

ENHANCING PRONUNCIATION IN THE MODERN ESL CLASSROOM: EQUIPPING STUDENTS FOR EFFECTIVE FUTURE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Earlier researches have revealed that in most ESL classrooms, utterances are often wrongly produced by speakers and, in turn misinterpreted by listeners due to improper pronunciation of speech segments and/or incorrect application of prosodic features. As a result, the purposes of discussions are often defeated and learners graduate from various institutions still influenced by their L1 pronunciations when speaking the English language. Hence, this review paper, whose aim is to offer suggestions for better management of students' production of English speech sounds, discusses pronunciation, discourse and context in general, classroom communication, the treatment of difficult and confusing speech sounds, as well as the importance of the suprasegmentals in relation to classroom interactions. In conclusion, the paper stresses that giving adequate explanation of difficult speech segments and prosodic features- through illustrations and regular student practice during instruction- makes verbal exchanges easily comprehensible, melodious and more convincing.

Keywords: Pronunciation, classroom discourse, speech sounds, suprasegmentals

Introduction

Pronunciation is an essential aspect of spoken discourse in all contexts of human interactions. Oftentimes, the success or failure of verbal activities rests largely on the manner in which speech units are produced by interactants, as well as the appropriateness of selected paralinguistic features (such as gestures, facial expressions and body movements) employed by speakers and the extralinguistic properties (such as age, sex, societal status) possessed by interlocutors in every speech related discourse. In every milieu the way in which utterances are produced is important to listeners of all types, whether they are adults or children, teachers students, professionals or artisans, as their perception of the message, utterance interpretation and meaning generation are not unconnected to effective pronunciation.

In effect, wrong pronunciation (of speech segment and or longer speech units) and improper application of the prosodies both of which are predominant features of second language verbal activities in English language, may lead to misinterpretation and outright defeat of the purpose(s) of speech (Cruttenden, 2014; Jowitt, 2020 cited in Oladipupo et al., 2020). It is therefore the aim of this paper to ex -ray pronunciation as an aspect of discourse in general, communication within the classroom, that is, between learners and the teacher and among students, ways of managing teacher- learner and learner- learner pronunciation in order to prepare the learners as effective future speakers.

Methodology

This descriptive/ review study employed mainly secondary sources. It used textbooks, journal articles, published and unpublished documents and internet materials for information gathering and discussion of concepts. Concepts examined in this descriptive research include; the meaning of pronunciation, discourse and context, aspects of classroom communication, treating difficult and confusing Phonemes, and the prosodic speech features (also referred to as suprasegmentals).

Conceptual Framework

Meaning of Pronunciation

Pronunciation refers to the acceptable ways in which languages are spoken by their users. It also refers to an individual's manner of pronouncing the sounds of a particular language or how a given language is produced by the members of a community over a period of time (Hornby, n.d.). Therefore, effective pronunciation within the classroom and beyond requires adequate knowledge of the major features of the basic sound segments of a given parlance, the way they combine together to form words and longer speech units and that of the prosodic features being imposed on its segments to achieve semantically and pragmatically contrastive interpretations (Roach, 2011). In other words, English pronunciation deals with phonetics, phonemics (as they do not always have one on one relationship with letters of the alphabet) and prosodies, that is, word accentuation and the combinatory effect of loudness, pitch and length for rhythmic and intonational patterning of utterances (Cruttenden, 2014). Good

pronunciation leads to meaningful verbal activities which in turn yield successful discourse both within and beyond the formal learning environment. Hence, the paper looks at the meaning of discourse as follows.

The Notion of Discourse

Discourse refers to the different verbal and written or spoken discussions utilized for social practice (Fairclough, 1995 cited in Ezeifeke, 2018). It concerns an expression of the hidden thoughts, emotion and intentions of humans through written or spoken language which may be realized by employing varying words, phrases or much longer linguistic items (Akinola, 2015). In a related sense, Syal and Jindal (2014) suggests strongly that discourse involves the study of language units which are longer than the sentence. This, according to them, also includes the application of inter-sentential links used in arriving at a carefully organized cohesive text. Hence, discourse can be viewed as a concept which involves the employment of linguistic items ranging from words and phrases to sentences, paragraphs and longer language structures for the description of human's feelings, ideas, opinions, intentions. in a coherent manner for effective communication flow and for the benefit of the interlocutors involved in a verbal / written exchange. It includes all spoken and written / printed texts used in the transfer of information and or messages from one interactant to the other in day to day human interactions, in a linguistically acceptable manner.

Discourse is somewhat related to context as discursial language elements chosen by speakers are most of the time determined by the context of their interactions. The notion of context is an all embracing one. It includes not only the language code (s) selected for the communication but also other activities (linguistic and non-linguistic) going on at the of the time of discourse, the place and time of the speech event, the ages, gender, professions and societal status(es) of the interlocutors (Opara, 2009). It also involves the dialects chosen for the discussion based on the speakers' cultures, value system, and religious affiliations. Context also covers the emotions and feelings of the speakers revealed through their choice of pitch modulation patterns (Osisanwo, 2008).

Consequently, since context includes the activities going on during a speech event, together with the place and time of the event, all of which are major contributors to the selection of language codes employed for verbal activities which lead to a smooth flow of discourse, communications between teachers and their students in the physical (traditional) and virtual (online) classroom context is often referred to as classroom discourse and it is an essential part of this investigation. This is because issues relating to correctness and incorrectness in the production of speech objects occur as part of the teaching and learning process. Hence, a discussion of the concept classroom discourse is presented below .

Classroom Discourse

This deals with the communication between teachers and their students and among students or learners in a traditional / physical classroom. It involves more specifically the parlance being used for spoken and written interactions during face to face teaching and learning within the classroom (Everstudy, 2023). Earliest scientific examination of classroom discourse was carried out in 1910 and it employed stenographers who carried out repeated recordings of the discussions of high school teachers and students in the classrooms. Decades later, (precisely in the 1930s), the earliest audiotape recording of the classroom speech activities carried out were made public. And from the 1960s there was an increased development in the rate of classroom discourse based researches (Nuthall, n.d.).

Types of Classroom communication

Different types of classroom communications have been identified by experts across the globe over the years and some of them have been the norm both in Anglophone and non Anglophone countries. Alpert (1987) presented three major patterns of classroom communications which he called (1) silent (in this case, the teacher dominates the discussion during the lesson while the students make few contributions as responses to the teacher's questions), (2) controlled (here, the teacher teaches but asks questions comprehensively while the students contribute appreciably during teaching and learning both in response to the teacher's many probing and formative questions and by asking their own questions) and (3) active (the teacher facilitates while the students talk primarily to each other).

Similarly, Everstudy (2023) identifies three types of classroom communication which are verbal communication (where teachers interact verbally with their students either individually or as a group by using sounds and words), non-verbal communication (during which classroom information are passed across and received mainly through paralinguistic means like gestures, facial expressions, body language and the pitch and tone of the voice) and written communication (where classroom information, instruction and so forth are conveyed and carried out in written form. This may be in form of notes or questions which the teacher writes on the board or displays on a

projector or in form of notes or answers to the teacher's questions which students write in their notebooks or on the marker board).

In addition to the foregoing, Everstudy, 2023 presented some importance of classroom communication as follows;

- It brings clarity and distinctiveness in speech.
- It provides learners with the scope of speaking and probing.
- Learners can be prompted to think and do something new in the teacher's subject area.
- The teacher is able to identify learners' intellectual capability and giftings during classroom interactions.
- Learners are able to easily familiarise themselves with a new topic during classroom.

Theoretical framework

This study employs the Birmingham classroom communication model developed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) as discussed in (Ezeifeka, 2018). It was adopted on its merit as the classroom communication model which ex-rays extensively teacher-student language use as obtainable in all forms of classroom. It is also referred to as the 'exchange structure model' and is presented as a rankscale for classroom discourse, patterned after Hallidayan grammar rankscale known as 'Categories of the theory of Grammar.' The rankscale has five major ranks which are Lesson, Transaction, Exchange, Moves and Acts. Lesson is the highest of the ranks and it includes major categories of spoken and written teacher-student interactions/ instructions like teaching/ lecture, practical experiments, note dictation and so forth. Transaction is the next rank on the scale and it operates in form of exchanges which are known as the teaching exchange and the boundary exchange. The teaching exchange which contains linguistic items utilized by the teacher for informing (this involves stating facts as in the statement 'a noun is a word that names or can be used to identify anything'). It is used for eliciting (this is employed for questioning as in the question 'what are the functions of the noun in sentences?') It is equally utilized for answering as in the answer, 'the noun functions as the subject or object of the verb,' and for responding to / or evaluating students' answers as in the statement 'that's correct!'). The teaching exchange is equally used for directing. Directing is the last of the teaching moves and it is employed by the teacher to elicit non-verbal responses from the learners as in the command 'listen carefully.') Teaching exchange(s) are usually produced within the boundary exchange(s).

The boundary exchange as a transaction exchange consists of words and longer expressions like 'now', 'okay', 'good' and so forth which are used at the beginning and ending of utterances. It is of two sub-divisions known as (i) framing exchange and (ii) focusing exchange. Framing exchange is utilized by the teacher to draw the students' attention to the beginning and end of a lesson or its sub topics using words like 'now', 'okay', 'alright' while focussing exchange consists of utterances which give cues about the next aspect of the topic to be treated and it makes use of words like 'right now', 'now' to make introductory sentences such as 'now, we shall discuss the next sub topic which is 'Pronoun.' Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) refers to the next level on the rankscale as 'Moves.' According to them, the move has three sub-categories or turns which they describe as initiation (I), response (R) and feedback (F). Initiation is a teacher related turn which may be employed for information or interrogation. An instance of this is seen below 'what is a pronoun?' 'Response' turn is the next and it is mainly employed by students in form of answers to the teacher's questions. Sentences employed for this purpose are expected to contain finite verbs. The last which is called the feedback turn is equally teacher related, and it is for accepting or rejecting learners responses, thereby controlling discussions in the classroom in a manner that reflects unequal learner / teacher power relation. The last level of the rankscale is described as 'Acts'. Acts are all-embracing as they represent virtually all the earlier classroom moves presented by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). They include elicitation, informative, bid, demonstration, reply, react and nominate acts among others.

Most verbal and written classroom interactions are realised through the application of relevant speech elements, that is, the phonemes which combine to form words and words that are chunked together to form sentences and longer speech structures. These are utilised by teachers and their students in form of lessons, transactions, exchanges, moves and acts during regular classroom instructions which are often geared towards the preparation of the learners for effective speaking activities in future. This is to encourage impactful communication, not only through syntactic means but also through the application of relevant prosodic features.

Thus, in addition to the knowledge of grammar, proper mastery of speech segments and suprasegmental features of speech such as pitch, stress, length, rhythm and intonation are required for seamless discourse management particularly within the L2 English language learning setting. Non-verbal/ non-linguistic gestures, which are also utilized for the elicitation and supply of messages all of which must be clear to both the teacher and their learners (Roach, 2010), must also be carefully explained to the learners. This is owing to the fact that grammatical expressions used within and outside the classroom derive their meanings not only from the forms and the structural

arrangement of the words they contain, but also from other non-verbal context features as well as accompanying prosodic modifications and significations (Akmajian et al. 2010; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975 as cited in Ezeifeke, 2018; Aremo, 2020; Everstudy. 2023).

The English Speech Sounds

There are forty-four (44) sound segments in English language, twenty-four (24) of these are consonants (/p, b, t, d, k, g, f, v, θ, ð, s, z, ʃ, dʒ, ʒ, h, m, n, ŋ, l, r, w, j/) while the remaining twenty (20) are vowels. Twelve (12) of the vowels are called monothongs or pure vowels and they are as follows /ɪ, e, ə, æ, ʌ, ɒ, u, ə, i:, a:, ɔ:, u:, and ɜ:/ while the remaining eight (8) are known as diphthongs and they have been listed here /ei, ai, ɔi, əu, au, iə, eə, uə/ (Jones 2006). The vowel sounds of English combine with consonants to produce syllables as follows: /i+/n/= /in/→ in, /s+/i:/ = /si:/ → see, /s+/i:/+/k/ = /si:k/→ seek, /f+/i+/l/= /fil/→ fill and so forth. Syllables combine to form words. Words can be mono-syllabic (with only one syllable), for example the words ‘yes’, ‘at’, ‘men’, ‘they’, ‘come’, or di-syllabic (with two syllables), for example, ‘dewlap’, ‘faithless’, ‘impend’, ‘lowland,’ or polysyllabic (having three or more syllables), for example, examination, politician, maturity, incarceration. And with two or more words, phrases, clauses, sentences and longer structures are generated.

The syllable is the basic unit of any spoken language which often consists of one or more consonants and at least a vowel or at times a vowel and a syllabic consonant (Anagbogu et al, 2010; Osisanwo, 2012). The syllable contains a vowel which is the most obligatory elements and it is known as the nucleus or the peak. The nucleus is often the most accentuated and the loudest part of the syllable. It may be preceded by a consonant which is called the onset or succeeded by another consonant sound known as the coda (a combination of the peak and coda is described as rhyme). Neither the onset nor the coda is fundamental to the formation of the syllable. Therefore, once there is a nucleus or a syllabic consonant, a syllable can be formed with or without the onset and the coda (Eneremadu 2013; Elugbe 2015). In the letter , a - /ei/ for instance, the nucleus stands as a syllable, in the word panel - /pænl /, the first syllable /pæn / contains an onset /p/, a peak / nucleus /æ/ and a coda /n/ (whose second syllable has only a syllabic consonant / l /), while the word eaten - /i:tn/ represents a situation where the first syllable contains only a vowel sound / i:/ while the second syllable /tn/ has an onset /t/ and a coda /n/ which is a syllabic consonant. However, while some phonemes and syllables may be easy to produce in all oral interactions, some are not. Thus, the onus is on language teachers to supply the needed information on these realities and the linguistic factors responsible for them.

Treating Difficult Confusing Phonemes

Teachers of Oral English / Phonetics at all educational levels are to employ different classroom communication methods, such as the ‘verbal,’ ‘controlled’ and ‘active’ techniques, during which students are allowed to repeat words and sentences after them and can freely construct and produce sentences of their choice under the teachers’ corrective and facilitative watch, to properly teach all essential aspects of the concept and particularly the potentially confusing ones. This in turn aids effective management of the students’ pronunciation of English speech items. For instance, the schwa /ə/ which is a weak vowel sound and is capable of representing most English vowel sounds during quick, naturally occurring speeches, when vowels are usually in their reduced or weak forms, the usual occurrence of vowel reduction and vowel/consonant elision, particularly in rapid speech, should be brought to the fore when teaching.

The aforementioned speech unit and related others as well as the verbal properties affecting /resulting in their alterations should also be consciously employed by teachers and learners as boundary, focusing, answering, responding and directing exchanges. In terms of vowel reduction and the use of the schwa, the first letter ‘a’ of the word ‘an’ is produced as /æ/ when in its strong form and is being utilised to show contrast, as in the sentence ‘ it is an elephant not a bull. On the contrary, it is pronounced as /ən/, with its first vowel replaced with a schwa, in quick utterances, as in the sentence ‘ give an instance’ /gɪv ən Instəns / or when it appears after an alveolar or palatoalveolar consonant as in the phrase ‘cash and carry’ /kæʃ ənd kærɪ/.

Other seemingly confusing sounds like the diphthongs / iə and eə/ and the consonants /θ, ð / among several others also require careful distinction for proper production and intelligibility. The diphthong / iə / on the one hand is produced with a glide which begins with a centralised close-mid tongue position used to pronounce the /i/ and moves in a moderately open manner as the /ə / is produced. This is often the case when the / iə / is the final phoneme in a word as in the words ‘year’ and ‘sincere.’ However, when the sound is non -final in a word, it is produced with the lips in a neutral position and then the lips moves and takes on a shape which is between spread and open. Example of words containing /iə/ and the letters representing it are material (er), austere (ere), material(ia), pancreas (ea), museum(eu), salient (ie), million (io), previous (iou), cheer (eer), dear (ear) and so forth (Cruttenden, 2014). The /eə/ on the other hand is a glide which starts with an open mid position of the lips to pronounce the /e/ and quickly takes a more open shape to complete the its production as the /ə/ is uttered if

its in the final position as in the words 'care' and 'share'. But if it is found in the medial position in a word the lips maintain a neutrally open shape as in the words 'rarity' and 'parent'. Other words containing /eə/ are librarian (ai), affair (air), tear -verb (ear), aerobic (ae), and aware (are) (Cruttenden, 2014).

Similarly, the consonant sound /θ/ is a dental fricative pronounced with the tip and rim of the tongue touching the upper incisors slightly, while at the same time touching the side upper teeth in a firmer way. That way, there is remarkable friction as air is released through the front surface of the tongue and the incisors during its production. Hence its uttered in a much harder manner than /ð/. Examples of words containing /θ/ are thief, thick (word initial), through, thrice (word initial clusters), fifth, bath (word final), earthed, depths (word final cluster). /ð/ is equally a dental fricative consonant pronounced the same way as the /θ/. The only difference in their articulation is that the friction is a lot weaker during the production of /ð/ although there may be some vocal fold vibration as it is being uttered since it is a voiced sound. Words having /ð/ among others are though, them (word initial), worthy, although (word medial), soothe, mouth (word final) (Cruttenden, 2014). L2 learners of English pronunciation should be careful to ensure they position the tongue and the upper incisors properly while producing the two sounds as they are likely to pronounce the plosive /t/ instead of /θ/, and /d/ instead of /ð/ if care is not taken.

The Suprasegmentals and Classroom Communications

Adequate explanation should also be given on the effect of the suprasegmentals on the pronunciation of certain words, as well as their roles in teaching and learning and general speech making. For instance, with the application of loudness which is a prosodic feature of English pronunciation, which involves occasional increase in the volume of the speaker's voice, and or lengthening of some phonemes or syllables, to arouse the listener's interest and ensure concentration on the content and the entire speech event, good speech delivery is easily achievable (Communication center, 2022). With loudness in place, speakers of all ages are able to utilise the right voice volume as occasions on different.

In the same vein, certain words can be stressed or made more prominent than their neighbours in natural speeches. This occurs mainly to achieve contrast and emphasis. Hence, when the prosody stress is applied, a sentence like 'he too should' and a phrase like 'you and I' with naturally unstressed sound units, as they are all function or closed-system words, may be produced with extra prominence and all their items unusually accentuated (as in 'he 'too 'should and 'you 'and 'I), with the aid of contrastive stress and pitch variation.

Further, a speaker may deliberately lengthen some syllables of some words in an utterance in a manner different from their usual length in order to assign to them additional meaning or to display deep emotional feelings. The prosodic feature, length is often superimposed on speech items like 'now...', an 'adverb... is...' and 'o...kay' employed by the teacher during framing and focussing exchanges to draw the attention of students to the introductory or concluding parts of a lesson or its sub topics. Learners are to be taught to embrace regular utilization of vowel, syllable and word lengthening whenever they are contributing actively during classroom instruction and the teacher is only serving as a facilitator or while supplying answers to questions as a 'response' move. Regular lengthening of words like 'well', 'that', 'obviously', 'however' 'then,' 'needs', 'of course,' 'again,' 'know,' 'he,' 'she' admittedly' and so on, to realise phrases and sentences like 'well...', 'the idea is that...', 'obviously...', 'that is not the answer,' 'as you all know...', 'he gave the information, then...', 'what the farmer needs... is more than a tractor,' 'isn't he,,,?' 'Won't she....?' 'Admittedly...the driver was careless' and a host of others, is expected of good learners of English language. This will in turn help them to always process their thoughts properly and carefully, express their opinions and feelings in clear and convincing ways not only during lessons but also when interacting with other interlocutors away from the classroom.

Additionally, when English words are stressed and lengthened, pitch modification is involved. And when pitch variation cuts across an entire phrase, a sentence or at times a single word, intonation is in place. Also, when we modify our voice quality oftentimes unknowingly and talk slowly, quickly, loudly, or quietly in the bid to convey meaning, we are employing intonation. Intonation refers to '...the use of pitch to signify different meaning'(Carroll, 2004, p. 66). There are five major intonation patterns in English. The first to be discussed is the falling intonation (used mainly for declarative sentences and wh- questions as in the sentences 'today is Friday' and 'what is your name?')

, while the second is the rising intonation (often employed towards the end of yes/no or polar questions and when the speaker is being friendly as in the sentences 'glad to know you're here,' 'you call her your friend?').

The third is the fall-rise intonation (used when warning or threatening others or when expressing wishes and hope as in the utterances 'beware of dogs,' 'all will be well'). The fourth is the peaking or rise-

fall intonation (used to show surprise or sarcasm as in the sentence 'that's ^\ great!') while the last is known as the level tone (used when seeking a routine information or making general interactive statements as in 'have you eaten your food?' 'Good morning'). These too must be brought to the learners' attention and practise using relevant classroom discourse types and ranks, to enable them adopt personal seamless speech rendition/production technique as early as possible in life.

Conclusion

Communication involves the employment of linguistic items, that is, phonemes which combine to form words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs and longer language structures, whether written or spoken, for the description of human's feelings, opinions and intentions in a coherent manner, and for proper transfer of information from one interactant to the other, in day to day human relationships. It occurs in form of discourse and discourse is somewhat related to and largely dependent on context as discursal language elements chosen by speakers are most of the time determined by the context of their interactions. A good knowledge of aspects of context is therefore essential for every language user for it includes not only the language code (s) selected for the communication or the emotions of the speakers which are indicated by their choice of pitch modulation patterns, but also other activities, and determines the success or otherwise of verbal exchanges both within and outside the classroom. Hence, its was deemed necessary for discussion in this study.

Classroom communications are often impromptu but somewhat formal. They follow carefully controlled procedures (which are quite similar to that which exists in other milieus and contexts within the society) as they take place in form of lesson, transaction, exchange, moves and acts. Hence, learners need adequate knowledge of the pronunciation of English speech sounds both in isolation and in rapid and connected utterances and the effect of proper/ improper articulation of speech units on their verbal exchanges within and beyond the school. This will enhance easy application of both the segments and the prosodies for clearer, readily intelligible, more melodious and more convincing verbal interactions and speech making, both when communicating with fellow students or with other members of the L2 community, as well as native speakers of the parlance, now and in the near and distant future.

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