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Future Directions for Pronunciation Teaching: Intelligibility, Content, and Oral Communication

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Abstract

Although pronunciation has become an important component of a communicative approach to language teaching, the development of pronunciation research and teaching is faced with three important, unresolved issues. First, pronunciation theory and practice suffers from a poorly developed understanding of intelligibility, a weakness which stunts significant progress in research and teaching. Second, the widely accepted belief that suprasegmentals such as stress, rhythm and intonation are more important in intelligibility than vowel and consonant sounds is overly simplistic and should be more carefully examined. Finally, while the integration of pronunciation and oral communication curricula is critically important, attempts to integrate have often been less than successful. Reasons for this are explored and new directions for integration are suggested.

*The words of the prophets are written
on the subway walls and tenement halls
Simon and Garfunkel, "The Sounds of Silence"*

Factors which define the shape of the future are often unforeseen, and it is very likely that even the best predictions will badly miss the mark. Predicting the future of pronunciation teaching is no different. The goal of this paper, however, is to do exactly that by examining at key trends over the past two decades in order to guess what directions the future will take. This paper will suggest that three trends are particularly important in the development of pronunciation theory and teaching: the issue of intelligibility, a rethinking of the content of pronunciation instruction, and a more complete integration of pronunciation into the oral communication classroom.

Any introductory ELT methods class describes the changing role of pronunciation in different methods. In some, such as the Reading Method, pronunciation was largely irrelevant, while in others, such as Audiolingualism, pronunciation was central to language teaching. As a result of the loss of influence for Audiolingualism in the mid 1960s, acceptance of pronunciation instruction has been decidedly mixed. Some communicative methodologists, especially in the early days of communicative language teaching, have argued that pronunciation is not really worthy of classroom time, and even those who argue most strongly for pronunciation's role in ELT no longer give it the importance that it had in Audiolingualism. Although students frequently assume that pronunciation is essential, teachers may not. Those teachers who do believe pronunciation is essential find that the widespread acceptance of communicative goals has forced them to demonstrate exactly how pronunciation is essential to communication. The assumption that students should (and can)

speak like native speakers has rightly fallen by the wayside as being impossible, irrelevant, and damaging to proficiency. Instead of seeking a native-like accent, pronunciation theorists now speak of helping learners achieve an acceptable level of intelligibility, that is, helping them to become understandable without seeking to eradicate non-native speech patterns that do not significantly impede understanding.

Along with this fundamental change in goals has been a fundamental change in the content of pronunciation instruction. The overall emphasis of the past was toward the more well-described and easily presented vowel and consonant sounds with less emphasis on suprasegmentals (stress, rhythm, and melody). There were exceptions to this general pattern, of course. Pike's (1945) *Intonation of American English* created a very long-lasting system for teaching the rhythm and intonation of American English, while O'Connor and Arnold's (1963) *Intonation of Colloquial English* was equally influential for British English.

In contrast, today it would be difficult to find a theorist or knowledgeable teacher who does not advocate a primary focus on suprasegmentals. This is primarily because suprasegmentals are considered most likely to aid intelligibility. McNerney and Mendelsohn (1992) say that because suprasegmentals are most likely to make learners' speech more easily comprehensible in the short run, they should be the focus of instruction. To this could be added the idea that learner difficulties with suprasegmentals may be less tied to learners' native languages than segmentals and thus are more suited to mixed language background classes.

A third trend that has affected the role of pronunciation is the ascendancy of

communicative approaches to language learning. These newer approaches have cast a spotlight on how pronunciation is connected to oral proficiency for listening and speaking (Murphy 1991; Morley 1999). Rather than being a central focus in language proficiency, pronunciation is increasingly seen in light of how it can help achieve communicative proficiency without setting up unrealistic standards of attainment.

These three areas, the role of pronunciation in intelligibility, the primary content of pronunciation instruction, and the place of pronunciation in oral communication curricula, appear to be key to the future development of pronunciation theory and teaching. Issues of intelligibility seem especially important because it is definitions of intelligibility which will help define which pronunciation topics are most important and which are least. Each of these areas will be explored for its importance in the possible future shape of pronunciation theory and teaching.

The Role of Intelligibility

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT INTELLIGIBILITY

Although intelligibility is a central issue in a wide variety of fields, including psychology, linguistics, and language teaching, we actually know very little about it. Like many useful concepts, usable definitions of intelligibility are very hard to pin down. Intelligibility may be confused with comprehensibility or accentedness, although these terms appears to describe different constructs (Munro & Derwing, 1999). Intelligibility is also sometimes confused with irritation (Hahn, 1999). Judgments of intelligibility appear to be affected by many different unexpected errors and variations in the content of the expected

message. Thus negative judgments of intelligibility can come from mispronunciations of vowels and consonants (Munro & Derwing, 1999), perceptions of speaker origin, class, or personality, incorrect focus placement (Hahn, 1999), errors in prosody, grammar, and lexical choice (Tyler et al., 1988), or word stress errors (Gallego, 1990). Unfortunately, which factors most contribute to unintelligibility has been much harder to specify because intelligibility judgments are closely tied to other factors such as conversational context (Hahn, 1999).

What seems likely from these findings is that differences in what is expected, whether from errors or variety of a language or from content, are likely to limit understanding. The extent of the limitation for each error is not well understood nor is it easy to determine which difficulty is most likely to increase unintelligibility. If learners made only one easily classifiable error per utterance, determining contributions to intelligibility would be straightforward. This is clearly not the case and has been recognized by many. Prator and Robbinett (1985), for example, suggested that lack of intelligibility results from "the cumulative effect of many little departures from the phonetic norms of the language...Under certain circumstances, any abnormality of speech can contribute to unintelligibility" (p. xxii).

Intelligibility is and is likely to remain a key concept in pronunciation instruction. The fuzzy definitions of what constitutes intelligibility should become more clear. In addition to defining intelligibility as a construct, it is important to determine the context of communication in discussing intelligible speech. What is now needed most are carefully designed,

pedagogically meaningful studies on learner intelligibility, both synchronic and diachronic. Studies leading to clearer definitions of intelligibility are especially needed as a starting point.

IMPLICATIONS OF FOCUSING ON INTELLIGIBILITY

Teaching for intelligibility rather than to achieve native-like accuracy has important consequences that are only now becoming widely accepted. The first consequence is that pronunciation teachers must accept a wider range of accepted varieties of English. Rather than focusing on Received Pronunciation or General American, as has traditionally been the practice in ELT (Trudgill, 1994), pronunciation teachers should be able to use as a model the variety of English that is most commonly used in their own teaching context. Such a variety may be one of the other standard native varieties, such as Australian, New Zealand, or South African English, varieties that students in certain parts of the world are most likely to be in contact with (Trudgill 1994). Alternatively, pronunciation may be more profitably taught in reference to a nativized variety, such as Indian, Singaporean, or Nigerian English. Kachru (1986) argues persuasively that such nativized varieties are equally valid varieties of English which have independent, valid functions and usage patterns that cannot be judged as inaccurate variants of native varieties. By and large, speakers of different standard native and nativized varieties of English understand one another's pronunciation differences, that is, they are mutually intelligible. This fact alone indicates that the choice of a model should be far more flexible than is usually the case.

A second consequence of focusing on intelligibility rather than native-like pronunciation is that non-native teachers can openly be given a place in teaching pronunciation. The widespread assumption that only native speakers should teach pronunciation is evident in the comments of native teachers, from students ("I want a teacher who sounds American, British, etc."), and from non-native teachers themselves. When I teach a pronunciation tutoring section of a TESL Practicum course, I always find myself having to convince non-native teachers that they can be successful, no matter how many problems they perceive in their own pronunciation. They invariably find, much to their own surprise, that they are successful and that their non-nativeness gives them a face validity with the learner because they know what it is like to be a learner of English.

Non-native teachers bring significant strengths that bring to the classroom in knowledge of grammar and from having been a learner, among other areas (Seidlhofer, 1999). But non-native teachers are all too often excluded from teaching pronunciation because of the assumption that only native speakers can really teach pronunciation. This "native speaker fallacy" holds that native-like pronunciation is required for admission to the top level of teaching professionalism and can force non-native teachers to "be obsessed with native-like pronunciation" and "to spend undue time repairing their pronunciation or performing other cosmetic changes to sound native" (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 84).

Although intelligibility is now the accepted goal for teaching pronunciation, there has been less recognition that the long-standing prejudice against non-native

teachers should be done away with as well. In the future, this should significantly change. The number of users of English in the world is currently estimated to be around one and a half billion, only 350 million of whom are what is traditionally called native speakers (Crystal 1997). This leaves around 80 percent of English users who are non-native, a figure that indicates that the teaching of pronunciation must be done by non-native teachers if it is to be done at all.

The Content of Pronunciation Teaching

LESS FOCUS ON SUPRASEGMENTALS IN GENERAL AND MORE ON SPECIFIC

Emphasis on suprasegmentals over segmentals has become an article of faith among pronunciation theorists. Morley, for example, in summarizing major trends, says that pronunciation instruction “now emphasizes the critical importance of the suprasegmental features (i.e., stress, rhythm, intonation)” and adds that work on vowel and consonant sounds should be integrated into suprasegmental patterns (1999, p. 20). A weakness of the definition of suprasegmentals given by Morley is the use of meta-categories which include a variety of prosodic phenomena, such as word stress (*eléctric* vs. *electricity*), the stress of compounds (*a black bírd* vs. *a bláck bird*), focus (*Is he LEAVing soon?* vs. *Is he leaving SOON?*), stress versus syllable timing, vowels and consonants which change character because of rhythmic properties (e.g., schwa, “Did you” becoming “Didja”), and a wide variety of intonational issues such as pitch movement at the end of a sentence, pitch movement at the end of a non-final phrase, and the beginning pitch level of an utterance (“key” in Brazil 1994). Exactly which suprasegmentals should be

emphasized, however, is usually not stated very clearly. Clarifying the relative importance of various suprasegmentals and the contexts in which they are most important is likely to be a major focus of future pronunciation theory and practice.

There are some preliminary indications about relative importance of various suprasegmentals. Focus, the use greater length, pitch movement, and loudness to highlight certain words or syllables, appears to be one of the most important suprasegmentals. For learners of English in an EIL context, Jenkins (1997) listed focus as the single most important element to teach. Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994) say that focus is “maybe *the* most important function of intonation” (p. 81, emphasis theirs).

A rhythm based phenomenon in English, elided and blended sounds, as in (1), appear not to have the same importance. While learners clearly must gain control over focus both in comprehension and in production, elided and blended forms appear to be most crucial for learners who have regular contact with native speakers. Non-native speakers of English who use English primarily with other non-native speakers would have little need for this feature of English speech.

- (1) Tim: I *dunno* what clothes to take.
 Whaddaya think I should pack?
 Jackie: I *dunno*. It depends on *whatcha*
 wanna do after you get there.
 I’m *gonna* go shopping now.
 Do you *wanna* come with me?
 Tim: I *dunno* if it would help.
 Whaddaya think?
 Jackie: It couldn’t hurt.
 (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996,
 p. 235)

Final intonation, a mainstay in many pronunciation books, also appears to be relatively unimportant. Jenkins (1997) found that unintelligibility in interactions between non-native speakers of English was almost never connected to errors in final pitch movement. Levis (1999) argued that the difference between falling and rising pitch movement on yes/no questions does not affect intelligibility greatly and should not be taught.

Because of the central role of intelligibility in determining what should be taught, pronunciation teachers need more specific help in knowing which suprasegmentals are most likely to help learners. It is not enough to continue to say that suprasegmentals should be emphasized. Teachers need to know which suprasegmentals and when.

A GREATER EMPHASIS ON SEGMENTAL ACCURACY

Despite my belief in the central importance of suprasegmentals in creating meaning, I think that pronunciation teaching in the future must move back toward a greater emphasis on vowels and consonants to aid intelligibility. Some theorists already admit that such a change is necessary, calling for a more balanced approach to the suprasegmental/segmental debate (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin 1996, p. 10). It is not uncommon to find very advanced learners of English who are very hard to understand simply because they have significant segmental errors. In one striking but by no means unusual case, I had a student in a pronunciation class who skillfully did everything I asked regarding suprasegmentals. He put focus on the correct words, lengthened appropriately,

used reduced vowels in the right places, and stressed the correct syllable on most words. He remained almost completely incomprehensible because of a small number of pervasive vowel and consonant errors, such as the use of /ay/ for /ε/ (*bed* and *let* sounded like *bide* and *light*) and a seemingly free variation between /l/ and /n/. Intelligibility was not a matter of suprasegmentals but vowels and consonants.

In a striking confirmation of the importance of segmentals, Jenkins (1996) recorded eight hours of interaction between non-native speakers using English. She found that 27 of 28 misunderstandings due to pronunciation involved segmental errors, either alone or in combination with prosodic factors. The errors often caused lack of understanding even when contextual clues should have made the meaning clear. She says that "miscommunication of some sort occurred in spite of the availability of extra-linguistic information and persisted up to the point where the phonemic or phonetic pronunciation error was corrected by the speaker" (p. 37). Although Jenkins only studied non-native users of English and her results cannot be extended to the behavior of native speakers in making sense of mispronounced consonants and vowels, the findings suggest that the power of contextual clues in aiding understanding for native speakers may not always be strong enough to overcome misunderstandings caused by vowel and consonant errors.

Pronunciation and Oral Communication INTEGRATING PRONUNCIATION AND ORAL COMMUNICATION

The final trend in pronunciation theory and teaching is the increasing integration of pronunciation and

communicative approaches to language teaching. The resuscitation of pronunciation teaching in the past twenty years has come about in large measure due to a greater recognition of the contribution of suprasegmentals to successful interaction. Morley (1999) gives primary importance to the integration of pronunciation (especially suprasegmentals) into oral communication, saying that pronunciation must not be separated from communication in the second language curriculum.

In contrast to these calls for integration, a communicative approach to teaching pronunciation has often meant simply doing pronunciation exercises in a separate pronunciation class in a more "communicative" way rather than in a way where successful pronunciation is crucial to the success of the communication. Celce-Murcia (1987), in one of the earliest American discussions of communicative pronunciation teaching, illustrates this approach. She discusses a variety of activities (such as calendars and family trees) meant to make pronunciation practice more interactive. Celce-Murcia's article was written at a time when simply creating pronunciation games was a tremendous step forward. Similarly, Naiman (1992, p.166) uses matching and chain activities that rely on an overabundance of target sounds to provide what he calls communicative pronunciation practice. For the sounds /b/ and /v/, for example, he suggests that teachers divide the class into two groups.

Group A has a written description of several people. Group B has a picture containing all of the people for which there are descriptions. The object of this activity is to match the written descriptions with

the appropriate people. Some sample descriptions might be:

Becky has big boots.
Vicky has a velvet vest.
Barbara is carrying a big bag.
Virginia is wearing gloves.
Bill has a shiny belt-buckle.

While this type of exercise is undeniably more interesting than simple listen and repeat, it does not appear to be overly applicable to actual interaction. Yet it is exercises like this that are often considered communicative, despite strong similarities to older pronunciation exercises that made no claims to being communicative.

INTEGRATING PRONUNCIATION AND ORAL COMMUNICATION

Truly integrating pronunciation into the oral communication classroom means that pronunciation increasingly must be practiced in situations in which it is essential to successful communication. Rather than being taught simply through games and activities, pronunciation should become an important part of task-based activities and simulations in which it is possible to miscommunicate due to pronunciation errors (Kaltenböck & Seidlhofer, 1999). Pronunciation should also be taught with reference to larger communicative goals, necessitating a change in the syllabus from pronunciation topics to oral communication topics. Instead of teaching intonation patterns, for example, we would teach intonation only when and to the extent that it was necessary for successful communication. I have suggested elsewhere that "the primary reason to teach intonation should be to highlight its use in

communication...when teaching intonation, intonation should not be the only, or even the central reason for the instruction [and] can only be central in language teaching if it is subordinate to communicative uses of language" (Levis, 1999, pp.57-58). This principle can be applied to other elements of pronunciation as well. A goal of intelligibility means that pronunciation instruction can only be truly useful when it is clearly essential to success in communication. To fine tune accuracy of vowels, consonants, and suprasegmentals when accuracy is not crucial for intelligibility means wasted time.

There are very few models available which integrate pronunciation into oral communication teaching. Two obvious possibilities exist. First, we can teach pronunciation, but do it in a communicative manner. In this way of teaching, the teaching is centered around pronunciation points, such as rhythm, focus, word stress, or sounds like /l/ and /r/. The pronunciation point is central and speaking and listening activities are included which will help learners practice the pronunciation points. In a limited way, this is what many of the better pronunciation textbooks currently do. A weakness of this approach is that it is frequently easy to shortchange communication practice because of the central focus on pronunciation. In addition, the approach assumes that it is possible to determine ahead of time which topics are most important to intelligibility.

Alternatively, teaching can be centered around important communicative tasks for the learners, with pronunciation topics that are likely to be elicited in the

task. This is an approach which has been used with mixed success. Successful series like *New Interchange* (Richards, Hull, & Proctor, 1997) regularly include pronunciation practice that fits with a functional or communicative topic. For example, the intonation of questions may be practiced in a unit that practices asking about likes and dislikes. A weakness of this approach to integrating pronunciation and oral communication is that the pronunciation topics are related to the communicative tasks but are rarely essential to successful communication. Thus it is often possible to forego pronunciation practice in this approach with little noticeable effect.

Clearly, what is needed are models of integrating pronunciation and oral communication that promote communicative effectiveness but also include practice with pronunciation issues essential to effectiveness. In one example which successfully included pronunciation instruction into an oral communication course, Clennell (1997) describes an English for Academic Purposes course in which practice with discourse intonation was essential to communicative effectiveness. Integrating oral communication into a pronunciation class can also be difficult, since it is important to practice pronunciation in an area where its accuracy is crucial to communication. Pronunciation exercises which successfully integrate with speaking and listening should have a clear communicative purpose beyond the practice of pronunciation, the pronunciation topic should be essential to successful communication, and there should be a built-in monitor which shows when the interaction has been less than successful.

CONCLUSION

Pronunciation, once central to language teaching and later marginalized through a greater emphasis on communication, has once again begun to move toward becoming essential in English language teaching. Further progress, however, may be stymied if important issues central to the role of pronunciation are not addressed. The primary issue in making substantive progress is a more usable definition of intelligibility, one that is based on generalizable research findings. Helping learners achieve intelligibility has long been an important goal of pronunciation instruction, but knowledge of what elements of pronunciation most contribute to intelligibility remains spotty and suggestive. Secondly, the assumption that suprasegmentals are of primary importance in achieving intelligibility must be examined. This idea, although nearly 50

years old, has very little empirical support and is overly simplistic. Just as different segmental errors do not equally affect intelligibility, neither do different errors in the use of suprasegmentals. We do not know, however, which suprasegmentals most affect intelligibility. Finally, pronunciation's rise from the ashes has occurred because practitioners have increasingly argued that pronunciation must be integrated into oral communication so that its contribution to communicative competence be maximized. Currently, making pronunciation communicative has mostly meant using games and communicative exercises. Integrating pronunciation as an equal partner with speaking and listening, however, has been an elusive goal. But it is a goal that must be pursued if pronunciation teaching is to remain an essential part of teaching oral communication.

The Author

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