

TEACHING INTELLIGIBILITY TO IRAQI STUDENTS

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Abstract

Current approaches to pronunciation contrast starkly with the early approaches .Rather than attempting only to build a learner's articulatory competence from the bottom up, and simply as the mastery of a list of phonemes and allophones ,a top down approach is now taken in which the most relevant features of pronunciation –stress ,rhythm ,and intonation –are given high priority .Instead of teaching only the role of articulation within words ,or at best ,phrases ,we teach its role in a whole stream of discourse .over two decades ago ,Rita Wong (1987,p.21) reminded us that "contemporary views [of language]hold that the sounds of language are less crucial for understanding than the way they are organized .The rhythm and intonation of English are two major organizing structures that native speakers rely on to process speech ... Because of their major roles in communication ,rhythm and intonation merit greater priority in the teaching program than attention to individual sounds ." This research shed light on intelligibility and student's ability to understand native speaker's speech .

key words: teaching pronunciation ,intelligibility ,communication

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1-The Problem

Increases in the number of English users in the world and growing acceptance of indigenized varieties of English (Englishes) have given rise to concern that speakers of different English dialects will cease being intelligible to each other, resulting in failure in communication, especially in cross-cultural encounters. Munro and Derwing (1995) conceptualized intelligibility in relation to comprehensibility accentedness as a basis for pronunciation pedagogy.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the concept of intelligibility and whether it is known and tackled by instructors in Iraqi universities or not. Besides, Do students know this concept or not. This research is limited to Iraqi universities namely Tikrit university during the year 2018-2019.

2- Teaching Pronunciation

Avery and Ahrlich (1992:14) refer that the main goal of almost all English speakers as SL/FL is to have native like accent since native speakers identify non-native ones from their foreign accent. Yates and Zielinski (2009:11) state that pronunciation is how we produce sounds we use to make meaning when we speak. It includes the segmentals of a language, and aspects beyond the level of individual segments such as stress, timing, rhythm, intonation and how the voice is projected. Khanbeiki and Abdolmanafi-Rokni (2015) denote that mastering of pronunciation of any language is important in terms of communication because the substitution of one sound with another leads to a change in meaning, which affects the flow of communication. To the majority of EFL learners, pronunciation is the main problem in communication and main source of difficulty. Morely (1991) launches the term intelligible pronunciation rather than perfect pronunciation which should be the learner's objective. Roach (2009:3) denotes that languages have different accents: people from different geographical places pronounce language differently, the accent that is recommended for foreign learners studying British English is RP, still the most accepted and understood among British English varieties. Jenkins (2000:18) suggests that teaching either RP or GA in the classroom should be as model i.e. "providing points of references to prevent learners from diverging too far from each other and from a common pronunciation core safeguarding intelligibility."

The basic principle that instructors follow in the process of teaching pronunciation are:

- 1- Adopting an integrated approach that gives equal focus on segmental and suprasegmental features and using "top-down" rather than "bottom-up" approach (Celce-Murcia, 2001:18). Also an actual concern should be given to paralinguistic / body language side (Morely, 1991).
- 2- Richards and Renandya (2002, 183) emphasize the pragmatic and authentic function of pronunciation in relative to form, Schmidt (1990) assumes that raising learner's awareness is significant for proper acquisition of the phonological and phonetic features to take place.
- 3- A call for connecting pronunciation to sound spelling activities, since there is no one-to-one correspondence between spelling and pronunciation in English (Kelly, 2000:122).
- 4- Emphasis on the communicative nature of language and focusing on the appropriate place of pronunciation in the teaching/ learning of foreign language (Morely, 1991).

- 5- Change from passive role of student to an active one in learning of pronunciation and enhancing the interactive and collaborative nature of communication through interpretation expression and negotiating meaning (Savignon cited in Celce - Murcia ,2001:14-15).
- 6- A classroom tasks have to prepare the learners to communication in real-world context (Brown,2007:46).
- 7- Odisho (2007) observes that multisensory, multicognitive approach to to teaching pronunciation (MMA) that language is positioned in brain before its oral manifestation in the form of speech .This approach requires treating different cognitive process such as : thinking ,association ,analyzing ,synthesizing ,comparing and contrasting.

3-Intelligibility

Bamgbose (1998:11)describes intelligibility as a complex of factors comprising recognizing an expression, knowing its meaning , and knowing what that meaning signifies in the sociocultural context. Mutual intelligibility includes also word and utterance recognition speaker's message apprehension , and accessibility of the propositional content encoded in an utterance . Jenkins (2002:82)uses the term intelligibility to mean " the production and recognition of the formal properties of words and , in particular, the ability to produce and receive phonological for ."

Munro and Derwing (1995) ,operationalize intelligibility as "the extent to which the speaker's intended utterance is actually understood by a listener ;comprehensibility as 'the listener's perception of the degree of difficulty encountered when trying to understand an utterance; and accentedness as the listener's perception of how different a second language (L2) accent is 'from the variety of English commonly spoken in the community '(ibid:291) . In this conceptualization , while intelligibility refers to listener's actual understanding and accentedness mainly concerned listener's perceptions. Consequently, Derwing and Munro highlight the significance of the linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds from which hearers as well as speakers come .Jenkins (2000) has referred to the notion of 'accommodation ' to explore the dynamic interplay between speakers and hearers , suggesting that L2 users of English strategically make adjustments in their speech which lead to convergence with or divergence from their interlocutor's speech . Therefore, successful interaction may depend on not only on the pronunciation teaching L2 speakers of English receive but also on the extent to which English users and learners are prepared to listen to and understand varieties of L2 speech and ' maintain a positive and receptive attitude 'towards doing so (Munro,2008:211). Speech intelligibility is calculated by dividing the number of fully intelligible words by the total number of words(full intelligible plus unintelligible).

Intelligibility is being able to see a speaker can improve intelligibility . it is a measure of how comprehensible speech is or the degree to which speech can be understood

intelligibility is affected by spoken clarity, explicitness, lucidity, comprehensibility, perspicuity, and precision (www.cleartalkmastery.com>intell.).

4- Perfection VS. Intelligibility

A question we need to answer is how good our students' pronunciation ought to be. Should they exactly like speakers of prestige variety in English just by listening to them, we would assume that they were British, American, Australian or Canadian? or is this asking too much? perhaps their teacher's pronunciation is the model they should aspire to.

Perhaps we should be happy if they can at least make themselves understood. The degree to which students acquire 'perfect' pronunciation seems to depend very much on their attitude to how they speak and how well they hear. In the case of attitude, there are a number of psychological issues which may well affect how 'foreign' a person sounds when they speak English.

To be exposed to a 'native speaker' variety, and will strive to achieve pronunciation which is indistinguishable from that of a first language (Harmer, :249). Other students wish to be speakers of English as an international or global language, and this does not imply trying to sound exactly like someone from Britain or Canada. Frequently, too, students want to retain their own accent when they speak a foreign language because that is part of their identity. Thus speaking English with a Mexican accent is fine for the speaker who wishes to retain his "Mexican-ness" when speaking in a foreign language. (ibid). Certain phonological differences (e.g. between /d/ and / / may not be critical to a speaker's ability to make themselves understood. Under pressure of such personal, political, and phonological considerations it has become customary for language teachers to consider intelligibility as the prime goal of pronunciation teaching. This implies that the students should be able to use pronunciation which is good enough for them to be always understood. If their pronunciation is not up to this standard, there is serious danger that they will fail to communicate effectively. If intelligibility is the goal, then it suggests that some features are more important than others. Some sounds, have to be right if the speaker is to get their message across (for example /n/ as in /sini / versus / / as in /si i/, though others (for example //d/ and / / in ELF) may not cause a lack of intelligibility if they are used interchangeably. In the case of individual sounds, a lot depends on the context of the utterance, which helps the listener to hear what the speaker intends. Stressing words and phrases correctly is vital if emphasis is to be given to the important parts of messages and if words are to be understood correctly. Intonation is a vital carrier of meaning; by varying the pitch of our voice we indicate whether we are asking a question or making a statement, whether we are enthusiastic or bored, or whether we want to keep talking or whether, on the contrary, we are inviting someone else to come into the conversation. The fact that we may want our students to work towards an intelligible pronunciation rather than achieve an L1-speaker perfection may not appeal to all, however. Despite what we have said about identity and the global nature of English, some students do indeed wish to sound exactly like a native speaker. In such circumstances it would be absurd to try to deny them such an objective.

It is often said that what is important for learners is to acquire an accent which is 'intelligible or to achieve 'comfortable intelligibility' (Kenworthy, 1987:3). The crucial role that voice and accent play in our perception of ourselves and others, so it is likely that social and psychological factors question also bear upon the question of intelligibility (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994:10). Materials, technology and teacher education programs are being challenged to grapple with the issue of intelligibility, and to adopt new standards of "correctness" and new attitudes toward "accent" in order to meet current global realities (Levis, 2005; Lazaraton, 2014 in Brown and Lee, 2015:348). Concerning accessibility and acceptability whether an utterance is accessible or not will be determined not only by accuracy and clarity of the speaker's, enunciation, but also by listener's expectation and attitude, such as experience with, and tolerance of, low prestige or foreign accent. On the other hand, whether the interlocutors find each other's pronunciation acceptable will largely depend on the value they attribute to each other's accents, and on whether they regard these as appropriate to the occasion and their respective roles and status in society. Intelligibility is by no means guaranteed by linguistic similarity and phonetic accuracy, but is often overridden by cultural and economic factors. Intelligibility is closely linked to social position and individual character. We adjust our understanding of the other person according to how we relate to them socially and as individuals (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994:11).

Word stress is also a factor of intelligibility. Recent models of how speakers of English recognize words in continuous speech suggest that the recognition process does not simply work sequentially, from 'left to right', one word at a time (Grosjean and Gee, 1987). Rather, there is evidence that during the mental search process, the stressed syllable is picked out of the speech stream and is used to search the mental lexicon. Feasible candidates are selected from the mental lexicon on the basis of this syllable, and are then judged by how well they fit with the unstressed syllables that appear to their left and right. If this kind of model is correct, the logical consequence is that processing time and processing difficulty increase considerably if a stress appears in the wrong place. Put differently, incorrect word-stress decreases intelligibility- and may even lead to embarrassing misunderstandings (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994:39).

5- Discussion

Teaching pronunciation at Tikrit university is going on by using the text – books: Better English Pronunciation written by O'Connor, and Phonetics and Phonology written by Peter Roach. Both of them are resource books not pedagogical books. Both of them concentrate on the English theoretical side of language. Ideas of connected speech and intelligibility has not been discussed. In past teaching pronunciation is limited to the perfect articulation of phonemes. Because of globalization and variety of accents, there is a need to shift the goal of teaching English pronunciation toward intelligibility which is not known neither to the teacher nor to the students.

6-Conclusions

the conclusions of this research are :

- 1-Intelligibility is not discussed in the current syllabi of teaching pronunciation in Iraqi universities
- 2-The definition of intelligibility is not clear to Iraqi scholars .
- 3-Mesurement of intelligibility is complicated and needs equipments which are not available in Iraqi educational establishments .
- 4- Investigations related to intelligibility are very rare .
- 5- Correctness of sounds are sought rather than variety of accents.
- 6-Diistorted pronunciation makes it difficult to students to be intelligibile.

7-Reccommendations

It is recommended that :

- 1- The goal of pronunciation should be shifted toward intelligibility .
- 2- the syllabi of teaching pronunciation must be novel according to the current situation of globalization ,
- 3- variety and accents must be taught and direct student's attention to meaning .
- 4- Pronunciation teaching must be directed to discourse rather than isolated words .
- 5- More attention should be paid to meaning rather than form .

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