Teaching the Elements of Pronunciation with Communicative Perspectives to Enhance the Speaking Skills

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Abstract

This paper inquires into the treatment of the elements of pronunciation in the EFL classroom context. The aim is to shed light on what features of pronunciation are taught and the way they are taught. Moreover, this research is meant to observe whether the communicative value of pronunciation is fostered in classroom practices. An observation grid is designed in order to weight EFL teachers' performances against a set of criteria revolving around the elements of communication. The analysis based on the outer view approach shows that teachers are not adequately trained to teach the features of pronunciation. The focus is more on form disregarding meaning and attitude. Usage prevails over use with a complete neglect of negotiation of meaning. The pedagogy implemented is limited to the presentation of isolated items neglecting context and authenticity.

Keywords: classroom observation, EFL, intonation, pronunciation, rhythm, segmentals, speaking, suprasegmentals, teaching.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of 'globalisation' has emphasised the need for a language used as a means of interaction to help promote cross-cultural communication. The English language has proven supremacy over other languages as a lingua franca in achieving communicative purposes. Any person aspiring at an international impact needs to be able to communicate in English. Achieving such an objective relies greatly on the individual's ability to be intelligible.

The field of English language teaching has taken such needs into consideration. It has witnessed the implementation of a variety of teaching approaches and methods. It is noteworthy that although many of these approaches target communicative competence, they propose diverging framework for its achievement. This is noticed in the way the speaking skills are treated and in the importance given to EFL pronunciation and its instruction.

Pronunciation is vital to successful communication. Segmental features and with a greater level suprasegmental features have a real

communicative significance in discourse. Prosodic features of spoken language can be decisive in non-verbal communication. The users of a language should be competent enough to decipher the message conveyed in all its forms: linguistic, attitudinal, sociolinguistic, etc. They should also be able to respond using the appropriate features of pronunciation so that mutual intelligibility can occur.

A growing body of literature (Brazil, 1997; Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994; Dewing & Munro, 2009; Morley, 1991) is meant to raise awareness of the role pronunciation plays in communication. There has been a surge in empirical studies to decide what aspects characterise pronunciation and establish the extent to which these aspects are important to communication. For Ur (2012), "*The term pronunciation as it is understood here includes not only the sounds of the language, but also the rhythm, intonation and stress patterns*" (p. 128). According to Wong (2007), sounds are less critical for understanding than the way they are organized.

Despite this remarkable insight being universally accepted in the literature, pronunciation does not have the status it deserves in teaching practices. It is left to be picked up by the learners. At best it is 'taught' in the form of isolated instances to be memorised, leaving the learners to develop their own learning strategies.

2. Method

The methodological approach used in this study is an exploratory qualitative case study in which the lessons of four in-service teachers are videotaped for further study and analysis. The analysis is based on an outer view approach guided by the interpretations and comments the chosen inspectors and university teachers make. This approach is adopted with the firm belief that it is the ideal methodology to meet our objectives. It serves as a tool to conduct an in-depth investigation and have better understanding of the state of pronunciation and the teaching of pronunciation with a close link to the development of speaking competence in the classroom context. The instrument of research in this case -an Observation Grid- is meant to give a faithful picture of what really happens in classrooms via the videotaping and as seen through the eyes of experts.

This research is conducted with the participation of informants set in two separate groups according to the tasks they are meant to perform, as required by the outsiders' view approach adopted in this study. The first group represents the teachers who are observed and filmed while teaching their regular classes and the second represents the inspectors and University lecturers who watch the videotapes and

provide feedback in the form of their responses to the items in the Observation Grid.

Among the considerable number of teachers approached, only four eventually accepted to contribute to the research. They all happen to be female teachers of high school freshmen. Two of them belong to the same institution, and the other two come from two other schools. All of them hold a BA in English and show varying degrees (2, 6, 12 and 14 years) in terms of seniority. By the working standards set in this study, two are junior teachers, and two are experienced ones. For this purpose, we use the acronym TO which stands for teacher observed followed by a number from 1 to 4 to symbolise each of the four teachers. A group of five informants made up of three inspectors and two University lecturers accepted to examine the corpus, i.e. the four video-taped lessons and fill in the Observation Grid provided. Their feedback constitutes the second part of the analysis in this study.

The class Observation Grid is constructed aiming at drawing the observers' attention to the phenomena that are of particular concern to our research. The observers are asked to note the presence or absence of the targeted criteria by ticking the appropriate column, 'yes' or 'no'.

3. Data Analysis

The data analysis is presented under different headings by grouping some criteria according to their relevance.

3.1 Form vs. Meaning

The results obtained with items 1, 2 and 3 are presented in the table below.

Questions	Choice offered	Responses				Total	%
		TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4		
1. Focuses on form	Yes	4	5	5	5	19	95
	No	1	0	0	0	1	5
2. Hints at meaning and attitude.	Yes	2	0	0	2	4	20
	No	3	5	5	3	16	80
3. Focuses on negotiation of meaning and attitude.	Yes	0	0	0	0	0	0
	No	5	5	5	5	20	100

Table 1. Form vs. meaning

From the table above, it can clearly be seen that all five observers (or 100%) agree that TO2, TO3 and TO4 focus on form, except for TO1 who scores 4 responses (or 80%). Both TO1 and TO4 are observed to hint at meaning and attitude by 2 observers (or 40%). TO3 and TO4 however do not include meaning at all. The observers (100%)

95

unanimously indicate the absence of negotiation of meaning and attitude.The total population shows an emphasised focus on form with 19 responses (or 95%) rather than on meaning and attitude with 01 response (or 5%). A complete neglect of negotiation of meaning and attitude is observed with the score of 20 (or 100%).

3.2 Hints at outcomes in case of deficiency

The processing of item 4 gives the following table.

Questions	Choice offered	Responses				Total	%
		TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4		
4. Hints at possible outcome if item taught is missed out or improperly used.	Yes	1	3	2	1	7	35
	No	4	2	3	4	13	65

Table 2. Highlighting possible outcome

According to the table above no more than 1 response (or 20%), obtained by TO1 and TO2, describes teachers highlighting the possible outcome if the item taught is missed out or improperly used. In the case of TO2 and TO3, as many as 3 responses (or 60%) and 2 responses (or 40%) are recorded respectively.When we view the results shown above with reference to the total population, a total of 7 responses (or 35%) note the attention drawn to the possible outcome if the item taught is missed out or improperly used.

3.3 Gradation towards communication

The following table shows the results obtained with item 5

Questions	Choice offered	Responses				Total	%
		TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4		
5. Goes beyond presentation and consolidation to authentic communication.	Yes	0	1	0	0	1	5
	No	5	4	5	5	19	95

Table 3. Gradation from presentation to authentic communication

Only 1 response (or 5%) is scored with item 5 showing a gradation from presentation and consolidation to authentic communication. It is observed with TO2. The overwhelming majority sticks to repetition and responding to stimuli.

3.4 Reference to previous knowledge

The results scored with item 6 are presented in the table below.

Questions	Choice offered	Responses				Total	%
		TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4		
6. Refers to previously acquired knowledge in the field.	Yes	1	4	2	5	12	60
	No	4	1	3	0	8	40

Table 4. Referring to a priori knowledge

Results obtained with item 6 demonstrate, to varying degrees, that the majority of the teachers observed, with 12 responses (or 60%), refer to previously acquired knowledge in the field. The results described individually show that TO1, TO2, TO3 and TO4 score 1 response (or 20%), 4 responses (or 80%), 2 responses (or 40%) and 5 responses (or 100%) respectively.

3.5 Integration of other aspects of language

The results obtained with item 8 give the table blow.

Questions	Choice offered	Responses				Total	%
		TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4		
8. Integrates other skills and other aspects of language	Yes	3	2	2	3	10	50
	No	2	3	3	2	10	50

Table 5. Integration of skills

We can note from the table above that there are fairly close results with all the teachers. The scores range from 2 to 3 as far as the integration of other skills and other aspects of language are concerned. These results viewed for the total population indicate that 10 responses (or 50%) denote the integration of other skills and other aspects of language with the teaching of pronunciation.

3.6 Authenticity

The following table presents the results obtained with items 9 and 10.

Questions	Choice offered	Responses				Total	%
		TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4		
9. Involves authentic context-embedded language at the comprehension level	Yes	0	1	1	2	4	20
	No	5	4	4	3	16	80

Table 6. Involving authentic context-embedded language

According to the results displayed in the table above, the involvement of authentic context-embedded language at the reception level does not constitute a top priority for the bulk of teachers observed.The results point out a timid attempt at including authenticity and context of use. TO1 does not score any response. TO2 and TO3 score 1 response (or 20%) each. TO4 scores 2 responses (or 40%). The total population scores only 4 responses (or 20%).

3.7 Reinvesting in a communicative setting

The table below displays the results scored with item 11.

Questions	Choice offered	Responses				Total	%
		TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4		
11. Encourages the correct re-use of the item taught in a communicative setting.	Yes	0	0	1	1	2	10
	No	5	5	4	4	18	90

Table 7. Encouraging correct use of aspects in a communicative setting

The results obtained with item 11 show that TO1 and TO2 do not score any point concerning the encouragement of the correct use of the aspect taught in a communicative setting. TO3 and TO4 score 1 response from one single observer (or 20%) each. The computation of the results scored by the total population shows a low degree of encouragement on the part of teachers to reinvest what they have learnt in a context involving genuine communication.

3.8 Aspects completely ignored

Collected here are the items that received a 'No' response from all the observers for all the teachers observed. The results obtained with items 7, 10, 12 and 13 are shown in the following table.

Questions	Choice offered	Responses				Total	%
		TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4		
7. Refers to learners'	Yes	0	0	0	0	0	0

native tongue.	No	5	5	5	5	20	100
10. Involves authentic context-embedded language at the production level.	Yes	0	0	0	0	0	0
	No	5	5	5	5	20	100
12. Encourages interaction between learners.	Yes	0	0	0	0	0	0
	No	5	5	5	5	20	100
13. Raises consciousness on the ongoing nature of discourse.	Yes	0	0	0	0	0	0
	No	5	5	5	5	20	100

Table 8. Aspects neglected

No response is recorded with item 7. This means that there is no reference made to the learners' native tongue to teach the aspects of pronunciation. According to scores with item 10, the results displayed in the table above, the involvement of authentic context-embedded language at the production level is far from being a concern for the teachers observed. From the results displayed in the rest of the table above, it is clear that neither is there encouragement of interaction between learners nor raising consciousness on the ongoing nature of discourse. They are totally disregarded.

4. Discussion

According to the results presented in this part, namely Elements of Communication, some observations are obvious. It is patent that form prevails over meaning and attitude in the classrooms observed. Form is important and should not be disregarded. Unfortunately, it is the one and only step in the classes observed neglecting meaning and attitude completely. This focus on usage over use and neglect of negotiation of meaning and attitude deprive the aspects of pronunciation of the communicative functions they can transmit.

This situation is accentuated by the pedagogy adopted by the population observed. A pedagogy that is limited to the presentation of a list of items/chunks in isolation neglecting context and authenticity. The learners are not given the possibility to transfer their knowledge of the aspects learned into an act of communication. This knowledge, if acquired, is left internalised away from any real communicative use.

The learners cannot be active participants in true communication acts if they are not encouraged to interact with each other using the aspects of pronunciation they are taught. Instead, these learners are

observed to be writing more than speaking. Little is said about how different linguistic constituents (grammar, lexis, pronunciation, paralinguistic features, etc.) all work towards genuine communication.

In the observation column, many experts have commented on the following points: awareness raising, attitudinal function, integration, discourse and methodology.

Awareness raising:	No reference at all is made to the native tongue. This could help raise the learners' awareness of the universality of certain pronunciation features, such as for example the attitudes attached to certain intonation contours for instance; or the law of the least effort when dealing with regressive or progressive assimilation.
Attitudinal Function	They suggest ways to raise the learners' awareness of the function of pronunciation as for example making them say the same utterance but expressing a different attitude to raise their awareness of the function of pronunciation
Integration	Another suggestion is to make the learners keep the same intonation contour but change the lexis (opposites of adjectives for example: Mary is so 'ugly'. Mary is so 'beautiful'.) to make learners aware of the integration of skills.
Discourse	Another important suggestion is to ask the learners about a given utterance: Who can say that? Where? To whom? In what circumstances? And ask them how it could change if one of the elements -speaker, addressee, topic- is changed in order to raise the learners' awareness of the discourse function of language.
Methodology	The observers also mention that in order to give the learners a sense of achievement, recordings of similar oral productions should be made at regular intervals, with extra features added to avoid boredom on the part of the fast learners.

5. Conclusion

This study puts the phonological input for the improvement of the speaking skills to the test of the classroom, which, all in all, is the closest to real life. Four classes have been observed and filmed and the video-tapes examined by Inspectors and University lecturers. The performances have been scrutinised against an Observation Grid

constructed along the principles of communicativeness and communicative language ability.

One of the constraints of this research was to find teachers who accept to be observed and have their performances videotaped. Not only do they feel uncomfortable when observed and worse still filmed, but many also admit that their feeling of uneasiness increases when the observation concerns pronunciation.

The data clearly highlights the teachers' inadequate preparation for the teaching of pronunciation, as well as the total absence of audio material likely to boost the teachers' self confidence and enhance the learners' capabilities. The very fact that only one teacher was bold enough to present a pronunciation lesson devoted to intonation, and not to the all-too-often rehearsed lessons on the pronunciation of final 's' or final 'ed' says a lot about the self-confidence of the practitioners.

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Appendix: Classroom Observation Grid

Elements of communication

	Yes	No	Comments
1. Focuses on form			
2. Hints at meaning and attitude.			
3. Focuses on negotiation of meaning and			
4. Hints at possible outcome if item taught is			
5. Goes beyond presentation and consolidation to			

6. Refers to previously acquired knowledge in the
7. Refers to learners' native tongue.
8. Integrates other skills and other aspects of
9. Involves authentic context-embedded language
10. Involves authentic context-embedded language
11. Encourages the correct re-use of the item
12. Encourages interaction between learners.
13. Raises consciousness on the ongoing nature of

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