



Teaching Phonetics of English in Indian Context

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Teaching Phonetics, accent, articulation, phonemic script, learners and teachers

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ABSTRACT *After the determined and successful attempt made by Indians to communicate in English, the intelligibility of the variety of English spoken by Indians to the speakers of other varieties has become a big subject for both teachers and learners of English in India now. Pronunciation of English undoubtedly matters a great deal to teaching as well as learning in a country like India. Addressing this complex phenomenon of phonetics in terms of teaching is also equally complex. My experience as a learner and a teacher of phonetics has provided an impetus for this paper which helpfully suggests three crucial steps towards the betterment of pronunciation of English in the teaching and learning setting in India.*

1. INTRODUCTION

English, which has risen to the level of being just one of the Indian languages for the educated in India, is still a tough nut to crack with regard to its alien pronunciation and mismatching spelling for both teachers and learners. It's a fact that the teaching of English in India chiefly confines to its grammar, vocabulary, speaking, writing and reading leaving pronunciation behind. Though listening skill is taught considerably well, mostly the students are expected to listen to the fellow learners or their teachers for this. And in most of the cases, the teacher and the listeners share the same native language and therefore the students may not stand a chance of getting exposed to right pronunciation. To put it in other words, In India, the learner either listens to teacher who also shares the same language and thus may not produce certain sounds properly for the learners or listens to typical British pronunciation that is extremely above his or her head. At times, both the varieties the learner gets exposed to may even confuse him/her.

As a learner, when I was instructed to practice pronouncing certain sounds listening to an audio that contains typical British English accent, I found many sounds extremely difficult to articulate as they are absent in my language. Furthermore, my teacher was not able to come to my aid as it was difficult for him too. Thus, in the phase of learning, incidents of this sort drove me to form a personal and false opinion that though we manage or learn to speak English, we cannot freely converse with native people because of the mutual unintelligibility. This subjective opinion, however, did not last for long as I made a constant effort to be a better articulator. After reaching certain heights as a learner in my graduation, I found my juniors also facing the same problem with the practice of pronunciation that I faced at my initial stage of learning.

2. THREE CRUCIAL STEPS TO TEACHING PHONETICS

As a teacher of English at Vishnu Institute of Technology (VIT), Bhimavaram, Andhra, the great care that I took to make my students feel at home while learning phonetics through some audios that I made yielded a satisfying result, which, I suppose, would be a great help for other teachers and learners as well in India. The learners are all students of engineering and technology who will have

to communicate with people of different nations. As part of syllabus, the engineering students have communication skills laboratory and a manual specially designed by phoneticians for teaching pronunciation. Apart from the lab manual which is fairly good, the software designed for pronunciation practice contains British accent which is difficult for the learners to get tuned to. It then urged me as a phonetics teacher to design an audio which can help them as a launch pad and get closer to the actual pronunciation of English. I, then, planned three crucial steps at which pronunciation can be taught effectively and understandably. The idea became a conspicuous success and the learners, to my surprise, could fairly connect to the accent used in a British documentary played to them at the end of the course.

Step 1

The first task towards teaching phonetics is to adequately explain how speech sounds are produced by an air stream. Once the learners realize that the speech is nothing but modified air, they will become ready to understand the anatomy of articulation system. Showing the picture of anatomy of articulation, the teacher can one by one introduce the terminology used to refer to the articulators in the mouth. After explaining the difference between vowels and consonants, the teacher should patiently demonstrate the articulation of all sounds of English. As the teacher pronounces certain sounds, he/she can introduce the phonemic symbols that represent those sounds. The learners can be encouraged to pronounce certain words that are easy for the students after which the teacher can make the learners work on some words that pose a problem in terms of pronunciation. Since all this activity takes a lot of time, the teacher can design a schedule based on the availability of number of classes. If time permits, the learners can even be motivated to write their names using the phonemic script taught to them.

This first step is well carried out by most of the teachers in India. Now let us move on to the second step which presents the crux of this paper.

Step 2

Of all the three steps that I propose here in teaching phonetics, this is the most crucial part. In general, once

the learners are introduced to the subject, they will become sensitive to the way sounds are articulated and pronounced. At this point, it is the responsibility of the teacher to articulate all sounds of English one by one with the help of a pronunciation dictionary (Preferably Daniel Jones) with corresponding words as examples and make an audio of it. The objective behind it is the fact that learner will find difficulty in following and catching the accent put on by native English people. The teacher though may not be perfectly accurate in terms of pronunciation, will be understandable to his/her learners since the teacher and the learners share the same linguistic background. To put it in other words, the audio made by the teacher will be of great help by being clear enough for the learners to start to correct their articulation which will be an initiation towards the foreign accent. Here, it is not intended that the teacher's articulation will be like the learner's. But when a teacher tries to articulate sounds consciously keeping in mind the competence levels of the students, it becomes easy for the learners to easily tune to it. Some teachers can, of course, be impeccable in their pronunciation with native like competence but in the setting of teaching and learning, the teacher has to be aware of who it is intended for.

The teacher, while recording his/her utterances, can even shed some light on the differences between a phoneme of English and its corresponding phoneme in their mother tongue. For instance, the phonemes /t/ and /d/ are alveolar plosives in English while they are always retroflex sounds in Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and most of the Indian languages. The phonemes /θ/ and /ð/ are interdental fricatives in English while they are dental in Telugu, Kannada and other Dravidian languages. This knowledge helps the learners better their pronunciation with regard to these sounds.

Once the learners acquire ease in their articulation of sounds of English properly, then they will find the RP (Received Pronunciation) easy to comprehend and thus further get tuned to it.

Step 3

At this step, the learners are expected to have some knowledge about the phonetics of English. The teacher can play some conversational audios designed by the native speakers of English and ask the students to pay attention to the pronunciation and also the intonation patterns of English like rising tone, falling tone, rise fall or fall rise. This exposure to native English will, beyond doubt, help the learners refine their accent to a great extent. After the audio, the learners can be encouraged to have a conversation in pairs putting on the accent they have just listened to. Here, it is not intended to say that they pick up the accent by listening to an audio but it will definitely help them to be better. Even in classroom, the teacher can ask students to make a write up using phonemic script which exactly represents the sounds of English.

Furthermore, the teacher can pick up some highly motivated and interested students and give them books written in phonemic script for practice at home.

3. CONCLUSION

It is apparent to say that phonetics is a complex phenomenon for both the processes of teaching and learning. Though in India pronunciation is not paid much attention, it does matter on the global market. With the advancement of technology and science, peoples of different nations come together to communicate and have a share in everything. This paper does not argue that students should speak English just like Englishmen do but to the extent intelligible to the outer world. When this challenging phenomenon is dealt with by the teacher with a good amount of care and patience, the learners can at least rise to being fairly intelligible to other nations.

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