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Native-like Pronunciation in English.The Bone of Contention in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning?

Pronunciación nativa en inglés ¿La manzana de la discordia en la enseñanza-aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras?

Dicção nativa do inglês ¿Tema polémico do ensino e aprendizagem da língua estrangeira?

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring some of the sides of the teaching and learning of pronunciation, a controversial topic, in an attempt at elucidating conceptions, establishing referential points and suggesting possible solutions and logical procedures when addressing the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language, specifically when approaching pronunciation, one of the key components of language. Pronunciation is linked to the primacy of oral over written language, thus being a priority in the learning process and a necessary primary teaching objective when dealing with the speaking skill. It is also a component of the so-called linguistic (or grammatical) competence language learners are supposed to incorporate to their general competences, one of which is communicative competence, so they can complete their learning goals according to the Common European Framework of Reference for teaching foreign languages.

Keywords: pronunciation; native-like diction; linguistic competence; communicative competence; linguistic model

Resumen

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo explorar algunas de las vertientes de la enseñanza-aprendizaje de la pronunciación, un tema controvertido, en un intento por dilucidar concepciones, establecer puntos de referencia y sugerir posibles soluciones y procedimientos lógicos al abordar la enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera, específicamente al abordar la pronunciación, uno de los componentes clave del lenguaje. La pronunciación está relacionada con la primacía de la lengua oral sobre la escrita, siendo así una prioridad en el proceso de aprendizaje y un objetivo didáctico primario necesario cuando se trata de la habilidad de hablar. También es un componente de la llamada competencia lingüística (o gramatical) que los estudiantes de idiomas deben incorporar a sus competencias generales, una de las cuales es la competencia comunicativa, para que puedan completar sus objetivos de aprendizaje de acuerdo con el Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras.

Palabras clave: pronunciación; dicción nativa; competencia lingüística; competencia comunicativa; modelo lingüístico

Resumo

Este artigo procura explorar algumas faces do ensino e aprendizagem da pronúncia, tema polêmico, na tentativa de elucidar concepções, estabelecer pontos de referência e sugerir possíveis soluções e procedimentos lógicos quando se trata do ensino e aprendizagem do inglês como língua estrangeira, especificamente ao abordar a pronúncia, um dos principais componentes

da linguagem. A pronúncia está ligada à primazia da linguagem oral sobre a escrita, sendo, portanto, uma prioridade no processo de aprendizagem e um objetivo primário de ensino necessário quando se trata da habilidade de falar. É também um componente da chamada competência linguística (ou gramatical) que os aprendizes de línguas devem incorporar às suas competências gerais, uma das quais é a competência comunicativa, para que possam completar seus objetivos de aprendizagem de acordo com o Quadro Europeu Comum de Referência para ensino de línguas estrangeiras.

Palavras-chave: pronúncia; dicção nativa; competência linguística; competência comunicativa; modelo linguístico

Introduction

In the 1980s undergrad learning of English as a major specifically in the Cuban Teachers' Colleges was signaled by an emphasis on the three discrete aspects of language (phonetics, vocabulary, grammar) supported and encouraged by the teaching philosophy at the time. Constant drills to practice those aspects were supposed to guarantee their mastery, which in turn would grant the learner an in crescendo command of the English language. Despite this, the coveted aim of mostly every student in the freshman year—and of those from sophomore to senior years—was in amassing a staggering vocabulary that would impress others and the teachers, and in honing a pronunciation that would emulate English native pronunciation, an aspiration bordering, in our view, on the impossible.

Here we aim at exploring some of the sides of the teaching and learning of pronunciation, a controversial topic, in an attempt at elucidating conceptions, establishing referential points and suggesting possible solutions and logical procedures when addressing the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language, specifically when approaching pronunciation, one of the key components of language. This is the key objective of the paper. To bring off that objective, traditional (1960s, 1970s and 1990s) and most recent (early 2000s up to 2023) bibliographical material was resorted to.

Pronunciation is a part of oral language. It has primacy in learning a language, and becomes a central objective in teaching a foreign language. It is a component of linguistic competence that learners must build into their competences, so they can complete their learning goals according to the (Common European Framework of Reference [CEFR], Council of Europe, n.d.) for teaching foreign languages.

Material and Methods

Methods applied to develop the paper included the historical-logical (an analysis of the evolution of the teaching-learning of English, specifically pronunciation, from the 1980s up to the present conceptualizations of the matter under discussion). Also, the abstract-concrete method was used to organize and unravel on a mental level, after examining realities and contexts, the practical bases

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leading to the problems declared; and the analytic-synthetic method, to explore the pronunciation-related aspects in their separate interconnections and later regrouping those aspects in a systemic whole to explicate the facts collected. As well, supporting *in situ* interviews were put into effect. Pertinent documents and bibliography were consulted too.

Results and Discussion

The following dimensions of communicative competence have remained as the most general and consulted ones:

- The linguistic dimension, which includes knowing lexical, grammatical and pronunciation aspects, as well as rules of morphology, syntax. It refers to the ability to use the language accurately;
- The discourse dimension, which refers to the knowledge and skills to connect ideas or sentences correctly in order to a text;
- The sociolinguistic dimension, which includes knowledge of specific sociocultural rules to be in line with conventional norms and registers of language, and;
- The strategic dimension, which means using verbal and non-verbal strategies to keep communication or fill interruptions in the communicative act. It is also the ability to initiate, to maintain or finish a conversation and attain its purposes successfully.

Although there are many authors who have proposed or expanded these dimensions, they are still recognizable and accepted in the field. It should be noticed that the pronunciation element falls within the linguistic dimension. It is a "sub-competence" of communicative competence, and the sole emphasis of structural teaching. Likewise, we can speak of lexical competence or grammatical competence.

Any analysis of pronunciation must begin with a definition, or definitions. It is registered as "the act or manner of pronouncing something: articulate utterance" (Webster , 1987, p. 682), and Alvero (2008) records the term as "articulation of the letters, the syllables, the words"(p. 644).

A look at these definitions renders initially that pronunciation is directly associated with other terms such as articulation, sound, accent, utterance, manner of speaking, speech, diction, delivery, elocution, intonation, enunciation, voicing, vocalization, sounding. Therefore, working towards a good pronunciation implies considering and improving those related terms. It has been detected that a factor affecting the acquisition of good pronunciation is related to students unwilling to speak in class because

"… in many cases they think others might laugh at them if they mispronounce a word" (Huq & Sheikh, 2021, p. 10). This social element must be considered too and appropriately treated.

Having presented the issue of the place of pronunciation in learning a language and different ways to view it, we must continue with a clarification of what is understood as native, a concept referred to at the beginning. We assume the following definition from Webster (1987, p. 563): "adj. belonging to a particular place by birth… natural, normal."

To delve deeper into the topic, seeing impossibility in reaching perfection in a foreign language like English, for Spanish learners for example, bases on the following:

1. Corroborated feedback: English speakers, mostly Canadian but also American and British (academics and language teachers included) have systematically commented that impeccable English is the first red flag, because most times impeccable means "flat" English with no nuances of usage, origin, region, norm, schooling, etc.

2. Exquisite grammar: Excessive quality grammar and over-punctiliousness in producing the language also conspicuously send up red flags.

3. Naturalness: Full grasp of allophonic variants, geography-related variants and a speaker's natural use of strategies to communicate are noticeable markers difficult to build into our Spanish system while learning English. Two main causes of mispronunciation in English are that Spanish learners of English grapple with sounds that do not exist in their mother tongue. The sound /ʃ/ is one of them. A Spanish-speaking student would tend to pronounce she with /ch/ (/tʃ/ is another transcription symbol used in dictionaries), as in chocolate. In our experience, we have even heard students say either /tʃ/ or /s/ in final position (as in Spanish) or even omit the sound and say /spani/. The second general cause is that the sound does exist in the student's mother tongue but with different allophonic variants. Two examples are the so-called long /i/, as in sheep (/ʃip/) as opposed to short /ɪ/ as in ship (/ʃɪp/). The tendency is to use the Spanish-like long /i/ in the latter example, because that is the sound they know (and hear) in their own language, so they transfer their familiar sound to English and imitate what is closer to their experience. As has been warned, changing the sound brings about a change of meaning and ensuing miscomprehension in communication. The second example is the allophonic signature in the initial position of the English plosive /p/. Spanish speakers do not assimilate this variant and would not explode the p in the initial position in people (/ˈpipəl/).

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4. Let's be clear about two things. Firstly, this allophonic reference occurs in initial position. The second p in people does not undergo this phenomenon, and that is when the "mistake" is made. Secondly, pronouncing with the allophonic distinction is fine but in this particular case, not doing so does not affect understanding. That is why we put mistake between quotation marks. The best solution will always be conscious practice towards improvement in pronunciation.

5. Accuracy and fluency: These two elements refer mostly to linguistic targets in learning. Acquiring spotless accurate and fluent English is a challenge not everyone succeeds in. Generally, paying attention to accuracy deters fluency because we focus on how to pronounce a word (or conjugate a verb) thus affecting the natural unfolding of the utterance but when we do not mind those details and try to be fluent (oftentimes mistakenly equated to being fast) then accuracy suffers. Exacting both becomes a formidable endeavor.

The above are not the only reasons but they illustrate our point. Briefly, to speak native-like English you must have been born in an English-speaking country or in a country with English as a co-official first language or second language, or having emigrated in your childhood years—or being a really gifted learner. Now, we are not saying it is impossible to master the language. It would contradict our entire pedagogical and linguistic formation, whose principles advocate the viability of growth in an individual's learning curve. In addition, in Cuban and Ecuadorian education, we adhere to the notions upheld by the Common European Framework of Reference staff for learning languages. If we accept that, then a person with a C2 (highest qualification) in English would impressively listen/speak/read/write/interact socially; yet let's keep in mind that the CEFR (Council of Europe, n.d.) is conceived chiefly for people who plan to live, work or study in an English scenario.

Our contention that struggling to achieve perfect pronunciation is extremely complicated, rather impossible, is not only an inessential occupation of learning time—our opinion—but also an ineffectual one. Nevertheless, it must be clear that Pronunciation is linked to the primacy of oral over written language, thus being a priority in the learning process and a necessary primary teaching objective when dealing with the speaking skill. It is also a component of the so-called linguistic (or grammatical) competence language learners are supposed to incorporate to their general competences, one of which is communicative competence. This quotation identifies pronunciation as a key element in learning a foreign language. Accordingly, working towards improving it cannot be disregarded.

Are we back to square one? No, we are simply stating the facts, sharing the experience and throwing into the debate thought-provoking factors. In the traditional school reality we lived decades ago,

language teachers (based on our experience, we dare say they did it maybe unconsciously, maybe caught in the very standards they had inherited and were passing on to their teaching styles) were very strict when it came to practicing and evaluating pronunciation. In their defense, we admit that they were training students with their minds set on preparing would-be models, and by model we refer to "an example for imitation or emulation" (Webster, 1987, p. 544).

Students, be it in Cuba, Ecuador or any other country, have to be, by definition, an example of a quality, or set of qualities. So, where do we stand? Do we idealistically pursue perfect pronunciation or do we objectively and contextually train our students to attain their due qualification, B2 for a senior student according to CEFR (Council of Europe, n.d.) descriptors, when they graduate, armed with appropriate (nonnative but satisfactory for their roles and purposes) pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, culture and tools, which will enable them to optimally perform, responding to the social demands they were prepared for?

Let's go further by describing the descriptors for the different levels of language proficiency for the case of phonological control: C2 is assessed as C1; C1, the student can vary intonation and place sentence stress correctly in order to express finer shades of meaning; B2 the student has acquired a clear, natural, pronunciation and intonation; B1 the student's pronunciation is clearly intelligible even if a foreign accent is sometimes evident and occasional mispronunciations occur; A2 his/her pronunciation is generally clear enough to be understood despite a noticeable foreign accent, but conversational partners will need to ask for repetition from time to time; and on A1, pronunciation of a very limited repertoire of learnt words and phrases can be understood with some effort by native speakers used to dealing with speakers of his/her language group.

As clearly noticed, B2 for example (the level students in most schools are demanded to complete for graduating), reads that the student must acquire a "natural" pronunciation and intonation. We have made reference above to the problem of naturalness in speaking. We may seem to contradict CEFR (Council of Europe, n.d.) principles, however, the natural pronunciation they ask for is connected to the idea of organic performance in language, that is, a performance that shows a balanced relationship between the components of a larger system.

That is the essence of what CEFR (Council of Europe, n.d.) expects from a B2 learner who has reached that level: the elements (all of the aspects declared in the descriptors for language learning) that make a person become a B2 function integrally. They converge and operate as a system giving coherence and

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precision to the whole. What remains central in having adequate pronunciation (as is having a rich range of vocabulary and good grammar) is that when we engage in conversation with other people, native or not, they understand us without strain. In other words, communication flows and is efficient.

So far, we have presented the problem, recalled historic facts, provided empirical and more systematized evidence and substantiated diverse viewpoints. Let's try to answer the questions we have posed.

It is our perception that in one way or the other pronunciation has been—and continues to be—a bone of contention. Historically, structural methods and styles of teaching pervaded the classrooms. Pronunciation was central (according to structural teaching, native-speaker-like pronunciation was sought—yet never completed) when communicative competence, communication, etc. were only surfacing in our methodologies for foreign language teaching as part of the communicative approach where comprehensible pronunciation was the main concern. Structuralism was so rooted that pronunciation exercises were after topmost accuracy and the students were led to reproduce words and phrases whose meaning was not clear to them.

As said before, mechanical drills and behavioristic conceptions were applied to teach the language. Back then, the premises of teaching accentuated the teacher's role, and language teaching was almost automatic, repetitive, "hammered." We remember dialogues learned by heart and parroted in tests, lab headphones that chimed prompting us to respond to the stimulus of the sound to answer questions, etc.

Pronunciation was a priority, either because the teaching guidelines followed what had been long established in learning the language or simply because we, as students, strived to attain a native-like accent.

With the full advent of communicative teaching, the mirage of a perfect pronunciation began to be replaced by the notion of a satisfactory level that would still be in correspondence to the moment (level) the learners were in and the context they were to use the language after graduation. The previous standard was modified to meet the present, more objective, more contextualized exigencies of learning English: teaching it in the national school system, that is, the major had the mission of graduating English teachers who would cover the teaching needs of the local educational grid.

Even so, our seniority as professors of English, our teaching experience and our personal attitude towards learning the language, impel us to say that we cannot just give up the aspiration of being better at the language we are learning, above all at the language we are learning so we can teach it to others.

Of course, such ambition ought to be controlled by objective benchmarks: we will never have native-like pronunciation or absolute elegance in grammar use or an astounding vocabulary. What we need to have is an assimilated language system in English, which is a true, well-earned reflection of the degree we were bestowed and which proves we have the didactic tools required to teach the language.

If our communicative competence reflects our command of the language the way it should, and if our didactic competence steps in to complement it, then we will have achieved a level where language as a system, our teaching mission and our cultural assimilation of the foreign language combine to offer a competent professional.

The second question posed was whether the idealistic pursuit of perfect pronunciation was ok or we must focus on the objective and contextual training of our students in the Cuban case, so when they graduate they are equipped with appropriate (nonnative but satisfactory for their role) pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, culture and teaching tools that will enable them to optimally perform, responding to the social demands they were prepared for.

The answer is we must aim at the best pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary status we can reach. We cannot conformingly throw in the towel believing we cannot go beyond. The message is that we can never stop studying and learning the language. This is not our statement but Travis Blake's, an American journalist living in Havana in the 1980s and working at Taíno Radio Station.

If our students know that but we do not, we are running the risk of making unnecessary corrections in class simply because we did not read books that are essential in our learning, so we might make the mistake of telling a student his pronunciation of a word is wrong when the dictionary says it is not. It happens with grammar too. Not knowing one or more alternatives of a grammatical aspect might lead you to make corrections in class that, had you deepened into the language, could have been prevented.

One example will suffice: Eckersley and Eckersley (1972) "decree" that we can say "He is six-foot tall' and 'He is six-feet tall"(p. 28). A simplistic generalization of the English rule about adjectives would lead an unaware teacher to correct because he/she knows and applies only one variant.

These examples alert readers that we must work hard towards knowing more and more because we are models. Our role in class is to teach, yes; also to guide, to stand as a model and to plant confidence in our students that what we say—or correct—is ideally one-hundred percent valid. We must also be "language advisors." We have to be able to take from our teacher's repertoire and lead our students

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across the most suitable roads in language. Two elements sometimes forgotten in leading our students properly across the target language are appropriateness and style.

The speaker of English has to be appropriate, realize what sounds more English-like rather than native-like, and has to understand elements of style that will lead him/her to produce better utterances. Though the "of" construction, for example, in English has its own rules and functions, excessively using it ought to be avoided. We always tell students to see which cases can be changed into the possessive form, that is, the use of the apostrophe, so that their sentences, either spoken or written, do not fall into the trap of unduly use of "of". Something similar happens with the passive voice.

In regards to pronunciation, our students oftentimes blend American and English pronunciation (and vocabulary). It would be counterproductive to tell them their English is wrong. The language we learn is artificial (another reason why we cannot aim at perfection) because we learn it in an unreal environment and our models are also a result of that reality. Therefore, the tendency to mix variants is quasi-inevitable. Our role is to identify and reveal the fact, explain the cultural differences and suggest they study more and try to stick to a single variant as they advance on their learning path.

Traditionally, in Latin America we have been mostly exposed to and learned the American variant of English, which is perplexing—today this is not a straightjacket anymore—because there are many versions of English within the very U.S. The point is that we cannot grade a student with a C or less when he/she pronounces "no" /nəʊ/, the English variant, rather than the allegedly all-American one, /nou/; or says 'wä- tər/ (or /'wɔ-tə/) instead of /ˈwɔ:tər/.

Our position as methodological supervisors is to detect this and work towards warning, upgrading and guiding teachers under our lead. In a nutshell, what counts is communication, legible/recognizable, correct—appropriate, and not a wild-goose crusade in search of perfection in language. We have to learn the language without forsaking, of course, passion in learning, desire to be better and do better.

Corona and Terroux (1989) warn that our students do not just acquire correct pronunciation. They say that learning consciously is important, so pronunciation has to be a part of teaching. This assertion is especially factual when we think of students in a teacher-training course: they will be teachers of English; they need to acquire and develop good pronunciation.

Conclusions

The objectives revealed at the beginning of the paper have been fulfilled. The idea of impeccable pronunciation has been modified by a notion of correctness according to contexts and purposes in

learning the language. As opportune coda for our analyses, we quote verbatim some of the classical ways to improve pronunciation. We call them classical because they consider not just the idea of getting better at pronouncing departing from the "technical'' basis, that is the key aspects that converge in the concept of pronunciation, but they also direct towards the paramount objective of getting better for better communication. This is a thought we have been trying to keep at the forefront throughout the paper. Higher linguistic competence for higher communicative competence in combination with the rest of the competences

Once more, that pronunciation is and has been a bone of contention must be reexamined. Our strong pieces of advice stress on working hard to learn the language and about the language, never throwing the towel, never thinking this is it, this is my ceiling, I can't go any further; and working hard so my desire to learn the language does not become an obsession but useful motivation to be a better communicator in the target language, which is reflected in my proficiency in English and my capacity to teach English.

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