

Issues in Pronunciation

Dr. Neelam Singh

Department of Phonetics and Spoken English
The English and Foreign Languages University
Hyderabad

Abstract

Pronunciation plays a central role in both our personal and social lives: as individuals, we project our identity through the way we speak and also indicate our membership of particular communities. At the same time, our pronunciation is responsible for intelligibility: whether or not we can convey our meaning. The significance of success in L2 (second language) pronunciation learning is therefore far-reaching, complicated by the fact that many aspects of pronunciation happen subconsciously and so are not readily accessible to conscious analysis and intervention. The present paper will focus on some issues of pronunciation that are often overlooked by language specialists and educationists in the related fields. In this paper, we wish to focus on the various neurological processes that occur in the mind of the speaker and the various articulators responsible in speech. It proposes to also introduce the feedback system: auditory and kinesthetic that usually goes beyond the threshold during the actual speech production and perception.

Keywords: intelligibility, identity, pronunciation, L2, feedback, neurological

1.0. Introduction

For many second language (L2) learners, pronunciation is ‘simultaneously the most difficult of the language skills. It is so much of daily life that we tend to take it for granted. Learning pronunciation whether in a first or second language involves developing subtle and detailed knowledge about why, how and when to communicate, and complex skills of producing and managing interaction such as asking a suggestion, making a requests etc. One of the most important aspects of everyday talk is that it always takes place in cultural and social setting. We speak or communicate in order to carry out various tasks and although, we may not always be consciously aware of doing so, we attune our language and the meanings we wish to exchange for specific purposes for speaking in that context. That is to say, casual greetings such as *hello* will differ from a more formal set up as in a classroom *lecture*. We tend to take speaking so much for granted that there are many factors responsible to make it happen but are often overlooked. . As we know that the primary function of the organs of the body for instance lungs, is used for the inhalation and exhalation of air, secondary function being speech, the basic function of the tongue is to exhibit some sensation of taste and secondary function is used for the production of various oralic sounds and so and so forth. It then becomes essential to understand some intricate processes that happen in the mind of the speaker when one is actually speaking.

A person’s pronunciation skill or competence has a mechanical aspect in terms of the functioning and control of vocal organs that is required for speech production. From this mechanical perspective, a person’s knowledge of pronunciation involves the manipulation of the physiological organs forming a system of breath, resonance, sensation, resistance and movement that makes speech possible. This is a system connecting the organs that control breathing (the lungs, muscles of the chest and traches) and that allow the intake and outflow of breath (the oral and nasal pathways) with the articulators (the lips, tongue, jaw, palate, uvula, and vocal folds etc) and their physical and mechanical properties. Speech then is the result of a speaker’s actions to manage and shape the air coming up from the lungs in complex ways that produce all of the variations in sound waves which people perceive as specific phonemes (vowels and consonants) and prosodic cues to meaning conveyed by pitch (tone or intonation), length or duration (rhythm) and volume or amplitude (loudness). Any or all these features of prosody may contribute to meaning by cueing prominence in words (stress) and larger units (accentuated components of a message), the grouping of word into units, and the communicative function of utterances. We refer to established work by Catford (1977) on the various speech processes that takes place as to address such issues. He discusses in detail the various phases of the speech process from its inception in the central nervous system of a speaker to its arrival and identification in a hearer which takes place between a tenth and fifth of a second. He establishes seven phases: The first stage is the *Neurolinguistic Programming* which is the central activity that organizes the selection, sequencing and timing of the neuro-physical events that follow. For instance: specific motor commands flow out through motor nerves in various organs of the body: muscles in the chest, throat and mouth and so on. The second stage is the *Neuromuscular phase* which is the whole contraction of muscles and is the direct result of this simultaneous and successive firing of great numbers of such motor in whole or in part. The next stage involves *the Organic Phase* and is the resultant of the contraction of particular and group of muscles during the neuromuscular phase. The organs to which these muscles are attached adopt particular postures and specific whole organs - lungs, larynx, tongue etc. This in turn is followed by the *Aerodynamic Phase* which refers to the successive and overlapping postures and movements that occur during the organic phase shape the vocal tract into a series of canals or pneumatic tubes as it were, of rapidly varying size and shape. The immediate result of this is to compress and to dilate the air contained in the vocal tract and to set in moving in constantly changing ways- in rapid puffs-in sudden bursts, in a smooth flow, in turbulent stream and so on. *In Acoustic Phase* we find the air molecules oscillating in ways that can be perceived by our sense of hearing. [i.e.: some of the aerodynamic events generate sound waves reaching the air of the hearer. *The Neuroreceptive Phase* is responsible for the movement of sensations. The sound-wave impinging on the eardrum of a hearer is transmitted through the middle ear to the inner ear or cochlea, thereby stimulating sensory endings of the auditory nerves. The last seventh phase is the *Neurolinguistic*

Identification which is an interpretative process, which gives rise potentially to the conscious identification of the incoming neuroreceptive signals as this or that particular sound or sound sequence. The most essential thing in common of all these phases is that it happens in a moment of jiff that is between fifteen seconds before the actual sounds are uttered by the speaker.

Another feature which is also worth mentioning is the *feedback system* that is often ignored. The two feedbacks system available to us but that is often overlooked by language specialists and educationists: the *kinaesthetic feedback* system and the *auditory feedback* system. According to Catford (1977), these feedback systems make possible the monitoring and control of speech by the insertion into the motor systems of information concerning ongoing muscular, organic, aerodynamic and acoustic events. They play an important role in the production of speech since their pathological or artificially induced abolition can drastically affect a person's speech performance. Hence feedback system helps us to monitor and control our speech production and speech performance. Most of the time, during actual spoken intercourse, they appear to go on below the threshold of consciousness. The *Kinaesthetic feedback* as the term suggest refers to the touch and pressure sensations. It thus is the immediate result triggered by the movement of the organs. That is to say, the organs of speech posture and move about, sensory nerve endings within the muscles and on the surface of the organs are stimulated both by muscle contraction and by contact and pressure. The *Auditory feedback* on the other hand consists of the speaker's own peripheral hearing organs by the sound waves issuing from his mouth and reaching to his ears by air and bone conduction. The issue is that we tend to often ignore them and often rely on the materials that already exist instead of channelizing our own mechanisms.

2. Historical perspectives

Pronunciation has often been overlooked as skill in various teaching approaches that emphasize learning through various practices for instance as in communicative practice and focus on the oral of oral fluency. In the study by Foote et.al (2016), such approaches find often to work on the implicit assumption that pronunciation will naturally develop through communicative practice. Consequently, teachers are reluctant to teach pronunciation. As is evident, commercial textbooks similarly have failed to provide systematic materials for pronunciation teaching. Goodwill et al. (2010) offer a heuristic for understanding historical trends in teaching pronunciation. Drawing on a distinction made by Kelly (1969), they have identified two broad approaches in the teaching of pronunciation: an *intuitive-imitative* approach and an *analytic-linguistic* approach. An intuitive-imitative approach harnesses the learner's ability to learn through imitation of models such as the native speaker models such as British broadcasting corporation (BBC), or the General American (GA) to name a few, with a corresponding emphasis on native speaker standards. On the other hand, the analytic-linguistic approach emphasizes on the teaching of the various speech mechanisms involved in the production of the phonemes through exhaustive use of the *International Phonetic Alphabet* (IPA). The IPA establishes the rule of one symbol for one sound across languages. Though both the approaches *intuitive-imitative* approach and an *analytic-linguistic* approach are different but not binary opposites because methods of teaching pronunciation often rely on both and there are no clear neat divisions. For instance, the *intuitive-imitative* approach is seen in the direct method, a naturalistic learning platform that emerged in the nineteenth century in Europe and was accepted well. This method flourished well because it focused on everyday spoken language and on learning through the through imitation and immersion in the target language in the classroom. Thus learning correct pronunciation is viewed as important, but is seen to happen through careful imitation rather than explicit instruction Newton (2018). The *audiolingual method* (ALM) which emerged in the middle of the twentieth century, on the other hand displayed core features of an analytic-linguistic approach. This method also focuses on learning through imitative speaking practice and foregrounds direct instruction and role, mechanical practice mostly in the segmental features of speech. That is to say, how speech sounds are produced, executed and analyzed etc. For instance, exercised on the speech sounds are carried out through drills, listening and production, flashcards etc.

3. Conclusion

The nuances of pronunciation are many and there are various methods adopted across towards the orientation of pronunciation teaching, not to forget that the target is toward *intelligibility*. The other important aspects are the physiological and neurological processes that one can take account of while dealing with such nuances of pronunciation teaching. We have discussed the various stages and activities that are involved in the production of speech and how such neurological processes are often taken for granted. Similarly the importance of the feedback system that is often overlooked by educators and language specialists. They are a powerful tool and are most accessible to us. These feedback systems are an important source and we need to activate and consciously work upon whenever other sources do not comply. As discussed in the introduction section, speech is planned as a message that the speaker wants to get across and so is produced not with a goal of articulating individual sounds or words, but with a goal of putting those together to generate meaningful units and coherent stretches of spoken language. Because the generation of speech is usually performed in *real time*, with limited time to plan and produce an utterance that will convey the message which the speaker intends.

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