Original Paper

Improving English as a Second Language Learners' Attitudes to Pronunciation through Motivation

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Abstract

Pronunciation is an important aspect of English learning. It is however one of the most abandoned or half taught. This is usually due to perceived difficulty in its teaching and learning. Hence, unfavorable attitudes set in, especially in English as a second language situation. In most cases, due to poor technique and methodology employed by the teachers of English, the students are not encouraged to learn pronunciation like other aspects of the subject. This attitude goes a very long way in determining their communicative competence as poor pronunciation could lead a breakdown in communication. It is thus the responsibility of the teachers to help the students learn. This paper thus advocates and presents some motivational strategies that could be employed by the teachers of English to improve the learners' attitude to learning pronunciation in English as a second language classroom.

Keywords

pronunciation, motivation, attitudes, English as second language

1. Introduction

Pronunciation is an important but generally or mostly abandoned aspect of English as Second Language. It plays a key a role in successful communication. It is an area of language that poses a challenge to both the learners of English language as a second language and the teachers. Many factors have been identified as being responsible for the perceived difficulty in learning pronunciation. These include availability of materials, teachers' role, poor method of teaching, etc. (Brown, 2001).

However, one common factor that affects learning of pronunciation is the learner's attitude. Due to one reason or the other, learners of ESL express some negative dispositions towards pronunciation learning (Abubakar & Abdullahi, 2015). According to Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwind (1996), since the

beginning of communicative approach in language teaching, particularly in relation to the teaching and learning of English, teachers have generally placed minimal or lesser emphasis on pronunciation. This unpopularity of this aspect in an ESL situation has brought about lack of measures in terms of exploring ways and techniques to improve English as Second Learners' pronunciation skills (Abubakar & Abdullahi, 2015).

The desire of this paper is therefore to examine the concepts of pronunciation and attitudes and suggest motivational techniques in improving the English as a Second Learners' attitude to learning pronunciation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Importance of Pronunciation

Like other ESL skills, good pronunciation helps learners with their communicative efficiency. Kriedler (1989) in Almaqrn and Alshabeb (2017) states that correct and clear pronunciation is important in language learning, since without it, learners might not be understood and may be poorly perceived by other English speakers.

Morley (1998) also argues that pronunciation plays an important role in helping learners to become more intelligible speakers. She adds that limited pronunciation skills can make learners lose their self-confidence and may have a negative influence on them when estimating their credibility and abilities.

In the same vein, Fraser (2000) also claims that poor pronunciation could, in turn, condemn learners to lower social, academic and work advancement than they deserve. Consequently, Morley (1998) stresses the importance of teaching pronunciation, arguing that tutors should work as "pronunciation coaches" when the students are initially receptive to learning in this area.

Pronunciation includes two major components: segmental features (vowels and consonant sounds) and suprasegmental features, also known as prosody. Pennington (1989) defines prosody as "the patterns in individual words of stress, pitch, tone, and rhythm and the intonational patterns of longer utterances" (p. 22).

Whatever the definition given to pronunciation, speaking with native-like pronunciation is not an easy goal to reach. A more realistic goal, and one that more and more teachers and researchers recommend, is *intelligible* pronunciation—speaking in a way that most listeners, both native and non-native speakers, can understand without too much effort or confusion (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010).

Many factors contribute to difficulty in learning pronunciation. They include students' ages, motivation, and personality (these are intrinsic factors as they depend on the learners themselves), quality of the teaching and the students' first language (these are external factors). Some of these factors are briefly discussed below.

The Age of the Learner

There is no denying that babies and very young children learn languages easily. They just seem to absorb the sounds and words they hear around them and, little by little, learn to imitate them accurately. This is known as critical period by linguists. It is usually around 12 to 14 years.

This implies that children can learn the sounds of language more naturally than adults and can approach native speaker pronunciation, provided they are surrounded by the language and have many chances to hear its pronunciation (Kenworthy, 1988).

Personality and Aptitude

Learners' personality traits such as extraversion, introversion as well talents, strengths, and weaknesses are factors that can affect how they learn pronunciation. Teachers sometimes assume that more outgoing learners will be able to learn pronunciation better than shy students, and there may be some truth to this. Confident students might speak more and be more willing to try new sounds, and this extra practice could help them improve their pronunciation (Judith, 2003).

Methods and Quality of Teaching

The kind of teaching students have experienced both in amount and quality has a strong influence on their learning. Have they received a lot of training in pronunciation? How much practice have they had? What kind of method is used, traditional or technological or modern? How effective is the method?, etc. (Brown, 2001).

Exposure to the Target Language

Students' pronunciation learning is also affected by how much English they have a chance to hear in their daily lives. Parents and peer group play prominent role here, and even the school environment. Learners who live in an English-speaking setting (homes, schools, friends, etc.) where they are constantly surrounded by the language will be more familiar with the sounds and melodies of the target language.

The Influence of the Learner's Language

A learner's first language (often referred to as the **L1**) has a strong influence on the way he or she learns the pronunciation of a second language (referred to as the **L2**). Often this influence is helpful, such as when some sounds are very similar in the two languages. For example, knowing how to pronounce /m/ in one language makes it easy for a learner to pronounce /m/ in another language. However, learners' pronunciation habits in their first language can also make it more difficult for them to pronounce sounds in the new language that do not exist in their L1 or that are used in a different way. Most language in Nigeria, for example, is tone-based while English is stress-timed. In some cases, we have issues such as Merging, Substitution, etc., and whatever the case, this affects intelligibility (Gilbert, 2008).

Nature of the Language (English)

The nature of the language itself throws some challenges. Unlike most local languages, English is not a spelling pronunciation language. There seems to be no relationship between what is written and what is read or pronounced. Whereas in most of our languages, we write as we pronounce and pronounce as we write.

2.2 Attitudes

The idea of attitudes in language learning is based on a long research tradition matched by an equally broad range of contexts (Bartram, 2010). This rests on the fact that studies have been conducted with focus on the role of attitudes in Li, Lii, foreign language and bi-lingual teaching and learning contexts. Attitude is thus an important factor in language learning; it provides the basic for reaction (response) to the teaching (stimulus).

The concept of attitudes has been variously defined. Once of the oldest but comprehensive definitions of the term was given by Allport (1954, p. 45) as

> A mental and neural state of read of readiness,
>
> organized through experience, exerting a directive
>
> or dynamic influence upon the individuals response
>
> towards all subjects and situations with which it is related.

Still stressing "response", Gardner (1985, p. 9) defined attitude as "an evaluative reaction to some referent…inferred on the basis of the individual's beliefs or opinions about the referent".

The connection between attitude and language is not easily determined though: this is because attitude does not necessarily translate into observable behaviour. According to Gardner (1985, p. 9), "attitudes are related to behaviour, though not necessarily directly". In relation to language learning, attitude is described as the sets of values which a pupil brings to the FLL (foreign language learning) experience. It is shaped by the pay-offs that she expects; the advantages that she sees in language learning (Chambers, 1999, p. 27).

This definition is particularly relevant as it does not only give the meaning, it is also very much related to learning foreign languages as well as stating that it could be influenced by certain factors. In another view, Bartram (2010) citing Baker (1992) presents "tripartite" attitude structure. According to the author, there are three components of attitudes. These are:

> cognitive constituents
>
> affective constituents
>
> conative constituents

Cognitive constituents are those aspects that are related to thoughts and beliefs. The affective components concern aspects related to feelings and emotions. The conative constituent is related to those areas which connect with behavioural intention. Although there are others models, this one seems most favoured by social psychology (Bohner, 2001).

Similarly, attitudes to language learning can be categorized in three (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Bartram, 2010). They are:

> attitudes relating to the target language community

> attitudes relating to learning a particular language

> attitudes relating to language learning in genreral

This categorization is now divided into two broad categories by Gardner (1985): social attitudes and educational attitudes. According to Bartram (2010), Gardner's categorization is based on the ideas or concepts of instrumentality and integrativeness. A learner who has integrative attitude will have positive attitudes towards language learning as this constitutes a desire for "social alignment with the target language community". He is thus socially motivated. A learner with instrumentality attitudes is motivated by the outcomes of the learning process: qualification, status, career advancement, etc. A learner can be motivated by the duo. A common phenomenon, however, in an ESL context (e.g., Nigeria, Malaysia) is instrumentality attitudes.

Besides those two factors (socio-cultural and educational factors), there are a host of other factors that are equally influential in language attitude formation (Kruglanski & Stroebe, 2005; Young, 1994; Dornyei, 2005). These include:

> Personality Trait of the Learner

> Cognitive Style

> Learner's Intelligence

> Aptitude

> Learners' Age

> Belief and Goals

> Teacher's Personality

> Methodology of Teaching

> Purpose of Learning

> Status of the Language, etc.

Attitude, in sum, is a psychological tendency expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavor. And finally, attitude thus is a hypothetical construct (inaccessible to direct observation) that has to be inferred from measurable responses which reflect positive or negative evaluation of the object (i.e., Language learning).

2.3 Strategies for Teaching Pronunciation: The Role of Motivation

Learners in any subject area tend to make more progress if they *want* to learn. No teacher can force students to learn if they are not motivated. This also applies to teaching pronunciation. We can provide information and many chances to practice, but we do not have the power to change our students' pronunciation for them. They have to want to do it and be willing to do the work themselves (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

According to Wharton and Race (2005), learners need motivation. They need to want to learn things. If they already want to learn, it is described as intrinsic motivation. Where intrinsic motivation is lacking, teachers have to encourage learners by showing them what benefits will flow from the achievement of their intended learning outcomes. This generates extrinsic motivation. In addition we need to make learning fun, interesting and rewarding, so that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation can work together. As teachers of English as second language learners, we can motivate our students by variety of strategies, activities and methodologies.

Learning-by-doing is important. Most learning happens when learners use language, have a go, and learn by making mistakes and finding out why. We need to ensure that learners are given early opportunities to try out and work with new language that they have encountered. By this, teachers can employ self-expression technique and ensure all fears are allayed (Frazer, 1999).

At the same time, feedback is essential to learners. They need to find out how their learning is actually going. They may feel that they have understood a particular aspect of pronunciation but cannot be certain until they get feedback on whether or not they are handling it successfully. This feedback must be timely.

The students need to know *why* something will be useful to them, even if they find it difficult; they are more likely to maintain their efforts until they have succeeded. In other words, teachers could arouse the interest of the learners as to the importance of learning pronunciation. We need to present to them the opportunities they have by knowing how to pronounce correctly (Edge, 1993).

At the same time, teachers of English as second learners should not concentrate only on supplying the learners with information. The teaching has to be structured so that they are practicing, applying, extending, comparing, contrasting, evaluating and engaging in other higher-level processes.

When teaching pronunciation, emphasis should not be on test or assessment. As Wharton and Race (2005), put it, the most important learning outcomes of an educational experience are not the syllabus-based, course-specific ones, but are the outcomes relating to being able to learn new skills and competencies better.

Another important strategy is by promoting self-esteem. Everyone is motivated by praise and encouragement. The more specific this can be the better. For example, teachers could mention particular areas of improvement when giving feedback to individual learners. Personalized, detailed praise is likely to be most meaningful, since it is clearly the product of some thought. There is thus more of a chance that it will impact on learners' self-esteem thereby motivating them to want to learn more (Azaraton, 2001; Wharton & Race, 2005).

The use of modern method such as call can be helpful (Adamson, 1996). Let learners listen to recordings of themselves. This can be a valuable awareness raising strategy; they may well hear features of their pronunciation that they simply do not have time to notice when actually speaking. As a result, they may be able to work on weak areas consciously.

Finally on this note, as teachers, we need to be models to our students. We can encourage them through the way we too use or pronounce words. That is leading by example. It is no use telling learners to do this or that if we cannot exhibit the same status. We need to ensure that our own behaviour is guided by the same values that underpin the code of conduct that we are attempting to establish with the class (Wharton & Race, 2005).

A language classroom is beyond just helping learners to improve their language. It is also about trying to create a rich, supportive, and memorable and life enhancing learning experience. Specifically, pronunciation is an area of language use where it is particularly difficult to exert conscious control (Bailey, 2006). We need to help the learners realise their potentials by giving them maximum motivation.

3. Conclusion

Attitude is very crucial to learning. It influences learners' perception of the whole teaching situation. Consequently, it affects their performance. In an ESL situation, teachers need to identify those attitudes of the students that could hinder successful learning and encourage them through motivation. No single method is the best in all situations but if the students are highly motivated through appropriate strategies they learn. The students need motivation to learn. It is the sole responsibility of the teachers of English to make them want to learn. This is most important in teaching pronunciation. Teachers must be aware that if care is not taken, whenever there is an occasion for ESLs to speak, the problem of pronunciation differential could lead to communication breakdown. So to curb this, teachers need to motivate the students to develop positive dispositions towards learning pronunciation.

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