Teaching Pronunciation: Some EFL Considerations[1]

DONNA M. BRINTON, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES[2]

Pronunciation has long been considered the Cinderella of ESL/EFL instruction (Kelly 1969). To some extent, this "poor cousin" status can be traced to the philosophies underlying various methods of second or foreign language (S/FL) teaching.[3] In the grammar translation method frequently used in the early part of this century, for example, little or no attention was paid to pronunciation, with the possible exception of the occasional teacher correction of students' oral reading of a second language passage. In the audiolingual method prevalent in the 1940s and 50s, pronunciation was not taught overtly, but rather was assumed to be acquired via oral drilling and emulation of native speaker models. When present at all, it was generally at the word or sentence level--most frequently with reference to the recognition or production of minimally distinctive word pairs such as *sleep/slip*.[4] More recently, with the advent of communicatively-oriented approaches to S/FL teaching, a focus on accurate pronunciation took a backseat to oral fluency, with communicatively adequate pronunciation generally assumed to be a by-product of appropriate practice over a sufficient period of time.

As we approach the end of this decade, however, we begin to see a change in what Celce-Murcia (1991) and others have characterized as the ever-swinging pendulum of S/FL methodology, such that a focus on accuracy is re-emerging, and along with it a new-found interest in the teaching of pronunciation.[5] Unlike previous approaches to teaching pronunciation, which

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[2] The author can be reached at the Department of TESL/Applied Linguistics, 3300 Rolfe Hall, University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California 90095-1531.

[3] Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin (1996) present a comprehensive discussion of the effect of methodological variation on the teaching of S/FL pronunciation.

[4] On the sentence level, students were asked to discriminate between sentences containing such pairs such as *Don't sleep on the floor* vs. *Don't slip on the floor*.

[5] This year at the annual convention of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), a proposal was presented and passed to form a special interest group (SIG) for the teaching of pronunciation. The language teaching field has also seen a plethora of new texts, both for ESL learners and for teacher training purposes, devoted to this language skill.

emphasized segmental (i.e., vowel and consonant) contrasts and often restricted practice to the word or sentence level, this newer approach to pronunciation extends into the realm of suprasegmentals (i.e., word stress, sentence prominence, and rhythm) along with connected speech phenomena such as linking and assimilation. Coupled with this expanded realm of pronunciation teaching is the integration of pronunciation into a discourse framework, and expansion of practice activities from more monitored activities such as word and sentence-level practice to less monitored conditions such as information gap, problem solving, and role play activities. (See Celce-Murcia 1994 and Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin 1996 for a more comprehensive treatment of how pronunciation can be integrated into a communicative framework.)

Why teach pronunciation?

Given pronunciation's historical backseat position in language pedagogy, it may be useful to present a brief rationale for its inclusion in the language curriculum. Few would argue that if we are to engage in teaching students language, the desired end outcome of our teaching is that students have a strong command of the language being taught. This outcome includes the ability to speak English intelligibly, an ability at whose root lies the need for focused pronunciation instruction. Not only can segmental substitutions or lack of knowledge of the suprasegmental features of English lead to misunderstanding, but a strong foreign accent can also have a stigmatizing effect (Elson 1992). Transfer of native language intonation patterns onto the second language, for example, can lead to the misperception of the individual as rude or pushy (see Gumperz 1982).

In today's globally-oriented societies, even the argument that pronunciation is less important in the EFL context (i.e., since learners may not be called upon to ever use the second language outside the school context) is no longer a compelling one. Most students learning English as a school subject outside of an English speaking country will nonetheless be called upon to use this language beyond the school classroom--either as a means toward pursuing their future education or in their workday world. Thus the stakes are high, and the need for intelligible English is more clearly called for than ever.

Introspecting about your teaching situation

Before proceeding to an examination of the challenges faced by those teaching pronunciation in the EFL context, I would like to ask the readers of this article to introspect for a moment, and answer for themselves the following questions:

How important is pronunciation in the overall curriculum?

What percentage of time is spent in your teaching on the following?

_____% Consonant articulation

_____% Vowel articulation

_____% English stress, rhythm, and intonation

_____% Reduced speech

_____% Linking and word boundaries

Which of the following pronunciation activities do you currently use in your classroom?

____ Explaining how the individual sound is produced (e.g., pointing to the speech organs, using blackboard diagrams, etc.)

____ Practicing individual sounds alone or in words

____ Practicing minimal pair contrasts (e.g., *sheep/ship*)

____ Practicing minimal pairs in sentences (e.g., I saw a *sheep/ship*)

____ Repeating words or sentences after the teacher

____ Practicing pronunciation features using role play, information gap, or other communication-oriented activities

____ Other (explain)

Although readers' answer to the above questions will obviously vary, chances are that many have answered (predictably) that pronunciation is still only marginally included in the language curriculum, and that when pronunciation issues are treated in the classroom, the articulation of consonants and vowels receives more attention than suprasegmental features and connected speech phenomena. Similarly, it is likely that the activities used in the class-

room fall into the category of those more closely controlled (and thereby less communicative) such as word and sentence level recognition and production tasks.

This is in no way surprising, since most all-skills language textbooks (especially the basal series often used in the EFL context), if they include a treatment of pronunciation at all, do some in the above-described manner. Nor are the above activities necessarily to be viewed negatively, since word- and sentence-level recognition and production tasks continue to be cornerstones of pronunciation practice. I am suggesting instead not to abandon such practices, but rather to broaden the pronunciation curriculum to include suprasegmentals and connected speech phenomena and to implement more communicatively-oriented activities to move students beyond the controlled practice stage of the pronunciation lesson.

What challenges does the EFL teacher encounter?

Let us turn now to a discussion of the special challenges to teaching pronunciation that exist in the EFL setting. Since in many countries of the world (ex-colonies of Great Britain excluded) there is no local variety of English spoken, the question inevitably arises whether the standard for pronunciation should be British or North American English.[6] This question can occasion heated arguments in school administrations or even at the provincial or state level, and has far-reaching implications for the production of English language teaching materials and curricula. Another challenge that exists is that students may have little motivation to speak English, and in particular to emulate the pronunciation of native speakers, preferring instead to retain an accented English as part of their identity. Compounding this problem is the fact that in many EFL settings, there is limited access to native speakers or authentic samples of English. To teach pronunciation effectively, teachers must have a thorough knowledge of the English sound system; however, in the EFL context, this may not have been a part of the teachers' pedagogical training. Finally, students (and even teachers) may have misperceptions concerning "correct" English that impede their acquisition of certain phonological features of the target language.[7]

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[6] See von Schon, 1987, for a more comprehensive discussion of this topic.

[7] This holds especially true for connected speech phenomena, which many NNS students and teachers mistakenly perceive to be "slang" or "incorrect English" and therefore wish to avoid in their own use of the language.

The brighter side of the picture

An additional challenge in the EFL context is that faced by the non-native speaking (NNS) teacher, many of whom lack the confidence to teach pronunciation because they fear they are not the ideal model for their students. While pronunciation that approximates a native speaker norm is the ideal, few NNS teachers have attained this level. Medgyes (1994), in his excellent treatise on NNS English teachers, notes that far from needing to despair over this situation, the NNS teacher should take comfort in the following:

- NNS teachers can provide a good learner model for imitation.
- They can teach language learning strategies more effectively.
- They can supply learners with relevant information about the English language.
- They can anticipate and prevent language difficulties better.
- They can be more empathetic to the needs and problems of learners.
- They can make appropriate use of the learners' first language.

Let's examine each of these statements as it relates to the teaching of pronunciation in the EFL context.

NNS teachers can provide a good learner model for imitation. Medgyes notes in his discussion of this statement that he sets greater store on success in the classroom than on linguistic proficiency itself. This statement deserves attention, since proficiency in the skill of teaching may indeed compensate for certain linguistic deficiencies that the NNS teacher has. As far as pronunciation skills are concerned, we know that training in *how* to teach the skill and monitored attention to one's own production can indeed assist teachers whose confidence in their own production is limited to overcome the crisis of confidence and serve as inspirational models for their learners. Keep in mind as well that the goal of S/FL pronunciation instruction

is intelligibility, not native speaker perfection (this goal is not achievable for most learners in classroom settings). In short, a non-native accent itself is not a legitimate impediment to the successful teaching of pronunciation, and skill in teaching coupled with efforts on the part of the teacher to provide appropriate models for students pave the road toward successful pronunciation teaching.

NNS teachers can teach language learning strategies[8] *more effectively.* Researchers in second language acquisition have long recognized that individual learners acquire language at differential rates and with differential degrees of success, depending on such factors as their age at time of acquisition, socio-cultural background, motivation, language learning aptitude, level of education, and knowledge of other foreign languages. Yet another factor that impinges on the process of language acquisition is the degree to which the learner possesses and/or utilizes effective language learning strategies. Again in this domain, the NNS teacher, him or herself a successful acquirer of the second language, can offer to students a wealth of strategies, sharing and modeling these at appropriate points in the instructional process. Thus when teaching pronunciation skills, the teacher can give students tips for how to better monitor their linguistic output, or how to employ compensation strategies when their output is not understood by their interlocutors.

NNS teachers can supply learners with relevant information about the English language. According to Medgyes, a "language teacher's expertise consists of three components: a) language proficiency, b) language awareness, and c) pedagogic skills (p. 57)." Thus though language proficiency is an important prerequisite for effective language teaching, it is not the only facet of a teacher's expertise. Being aware of the internal mechanisms of the language, the NNS teacher may, in fact, be able to contribute more in area b) than the NS teacher. As Medgyes notes, "Have NESTs[9] ever realized the magnitude of the difficulty that the *there is* structure causes to speakers of certain languages? Are they aware of the confusion about prepositional phrases: *She sat on it* cannot be *She sat it on* (p. 60)." If we extend this argument to the realm of pronunciation, we can argue, quite effectively, that many native speaking teachers would be similarly unaware of the differ-

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[8] For excellent treatments of learner strategies, see Oxford (1990), Wenden and Rubin (1987), and Stevick (1989).

[9] Medgyes coins the acronym NEST to refer to native English speaking teachers. The opposite, non-NEST, refers to the NNS teacher of English.

ent meaning conveyed by rising versus rising falling intonation in tag questions such as "*Your name is Joe, isn't it*?" The NNS teacher, having studied this same feature and mastered it, would easily be able to anticipate the difficulty and explain to students that rising intonation on the tag signals uncertainty whereas rising falling intonation signals a request for confirmation.

NNS teachers can anticipate and prevent language difficulties better. Given that NNS teachers have first-hand experience with the learning process that their students are encountering, we can infer that they are able to draw on this experience to better explicate features of the language that they predict learners will have difficulty with. Medgyes, himself a NNS teacher of English, puts this nicely as follows:

> Non-NESTs sharing the learners' mother tongue are in a particularly favourable position. Since we have jumped off the same springboard as our students, both in a linguistic and cultural sense, we are intrinsically more sensitive to their difficulties than NESTs. Discovering trouble spots requires little energy and time; messages can be exchanged merely by winking an eye (1994, p. 61).

With reference to teaching pronunciation, a teacher who herself has "conquered" the English /iy/ vs. /I/ distinction will better be able to diagnose this learner difficulty and explain to her students how to produce the distinction. Similarly, a teacher who has mastered the aspiration of (or puff of air accompanying) English stop consonants in certain positions will be able to anticipate students' difficulty aspirating the initial consonants in words such as *pear*, *tea*, and *coffee* (perhaps contrasting them with the equivalents in Spanish which are unaspirated, i.e., *pera*, *té*, and *café*).

NNS teachers can be more empathetic to the needs and problems of learners. Medgyes points out in this respect that the more self aware an individual is, the more capable that individual is of understanding and appreciating the needs of others. As pointed out above, by virtue of being learners themselves, NNS teachers understand the learning process that students are going through, and can relate to the frustrations they may be experiencing. Too, they have a better picture of their students' backgrounds and aspirations, and can therefore more effectively help their students realize their potential.

NNS teachers can make appropriate use of the learners' first language. This statement is particularly pertinent to the skill area of pronunciation, where transfer of the first language phonetic features is strongest. Here,

the NNS teacher can often use the first language effectively as a teaching device to point out differences between certain L1 and L2 features, such as point of articulation, degree of aspiration, linking, rise in intonation, and the like. For example, when pointing out differences in articulation between /b/ in Spanish words and /b/ in English words, it is useful to select cognate words such as *bank/banco* or *blouse/blusa* to point out differences in the manner of consonant articulation in the two languages. Similarly, when teaching /v/, one can effectively use the first language to demonstrate that in Spanish, there is essentially no difference in articulation between /b/ and /v/, whereas in English these two consonants are distinct phonemes. Compare *vacation/vacación* or *vision/visión*.[10] Of course, a corollary to this argument is that the NS teacher in the EFL context who has command of the students' first language is also at an advantage.[11] But I suspect that unless NS teachers are highly proficient in this language, they will not approach the advantage that NNS teachers have in this area.

Conclusions

I began this discussion by outlining a trend in S/FL teaching: a renewed interest in the teaching of pronunciation. This trend calls upon teachers to integrate pronunciation teaching into their curriculum, and to find ways in which to extend practice into more communicative contexts. The charge is not to be lightly taken, as teaching pronunciation effectively in the classroom involves a sound knowledge of the phonological features of the second language, a repertoire of strategies for teaching the skill, and the ability to serve as a model for students to emulate. As I have noted, many NNS teachers despair of their ability to serve as a model, and thus avoid teaching pronunciation explicitly. In this article I have hopefully provided some convincing reasons why the NNS teacher of English can serve as an effective learner model for students, thereby removing some of the anxiety that NNS teachers face when dealing with pronunciation issues in the classroom.

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[10] See Kenworthy (1987), Swan and Smith (1987), and Avery and Ehrlich (1992) for useful discussions of Spanish and English language contrastive features.

[11] When I taught in EFL in Germany, for example, I felt that I was at a distinct advantage over other NS English teachers who were not proficient in German there since I had a good command of the language (and used it frequently in class as an explanatory tool).

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