

Some Remarks on Contemporary Pronunciation-instruction Priorities and Pronunciation Issues Encountered by ESL/EFL Learners

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It is an undeniable fact that learners who want to develop good speaking skills in a language also need to cultivate good pronunciation, and yet groundwork evaluation continues to evidence that pronunciation still has a limited and inferior manifestation in the curriculum and is often viewed as something of an ineffectual relation in the classroom. During the past decades there has been significant growth of interest and attention given to pronunciation teaching. However, while these studies on pronunciation are performed, this sphere needs to be investigated, and more research in ESL/EFL classes among foreign and second language learners is required,

This research article is concerned with the importance, focal recent priorities in pronunciation-teaching and the pronunciation issues encountered by ESL//EFL learners in general, and by Armenian learners in particular.

The ongoing reinforcement on communicative perspectives for the teaching of English has pinpointed weightier requirements for proper pronunciation. However, the effectiveness and usability of teaching pronunciation still are the most immensely disputed issues in the area of language teaching. The maintainers of the significance of teaching pronunciation, complied with some recent research outcomes would recommend that teachers can make an apparent divergence in definite norms and standards, such as the teaching of supra-segmental and the linking of pronunciation with listening practice. Conversely, the objectors of pronunciation teaching, also complied with some groundwork results, would suggest that teachers can make scanty or no difference in developing and cultivating their students' pronunciation.

When we begin to learn a new language, students are always exposed to the new language in its fullest and most explicit form. The patterns that they

are required to copy and, later to produce are either single words or short sentences carefully and slowly enunciated. In the early stage while the student is still struggling with an unfamiliar sound system, not to mention exotic syntactic and lexical forms, this is clearly practicable approach. Unfortunately many students progress to more complicated and sophisticated grammar and vocabulary, but do not move beyond the basic, elementary, clear and explicit pronunciation. From the point of view of their own production of the spoken language this is not a disaster – a foreigner whose command of English is not perfect is much more likely to be understood if he speaks slowly and clearly [1, 156].

As Gerald Kelly mentions, the fact that pronunciation tends to suffer from neglect may not be due to teachers lacking interest in the subject but rather to a feeling of doubt as to how to teach it. Many experienced teachers would admit the lack of knowledge in the theory of pronunciation and they may therefore feel the need to improve their practical skills in pronunciation teaching. In spite of the fact that trainees and less experienced teachers may be very interested in pronunciation, their concern with grammar and vocabulary tends to take precedence. Language learners, on the other hand, often show considerable enthusiasm for pronunciation. They feel it is something that would help them to communicate better. So, paradoxically, even though both teachers and learners are keen on the subject, it is often neglected [7, 13]. Pronunciation skills are often regarded as insignificant by a considerable number of English learners. At the same time, proper and apprehensible pronunciation is as significant as, for example, auditory perception and communicative competences. Why should we pay close attention to pronunciation-teaching? English has spread all around alongside with globalization of the world. It is not clear how many speakers of English exist in the world. Estimates go up around 2 billion speakers worldwide, majority of which is non-native speakers [4, 3-6]. Due to these processes its teaching has changed too, and English is now taught under the term English as an International Language (EIL) in addition to terms such as a Second language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL). English has become the foremost and by some accounts – world language and is often chosen for cross-cultural communication, including a great many non-native English-speaking teachers throughout the world; students at all levels of education; diplomats, politicians, and entrepreneurs; and service industry

employees such as call center personnel, hotel and restaurant personnel, tour guides, travel agents, and customs agents. Actually, many residents of English dominant nations use English as the means of communication when speaking with multiracial foreign visitors and workers employed on temporary basis with little practice in the local language. English has become an interlanguage, or the language which people use to communicate with one another globally. People speaking various languages use English to interact with each other, even if there is no native speaker present. At present, the objective of teaching pronunciation is not to create an impression of being a native speaker, but rather to communicate successfully in a global context.

Speakers of all languages produce a far wider range of different phonetic sounds than phonemic descriptions would suggest. It is this phonetic overlap between languages where very similar, even identical phonetic sounds have to be interpreted as different phonemic tokens – which causes a great deal of difficulty in the understanding of the spoken form of a foreign language. Where there is no phonetic overlap between a sound in one language and any sound in another, where one language has a sound that is exotic to a language bearer from the other language, the language bearer rarely has any difficulty in perceiving the sound though he may have difficulty in producing it [1, 13-14]. According to Yates and Zielinski, much attention to English pronunciation indicates that pronunciation has a key role in learning English. If teachers do not present the general rules and principles toward comprehensible pronunciation to their ESL//EFL learners, nobody will certainly do it. This is the responsibility of ESL//EFL teachers to do this by teaching the new sounds, words, sentences, and phrases and arranging appropriate materials for understandable pronunciation in their ESL//EFL classes. ESL//EFL teachers should explore new ways of indicating, practicing, and giving feedback on English pronunciation that are actually appropriate for learners to learn English pronunciation easily and effectively [14, 11-23]. One of the most important requirements for proficiency in language is to secure the pronunciation that is understandable for the language students [12, 119-128]. It is also assumed that research in second or foreign language practice should not be scrutinized with the significance of pronunciation-teaching but with the methodology of pronunciation instruction. Both scholars and educators must “recast” roles and the objectives should be modified during the succession of teaching steps.

Instructors must act the part of pronunciation trainers and students must feel motivated and enthusiastic, seizing the initiative to train. The instruction methodologies must be altered from focusing on linguistic competence to communicative competence and segmental parts of pronunciation to supra-segmental parts of pronunciation. One of the essential objectives of pronunciation-teaching in any coursework is comprehensible pronunciation which for its part is a focal component of communicative competence. Flawless pronunciation acquisition should no longer be the final goal. Alternatively, more pragmatic objectives are recommended, which are productively workable, reasonable and appropriate to the communication needs of the students.

Morley emphasizes that learners need to expand functional intelligibility, i.e. to develop the skills for making themselves simply comprehended, functional communicability, speech monitoring that increased self-confidence abilities, and speech modification strategies [9, 51-74]. Foreign accent may not be a significant issue, since it does not hinder comprehension. Speaking with a foreign accent is definitely preferable to not being able to intercommunicate at all. The importance of pronunciation-teaching is beyond question because words can contain various meanings conditioned by the manner of how to produce them. Consequently, pronunciation instruction evidently is a very significant component of becoming proficient at any foreign language. It does not imply that the objective of such phonetic practice is to do away with a foreign accent finally and entirely. In plain English, it is not always possible and of paramount importance, of course, if you are not planning to work for foreign intelligence or teach yourself the language proficiently. The primary purpose of this kind of practice is to acquire skills in hearing yourself and others. Poor pronunciation causes extra embarrassment in comprehending between interlocutors. On account of this, it is vitally significant that learners should learn English for global interaction and should learn to speak it as intelligibly as possible not necessarily like native speakers. It is universally accepted that pronunciation is a fundamental constituent of oral communication and verbal communication can be done inappropriately without accurate pronunciation and can be strongly distorted.

Another question to consider is which of the many acceptable pronunciations of English should be used as a model for the class. For pure academic purposes the British English RP type is preferable to other types but

for pragmatic and communicative purposes, in most cases the choice rests with the American GA pronunciation type.

Whereas the choice of the type of pronunciation to be taught in the schools, colleges and universities of the English-speaking countries themselves is determined by their own national standard or standards, teachers and learners of English in countries where it is taught as a Second or Foreign language are faced with the problem of choosing one of the national types of English pronunciation as the teaching norm. Therefore, the question naturally arises: What are the criteria for such a choice? First of all, purely subjective criteria, preconceived ideas and prejudices should be brushed aside before even attempting to find an answer to that question. One of these is the widespread but fallacious notion that one national type of pronunciation is intrinsically “better”, “more beautiful”, “elegant”, “correct” than all the others [13, 57]. Consequently, the question which of the many acceptable pronunciations of English should be used as a model comes in as a matter of consideration. Present-day objective factors which do determine in certain special cases the choice of a type of pronunciation as the teaching norm are geographical, economic, political, military, and cultural factors. The geographical proximity of a country where English is taught as a Second or a Foreign language, to an English-speaking country results in a huge volume of contacts and exchanges between the two countries, in all possible spheres (economic, commercial, financial, industrial, agricultural, political, diplomatic, military, scientific, cultural etc. and on all possible levels (from personal to official) [13, 57-58]. In the past the preferred pronunciation model was Received Pronunciation (or RP) but it is falling out of favour as a teaching model. As a teacher the model one uses in the classroom will usually be close to the language one uses outside the classroom. Many teachers modify their accent slightly for the benefit of their students, but few could consistently teach with an accent significantly different from their own, even if they wanted to. As ever, it is important to consider the needs of learners. Learners will usually have a target model in mind. Anyway targets tend to be highly personal and on occasion rather vague which complicates the choice of the teaching pronunciation model. There are no easy answers here, though teachers can, in catering for their students’ needs, work on issues of production and reception independently, enabling students to

understand a wide range of varieties, while allowing them to choose their own target model so long as it is widely comprehensible [7, 15].

Can non-native speaker teach the pronunciation of English? The answer to this question is an emphatic YES, and for several reasons. First when viewed from a global perspective, there are far more English language courses and learners being taught by non-native English speakers than native speakers. Second, empirical research documents with two essential themes: the first year of second language learning is especially important for pronunciation development [6, 55-76], and learners' spoken intelligibility may suffer long term negative effects if attention to pronunciation is neglected during the initial stages [14, 11-23]. Given these findings, the wider field needs as many non-native English-speaking teachers as possible – especially those teaching in EFL settings – to be able and willing to teach pronunciation. Without their participation, the needs of language learners will not be well served. Third, there are very good reasons for non-native speakers to feel more confident than they typically do with respect to their potential to serve as effective models and teachers of English pronunciation. Since few second language learners, except for the very young, will eventually acquire a native-like accent [11, 31-54], non-native English-speaking teachers own qualities of English pronunciation represent realistic aspirational models of pronunciation attainment (if they are intelligible and comprehensible). As Murphy explains, it is simply more realistic for teachers and learners to embrace non-native accented, intelligible, comprehensible speech as an aspirational model. In fact, Murphy's exploratory research suggests that pronunciation teachers who are native speakers should supplement the model of their own first language English pronunciation by incorporating within their courses frequent illustrations of intelligible and comprehensible non-native accented speech precisely because the latter are more realistic aspirational models [10, 258–269]. Classroom introduction of such models of pronunciation may be easily facilitated by accessing TED Talks, Three Minute These, YouTube interview videos and other relevant internet resources as a normal part of instrumental routine. Without exposure to such illustrations, second or foreign language learners may fail to realize that non-native accented speakers of English can attain high levels of intelligibility and comprehensibility and that such attainment is within their reach. Fourth, all ESOL teachers may feel confident that pronunciation can be taught successfully

not only at intermediate and higher levels of proficiency [3, 46-66; 5, 1-16] but to the beginning level learners as well. For this to happen, everyone who teaches the pronunciation of English should be well trained.

What are the most common pronunciation errors I have witnessed in my almost 30 years of teaching experience? The major problem for Armenian learners of English is the substitution of one phoneme or sound for another. This phenomenon is conditioned by several factors and I would like to briefly introduce some of them. Speech sounds belonging to the three most general types (vowels, consonants and contoids) are found in all languages. This general typological community of speech sounds existing in different languages is due to the typologically and functionally identical structure of the speech apparatus of people belonging to different races and nationalities. It is common knowledge that a child of any race or nationality brought up in an ethnically and linguistically different community will speak the language of the community without the slightest traces of a foreign accent. And yet, despite the typological community of speech sounds in different languages, not a single sound of one language is absolutely identical spectrally with a typologically identical sound of another language. Thus, the English [t] and the Armenian [թ] are identical typologically, but they are quite different spectrally. One of the principal causes of spectral differences in typologically identical sounds of different languages is the difference in what is called the articulation or speech basis. By articulatory or speech basis the positions of the organs of speech is meant. Languages differ in this respect. For example, in English, the spreading of the lips is pressed tightly against the teeth; in Armenian, the lips are slightly rounded and protruded easily. The tip of the tongue is slightly curled back in English and is against the alveoli but does not touch them, so the tongue is drawn back from the teeth; in Armenian the tip of the tongue is put forward and touches the teeth, the middle and back parts of the tongue are slightly raised. The dynamic aspect of the articulatory basis is the transition from a consonant to a vowel or from a vowel to a consonant within a syllable or at the junction of syllables and words. In both languages, the transition from a consonant to a vowel is rather loose. Unstressed vowels in English have a high degree of reduction while in Armenian they do not. As the checked or unchecked character of the short vowels depends on their position, they are allophones of the vowel phonemes. As all Armenian vowels are free, strong

linking is often made weak by the Armenian language bearers. There are widespread sound-articulation problems typical of the Armenian language bearers. Let us mention some of them:

- the English tense [ɑ:] is often replaced by the Armenian lax [u]. The latter is higher than the English [ɑ:].
- the English slightly protruded [ɒ] is often replaced by the fully rounded and protruded, higher, more retracted and free Armenian [o].
- the English slightly protruded tense [o:] is often replaced by the Armenian [o] which is lax and fully protruded.
- the English back-advanced, slightly rounded [ʊ] is replaced by the Armenian back higher and fully rounded [nɪ].
- the non-protruded and slightly rounded nucleus of [ɒi] is usually replaced by the fully protruded and rounded Armenian [o]. The glide [i] is usually replaced by the Armenian sonorant [j].
- the front-retracted nucleus of the diphthong [iə] is often replaced by the Armenian [h]
- the vowel combination [aiə] is a trouble spot for the Armenians. They replace the glide by the Armenian sonorant [j].
- the English apical-alveolar consonants [t], [d] are usually replaced by the Armenian dorsal consonants
- the English dental [θ], [ð] are often replaced by the Armenian labio-dental [ʃ], [ʒ], dental [p̪], [t̪] or back-dental sibilants [u] [q].
- the dark variant of the English [ɫ] is often replaced by the Armenian clear [l] in the final position after [i] and [e]. The English apical-alveolar [l] is often replaced by the Armenian dorsal dental [ɫ].
- the English bilabial sonorant [w] is sometimes replaced by the labio-dental noise consonant [v].
- the front secondary focus of the English [sh], [zh] in Armenian is sometimes replaced by a consonant with the back secondary focus and the non-palatalized consonants are pronounced instead of the half-palatalized English [sh], [zh].

As we have already mentioned, pronunciation work should flow naturally from other work in class. Anyway, there are many times it should not be done. Teachers must listen for problems. They should not interrupt the flow of a reading lesson or a conversation to teach a phonetic nicety. Communication is

the goal of language. When it is happening in the classroom, do not break in. Occasionally teachers may feel the need to correct a word. They can do this by taking part in the conversation and using the problem word in a question or statement to provide a model without changing the topic of discussion. In a reading lesson they may read the next paragraph or ask a question about the story and so use the problem word without making it the focus of attention [8, 195]. All students can do well in learning the pronunciation of a foreign language if the teacher and student participate together in the total learning process. Pronunciation must be viewed as more than correct production of phonemes: it must be viewed in the same light as grammar, syntax, and discourse that is a crucial part of communication. The student must also become part of the learning process, actively involved in their own learning. With the teacher acting as a "speech coach", rather than as a mere checker of pronunciation, the feedback given to the student can in itself encourage learners to improve their pronunciation. If these criteria are met, all students, within their learner unique goals, can be expected to do well, learning the pronunciation of a foreign language [9, 51-74]. The communicative methodological tendency which manifested itself in the 1980s and is presently prevalent in language teaching, assumes that since the most important purpose of the language is communication, using language to communicate should be superior in all classroom language teaching. This careful observation of language as communication, imparts renovated weightiness to the teaching of pronunciation, since practical conclusive verification signifies the threshold level of pronunciation for non-native speakers of English; if non-native speakers fall below this threshold level, they will experience oral communication problems regardless of how exemplary and copious their proficiency of English grammar and vocabulary might be.

A consideration of learners' pronunciation errors and how these can inhibit successful communication is a useful basis on which to assess why it is important to deal with pronunciation in the classroom. A learner who consistently mispronounces a range of phonemes can be extremely difficult for a speaker from another language community to understand. This can be very frustrating for the learner who may have a good command of grammar and lexis but have difficulty in understanding and being understood by a native speaker [7, 11].

The main aim in teaching students how to understand English as it is normally spoken by native English speakers must be to make the students aware of what signals they can depend on hearing in the stream of speech and to make use of these signals. They may deplore the fact that English speakers speak in an indistinct manner – this sort of judgment does not damage, or help, anybody. The point is that they must learn to come to terms with the situation that undoubtedly exists. In doing so they may incidentally come to observe and accept that a very similar relation exists between the “idealized” and the normal speech of their own language, this is a bonus and the teacher must certainly not rely on his happening. The main aim in teaching comprehension must be to help the students recognize and use the reliable signals in the spoken form of the foreign language and help them to predict when only the tip of an iceberg is apparent what the shape of the rest of the iceberg must be [1, 168].

As highlighted in this article pronunciation should be regarded as more than flawless articulation of single sounds or words. It should be estimated as an eminent component of intercourse that is joined up with curricular proceedings. Instructors should encourage their learners to keep their own pronunciation under observation and work up their verbal communication skills in the best way possible in and outside the classroom. Intelligible pronunciation is an integral constituent of communicative competence. From this perspective, instructors should establish attainable objectives that are relevant and workable for the prior communication requirements of learners. Pronunciation guidance has to focus on coherent pronunciation and teachers should intensively motivate their learners’ actual utterance, develop pronunciation awareness and training. Pronunciation teaching is of great significance as it is the main source of comprehension. The mispronunciation of the proper variants of words may lead to communication breakdown. Pronunciation instruction enables learners to have a more accurate comprehension of native speakers and develops their facilities to intercommunicate efficiently and comfortably.

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**Մի քանի դիտարկումներ արտասանության ուսուցման
ժամանակակից առաջնահերթությունների և ESL/EFL սովորողների
մոտ նկատվող արտասանական որոշ խնդիրների շուրջ**

Մարիկյան Նունե

Ամփոփում

***Հանգուցային բառեր.** արտասանության ուսուցում, արտասանական խնդիրներ, ESL/EFL (անգլերենը որպես երկրորդ կամ որպես օտար լեզու) սովորողներ, միջմշակութային հաղորդակցություն, օտարալեզու խոսողներ, գործնական նպատակներ, արտասանության թիրախային նմուշ*

Միջազգային և միջմշակութային հարաբերությունների սրընթաց զարգացումը նոր պահանջներ է ներկայացնում օտար լեզուների մասնագետների պատրաստման ոլորտում: Օտար լեզուն որպես միջմշակութային հաղորդակցման միջոց օգտագործելու կարողությունը հանդիսանում է մասնագիտական կոմպետենտության որոշակի ցուցիչ:

Ներկայումս աշխարհում մեծացել է հետաքրքրությունը օտար լեզուների՝ մասնավորապես անգլերեն լեզվի նկատմամբ: Դա բացատրվում է անգլերենի՝ ժամանակակից աշխարհում զբաղեցրած դերով և տեղով, որոնք պայմանավորված են անգլիախոս երկրների հետ առևտրատնտեսական հարաբերությունների զարգացմամբ, համացանցի ի հայտ գալով, ինչպես նաև արտերկրում սովորելու, աշխատելու և ճանապարհորդելու հնարավորություններով: Լեզվին ծանոթանալու սկզբնական փուլը սկսվում է հնչյունաբանական մակարդակով, այդ իսկ պատճառով լեզվի ուսուցման գործընթացում արտասանական պատշաճ հմտությունների ձևավորումը հանդիսանում է հիմնական խնդիրներից մեկը:

Հոդվածում ակնարկային քննության են ենթարկվել ինչպես անգլերենի արտասանության ուսուցման ժամանակակից միտումներն ու առաջնահերթությունները, այնպես էլ ESL/EFL սովորողների (մասնավորապես հայախոս) կողմից թույլ տրվող արտասանական որոշ սխալներ և շեղումներ: Որպես առաջնահերթություն շահեկանորեն առանձնացվել է արտասանության՝ որպես հաղորդակցման հասկանալիությունն ապահովող, ինչպես նաև այսպես կոչված արտասանական մշակույթի բաղադրիչ լինելը: Արտասանական մշակույթ ասելով հասկանում ենք համապատասխան իրավիճակում խոսողի կողմից լեզվի հնչյունաբանական միջոցների համարժեք կիրառման կարողությունը: Այդ միջոցները ներառում են ոչ միայն առանձին հնչյունների ճիշտ արտաբերումը, այլև ռիթմական և հնչերանգային տարրերը, որոնք նպաստում են խոսքի լիարժեք արտահայտչականությանն ու հասկանալի լինելուն:

**Некоторые замечания о современных приоритетах обучения
произношению и проблемах произношения, с которыми
сталкиваются изучающие ESL// EFL**

Мариян Нуе

Резюме

***Ключевые слова:** обучения произношению, проблемы произношения, изучающие ESL// EFL (английский как второй или иностранный язык), межкультурная коммуникация, не-носители языка, практические цели, целевая модель произношения*

Стремительное развитие международных отношений и межкультурных контактов в современном мире предъявляет новые требования к подготовке специалистов в области иностранных языков. Способность пользоваться иностранным языком как средством межкультурного общения оказывается определяющим показателем профессиональной компетентности. В последнее время в мире возрос интерес к иностранным языкам, в особенности к английскому языку. Это объясняется ролью и местом английского языка в современном мире: развитие торгово-экономических отношений с англоязычными странами, появление мировой компьютерной сети Интернет, а также возможность путешествовать, работать и отдыхать за границей. Первое знакомство с языком происходит на звуковом, фонетическом уровне, поэтому формирование произносительных навыков в обучении языка является одной из основных задач.

В статье представлены очерковый сравнительный анализ современных тенденций и приоритетов обучения произношению английского языка, а также некоторые типичные ошибки в произношении, которые допускают изучающие ESL//EFL (в частности носители армянского языка). Произношение как компонент коммуникативной доступности выгодно выделяется в качестве приоритетного компонента произносительной культуры. Под произносительной культурой мы понимаем способность говорящего ситуативно адекватно использовать нормативные фонетические средства языка (как звуковые, так и ритмико-интонационные) для достижения максимальной выразительности и понятности речи.

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