different sounds. Mirrors are useful with all age groups,

adults understand the position of different articulators and make purposefully required position, and they can also bring fun for young learners to see the movement and position of their mouth and tongue.

Phonics

It has been developed for native speakers of English to connect the spoken and written language. Each letter or combination of letters represent a sound or sounds. Learners must recognise which symbols (letters) make which sounds in order to read. This technique is becoming very popular in ELT too, where learners know the letters (can read), but do not know the sounds of the foreign language. Phonics in ELT teaches learners sounds of English, connects them to letters (starting with simple words to create a pattern - cat, pen, sun). The next step is to introduce that sounds can be represented by more than one letter (k in cake) and the final step is to introduce tricky words with alternative spellings. This technique is especially recommended for young learners.

Sound-colour charts

This is becoming a very popular technique in English pronunciation teaching. It was originally developed for teaching native speakers how to read and write. It was a spelling programme connecting letters to colours. The Sound-colour charts give a direct link between sounds and colours. The teacher trains students to vocal gymnastics, it means that students become aware of different lip positions, muscular movements for new sounds. Sound-colour charts replace learning phonemic alphabet and can be suitable for all age groups from small children to adults.

Phonetic training

This technique is quite demanding as it includes phonetically transcribed words or texts. Learners need to be acquainted with phonemic symbols for consonants and vowels and need to be able to connect them to individual sounds. Visual aids in a form of phonemic chart, articulator diagrams are very helpful. This technique is not suitable for young learners but can be very helpful for adults. Adults have difficulties to hear different sounds and imitate them. When it is explicitly explained how sounds are produced and they are given concrete visual form of a symbol, it helps adult learners to understand and pronounce the different sounds.

Teaching sounds and explicit learning

Explicit learning on the segmental level can be done by introducing sounds in new words and it is explained how these sounds are articulated. Learners can practice new sounds by drilling or other techniques. The next step is to recognize particular sounds in different words (hut, cat, cup, hat). Learners are introduced same spelling patterns with different sounds (paid, said/none, gone). Learners practice connecting words with sounds by grouping words according to e.g. same vowel sounds in them. Using crosswords focusing on sounds, rhyming crosswords, odd one out, putting similar sounds in the contrast are some other activities practicing particular sounds. These explicit teaching techniques are more suitable for older learners who have lower ability to imitate unknown sounds. But by understanding how to articulate new sound and by practicing them with such activities, older learners can gain correct pronunciation.

Suprasegmentals and explicit learning

Explicit learning can be on the level of suprasegmentals, where learners learn and practice word stress, sentence stress, rhythm, weak forms, intonation. Word stress can be practiced by counting syllables, highlighting stressed syllable, recognizing different stress patterns, grouping words according to a stress pattern, etc. Sentence stress and rhythm can be practiced by recognizing lexical (stressed words) and function words (in their weak form). Example sentences, jazz chants, rhymes, tongue twisters practicing rhythm can be drilled. Songs are also very good activity to practice suprasegmentals. Intonation is difficult to teach explicitly, as it is mostly produced at subconscious level. There are some rules to follow on what attitudes and emotions different tones can carry. Drama techniques and simulations are good techniques where intonation is especially important. Suprasegmentals taught explicitly are suitable mainly for adults.

Maximizing the Quality of our Teacher Talk

“Grading language does not mean abandoning features of connected speech. If we teach speaking word for word, our students will never learn how to join them.” (Elcio Souza, 2018) Recently I saw one of the specialist speeches about the role of teacher talk in the development of the pronunciation of our learners. I think he makes an excellent point and it’s one that I have observed in my many visits to Young Learner classrooms. I said it before and I’ll say it again... your pronunciation matters. We have to acknowledge the importance of providing quality Teacher Talk in the YL classroom. While we are constantly told to reduce TTT and increase STT in the classroom, we also know that children need lots of natural, clear language that provides them with a model they can copy. Why do so many teachers feel like they have to modify their language to the point where it becomes unnatural?!!

I know that many of you feel like your beginner students are not going to understand you but I promise that it’s not speaking like a robot that is going to make it easier for them to understand the words. Let me teach you an easy way that you can transition your students from one activity in a way that they will understand you perfectly, retains all the beautiful features and doesn’t involve L1.

I always say that in the YL classroom I spend the first 6 months singing! that’s because in the beginning, I add music to my classroom instructions.

- 🎵 starting the class - come and sit down on the floor 🎵 tidy up
- 🎵 circle time
- 🎵 story time
- 🎵 getting in line
- 🎵 putting on/taking off shoes

Children can learn to recognize the songs much quicker than the words, teaming that up with the regular and predictable class routine and the gestures I use, they understand what is expected of them in just a few classes. This kind of classroom language is very deliberate and planned. After a while, I can remove the music and these become spoken requests. Next, I can start switching up or extending the language. Finally, you will see the children using this language too - naturally, fluently and appropriately.

There are many different techniques and activities which can be used for teaching and practicing pronunciation. Some of them are suitable for age groups and some are better for

young learners and some for adults. This paper analysed most of the available teaching techniques for pronunciation with the focus on suitability for different age groups.

Moreover, there are some difficulties involved in teaching pronunciation to preschool children and strategies to overcome these challenges.

1. **Limited Attention Span:** Preschool children have short attention spans and may find it difficult to focus on pronunciation exercises for an extended period. Teachers and parents need to make learning sessions engaging and fun to maintain the children's interest.

2. **Articulation Issues:** Preschool children are still developing their speech and motor skills, which can result in difficulties with articulating certain sounds. For example, some children may struggle with sounds like "r," "l," or "th." Patience and consistent practice are key to helping children improve their articulation.

3. **Lack of Phonemic Awareness:** Phonemic awareness is the ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds in words. Preschool children may not have fully developed this skill, making it challenging for them to differentiate between similar sounds. Activities that focus on sound discrimination and phonemic awareness can help improve pronunciation skills.

4. **Influence of First Language:** Preschool children who are exposed to multiple languages or dialects may face challenges in pronouncing certain sounds that do not exist in their first language. Teachers and parents can provide additional support by encouraging children to practice these sounds regularly.

5. **Imitation and Modeling:** Preschool children learn through imitation and modeling. Teachers and parents play a crucial role in demonstrating proper pronunciation and providing clear examples for children to follow. Consistent modeling and reinforcement are essential for helping children learn correct pronunciation.

6. **Fear of Making Mistakes:** Some preschool children may be hesitant to practice new sounds or words out of fear of making mistakes. Creating a supportive and non-judgmental learning environment is important for encouraging children to take risks and try new pronunciations.

7. **Developmental Variability:** Children develop at their own pace, and it is normal for preschoolers to exhibit a wide range of pronunciation abilities. Teachers and parents should be patient and understanding, recognizing that some children may require more time and practice to improve their pronunciation skills.

8. **Limited Vocabulary:** Preschool children have limited vocabulary compared to older children and adults. Teaching pronunciation in the context of familiar words and everyday phrases can help children grasp new sounds more easily and make connections to their existing vocabulary.

In conclusion, teaching pronunciation to preschool children requires patience, consistency, and creativity. By understanding the challenges involved and implementing effective strategies, teachers and parents can help children develop clear and effective communication skills from a young age.

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