

# How Can EFL Teachers Help EFL Learners Improve Their English Pronunciation?

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**Abstract**—One of the important parts of foreign language teaching and learning is English pronunciation because it impacts learners' communicative competence and performance. Lack of pronunciation skills reduces learners' self-confidence and limit their social interactions. EFL teachers can help their learners obtain the necessary skills of pronunciation they need for effective communication. In this paper, the researchers define the term pronunciation, explain the importance of pronunciation, declare the goals of English pronunciation, state the aspects of English pronunciation, elaborate the reason of integrating pronunciation in EFL classes, express techniques for teaching English pronunciation, and mention implications for the learning and teaching of English pronunciation. The review of literature indicates that EFL teachers play a vital role in improving the learners' pronunciation skill.

**Index Terms**—importance, goals, aspects, integration, techniques, implications

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to Elliot (1995), pronunciation is one of the most important features of an individual's speech, but a lot of teachers do not explicitly teach it. It is seldom taught by teachers in the foreign language classrooms. In addition, it is one of the most difficult challenges that language teachers and learners face. If teachers understand the characteristics that impact their learners' pronunciation, they can effectively improve their instruction to increase the accuracy of their learners' pronunciation.

Fraser (2000) stated that ESL/EFL teachers should be provided with courses and materials to help them improve their pronunciation instruction. According to Morley (1991), understandable pronunciation is one of the principal aims of pronunciation instruction not perfect pronunciation and it is an important part of communicative competence. Realistic goals that are reasonable, applicable, and suitable for the communication needs of the learner should be set. Therefore, it is very important for learners learning English speak it as understandably as possible – not just like native speakers of English, but well enough to be understood.

Fraser (2000) stated that pronunciation is the most important oral communication skill. Miller (2004) expressed that pronunciation should be balanced with all of the other communication skills. Miller continued that teachers have a big role in developing this important skill. According to Fraser (2000), being able to speak English involves certain sub-skills such as vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatics. However, the most important of these skills is pronunciation. With acceptable pronunciation, a speaker's speech can be understandable despite having other mistakes; with bad pronunciation, his/her speech would be very difficult to understand, despite being accurate in other areas. Julia (2002) stated that pronunciation is one of the basic skills and the foundation of oral communication for EFL learners. Julia (2002) continued that without pronunciation there would be no spoken language and no oral communication.

The aim of teaching pronunciation to learners is not to ask them to pronounce like native speakers. Instead intelligible pronunciation should be the real purpose of oral communication. According to Pourhosein Gilakjani (2011), in order to change the way learners pronounce English words, they should change the way they think about the sounds of those words. This is true not just for individual sounds but for the bigger parts of speech like syllables, stress patterns, and rhythm. Unfortunately, pronunciation instruction remains largely neglected in English language teaching.

In this paper, the researchers define the term pronunciation, elaborate the importance of pronunciation, mention the goals of English pronunciation, explain aspects of English pronunciation, declare the reason of integrating pronunciation in EFL classes, state techniques for teaching English pronunciation, and indicate implications for the learning and teaching of English pronunciation.

## II. WHAT IS PRONUNCIATION?

According to Pourhosein Gilakjani (2012) and Yates and Zielinski (2009), pronunciation is the way of producing the sounds that are used to make meaning when speakers speak. It involves consonants and vowels of a language (segments), features of speech beyond the level of the individual segments, like stress, timing, rhythm, intonation,

phrasing (suprasegmental features), and how the voice is described (voice quality). All of the above parts work together when speakers talk so that problems in one part can influence on the other and this can make a person's pronunciation easy or difficult to comprehend.

### III. IMPORTANCE OF PRONUNCIATION

People can understand learners who have good pronunciation even if they make mistakes in other areas of language but they are not able to understand those who have unintelligible pronunciation even if they have extensive vocabulary knowledge and know grammar fully (Yates & Zielinski, 2009).

Listeners judge about a speaker's English ability based on his/her own pronunciation. If a speaker's pronunciation is so weak this has a negative impact on his/ her overall language ability. Bad pronunciation is very difficult to listen to and it needs greater effort and concentration on listeners. Bad pronunciation results in misunderstandings even a breakdown in communication. If a speaker has an acceptable pronunciation, listeners judge about the speaker's overall language ability much more effectively, even to the point of tolerating grammatical mistakes (Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2012).

Good pronunciation provides a valuable confidence for speaker. Good pronunciation is not 'native-like' pronunciation. If a learner tries to speak exactly like a native speaker he will soon be disappointed because this is not a realistic aim of learning pronunciation. The objective should be to gain a 'listener-friendly' pronunciation; that is, listeners can easily understand it that can make meaningful conversation possible (Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2012).

According to Morley (1998), when speakers talk to other persons, the first thing that can create good impression about the quality of their language ability is their pronunciation. Bad and incomprehensible pronunciation will make misunderstanding for both speakers and listeners. Moreover, learners with limited pronunciation skills lose their self-confidence and result in negative impact for learners to assess their abilities.

Good pronunciation can make individuals understand us easily. Bad pronunciation can confuse persons and lead to an unfavorable talking and misunderstanding even if we use advanced grammar or vocabulary. Consequently, we can use simple words or grammatical structures to make people understand us but we cannot always use simple pronunciation (Lund, 2003).

According to Gelvanovsky (2002), pronunciation has an important social value and it should be related to prestige like intelligence, professional competence, hard work, and social advantage. Pronunciation provides information about the speakers' geographical and social characteristics and it is the most important feature of non-native speakers.

Fraser (2000) declared that pronunciation impacts the speakers who are judged by other people and it is the most difficult skill to be learnt. Miller (2004) emphasized that pronunciation problems result in conversation breakdowns. Miller stressed that the significance of pronunciation instruction should be balanced with the instruction of the other language skills.

### IV. THE GOALS OF ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

Intelligibility is an ideal goal for many EFL learners and the goal of these learners is to be understood in conversation but there are other learners who wish to communicate with native speakers. According to Fraser (2000), learners should be able to speak English with their favorite accent which is easily understandable to an English speaker. Jenkins (2002) stated that learners need to be intelligible to both native and non-native speakers. Teachers should help learners become both intelligible and easy to understand.

EFL learners cannot completely pronounce English words exactly like native speakers. Intelligibility is an ideal goal for most learners although some of them like to pronounce more native-like than others for specific reasons (Abercrombie, 1991).

Yates and Zielinski (2009) said that 'intelligibility' itself is not an ideal aim. What is intelligible is dependent on the listener. What speakers interact is just as important as what they say and do. Listeners have their own attitudes, skills, experience, and biases that can impact their views about intelligibility. These involve familiarity with the speaker's accent, ability in comprehending speakers from various levels, and attitudes towards the speaker and the speaker's racial group. Thus, every listener judges the understandability of the same speaker differently due to some factors. These involve how kind they are to the speaker and how familiar they are with the speaker. How much they already know about what is being talked about is also important.

According to Butler-Pascoe and Wiburg (2003), the goals of teaching pronunciation are to develop English that is easy to understand and not confusing to the listener, develop English that meets persons' needs and that results in communicative competence, help learners feel more comfortable in using English, develop a positive self-awareness as non-native speakers in oral communication, develop speech consciousness, personal speech monitoring skills and speech adjustment strategies that help learners develop in and out of the class.

James (2010) and Pourhosein Gilakjani (2012) stated that speakers have understandable pronunciation when other persons can understand what they say and the speaker's English is good to listen to; that is, the speaker is 'comfortably intelligible.' The researchers continued that for some learners, the goal of learning pronunciation is to speak like native speakers. This may be a valuable goal for learners, it should not be the goal of teachers who want to improve their

learners' pronunciation and confidence. Therefore, acceptable pronunciation is not to force learners to have an American or British accent, but teachers should encourage their learners to speak English clearly and understandably.

## V. ASPECTS OF PRONUNCIATION

Pennington and Richards (1986) indicated that there are two various viewpoints concerning pronunciation. From the view of many language teachers, pronunciation is the production of individual sounds, stress and intonation patterns of the target language which shows the traditional opinion that pronunciation is related to the referential meaning and individual sounds.

According to Brazil, Coulthard, and Johns (1980), pronunciation is a part of both referential meaning and communication process. Pennington and Richards (1986) expressed that pronunciation is a complex interaction of perceptual, articulatory, and interactional factors in terms of three kinds of qualities: segmental features, voice-setting features, and prosodic features.

### A. Segmental Features

Segmental features are minimal units of sound determined in phonetic terms. The basic elements of pronunciation are phonemes; therefore, learning of the target language phonological system is the understanding of the phonemic differences and of the phonetic forms of phonemes that are in particular environments within syllables and words. It is the particular features of individual sound segments (Pennington & Richards, 1986).

### B. Voice-setting Features

Voice-setting features are the general articulatory features of stretches of speech. The tendency of speakers of a specific language to pursue some habitual positions of articulation in connected speech are demonstrated in terms of voice-setting features (Pennington & Richards, 1986).

### C. Prosodic Features

The last aspects of pronunciation are stress and intonation. Prosodic features are the relative levels of stress and pitch within syllables, words, phrases, and longer stretches of speech (Pennington & Richards, 1986). Yates and Zielinski (2009) expressed that learners should pay attention to all features of their pronunciation that make better their comprehensibility and assist them to decrease miscommunication. What a learner finds very difficult about pronunciation differs from learner to learner and the effect of their first language has a vital role.

According to Yates and Zielinski (2009), it is necessary for learners to pay attention to those features of pronunciation which are related to larger units of speech like stress, rhythm, intonation, and voice quality (suprasegmental aspects) and to how the different sounds of English are produced (segmental aspects). The degree to which segmental and suprasegmental features of pronunciation intervene with understandability for a specific speaker may differ and in every class teachers may have learners from many backgrounds with many different accents. As a learner becomes more skilled, difficulty with intonation and voice quality may be more significant matters and teachers should emphasize these issues from the very beginning of their instruction (Yates & Zielinski, 2009).

## VI. THE REASON OF INTEGRATING PRONUNCIATION IN EFL CLASSES

Too much attention to English pronunciation in EFL lessons shows that pronunciation is an important part of learning English. EFL Learners should know how they speak to others in order to know what to aim for. Previous studies show that EFL teachers are the only persons many learners speak to in English. If teachers don't show the necessary guides towards understandable pronunciation to their learners, nobody will do it. Teachers can perform this through teaching the pronunciation of new words and phrases and setting up suitable anticipations for comprehensible pronunciation in their classes (Yates & Zielinski, 2009).

Teachers can help their learners to generate comprehensible speech and this is one of the most useful things they can bring to English pronunciation teaching and learning. Teachers should find methods to show, practice, and give feedback on pronunciation in a continuous way that is more useful than a large number of pronunciation subjects (Yates & Zielinski, 2009).

According to Pourhosein Gilakjani (2012), some variables are important when integrating pronunciation into the EFL classrooms. They are *learners* including their ages, educational backgrounds, experiences with pronunciation instruction, and motivation, *instructional settings* including academic, workplace, literacy, conversation, *institutional factors* including teachers' educational experiences, focus of syllabus, availability of pronunciation tasks, class size, and accessibility of equipment, and *linguistic variables* including learners' native language, diversity or lack of diversity of native language within the group.

## VII. TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

According to Gottlieb (2006), teaching pronunciation needs understanding three aspects of speech: perception, production, and prediction. Perception of oral language includes hearing, listening, seeing, and feeling. This sensing and

thinking about all of the parts of the speech system is necessary for pronunciation: lips, tongue, throat, vocal chords, sinuses, and facial muscles. Production of oral language needs time to listen, process, and form an answer, knowledge of the elements of the language and activation of background knowledge. Prediction of oral communication needs comes through experience different contexts. Through teaching prediction strategies, EFL learners progress rapidly to become independent learners.

The history of language teaching has limited the speaking/pronunciation part to the drill or situational responsive answers. New methods have focused on accurate speaking activities focused on doing real-world speaking activities with attention to a single segmental or spelling, phrasing, rhythm, or tone element of pronunciation (Gottlieb, 2006).

Cook (2001) suggested a number of techniques for teaching and learning English pronunciation. They are use of phonetic transcript, imitation, discrimination of sounds, and communication. Schmitt (2002) mentioned some ways of learning English pronunciation like elicited mechanical production, ear training for sound contrast, and sounds for meaning contrasts.

According to Penny Ur (1996), the goal of pronunciation is not to obtain a complete mimicry of native accent but to make the learner to pronounce correctly to be understandable to other speakers. She stated some methods of pronunciation instruction. They are imitation of teachers or recorded models of sounds, recording of learners' speech and contrast with native model, systematic description and training, imitation exercises, repetition of sounds, different repetition of drills, learning dialogues, rhythms, tongue twisters, and self-correction by hearing to recordings of own speech.

According to Harmer (2006), learners should be given additional information about spoken English and teachers should aid them to gain the aim of comprehensibility. Harmer emphasizes intelligibility rather than perfection as the main goal of pronunciation teaching. Harmer said that the techniques of pronunciation instruction are focusing on individuals sound, minimal pair drill, pronunciation games, sound waves practice, and learning connected speech. Thornbury (2008) demonstrated that intelligibility is vital in English pronunciation. He offers some techniques of teaching pronunciation such as preparing cards of rhyming words, telling story and noticing learners' mistakes and improving them, and presenting speaking exercises.

According to Cheng (1998), teachers can use the following strategies to teach pronunciation:

a) Meaningful materials: Teachers can use real materials for practicing linking, rhythm, stress, or intonation. Consequently, learners become active persons in their team work.

b) Using songs, games, and tongue twisters: These activities can enhance learners' stimulation in pronunciation classes because it is an important factor in pronunciation.

c) Evaluating learners' improvement: Evaluating advancement is a significant factor in keeping learners' motivation.

According to Scarcella and Oxford (1994), techniques for teaching pronunciation are self-monitoring, self-study, individual correction, communication activities, written versions of oral presentations, computer-assisted language learning, the application of known sounds, communication strategies, and affective strategies. Lin, Fan, and Chen (1995) indicated some strategies to teach pronunciation. They are intonation, stress and rhythm, consonants, and vowels. Noll and Collins (2002) mentioned certain strategies in pronunciation instruction. They are finger correction strategies, mime, and gesture strategies.

### VIII. IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY TO THE LEARNING AND TEACHING OF ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

EFL learners cannot learn an intelligible pronunciation without teachers' instruction. Learners can advance through this instruction although it may be done slowly. Both learners and teachers should be patient in obtaining the desirable results of improving pronunciation and should not expect that improvements are rapidly made. That is, the improvement of English pronunciation is a continuous process that is gained in the long term. Teachers should spend a lot of time to help their learners to understand more about the differences between their own pronunciation and more intelligible models.

Due to the fact that EFL learners are different from each other in many ways, there is not a particular approach to pronunciation instruction. A combination of techniques and methods can help learners improve their pronunciation. The following suggestions are useful for pronunciation instruction:

1. A lot of authentic listening activities should be provided by EFL teachers for EFL learners and they should continuously practice them in their classes.

2. Pronunciation should be integrated into other language skills and its learning should be a continuous activity for EFL learners.

3. EFL Teachers should first focus on suprasegmental aspect of English pronunciation because this permits the pronunciation instruction to be integrated into the teaching of spoken language and can meet the needs of EFL learners from different backgrounds. Of course, this does not mean that the teachers should not pay attention to the segmental aspect of pronunciation but they can use them in contexts.

4. EFL Teachers should explain important differences between the sounds of target language and the mother tongue that helps learners to adapt the new nature of the target language. When teachers know the differences and similarities between the sound systems of the native language and the target language, they can understand the difficult sounds that learners may encounter.

5. EFL Teachers should create a good learning environment and involve learners in real-life situations where they are provided with authentic listening materials. As a result, learners can learn native-like pronunciation through imitation, they can also learn gestures and body language by seeing video materials that help them to communicate naturally and give them more self-reliance in the communicative process.

6. EFL teachers should be aware of the pronunciation problems that their learners encounter and they should correct them when they make some mistakes in pronouncing English words.

7. EFL teachers should be trained in teaching pronunciation for their EFL learners. Teachers should have enough instructional facilities such as different kinds of computer software particularly pronunciation software.

#### IX. CONCLUSION

Pronunciation is an integral part of communication that should be incorporated into classroom activities. EFL teachers should pay attention to the learners' needs and abilities and include pronunciation into their oral skills and other English classes and focus on both segmental and supra-segmental features. EFL teachers should help their learners to produce the English words accurately and increase their awareness towards the importance of pronunciation into their classes. Due to the fact that the change of bad habits in English pronunciation is a long-term process and needs a lot of time, EFL teachers should help their learners to gradually improve their own pronunciation and speaking skills in and outside the classroom. Teachers should use different techniques and strategies for teaching pronunciation. With more techniques and strategies, EFL teachers will feel much more comfortable in teaching pronunciation. EFL learners can increase their confidence through listening and speaking to native and non-native speakers of English. Therefore, they have to improve their listening and speaking skills in different situations. EFL teachers should have knowledge of English phonetics and phonology and receive training in pronunciation instruction to help their EFL learners learn understandable pronunciation.

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