

**Problems in Teaching and Learning Pronunciation in India - A Detailed Analysis
with Possible Remedies**

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Abstract

Teaching English to the undergraduate learners is not just teaching the LSRW skills. In the global scenario, where communicating effectively is the prime requirement, stress is more on communicating orally in English. Writing skills are also equally important, especially for drafting a resume, inter-office correspondence (memos, circulars, reports etc.,) and drafting business letters.

While teaching oral communication skills, stress should be laid on pronunciation too. However, It may happen that a teacher may not get time to teach the various aspects of pronunciation because he/she is more worried about completing the syllabus which may include both LSRW skills and also ancillary skills –grammar and vocabulary.

One point that is to be considered here is that the emphasis is not on speaking fluently, but speaking intelligibly. So, the students need not know the jargon of phonetics, nor is there a need to rote learn the concepts.

This paper attempts to list some strategies of enabling the learners to speak intelligible English not worrying about the standard variety or Received Pronunciation. The emphasis is also on the use of technology for learning the various aspects of pronunciation.

There is no more a debate whether LSRW skills should be taught in isolation or in an integrated manner. The methods adapted are susceptible to change depending on the topic, number of learners, the responses given by the learners, etc.,

Especially while teaching the use of a foreign language like English, a learner should be trained in all the four skills and the corresponding sub-skills of the language.

When one considers the effective use of the English language for oral communication, listening and speaking cannot be taught and learnt in an isolated manner. In conversations, debates, discussions etc., the undergraduate learners respond to a previous speaker. While using language as a means of communication, more emphasis is on the appropriacy and the intelligibility of the message.

Now, the question is, when we are more concerned about the transmission of a message than accuracy and fluency, should we teach pronunciation at all?

Indian students, till their X Grade or SSC, take their English teacher as a model to learn English as a means of oral communication. This is because they are not exposed to the native speaker's pronunciation. Also, English is treated as a subject till their +2, emphasis is not laid on developing the "skill" of speaking.

There are two general difficulties which the learners as well as teachers face while learning or teaching the aspects of pronunciation:

- At undergraduate level, the learner comes with a restricted (previous) knowledge about the use and usage of English; as far as using the language for oral communication is concerned, especially the pronunciation, one reproduces the language aspects one has been exposed to and may be mispronouncing some words. One of the reasons could be that not all the teachers are trained, especially in phonetics. It has also been observed that not only the students but also the teachers (of other subjects-physics, chemistry, etc.,) find it embarrassing using the exact pronunciation of the word, because others may not be aware of that pronunciation and this may lead to mockery of that individual.
- The second issue to be considered is from the teachers' point of view - the coverage of syllabus. When there are many other components to teach - literature, grammar, vocabulary, writing (exam-oriented), can the teacher take time to concentrate on pronunciation as such?

Let's try to answer these general questions first. If a teacher makes a learner aware of the right pronunciation, the learner may hesitate using it outside the classroom. But at undergraduate level, where students opt for a specific course and hence are aware of the (future) communication needs, he/she may be taught about the importance of some aspects of pronunciation. The learner at this stage is a grown-up individual and can understand the aspects of pronunciation.

The second question, should we take time to teach the aspects pronunciation, is more important to consider. We have too much to do already, so teaching pronunciation may make it worse.

Students may seem reasonably good in pronunciation, but what is more important is (as mentioned earlier), is that they should achieve intelligibility in speech. Especially, in India where we use many languages, understanding the differences between Indian languages and English becomes very important. Hence, it is advisable to teach the articulation of the sounds of English, the importance of accent, and the use of tonality (especially the rising and falling tone) towards attaining both appropriacy and intelligibility in speech.

Having concentrated on the general problems, let's consider some specific problems we face while teaching English.

When learning a new language, a learner tries to compare and contrast the (target) language with his/her mother tongue to understand it. This is termed as Contrastive Analysis . Robert Lado, in his book *Linguistics across Cultures* (1957) says, "those elements which are similar to (the learner's) native language will be simple for him, and those that are different will be difficult".

When there are maximum similarities and minimum differences between two languages, learning becomes easy. But, if there are minimum similarities and maximum differences (English) learning becomes difficult.

The differences in the use of English (by the learners) occurs at six levels – phonological, lexical, grammatical, semantic, pragmatic and discourse levels.

If the students have been using the same pronunciation of a word for years, it is not very easy to help them use the exact pronunciation; that is they mispronounce the word that way by default.

Some aspects of the phonological differences that can be found especially because of mother tongue influence are as follows:

Pronouncing Sounds

- The first error made by the students is the pronunciation of the word –pronunciation. Many learners tend to pronounce it as /prən əv nsi:ei ʃən/, whereas it should be pronounced as /prənʌnsi:ei ʃən/. They can't make out the difference in pronunciation of some verbs and their corresponding nouns or adjectives. Some more examples could be converse and conversation, compare and comparable, admire and admirable, photo and photography, etc.,
- Some sounds don't occur in the Indian languages. Hence the learners (especially from regional medium background) find it difficult to pronounce them and tend to use some other sound from their mother tongue. Also, some sounds occur only in phonemic alphabet and not in English. The problematic sounds are:

Consonant Sounds: Most of the consonant sounds are the same in phonemic script as in the English Alphabet. Special emphasis should be given while teaching the sounds that occur only in phonemic script. They are /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/ /ʒ/ and /ŋ/

Vowel Sounds: The vowels of the English alphabet are 5, but the corresponding vowel sounds are 20 (12 vowel sounds and 8 diphthongs). This creates a problem in pronouncing the sounds or words with those sounds.

The sounds and words which are generally mispronounced are:

- The consonant sound /v/ and the semi-vowel /w/ /v/ is a labio-dental sound (lower lip and upper set of teeth) whereas /w/ is a semi-vowel (there is no obstacle to the air to escape while pronouncing the sound). This is the first difference to be dealt during the teaching-learning process, because learners tend to pronounce the semi-vowel as a labio-dental sound. For example /wet/ is pronounced as /vet/.

- The initial sound /j/ in words with start with ‘y’ are left out while pronouncing words like yellow, yesterday, yet, etc., by the learners. They are pronounced as /eləʊ/, /est ədeɪ/, and /et/
- /z/ does not exist in some south Indian languages. Hence, some learners tend to pronounce it as /dʒ/. so, zoo is pronounced as /dʒu:/, not /zu:/
- the sound /dʒ/ is mispronounced as /ddʒ /when it occurs in medial and final positions. For example, judgmental is pronounced as /dʒəddʒmentəl/ which should be pronounced as /dʒədʒment(ə)l/.

Inflections: The learners tend to add short vowels before or after the word. /skool/ is pronounced as /isku:l/ (Urdu speakers) or as sku:lu (Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Marathi), slate as /sleit/ as /sileit/ (Assamese Barpetia dialect and the Mizo language don’t allow any consonant clusters), /simpl/ is pronounced as /simplə/ by learners of north India) . The Tamil learners tend to add an inflection in negative questions. The vowel sound /æ/does not occur in Indian languages. The learners (Telugu speakers), tend to inflect /j/ before the word while pronouncing. /bæg/ is pronounced as /bjæg/.

Now, we will consider some methods to teach pronunciation in a remedial manner.

- If we get back to the question, should we teach pronunciation to the undergraduate students, it would be better to help them overcome their mother-tongue influence by comparing and contrasting it with the target language, and for this the teacher should have knowledge of both the languages.
- It is better to help the learners neutralize the accent to be more intelligible than exposing them to different varieties of English.

The next question to be answered would be -Should we teach them the IPA sounds?

We have 44 sounds of English out of which 24 are consonants and 20 are vowels and diphthongs. Should we discuss the three-term labels of all the sounds with the students?

Teaching the Pronunciation of Consonant Sounds

It is better to start teaching (I use the word *teach* here because only a teacher can explain it orally) the consonant sounds first because most of the sounds are written as the corresponding letters of the English Alphabet. A consonant sound is labeled using three terms –voiced or voiceless sound, place of articulation and manner of articulation:

Voiced or Voiceless: Students should be made aware of this differentiation because this is the only difference in some pairs of sounds –for example, /p/ is voiceless whereas /b/ is voiced. The parts of the mouth (articulators) used to pronounce both the sounds are lips. There is a simple technique to make the learners understand the difference. They are asked to place their forefinger on the voice box (larynx and vocal chords) and pronounce the both the sounds aloud. If they feel the vibration, it is a voiced sound, otherwise it is voiceless.

Place of Articulation: Students should also be aware of the articulators, that is the parts of the mouth used to pronounce the sound. As mentioned earlier, it would help them to differentiate between some sounds like /w/ (semi-vowel) and /v/ (labio-dental).

Manner of Articulation: The purpose of teaching here is neutralizing the accent, so manner of articulation, that is, the way the air escapes through the mouth parts while pronouncing the sounds, need not be discussed with the learners. Also, it is better to avoid using phonemic jargon as far as possible.

Teaching the Pronunciation of Vowel Sounds:

Vowels are described on the basis of :

Whether the mouth is open or close. For example, /e/ is between half-close and half-open, that is the front of the tongue should be raised towards the hard palate (front part of the mouth is almost closed) whereas, back part of the mouth does not come near soft palate.

Part of the Tongue : Front, central and back : /e/ is pronounced using the front part of the mouth.

Position of Lips: rounded, unrounded or neutral: /e/ is a rounded vowel. As far as teaching the pronunciation of vowel sounds is considered, it is suggested that students should can be taught only one aspect – rounded, unrounded and neutral, as the question here is intelligibility in communicating, not proficiency in phonetics.

The next question to be addressed would be - How to make the learners neutralize the accent:

Today, English is no more a foreign language in many countries including India. The term world Englishes is used to depict the varieties of English spoken across the globe. Indian English is also an accepted variety. As David Crystal rightly says, it's time we worry about using the lingua Franca not RP or 'standard pronunciation.'

The areas of pronunciation which can be taught to the students include individual sounds, word accent, accent and rhythm in connected speech and intonation. A procedural approach can be followed to help the learners speak intelligibly:

- First the learners are made aware of the fact that unlike their mother-tongue, the spelling does not correspond with the pronunciation in the case of English. (Examples of homonyms are given to the students in this context). So, there arises the necessity of learning the sounds of English.
- Now, an introduction is given about the organs of speech and the articulators (without exactly giving the difference in active and passive articulators) and the answers are elicited from the students – for example, what are the sounds produced using both the lips?
- Then, they can be taught the consonant sounds with special emphasis of the sounds which don't occur in the English alphabet. However, some teachers may feel that learning the phonemic script places an unnecessary burden on students.

The level of strain is greatly increased if there are asked to write in phonemic script. (Newton 1999)

So, it would be enough if they can just recognize the sounds instead of mastering them. They are not asked to give a three term label, but they are asked to understand as to what are the parts of the mouth used to pronounce the sounds.

- The third step is giving examples of sounds and words to teach vowel sounds. Again there would be no emphasis on three term label.
- They can be made to listen to some conversations (in the English Language Laboratory).

- The students are then given practice in pronouncing sounds and words
 - Some methods which could be followed in teaching the individual sounds are
 - Students are asked to identify which words in the list –bird, word, worm, worth, curl, heard, head, first , lurch, etc. have the sound /ɜ:/ (Hutchinson 1998:45).

Then they are asked to observe that the consonant *r* is always present in these words.
 - Contrasting two sounds which are similar can make students understand the difference more easily. These are termed as minimal pairs, where the difference in two words is only in one phoneme. Students can be given some minimal pairs to identify the two sounds and pronounce them.

Ex: leap and keep, shine and shown, sheep and cheap etc.,

The better method, to make the learners involved, could be giving them the two words in the context and ask them to identify the right word.

Ex: Small shops/chops are often expensive.

The writer Adrian Underhill recommends the use of a phonemic chart given below:

ɪ	I	ʊ	u:	Iə	eɪ	ɪ	ɔ
e	ə	ɜ:	ɔ:	ʊə	ɔɪ	əʊ	
æ	ʌ	ɑ:	ɒ	eə	aɪ	aʊ	
p	b	t	d	tʃ	dʒ	k	g
f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	ʒ
m	n	ŋ	h	l	r	w	j

Since each sound is placed in a separate square, it becomes easy for the teacher to help the students recognize and form words using the sounds. For example, the teacher can point on three different sounds and make them pronounce them individually and also make them form the word (s) . For example, /t/, /b/ and /p/ - can be top and pot.

Teaching the Use of Stress in Words, Phrases and Sentences.

The meaning of the word shifts based on the stress placed on a word in a sentence. We can teach the students the difference in strong and weak syllables, that generally the content words are stressed in a sentence. It can also be brought to their notice that shwa, /ə/ is weak syllable and /ʌ/, generally occurs in a stressed syllable. One method of teaching stressed and unstressed words could be writing the sentences and underlining the content words.

I can't believe it.

Students are also told that a word used in negative form is generally stressed.

Also students can be given the importance of emphasizing by stressing a particular word in a sentence or phrase:

Is *it* alright?

Or

Is it *alright*?

Teaching the Use of Intonation:

Intonation is the most important aspect of connected speech, as the meaning is implied by the rise and fall of the tone. The students can be made aware of the fact that a falling tone is used for statements and commands and a rising tone can be used for questions and requests.

Examples:

Statement – he will be coming *tomorrow* (falling tone on the second syllable of tomorrow).

Question – Is he coming *tomorrow* (rising tone on the second syllable of tomorrow)

Request – pass me the salt *please* (rising tone on please)

Command – Get away from here (falling tone on here)

The last but very important and pertinent question to be asked in this context is – Can we use technology to teach pronunciation?

The Language Laboratory: The modern language laboratory used in educational institutions has about 20 booths each equipped with a computer. Various pronunciation suites are available which can help the learner practice sounds, accent and rhythm and intonation.

Advantages of the Language Laboratory

✓ Teacher Access: The teacher can monitor individual student's practice through the Master Console

✓ Double Track: The students can listen, practice and also record their pronunciation

✓ Privacy: the students wouldn't hesitate practicing as they do it individually not along with the peer group members

- ✓ Individual Attention: The teacher can monitor and give feedback to each student

Activity in the Language Laboratory:

- ✓ Repetition: the students can listen, repeat and practice individual sounds. A video, which shows the use of articulators (parts of the mouth) can be accessed by clicking on the particular sound. The student can repeat as many times of times at his/her own pace.

- ✓ Similarly, the student can listen, understand and practice word accent and patterns of intonation.

Conclusion

If the learners are made aware of the(less) similarities and (more) differences between their mother tongue and English, it becomes easier for the learner to learn the aspects of pronunciation.

Technology can be used to make learners listen to some conversations. Software can be installed to help the learners practice the aspects of pronunciation.

However, the pronunciation suites (software) may not be a perfect model. It is always advisable for a teacher to teach the pronunciation aspects in the classroom (or Lab.) the students can be asked to practice using the software later.

If some steps mentioned in this paper can be followed, it becomes easier for the learners to learn some aspects of pronunciation and thereby neutralize his/her accent.

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