

Teaching Authentic English Pronunciation

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ABSTRACT: Most of the evidence from different research and literature indicates that learners beyond the age of puberty cannot acquire authentic pronunciation of a second language, because the articulation muscles have already lost their flexibility to be able to make new sounds which has not been in the first language. However, there are some adult learners who have the ability to achieve a perfect native like pronunciation of English. In relating Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences (MI) to second language learning, we can more easily discern the acquisition of authentic accent by adult learners in spite of the flexibility loss of the vocal cords. According to Gardner's theory, which attaches important features to the notion of intelligence, learners within a wide range of IQs can be successful in acquiring a second language. In this regard, "musical intelligence" -the forth intelligence in Gardner's theory- can explain the relative ease that learners have in perceiving and producing the intonation patterns of a language. This research aims to seek ways to enhance the ability of language learners to acquire more native-like pronunciation by the aid of their musical intelligence which is almost an innate ability in everyone.

Keywords: Teaching, English & Pronunciation

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This review of literature addresses issues about the role and status of using podcasts in teaching English pronunciation in order to help learners acquire authentic (native-speaker) pronunciation. Because of various practical and pedagogical reasons, pronunciation teaching often suffers from neglect. Unlike reading, writing, listening, and general oral fluency, pronunciation was treated as a luxury 'add-on' (Greenwood, 2002) and in practice, perceived by both teachers and students a boring and unproductive activity since it consisted of drill works.

Research on the acquisition of authentic control of phonology of English supports the argument about critical period and acquisition. In fact, speech muscles at birth are only able to control sustained cries. As the child grows older, because of possible causes such as neuromuscular plasticity and socio (LU) cultural influences, articulation muscles gradually develop and gain the control of complex sounds. Eventually the complete phonemic control is present in virtually all children before the age of puberty (Brown, 2000).

Most of the evidence from different research and literature indicates that learners beyond the age of puberty cannot acquire authentic pronunciation of a second language, because the articulation muscles have already lost their flexibility to be able to make new sounds which has not been in the first language.

However, there are some adult learners who have the ability to achieve a perfect native like pronunciation of English. Several studies undertook by Neufeld (1977, 1979, 1980) tried to determine to what extent adults could approximate authentic accent. He claims that older students have neither lost their sensitivity to notice the differences in sounds, rhythm, and pitch nor the ability to reproduce these sounds.

In relating Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences (MI) to second language learning, we can more easily discern the acquisition of authentic accent by adult learners in spite of the flexibility loss of the vocal cords. According to Gardner's theory, which attaches important features to the notion of intelligence, learners within a wide range of IQs can be successful in acquiring a second language. In this regard, "musical intelligence" - the forth intelligence in Gardner's theory- can explain the relative ease that learners have in perceiving and producing the intonation patterns of a language.

Although, the importance of speaking and the existing problems in putting a message together, communicating the message, and interacting with other people considered prior to authentic accent, this review of literature puts the emphasis on authentic accent and looks into speaking issue as a complex process which involves constructing and delivering a message with correct pronunciation, stress, and intonation in a form that other people from different parts of the world can understand.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking makes use of a wide range of expressing possibilities such as exploiting pitch and tone of voice, gestures, and facial expressions. All these options carry meaning which help people to establish social contact and set up communication. However, as so many people do in fact need to use English with native English speakers, Iandoli (1990) debates on the importance of acquiring authentic pronunciation:

There is a distinct pleasure in being able to interact with native speakers without paying undue attention to ones 'foreignness', and an even greater pleasure in being thought to come from...[the country] where the language is spoken. This achievement requires an integration of skills that unfortunately are too often taught separately. Phonemic system, stress, intonation, gesture, appropriate vocabulary, cultural mores, morphology, syntax... discourse and pragmatics –all need to fit together as a harmonious whole... . Dividing the elements of language acquisition by postponing attention to one facet, for instance, until the advanced level or until there is immersion in the target culture hinders the learner (Iandoli, 1990:27)

Moreover, Greenwood (2002) holds the view of reinstating authentic pronunciation, and explains because of the tendency towards monolingualism in English speaking countries, English speakers tend to be less tolerant and judgmental about English speakers with foreign accent. In addition to these, English of non-native English speakers can be incomprehensible by others whether native or non-native speakers, because of their lack of control over the vowels and consonants of the target language. Their discourse can be difficult to understand because of the inability to perform standard intonation and stress patterns.

Greenwood (2002) points to another issue from the learners' perspective that is the difficulty that the students face in communicating with native English speakers may be because they don't know enough about English pronunciation. In fact, lack of explicit knowledge about the pronunciation system of the target language constructs their attitude towards learning pronunciation quite similar to that of learning other aspects of English (such as grammar and vocabulary). Greenwood's analogy pops up in mind the thought that learners may want a form-focused analytical approach in order to understand how English pronunciation works.

In spite of the students' tendency, teachers have several reasons to neglect pronunciation. According to Morley (1991) although teachers in the place of students' interlocutors most of the times suffer from students' improper pronunciation and accent, they tend to focus more on the other aspects of English and slight pronunciation.

She names teachers justifications for not prizing pronunciation as follow: firstly, when there are groups of speakers from the same language background; they will model their pronunciation on that of other members of the group. That is learners pick up the pronunciation on their own. Thus, they tend to fossilize on the very features of the pronunciation of their classmates or group members. Secondly, pronunciation consists of different aspects. Some teachers tend to think that most of the aspects of pronunciation are not teachable, such as some English sounds like voiced and unvoiced pairs /p/b/, /t/d/, /s/z/ which are not distinguished for the speakers of some other languages like Arabic or Indonesian. Thirdly, most of the teachers think that being able to teach pronunciation needs the knowledge of phonetics and phonology. The problem here is that because of the shift towards communicative language teaching and experiential learning, teacher training programmes, have for a long time dropped more analytical approaches to the language system (grammar and pronunciation), and so over the last two or three decades, the knowledge and expertise has gone also.

Now a days, learners and teachers give listening more emphasis than in the past as a fundamental input for speaking (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). Accordingly, some rather new approaches to phonological training advocate the utilization of specialized computer software programs to enhance authentic pronunciation. In this regard, 'podcasts' are audio (sometimes video: "vodcasts") programs on the Web which are usually updated at regular intervals. New episodes can be listened to on the computer, or downloaded to an MP3 player or iPod for later listening.

Thorne and Payne (2005) suggest that podcasts can be used to provide learners with samples of real speech and other authentic materials. Stanley (2006) suggests that podcasts could be used as a supplement to syllabuses, a source for authentic listening materials. He adds utilization of podcasts in ELT programmes is a way for students to gain information on specific aspects of the language such as idiomatic expressions or grammatical constructions. Furthermore, the production of podcasts provides students with plenty of meaningful language use, which is highly desirable for second language acquisition (Nunan, 1995).

ELT podcasts can be used for intensive and extensive listening activities. However, ELT podcasts are particularly suited for extensive listening, for the purpose of motivating student interest in listening to English, and providing them with exposure to native speakers' speech (Rost, 2002). Stanley (2006) points out that podcasts offer students a wide range of possibilities for extra listening both inside and outside of the classroom. This activity effectively bridges the gap between the formal English which dominates most second language classrooms and the informal English used in most real-life communication events.

Most of ELT podcasts are produced by language teachers or native English speakers interested in teaching English, and focus on understanding real speech in the form of scripted dialogues, interviews, news stories and academic lectures (O'Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2007). Thus, the use of podcasting can transform classroom instruction when students begin to listen not just to music, but to language learning materials that are integrated into the curriculum. In fact, acquiring authentic pronunciation can be more probable if the exposure to the authentic materials be sufficient. Therefore, one lofty goal of the integration of podcasts into ELT programmes can be subscribing to course podcasts so that they become part of learners' daily listening routines to clog the learners' ears with authentic accent/pronunciation, which sets the native accent in non-native speakers' speech.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Since non-native speakers with perfect grammar and broad vocabulary may still immediately be recognized as foreigners if their pronunciation does not match the native norm, learners may feel the need of achieving authentic accent proficiency. This proficiency includes not only vocabulary and grammar, but also accurate and acceptable pronunciation. To acquire this, educators must think of innovative ways of teaching pronunciation. Brown (1987) points out, before considering how to teach pronunciation, decisions have to be made about what to teach. This raises the following question:

- What model of teaching English pronunciation does enhance authentic accent/pronunciation?

In this section three different experiments are reviewed to see how they addressed the issue under study.

The first study was done by Man-Man Sze (2007). This study deals with the application of podcasts in teaching English as a second/foreign language. This article covers how to locate ELT podcasts, the content of ELT podcasts on the web, and the educational benefits of teacher podcasts and student podcasts. The author finally suggests suitable speaking activities for student podcasts. Two oral language arts activities (radio drama and ELT rap) were explained as particularly suitable speaking activities for Hong Kong's secondary schools as well.

The second study was carried out by Ang Lu (?). This paper examined an example of how podcasts can be used to improve EFL learners' listening and speaking proficiency. It examined the improvement of a Taiwanese English learner after being exposed to online authentic English podcasts. The study made use of two podcast from Voice of America (VOA) and the Bob and Rob Show. The former was the sample of formal English and the latter was the example of informal English, which provide the exposure to both American and British accents. This study made use of both listening and speaking podcasts as teaching materials.

The VOA podcasts are used as primary teaching materials while the Bob and Rob Show podcasts are used as supplementary materials. The participant had to transcribe the VOA podcast; afterwards he was supplied with the original transcript to correct his output, which later on was used to teach vocabulary and grammar in context. For each VOA, a Bob and Rob Show was supplied for additional exposure to authentic listening. At the end of the week a discussion on the same topics as the provided podcasts were conducted in English. The output of the participant was recorded and the salient mistakes in pronunciation and intonation were marked. These mistakes were then tuned with the participant's cooperation later on.

The findings of this four-week study showed although the participant encountered a lot of difficulties he learned features such as co- articulation effects and grammatical structures more efficiently. The biggest difficulty that the participant reported which hindered his efforts was his small range of vocabulary knowledge. However, the participant agreed that these materials and instruction has prepared him for authentic usage of English as opposed to what he was exposed to in ELT classrooms. The researcher suggested that the future work can be done to further probe the possibilities of using authentic listening materials especially in the form of podcasts.

The third paper was conducted by O'Bryan and Hegelheimer (2007). This paper described a structured attempt to integrate CALL activities in the form of podcasts into an academic English as a second language course on listening strategies. The preliminary

evaluation of this ongoing experiment suggested that podcasts were useful components of the course from both students and teacher point of view. In this study, the learners listened to fourteen podcasts that have been designed for listening course over fifteen weeks of instruction. This study made use of native speakers to deliver interviews and tips in the form of podcasts as an authentic material. All the materials were delivered via the web which has the anytime-accessibility feature. The instructor involved in the study has reported through the podcasts she was able to give the students an opportunity to gain exposure to different types of spoken English since some of the speakers on the podcasts had heavier accents than others. Moreover, the students also viewed the podcasts as a very positive component of the course as well. For instance, one student who initially reported not owning portable MP3 player has purchased one and has downloaded the podcasts to it so he could listen to the podcasts on the bus, in the apartment, and before going to bed.

In comparison with the old approaches of teaching listening and speaking in which the main sources of listening input were the instructor and audio cassette tapes that came with the course text books, the online sources that has been used in the mentioned studies (drama and raps, audio or video excerpts from authentic lectures, instructor-produced podcasts or student produced texts) served as sources of input in the classroom. The podcasts which were used in these studies serve to improve students' general listening strategies, increase the note taking ability, and help students to comprehend the whole idea of a speech.

These studies also confirm that the ease of downloading authentic podcast to MP3 players engage the learners in plenty of listening practice while traveling which may enhance authentic pronunciation as well as meaningful language use which according to Nunan (1995) is highly desirable for second language acquisition.

These activities are quite suitable for students with low speaking proficiency, since producing podcasts is easy and it reduces the anxiety brought about by real-time interaction.

4.0 DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

People who have strong musical intelligence are good in differentiating and learning patterns, rhythms and sounds. They have a strong appreciation for music and are often good at musical composition and performance. According to Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, musical intelligence has to do with rhythm, music, and hearing. Thus, language skills are typically highly developed in those whose base intelligence is musical. In fact, as all the people have musical intelligence to some extent, if we strive to provide opportunities for the language learners to use and develop this intelligence, language skills specially speaking and listening skills can improve faster besides, the acquiring of the authentic accent become more probable. In this regard, using authentic video drama and raps as well as native-speakers speeches in the form of podcasts can bring the learners appropriate exercises to strength musical intelligence which may enhance the learners' authentic accent and pronunciation.

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