Approaches to Developing Pronunciation in a Second Language: A Study in Bangladesh

Mohammad Rasel Howlader[*]

Abstract

The article aims at interpreting different approaches of developing pronunciation including techniques, methods, and models. This will be pursued on the basis of literature review of published books and materials. Efforts have been made to find out some useful solutions for developing English pronunciation in second/foreign language context, especially in Bangladesh.

Introduction

Pronunciation is an inseparable part of the English language. It has become the burning question of the day because of comprehensibility and intelligibility of the spoken language. Joanne Kenworthy, in *Teaching English Pronunciation,* puts forward the concept of comfortable intelligibility as a suitable goal for the majority of learners (J Kenworthy,1987.)There are many models of English Pronunciation like RP, GA, Canadian, Australian, and Indian. It is really difficult to determine one specific model. More importantly, developing pronunciation in a foreign/second language context is noteworthy. Better pronunciation enhances smartness and smoothness in spoken English. Smooth English is mandatory in the global world since English is an international language. For better communication in the world of business, better pronunciation is expected. To our dismay, the standard of pronunciation is declining day by day. It is therefore important to ensure the quality of pronunciation in second/ foreign language context. Remarkably, the number of non-native speakers is outnumbering the number of native speakers. It will be an injustice to expect that the non-native speakers will produce oral communication like the natives of English in all cases. However, it is expected that communication should be comprehensible and intelligible. Robin Walker (2001) in his article *Pronunciation for International Intelligibility* cites:
"One of the first people to question the idea of a native-speaker accent as a model or norm was R. Macaulay. In 1988, in an article provocatively entitled 'RP R.I.P.?', he pointed out a simple but surprising truth about this supposedly prestige accent: less than 3% of the UK population actually used it at that time, and the percentage was falling. Macaulay also drew our attention to another forgotten reality of RP, namely that it was an accent which enclosed 'unnecessary' difficulties for learners of English, such as the 'r' sound or certain of its diphthongs." Walker(2001)

In this article the writer aims at suggesting different approaches of developing pronunciation including techniques, methods, models etc. This will be pursued on the basis of literature review of published books and materials. The writer has tried to find out some useful solutions for developing English pronunciation in second/foreign language context. The writer believes that the outcome of the study will enhance the teaching of English pronunciation in class room in a foreign/second language context.

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[*]Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Daffodil International University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Importance of Pronunciation

Better pronunciation is expected in many cases. Foreign learners studying in English speaking countries, international business people, diplomats, immigrants, tourist guide, and EFL/ESL teachers teaching in different countries need high level of intelligible pronunciation.

Literature Review: In the literature review the writer has dealt with some books that are related with teaching and learning pronunciation and its approaches and theory. Here the writer has tried to find out some solutions of acceptable and comprehensible approach to teaching and learning pronunciation in ESL/EFL context.

Pronunciation issues Investigated by many Linguists

Many linguists have tried to specify exact model of pronunciation. RP and GA have been considered to be the dominant models of pronunciation. There are as many Americans teaching English as there are Britons. American English is getting more and more dominant now-a-days for some reasons. Firstly, there is worldwide popularity of Hollywood movies. Secondly, there is more American influence in the oil-rich Middle East countries. Thirdly, Microsoft Corporation has popularized American English through the use of internet around the world. Finally, American soldiers have occupied many parts of the world where they are spreading American English. In this case the General American (GA) outnumbers the RP. However, the context has changed a lot. In reality there are lot more non native speakers of English (NNS) than native speakers (NS). In many parts of the world like India, Singapore, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada the tool of communication is English. RP or GA is hardly used in those countries. Which variety is used in which part of the world is not the focal point. Do we actually need model? Because no model is all in itself. In UK, for example, there are many varieties. All of them do not use the same model. Because they have different varieties, they do not bother about model. In communication, some linguists claim, comprehensibility and intelligibility should be the goal since the main purpose in communication is the apprehension of meaning in the broadest sense but not the form of the utterance.

Tench,P (1981) says that most English people do not speak RP in their pronunciation of certain vowels and diphthongs and possibly in some consonants and also in word accent. For example if we pronounce controversy, (with accent on the second syllable) we are certainly not RP speaker. But if the accent is on the first syllable, it is the RP. He suggests teachers to use an accent that is acceptable as an educated accent and keep it consistently in their teaching. But he does not show how pronunciation will be acceptable all over the world.

Robin Walker (2001) also does not emphasize any particular model of pronunciation rather he speaks about the lingua franca core. Much about native pronunciation has been discussed. What model should be followed in English pronunciation is also a matter of question. Because there are many models and varieties.It can be Australian, Canadian, British, American or Indian. Whilst constituting a great improvement over the frustration and futility of attempting to gain native or near-native command of all of the features of English pronunciation, the Common Core still does

not fully address the reality of English as an International Language (EIL). He identifies 7 areas in which it is essential to eliminate error in our students' pronunciation: vowel quantity, consonant conflations, phonetic realisations, consonant cluster simplification, prominence and weak forms, tone groups, nuclear/contrastive stress but not tone. He wants to show that if the production of vowel, consonants and their allophones are clear then the production will automatically be comprehensible.

Comprehensibility being an important issue cannot be ignored by linguist like Schmitt. In this respect; he focuses on the right point.Schmitt (2002) talks much in his book about procedures of teaching pronunciation. He emphasizes activities in context. He talks about elicited mechanical production, ear training for sound contrasts, sounds for meaning contrasts and cognitive analysis. What Schmitt says is about mechanical production and individual sounds of pronunciation. He also emphasizes acceptability and intelligibility in pronunciation learning and teaching

Some linguists, for example, David Abercrombie, do not believe that RP has been phonetically stable. He says that "no accent or dialect remains static: linguistic change is always at work" (Collins, B and M. Mees,I, 2008,p-224). In this book the decline of RP has been shown much. It also says that in some parts of UK, for example, in Scotland people moves away from RP. They have distaste for this Received Pronunciation. He speaks about the decline of RP but he does not propose any comprehensible approach.

Marianne, Donna and Janet (2000) show some relations between English language teaching and English pronunciation. They argue that some skills like reading and writing have grammar, semantics and syntax. They argue that pronunciation should have some method and technique like other language skills. Most of the methods ignored pronunciation. But some English teaching methods embrace pronunciation. In **Direct method** pronunciation is taught through imitation and repetition, **Audio-Lingual** method uses pronunciation through imitation supported by analysis and linguistic information. **The silent way** also uses sound colour chart, Fidel charts, word chart and coloured rods. Pronunciation is also taught in Community Language Learning. A tape recorder is used in this case. This is the history of teaching pronunciation. But in today's world communicative approach is the dominant approach.

Marianne, Donna and Janet (2000) argue that the goal of teaching pronunciation to ESL/EFL learners is not to make them sound like native speakers of English. They overstate that establishing **intelligible pronunciation** should be the necessary component of oral communication. But still there are some problems with the methodological issue. It raises the question as to how can the unintelligible pronunciation become intelligible. This is even a problem for the communicative language teaching (CLT). Because CLT has not developed an agreed–upon set of strategies for teaching pronunciation communicatively.

Marianne, Donna and Janet (2000) suggest some techniques of teaching pronunciation as a part of CLT by reviewing the types of techniques and practice materials that have traditionally been used to teach pronunciation.

Listening and imitating
Phonetic training
Minimal pair drills
Contextualized minimal pairs
Visual aids (e.g. sound-colour chart, Fidel wall charts, rods, pictures, mirrors etc)
Tongue twisters (e.g. a technique from speech correction strategies for native speakers.)
Developmental approximation drills.
Practice of vowel shifts and stress shifts related by affixation
Reading aloud/recitation
Recordings of learners' production

Marianne, Donna and Janet (2000) also argue about the theory of pronunciation acquisition. In the first issues they have taken into account some **factors:** learners' age, exposure to the target language, pronunciation instruction and attitude towards the target language. They suggest that teachers need to be aware of the degree learners determine for the acquisition of the target language phonology. In this case they encompass a number of hypotheses: The role of the native language, the contrastive analysis hypothesis, error analysis and avoidance, the inter language hypothesis, markedness theory, language universals, conformity hypothesis, Information processing theory etc.

Marianne, Donna and Janet (2000) propose that techniques like visual and auditory reinforcement, tactile reinforcement, kinaesthetic enforcement, use of authentic materials (e.g. jokes, advertising copy, comic strips, passages from literature) can be effective in developing approaches of pronunciation in a second language context. They also suggest using techniques from psychology, theatre arts and other disciplines. Their proposals and suggestions are certainly effective and worth following.

But Cook (2001) also gives some convincing solution about learning pronunciation. Cook, V also identifies a number of issues in teaching and learning pronunciation. It is evident in his book that pronunciation is taught as an incidental to other aspect of language. Teachers tend to correct learners' mistake when there is a major problem in their production. This incidental correction does not do much for the learning of pronunciation. In this respect Cook says, "…learning of sound is not just a matter of mastering the L2 phonemes and their predictable variants….it means learning the rules of pronunciation for the languages..."

Cook says that learners' L1 has great contribution in acquiring L2 pronunciation. He offers a number of techniques in teaching and learning pronunciation.

Use of phonetic transcript.
Imitation
Discrimination of sounds
Communication

Cook shows how learner's L2 is affected by their L1:

Sounds: learning of pronunciation depends on aspects other than the phoneme, for example, distinctive feature

Syllable structure: L2 learners simplify use consonant clusters and add extra 'epenthetic' vowels, often to fit the first language.

Voice onset time: L2 learners gradually acquire the L2 way of voicing stop consonants. Their first language is affected by their knowledge of the second language.

Intonation: L2 learners are still capable of discriminating tones. L2 learners have strategies for dealing with new intonation.

Schmitt, N. (2002) suggests "pronunciation does not work in isolation from other factors: in addition to employing our voice, we also use eye movement, mime, and gesture. " It is also evident in his book that we speak with our vocal organs, but we converse with our entire body. He also emphasizes learners' age, purpose and setting. He suggests some techniques of learning pronunciation.

Elicited mechanical production
Ear training for sound contrast
Sounds for meaning contrasts

While showing cognitive analysis he emphasizes some points.

Assimilation and elision as crucial feature of connected speech.
Phonetic training (e.g. using videos and head diagrams)
teaching learners phonemic transcription
Teaching rules: simple and comprehensive
Comparison between L1 and L2 sound system
Analysis of sounds in texts
Using a dictionary for pronunciation

He also notifies that the right side of the human brain often involves music, poetry, guided fantasies, relaxation techniques such as yoga breathing, and kinaesthetic experience. He emphasizes **attitudinal function of intonation.**

Penny Ur (1996) notifies "the aim of the pronunciation is not to achieve a perfect imitation of native accent, but simply to get the learner to pronounce accurately enough to be easily and comfortably **comprehensible** to other (component) speakers". She suggests some techniques of teaching pronunciation.

Techniques of pronunciation

> Imitation of teacher or recorded model of sounds
> Recording of learner speech and contrast with native model
> Systematic explanation and instruction
> Imitation drills; repetition of sounds
> Choral repetition of drills
> Varied repetition of drills (varied speed, volume, mood)
> learning and performing dialogues
> Learning by heart of sentences, rhythms, jingles
> Jazz chants
> Tongue twisters
> Self correction through listening to recordings of own speech.

Penny Ur does not bother about model. What he emphasizes is the **model easily understood** by other speakers of language. He also lightly notifies that for teaching English in Europe the British accent may be preferred, in Japan the American. He says that it is good to give learners at least some exposure to others, through the use of live speakers or recordings, in order to raise awareness of other possible accents and, of course, for listening practice.

Harmer (2006) suggests in pronunciation teaching learners should be "given extra information about spoken English and help them to achieve the goal of improved **comprehension and intelligibility**" (P-248). Harmer shows the requirement of intelligibility rather than perfection. He says "under the pressure of such personal, political and phonological considerations, it has become customary for teachers to consider intelligibility as the prime goal of pronunciation teaching". In some of his lesson plan Harmer shows some techniques of teaching pronunciation.

> Focusing on individuals sound
> Minimal pair drill
> Pronunciation games
> Sound waves practice
> Learning connected speech

Like other linguists, Thornbury (2008) also agrees that **intelligibility** is more important in English pronunciation. To him "intelligibility (i.e. being understood) is more important than sounding like a native speaker". He also suggests that while teaching, teachers should give special attention to pronunciation whether it is intelligible, receptive, in context, teachable etc. (P-162). He suggests some techniques of teaching pronunciation through some exercises:

> Preparing cards of rhyming words, e.g. take, make, do, true etc.
> Telling story and watching learners' mistakes and finally correcting them.
> Setting up a speaking exercise, e.g. dialogue, role-play, chat etc

the teacher plays a short section of a recorded speech, and leaves a few moments' silence to allow the sound of the words register. The students are asked to echo the segment internally, without speaking. The teacher replays the segment. This time, the students 'sub vocalise', i.e. repeat the segment under their breath. Next the students are asked to speak aloud and in step with the recording. The segment is repeated a number of times and then a new segment is attempted.

Rationale

The writer has tried to show techniques, theory and context of pronunciation suggested by many linguists. Some of the suggestion and discussion of the linguists are worth considering. The key considerations I have noticed are **Intelligibility, comprehensibility, stress, model and method/approach.**

Intelligibility

Some linguists like Thornbury, Harmer, Cook, Marianne, Donna and Janet agree that intelligibility should be the goal of pronunciation. Most of the language teachers and learners tend to be perfectionist or try to be like the natives. But in all cases it is not desirable. In this case intelligibility can be more important. It means pronunciation which can be understood with little or no conscious effort on the part of the listeners. The last decade, however, has brought about such a significant change in the role of English throughout the world that it is essential to re-examine this situation. English is currently regarded as the world's principal international language, as a result of which there are now more exchanges between non-native speakers of English (NNS-NNS), than between non-native speakers and native speakers (NNS-NS). In the immediate future at least, this situation is not going to change in favour of the minority of native speakers, and so suddenly the hegemony of their particular (and sometimes peculiar) accents is under fire.

Comprehensibility

It means the state of being understood. Comprehensibility is an important issue because of the increasing demand of communication in English between the NNS and NNS rather than NNs and NS in the world.

Model

English being a much communicated language in the world, draws attention in better comprehension and intelligibility. In this case any model is hardly needful. Some linguists like Harmer, Thornbury, Cook, Marianne, Donna and Janet also do not emphasize the importance of model rather they show how English can be comprehensible as a global language. Model like GA or RP is under threat because there are more interaction between NNS and NNS. The small number of native speakers cannot overinfluence the NNS interaction. In most countries respective way of pronunciation is used.

Method/Approach: Linguists like Cook, Schmitt and Marianne, Donna and Janet propose that pronunciation can best be applied through communicative activities since the goal of communicative approach is communicative competence.

Stress

Stress is an important tool in conveying meaning. In sentence lexical words are usually stressed. Important meaning depends on stress. Some linguists emphasize stress in sentences.

The writer also personally believes that intelligibility and comprehensibility are very important in case of pronunciation in ESL and EFL context. Stress is also important in case of conveying meaning in sentence. For example, the *cat* is out. Here the stress is on the cat. It expresses wonder. If we say the cat *is* out. The stress on "is". It means that I am confirming that the cat is out. If the majority is non-native speakers of English, they can emphasize appropriateness in their production. Based on the literature review and investigation on teaching and learning pronunciation the writer has got some suggestions:

Suggestions on the techniques of teaching English pronunciation:
- Use of phonetic transcript: Practice of phonetic transcript can help learners become self dependent in recognizing sounds. The writer believes that the learners can benefit themselves considerably through practice of phonetic transcript.
- Imitation: It is an effective way of developing pronunciation skill in audio-lingual method. Learners can listen to a sound and try to mimic in the same way.
- Ear trailing: Wells,J C and Colson, G (1993,P-05) suggest that "By systematic practice in listening to sounds one can greatly improve one's ability to recognize and distinguish different speech sounds. Such practice is known as Ear-Training. It is best done by taking dictation from someone familiar with the phonetic material to be studied."
- Phonetic training: Phonetic training can be done through the use of videos and head diagrams. This is an interesting way of learning pronunciation.
- Comparison between L1 and L2 sound system: It is significantly emphasized that learners get a clear idea about their mother tongue and the target language. This will enhance and promote their learning of English pronunciation.
- Minimal pair drill: Minimal pair drill is an effective way of learning pronunciation skill.
- Pronunciation games (based on communicative approach)
- Sound waves practice
- Learning connected speech
- Preparing cards of rhyming words, e.g. take, make, do, true etc.
- Telling story and watching learners' mistakes and finally correcting them.
- Setting up a speaking exercise, e.g. dialogue, role-play, chat etc
- Learning by heart of sentences, rhythms, jingles
- Jazz chants
- Tongue twisters

Conclusion

The writer believes that the outcome of the literature review has led us to some useful suggestions about learning and teaching pronunciation. The writer hopes that the suggested techniques will be tried by EFL/ESL teachers in the class room. Since English is a world language, intelligibility and comprehensibility should be brought under consideration while applying these techniques in a second/foreign language teaching context.

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