
The Importance of Teaching Pronunciation to Efl Learners

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Annotation: This article discusses the importance of the pronunciation of words in English on the example of the research and findings of many linguists. In addition, experience has shown that by improving the pronunciation of words, language learners have a greater opportunity to professionally develop their listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills in English. The article concludes with tips for language learners and educators on what to look for in pronunciation, as well as useful exercises and sets for learning a foreign language, as well as English quickly and easily.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), learner's objective, stress.

Introduction. We are living in the era of science and technology which has generated a great demand of intercommunicating. To meet the demand, English has become an international and important language as well as mandatory subject at schools in many countries nowadays. While learning another language, it is important to acquire not only the vocabulary but also the right pronunciation. If people pronounce one word incorrectly, this may affect in their speech and the meaning of the sentence and listeners may find it difficult to understand. Taking into consideration of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), learners are encouraged not only to learn new vocabulary and eligible grammar, but also correct pronunciation. Brown (1991) says: "pronunciation has sometimes been referred to as the 'poor relation' of the English language teaching (ELT) world. It is an aspect of language which is often given little attention, it should be completely ignored by the teacher in the classroom". Students should also pay great attention to their pronunciation. They should comprehend that weak, wrong, and unintelligible speech would make frustrating and unpleasant both for themselves and the listeners" (Joanne Kenworthy, 1987). Nation (2009) points that, "When some teachers and students complain about difficulties in speaking, they are often talking about pronunciation". While learning language, it is crucial to learn right pronunciation. Derwing and Munro (2005) claimed that, "having good pronunciation of the language can help in normal communication, particularly intelligibility." In teaching one language, learner's objective should be taken into consideration. If their aim is to be a language trainer or to be a radio broadcaster, they have to learn pronunciation correctly, accurately, and authentically; otherwise, when communication is possible, there is no obligation to strive for perfect pronunciation. English pronunciation is relatively various and more difficult for some learners, especially for those who has not some sounds in their native language. In this case they struggle from putting appropriate stress on their words, but they should understand function of sound, stress, and variation in pitch. As there is various stress pattern of some words, learners should comprehend that those words can be pronounced with slightly different way, that their voice used to convey the meaning and pay attention to the basic awareness. There are some key objectives of teaching pronunciation to learners. Firstly, the ability of right pronunciation helps them to develop speech clarity and listening comprehension. By learning proper pronunciation, students would be able to obtain smooth understanding by native speakers. Besides, it is the best way of increasing self-confidence in the way they speak and developing professional speech abilities for use not only in the

classroom but outside as well. Next, they can discover their own strength and weaknesses with certain sound patterns due to the influence of their native language. Lastly, unmistakable pronunciation gives an opportunity of natural listening and speaking skills.

Literature review. English Pronunciation rules are difficult somehow. This means that English grammar is unstable and there is not a certain rule of grammar pronunciation that explains how to pronounce some words in a proper way. There are so many contradictory practices reject the grammar rules and they do not know what method is reliable for pronunciation and cannot decide how to teach. Because of uncomfortableness teaching it in classes, teachers have to ignore those pronunciation grammar rules. However, some scholars found teaching pronunciation very important and I totally agree with some of them. For example, one of the ESL scholars Teresa Pica (1994) expresses more critical view in teaching pronunciation claiming that why some learners' pronunciation is poorer than others, and what is the solution of this problem. Present researches are unable to confirm high premium on accurate pronunciation. For teachers, clear pronunciation may be unrealistic goal to implement for their students and in their teaching". Pica emphasizes that although, pronunciation takes a lot of time and effort, and seems to waste of instructional time, it plays crucial role in speaking English. Furthermore, there are a number of method and techniques in teaching pronunciation. The teacher needs to determine the right method and media to solve problems in teaching pronunciation. Indeed, in learning pronunciation, the goal is not to make students pronounce the word like the native speakers (Gilakjani, 2016). In a study by Gilakjani, coaching technique facilitates pronunciation teaching. As a coach, the teacher provides a speech production for the pronunciation feature followed by learner's speech performance which, in turn, is monitored and assessed by the teacher (Nunan, 2003, pp.116-117)

According to the researches of the late 1960's and early 1970's, to pronounce the words as native speakers cannot be taught to the second language learners anyway because it mostly depends on cognitive ability of grammar and vocabulary understanding. Furthermore, during those years it was disputable topic that finding out whether role of pronunciation in the ESL/EFL curriculum is effective or not. Until that period of time pronunciation programs considered as non-communicative and meaningless drill-and-exercise gambits. (Morley 1991:485-6)

Actually, the process of teaching and learning English, especially it's sound systems, are mostly affected by environmental, physical, psychological, instructional factors. They are divided into two categories: the direct, which is related to both teacher and learner, and the indirect impact on the teaching and learning task. Direct factors influence the value of correct pronunciation arisen from society's needs and attitudes. Similarly, in Uzbekistan, English is treated as one of foreign, not necessarily second language and in academic articles learners are advised to read and translate technical or theoretical materials found in magazines, books, newspapers in order to collect necessary information for their specific field of interest. These English materials based on scientific information, require the learners to make proper translation and comprehending the theoretical sentences, but they do not pay attention the effectiveness of pronunciation. In English there is a special relationship between the different parts of a word. "... in an English word of two or more syllables, one of these will have 'prominence' or 'stress'" (Joanne Kentworthy,1987). According to the loudness, length of vowels, the pronunciation is perceived more crucial. This means that when learner stresses on wrong syllable, it would be very difficult to understand for listeners to understand him. The native speakers can identify the meaning of words according to the stress patterns, that's why it is very important to take into consideration. "In fact, experiments have demonstrated that often when a native speaker misheard a word, it is because the foreigner has put the stress in

the wrong place, not because he or she mispronounced the sound of the word” (Joanne Kentworthy,1987) “For example, the word ‘written’ was pronounced with the stress on the second syllable instead of on the first. The listener thought the speaker said ‘retain’ ‘comfortable’ was pronounced with stress on ‘com-’ and ‘-ta-’. The listener heard this as ‘come to a table’, ‘productivity’ which has the pattern pro duc tiv i ty, was pronounced with a stress on ‘-duc-’ and one on ‘-ty’ (pro duc tiv i ty). This was heard as ‘productive tea’ (and caused considerable confusion!)” In those words, the sounds are used by speaker were very accurate. But the listeners understood incorrectly. (Building Awareness and Concern for Pronunciation, p.27) Furthermore, lack of knowledge about linguistics and methodology among teachers can also cause some difficulties for language learners as they are taught words according to their English teachers’ pronunciation but later, they hear the same words with totally different pronunciation. Obviously, in this case, students get confused with the two diverse pronunciation possibilities of presenting a self-accent: neither English nor Persian.

As for indirect factors, the academic year is too short for English classes in Uzbekistan that the teacher may not even be able to correct every mistake that students are making. This means that, learners’ chances using English anywhere else are almost zero. Secondly, the excess number of students in one class affects the quality of teaching doing it more inconvenient to work individually with learners. Furthermore, lack of facilities in the school environment such as laboratories with tape-recorders, English books in libraries, video-players, computers, DVD players indicate one of the indirect factors. These facilities seem to be a great use and help in teaching English with creating for learners an opportunity to listen to native speakers’ accent and pronunciation and imitating them to speak like the way they do. “Learners who use incorrect rhythm patterns or who do not connect words together are at best frustrating to the native-speaker listener; more seriously, if these learners use improper intonation contours, they can be perceived as abrupt, or even rude; and if the stress and rhythm patterns are too nonnative like, the speakers who produce them may not be understood at all” (Marianne Celce-Muria et al.1996, p.131)

In the past decades, introducing the pronunciation patterns into EFL/ESL curriculum has been in the centre of interest. Emphasizing this, seven articles were chosen by Joan Morley emphasizing informative research and practical teaching of pronunciation. Three of those articles demonstrate the effective methods of teaching pronunciation in the classroom. The first one is “Pronunciation Assessment in the ESL/EFL Curriculum,” by Goodwin et al. (1996). They demonstrated diagnostic procedure assessment of perception and production, ongoing evaluation with feedback, containing peer, teacher, and self-correction, and classroom achievement testing. Dickerson entitled “Empowering Students with Predictive Skills”, and described his “3 Ps” which stands for: Perception, Production, and Prediction. They are a guide for teachers in helping the learners’ set goals for spelling and pronunciation, highlighting prediction skills which are applicable to all level of proficiency. The third article of these series is Gilbert’s “Intonation: A Navigation Guide for the Listener”, and this suggests practical activities using gadgets such as kazoos, magnets, and rubberbands for teaching linking, rhythm, and melody. The research and program development described in the rest of four articles. According to the age, gender, regional origin, educational background, pronunciation may differ and these problems were observed by Esling in his “Some Perspectives on Accent: Range of Voice Quality Variation, the Periphery, and Focusing” article.

Besides, the book “Pronunciation” by Christiane Dalton et al. (1994), was very informative for me as it is consisted of three sections that were specialized for the ESL practitioner. There

are 131 tasks in total inviting the teacher engaging in exploratory activity, followed by questions reflecting either value or significance of that endeavor and principles underlying it.

Section one describes important concepts and terminology in related field, and importance of speech, stress, intonation and rhythm emphasized. It is evident that, the writer took into consideration that the readers who have familiarities with English sounds. Section two contains a number of classroom activities from huge amount of currently available pronunciation texts. The teacher invites reader with interacting and assessing him properly using these activities. The reader would be able to get to know not only why these activities and methods are more useful but, more importantly, why they are made. This book is integrated the English sound system with available materials. Various pedagogical theories and practices give a chance to teachers obtaining knowledge how to teach learners in different levels.

Participant profile. In Uzbekistan, English has been teaching as the second language at schools and in academic institutions. It is not secret that children nowadays learn this language from their early ages when they began to go to the kindergartens. This is because, globalization and the media appear mostly in this language and it comes without saying that every citizen should know this language in order to be able to use any technology devices and communicate with people around the globe. Following this, this part gives information about participants that are involved in my project. I decided to conduct an experiment with my school children in my workplace. There are 10 of them and they are in different gender and they study in various classes in different level. **GROUP “A”**

Group A consists of two pupils at primary level of class four and they are 10 years old. They mostly enjoy with playing interaction games, cards and singing songs related to the theme during the lesson. They both admitted that they enjoy watching cartoons in foreign language and use the expressions to each other. They had great passion in learning foreign languages. They both dreamed of becoming business people and travel around the world.

GROUP “B”

There are 6 participants attending basic education class nine, and they are 15- to 16-year-old lower secondary level pupils. When I asked about their interests, they preferred to learn their L2 through learning vocabulary and playing game according the abundance of their vocabulary. Besides, they also are fond of watching cartoons in English version.

GROUP “C”

Group “C” consists of two participants at the age of 18 and they study at upper class. They volunteered to attend the research and they are fond of learning English through watching cartoons and movies with subtitles and sing songs in this language. The participants’ names are changed and given in TABLE 1 below.

| PARTICIPANT | LEVEL | SCHOOL |
|--------------------|------------------|---------------|
| Emma | Elementary class | A |
| Susan | Elementary class | A |
| Tom | Middle class | B |
| Jane | Middle class | B |
| Anna | Middle class | B |
| Anjela | Middle class | B |
| Edward | Middle class | B |
| Joseph | Middle class | B |
| Lucy | High school | C |

| | | |
|-------|-------------|---|
| Tonny | High school | C |
|-------|-------------|---|

In order to gather the responds to the questions, the participants were given a chance to speak independently in English. Besides, some questions, namely, pronunciation goals, textbook pronunciation exercises, pronunciation teaching practices, pronunciation models, number of pronunciation teaching, and learning pronunciation were given in their mother tongue.

According to the criterion was used in the textbook analyses by Tergujeff (2010), I began the analyses of classroom observation with excluding materials that described the general oral skills teaching. Although, it does not serve any communicative purpose, scholars suggest to read tasks aloud in order to practice the pronunciation. As for nursery rhymes concerned, they provide teaching pronunciation literature and offer speech rhythm practice.

So, I used three tools to collect data. These tools were some pictures, a questionnaire, and a recording test; they were designed to give accurate evaluation of the problems that face EFL students in learning pronunciation. First of all, for elementary school children I used the “**Sound the Pictures**” method with taking into consideration that they are able to neither write nor read anything not only the words another language, but even in their L1. There were different pictures hanging on the board, similar as the matter of their pronunciation: rabbit-rub it, ear-hear, hand-hunt, head-hat, tooth-goose, teeth-cheese, etc. The words mostly contained only nouns.

For the middle-class pupils, I implemented the “**Minimal Pairs of Words**” method. It uses the troublesome contrasts for a certain language background. I read words aloud to the students who were listening to: 1. fit; hit. 2. may; me. 3. sit; seat. 4. life; live. 5. pin; pan, etc. I checked whether the students could distinguish phonemes of each pair of words or not. As a result, assures that it is difficult to hear for speakers of a particular native language and the ones with which they were likely to confuse them. We usually list these problems in pairs. For example; the Uzbek speaker has trouble hearing English /ð/ because he does not have a parallel phoneme in Uzbek. He hears it as Uzbek /d/, which he transfers as English /d/. The using of pairs of words, phrases or sentences introducing a sound contrast is more valid than isolated words, as in: 1- *They heat it. They hit it.* 2- *Let me see the sheep. Let me see the ship.* The pupil had to decide which pairs were the same and which were different. The two perception techniques set out above require that the pupil identified phonemes regardless of the meaning of the words and sentences in which they appeared.

Thirdly, after searching a lot the related articles, I decided to analyze high school children according to “**Paper-and-Pencil Tests of Pronunciation**”. Harris (1969) suggests a lot of information related to the use of paper-and-pencil tests of pronunciation, where he has said that “the subjects have merely to check responses indicating how they pronounce English vowels and consonants and how they stress words and phrases.” This method has three categories: 1) Rhyme words (good, mood, wood...)

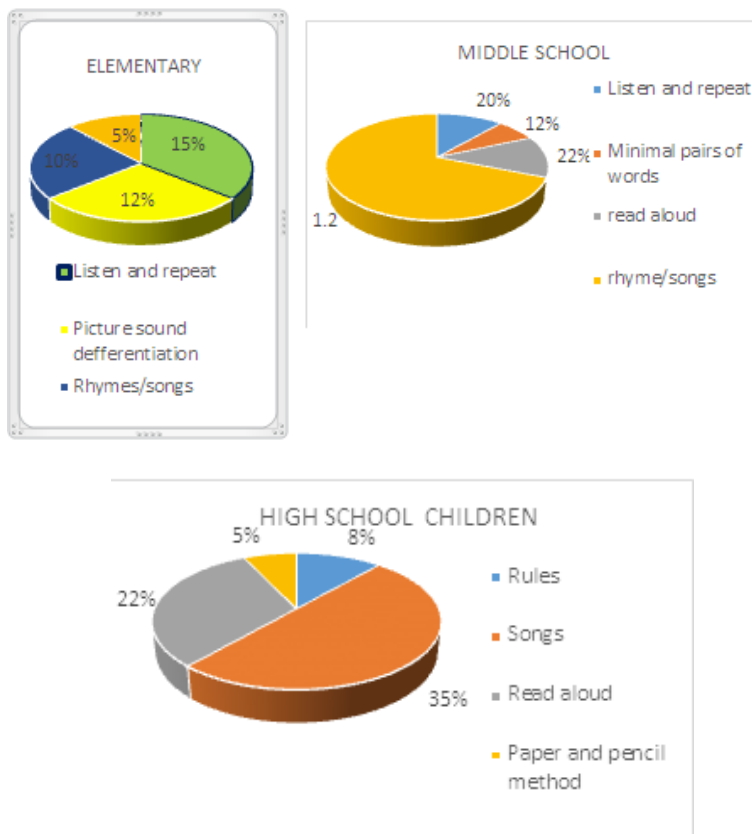
B- Word stress (contra'stive, depe'ndence, conce'ring...)

C- Phrase stress. (We saw the thief ran away, but where did he go? We have seen the parrot, but it has flown away).

Buck (1989) states that “The use of paper and pencil test of pronunciation is quite common in some English foreign language situations. A study was carried out in Osaka to determine the reliability and validity of such test as they are used in Japan. Results showed that reliability was very low indeed. Furthermore, correlation with more direct measures of pronunciation indicated that the written pronunciation tests had very low validity, and that the theoretical basis of such tests is open to question.”

30 EFL lessons were conducted, and 90 pronunciation teaching activities were detected. These are in table 1 below. Overall, the activities were very traditional, including the time-honoured listen and repeat tasks, reading aloud, giving rules and teachers correcting and pointing out how to pronounce.

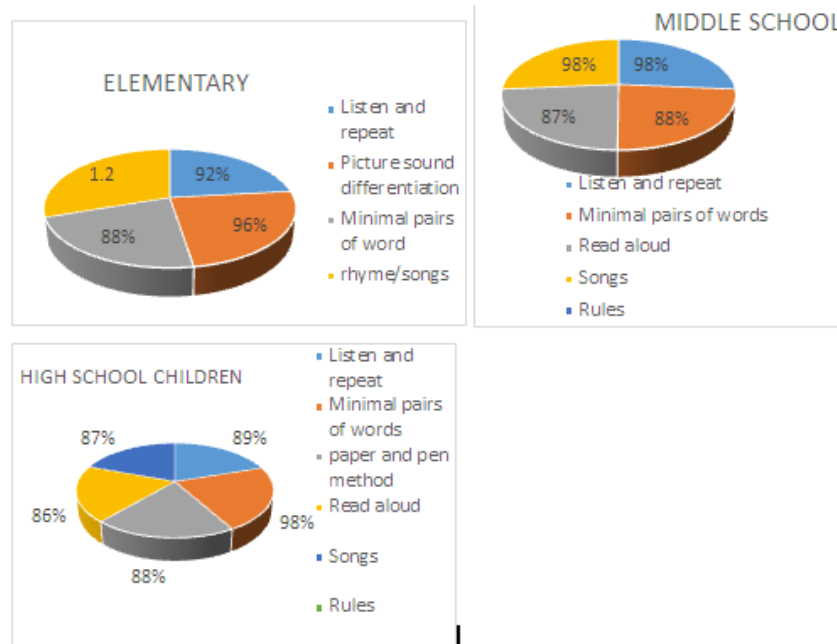
INITIAL RESULTS OF PUPILS



At the first lesson I conducted some tests, questionnaires, according to the level of the pupils in order to get to know how their pronunciation was. As the pie charts show, the test results were poor and this means that, some pupils do not pay attention to the pronunciation of words at all. I made the checklist of students and assessed their participation and class work to see how much they understood the daily task. Pupils, who had prior knowledge of Russian, quickly could pronounce all sounds. However, my monolingual pupils had difficulty to pronounce some sounds that are not available in their L1. The linguistic focus was to differentiate the sounds. Since in English, some letters have different pronunciation according to the words they come in.

According to the survey I understood that, it is useful to conduct some rhymes and modern songs in English. During the classes I implemented card games, role-play activities, read aloud techniques, as well as lyrics of the popular songs that pupils like to listen to. We practiced them as karaoke with whole class. Of course, the preferences of pupils were different; while girls opt to songs in pop style, boys inclined to choose rock'n rolls. I pared them by gender and gave different lyrics according to their preferences. I did not force them at all, but tried to conduct lessons as interesting as I could. After 30 lessons I examined my pupils with the same tests and oral questions which the results illustrated in pie chart 2 below.

FINAL RESULTS



As the pie charts depict, the most effective methods among elementary class pupils were picture and rhyme methods. Middle class pupils' results were indicated that, their enthusiasm was very high to learn English and all methods were useful for them and they were able to answer all questions with high marks. Finally, high class school children very interested in L2 and their pronunciation improved highly after I conducted these activities.

Reflection. As the results convey that the learners had many problems with their pronunciation. The main reason for this is negative influence of their mother tongue that some sounds are unavailable in certain languages. For this reason, they cannot use stress, intonation properly. At the beginning and at the end of the research I gave the same tests and the results were different that I was able to teach them how to pronounce some words correctly, and this helped them to differentiate the words that the meaning would totally changes when they are pronounced incorrectly. This experience taught me how to conduct lessons and what kind of activities would be more interesting for pupils in different ages and genders. It also taught me that, repetition and revision are the best tools for teaching correct pronunciation. Young learners can learn easily especially from when karaoke songs are used during the class. I did not force them to read or do monotonous activities, therefore our lessons lasted more than 1 hour. Besides, I organized some extra classes for introvert and less progressed pupils and they were able to catch up with their peers. As English is compulsory subject in our schools and the structure of sentences and pronunciation of words are strange for pupils, the teachers should try to learn pupils' interest and then try to implement various strategies, techniques, methods according to their interests. Testing can be defined according to Hartmann (1972), where he says that testing is "The setting of exercises and tasks to measure either the student's aptitude for a particular subject or his achievement in a particular subject. Tests in language teaching should be related to the aim of the instruction, and ideally all linguistic skills taught . . . should be represented in language examinations". What is more, when we teach another language to pupils, it is very crucial to take into consideration their

nationality. Some languages have lack of sounds that exist in English. In these cases, teacher should be able to connect the words together by comparing and explaining why some sounds pronounced unordinary way.

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