

PRIORITIES TO ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

This article is part of an MA dissertation in Applied Linguistics and TESOL, which provides recommendations by EFL experts on what and how to teach English phonology. It highlights the need of a precise pronunciation syllabus in textbooks in use at present times.

Keywords: Pronunciation teaching focus; pronunciation features; L2 phonology.

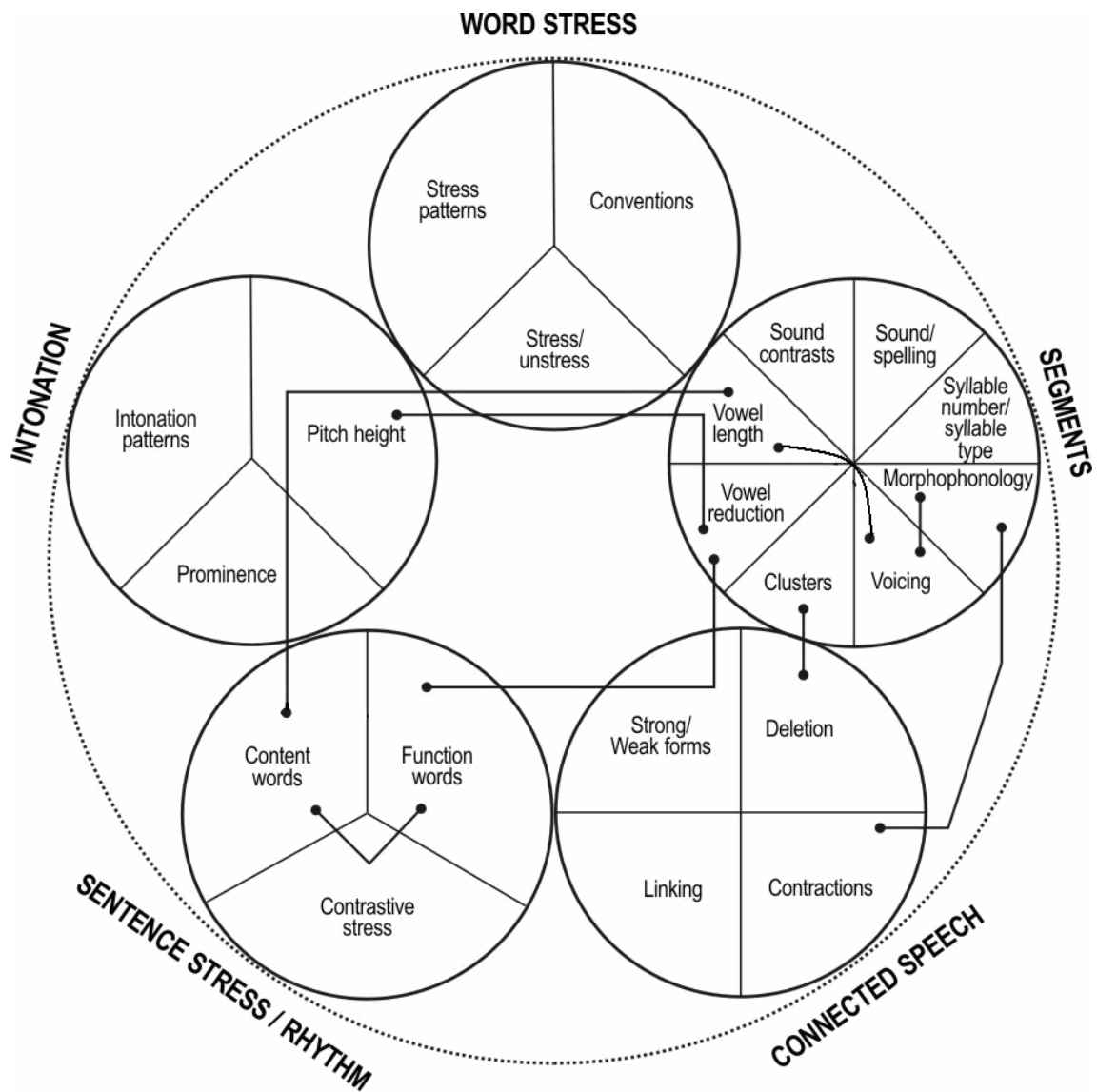
1. INTRODUCTION

Language school teachers hold the responsibility for coping with the instruction of all language skills. I have heard from many of them that pronunciation training is time-consuming besides difficult to approach; and observed that textbooks usually lack clarity of pronunciation teaching focus. Generally speaking, they undervalue the peculiarities of pronunciation features and generalise the focus given to them. Therefore, two models were designed to illustrate a compilation of what contemporary thoughts advocate, coupled with personal observations. They aim at adult learners and can be used since the beginning stage of learning.

2. WHAT TO TEACH

The first model involves five circles that form the components of L2 phonology and highlights elements within each pronunciation feature that Brazilian teachers should handle. Equally important, it presents their interrelationship, being this extremely beneficial for learners and economical for teaching.

THE TEACHING OF PRONUNCIATION FEATURES



Within **word stress** three elements should be prioritised: stress patterns, conventions and stress/unstress. There is a strong tendency to teach word stress with reference to its placement on the syllable only i.e., first/second/third. However, the pattern of word stress differentiates according to grammatical classes; nouns, verbs, compounds, numbers, phrasal verbs, reflexive pronouns have distinctive stress patterns. Additionally, suffixes play an important role in predicting word stress. If teachers call further attention to this fact, the information passed on to learners will become less vague and they may learn how to predict stress placement on different lexis more precisely. Obviously, learners should not be overtaxed by numerous rules; adherence to some is useful, though. Use of a convention (e.g. capitals) serves as a practical visual clue to indicate stress placement within the word. Teachers should adopt one, but learners should be informed of the variety in which they can be found. Overall, stress has caused teachers overriding concern. Nevertheless, both stress/unstress must be given equal emphasis as they relate to elements of other components; accurate production of a stressed syllable depends on knowledge of vowel length (segments) and pitch height (intonation – in this case a loud one); an unstressed syllable is characterised by vowel reduction (usually the sound schwa) and a lower pitch. Therefore, teaching the combination of these elements (stress – vowel length – pitch height; unstress – vowel reduction – pitch height) should be regarded as a necessity rather than trivialities. Lack of a clear focus on unstress triggers great difficulties with production of weak forms/function words; which in turn affects production of sentence stress/rhythm. The sound schwa, the vowel sound that occurs in unstressed syllables, should be taught explicitly to all learners.

Segments contain eight elements (see the figure above). The importance of working on specific sound contrasts (vowels/consonants); sound/spelling relationship; vowel length and vowel reduction is vital. Other suggestions are made, though. The teaching of sound contrasts may be complemented by the use of two significant tools: clear articulatory explanation (point/manner of articulation or voicing) when it is made necessary and phonetic symbols. The latter is useful for learner's individual dictionary work and the distinction between sound and spelling. Vowel length should be approached with some caution. It is necessary to teach beginners the effect of vowel length in word stress so that a stressed syllable is clearly distinguished from an unstressed one. However, the relationship between vowel length and voicing (voiced/voiceless sounds) should be presented to higher levels. If beginners have recently learned phonetic symbols, they may feel overwhelmed by the fact that the principle of voicing interferes in vowel quality in that any vowel can be lengthened. Explicit teaching on voicing is also indispensable in pronunciation lessons due to its connection with morphophonology (pronunciation of grammatical endings - plural, past/present tenses, etc). Concerning consonant clusters, those beginning with / s / (e.g. sp, st, spr, etc) should be prioritised as they have caused Brazilian learners frequent occurrence of wrong vowel epenthesis. It is possible that working on syllable number or syllable type (cv, cvc, ccvc, etc; c = consonant and v = vowel) aids our learners to eradicate problems with segmental insertion and/or omission. If the learner insists on saying / 'hæp / rather than / 'hæpi / (happy), the teacher can elicit from the learner the number of syllables in the word (e.g. How many syllables does it have?) and/or show

that the syllable structure is 'cvcv' through phonemic transcription on the board.

There are four elements inside the component of **connected speech**. Deletion is associated with simplification of a sound in consonant clusters. Many common words which are introduced to beginners contain mid position clusters in which a consonant is deleted (e.g. deletion of consonant / d / in the cluster nd in sandwich); but still many advanced learners mispronounce them. Contractions and linking are vital elements in natural spoken discourse; a precise focus on them should be sustained. Contracted phrases such as 'wanna, gonna, hafta, dunno, etc' are often used informally; at least working on perception/recognition is advisable. Contractions and morphophonology also form a loop in that the plural rule conforms to the pronunciation of contracted forms 'is' and 'has'. The teaching of strong/weak forms is related to function words; and these are also relevant for production of prominence regarding emphatic purpose.

Three elements appear in **sentence stress/rhythm**. Clear distinction between content and function words must be pointed out to avoid potential interference caused by the Portuguese rhythm; which differs substantially from the English one. Moreover, an explicit focus on content words would facilitate learning of prominence. Contrastive stress is essential to make learners produce and perceive contrastive information. Notice that it involves content/function words; and function words consist of strong/weak forms.

The teaching of **intonation** should cover basic intonation patterns, prominence and pitch height. By basic intonation patterns, I refer to intonation of yes/no questions, wh-questions, tag questions and statements mainly. It should be clear to learners why the pitch of our voice falls or rises and how it occurs in stressed/unstressed syllables of content words to produce correct intonation. In natural speech, native speakers concentrate on information focus which is usually a content word within an utterance or any other word (content/function) within a conversation. This is known as prominence which hinges on knowledge of several other elements; e.g., the prominent element within the word is a stressed syllable which must be pronounced higher (pitch height) and longer (vowel length) than its neighbour(s).

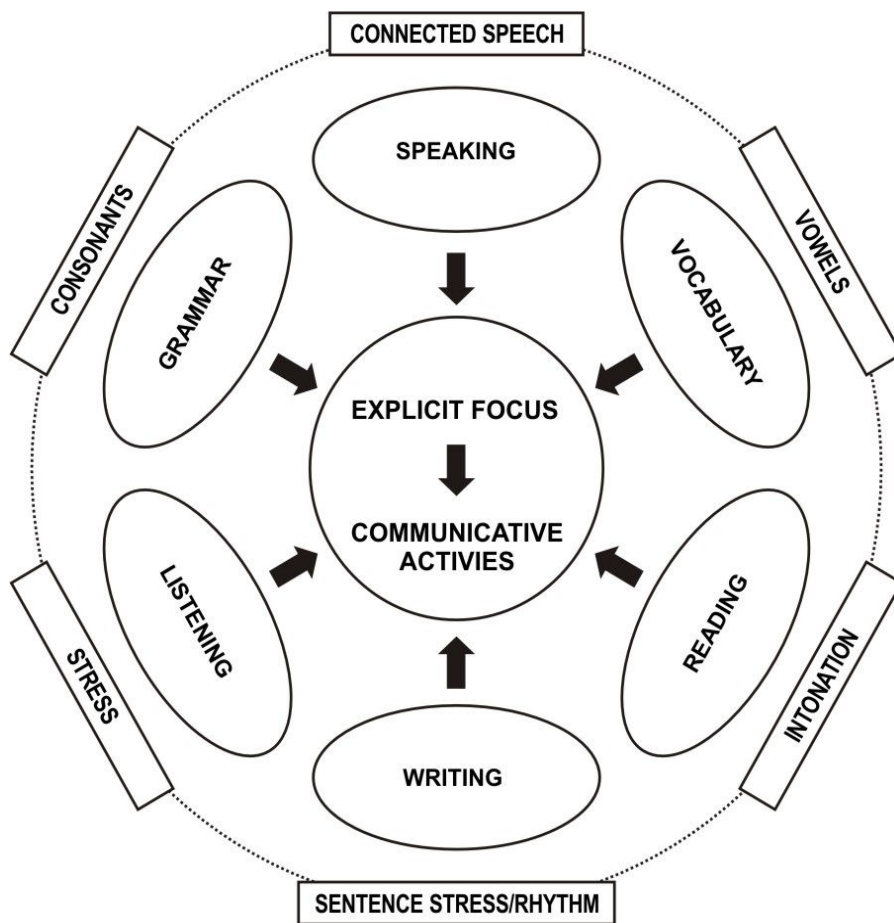
It is noteworthy that this discussion calls for a further explicit focus on the majority of these phonological elements; basically because not all learners are well-endowed with covert instructional approaches. If such information is neglected, pronunciation teaching tends to be peripheral and superficial; thus, inadequate for FL learners. It should be mentioned, however, that implicit instruction should not be absolutely discarded. Rather, it seems very effective when similarities outnumber differences between two FL phonologies. Obviously, the elements should not be taught all at once, but after two of them are introduced others will naturally follow. This is the main advantage of their interrelationship as a focus on one element may aid the teaching/learning process of others (e.g. vowel length \curvearrowright stress \curvearrowright prominence \curvearrowright content word). An authoritative account of this area is provided by Celce-Murcia et al. (1996),

ideal to be used with teachers in service training. Alternatively, Avery and Ehrlich (1992) provide a more simplified version.

3. HOW TO TEACH

The second model exhibits an integrated approach to L2 pronunciation training: connected speech, vowels, intonation, sentence stress/rhythm, stress and consonants are incorporated in the teaching of language aspects – speaking, vocabulary, reading, writing, listening and grammar.

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO PRONUNCIATION TEACHING



Notice that arrows point to an inner circle which stands for the consolidation of pronunciation work; it should begin with an explicit focus towards communicative activities. It is not suggested, however, that other activity types cannot be used at all, but that communicative activities should be a matter of concern as the basic purpose of ELT nowadays is to augment oral skills. Communicative activities involve dialogues, role-playing, simulation, debate, problem-solving situation, information-gap exercises (Littlewood, 1981) in which a pronunciation element is in focus. Interesting ideas can be found in Bradford (1988), Bowen & Marks (1992), Naiman (1992) and Celce-Murcia et al. (1996). Bradford's (1988) activities, for example, relate to intonation only and were devised for more advanced levels. Nevertheless, as she has developed a more thorough and varied pattern of activities this framework can be adapted to the teaching of any pronunciation feature with beginners too. It can be arranged as follows:

1. Sensitisation – This works as an awareness exercise. The teacher can explore pictures, start a conversation or work on a listening/reading comprehension by asking questions focussing on the pronunciation element she wants to teach.
2. Explanation – clear explanation on the chosen feature is provided.
3. Imitation – the learner listens to and repeats the model – the teacher or a recording.
4. Practice activities – Several activity types can be worked on and through the use of resources such as Cuisenaire rods, songs, games, etc.

5. Communication activity – In pairs students engage themselves in freer practice after a context is provided. (Adapted from Bradford, 1988: 3)

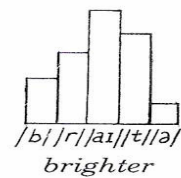
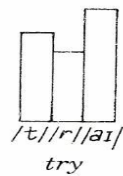
A variety of musical/tactile/visual tools can be employed: stretching rubber bands between the thumbs is useful to indicate vowel length; pocket mirrors may help learners to grasp the articulatory positions of the segments; plastic kazoos or a metronome may strengthen learning of intonation and rhythm (the features of a stressed vs. unstressed syllable); cuisenaire rods lend themselves well for the teaching of segments, stress, rhythm, etc. Others include a phonemic chart, dictionaries, songs and games. These recommendations are offered by Gilbert (1993); Kelly (2000); Bowen & Marks (1992); Underhill (1994) and Hancock (1995). The illustration below exemplifies the use of Cuisenaire rods (Figure 1):

Figure 1

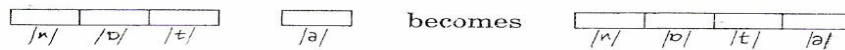
Cuisenaire rods can represent phonemes too. A convention can be set up involving, say, five different coloured rods to represent different sounds. For example:

white (1cm) = /ə/
 red (2cm) = /b/
 green (3cm) = /r/
 pink (4cm) = /t/
 yellow (5cm) = /aɪ/

One possible exercise would be for groups of learners, each with a 'pool' of rods, to construct as many words as possible, e.g. *tie, bite, try, buy*. They can then spell them as well, e.g. /raɪt/ = *right, write*, in order to help develop their awareness of English words as combinations of a limited set of units, and of relationships between sound and spelling. Just a couple of the many possibilities with the above set are given below.

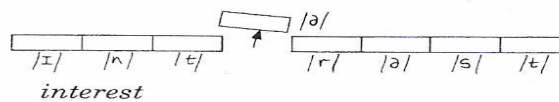


Rods which represent sounds in this way can be moved together in order to indicate linking between words:



not a (in a phrase like *not a good idea*).

Rods can be taken away to indicate elision:



Marks (1992: 123)

CONCLUSION

The present article discusses an important area of ELT – English phonology. It focuses on the essentials of English pronunciation and the ways they can be taught. It is hoped they can raise Brazilian teachers' awareness as to the need of changes towards the content and nature of activities that relate to the teaching of pronunciation.

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