

Teaching English to Indian Learners – A Pragmatic Approach A PowerPoint Participation

Swarnadevi Thirumalai, M.A.

Former Assistant Professor, D. Banumiah's College, Mysuru

Former Director of Library and English Instructor

Bethany College of Missions, MN USA

swarnadevi@comcast.net

1. What is Pronunciation?

- i. A component of speaking skill.
- ii. An essential tool for communication.
- iii. Perfect or elegant pronunciation may not be our goal.
- iv. Native-like pronunciation also may not be our goal.
- v. In India every region/state has its own English pronunciation.
- vi. Our goal is to learn pronunciation which is comprehended by the listeners despite differences in pronunciation.
- vii. Something that is understood despite our personal angularities in pronouncing a word, phrase or sentence.
- viii. Your pronunciation of a word or phrase or sentence or sentences should help your listener to retrieve relevant word/phrase or sentence in the head of the listener! It should click in the brain what is the similar item in the brain of the listener!
- ix. Pronunciation, thus, is not simply a physical process, it is a psycholinguistic process.
- x. Your intent and meaning of the utterances are carried through your pronunciation.
- xi. Incorrect pronunciation may be defined and described, but the concept of “poor” or “very poor” pronunciation is difficult to define and describe.
- xii. When we say “poor pronunciation” we seem to measure our pronunciation in terms of native English, or members of educated families, educated in English for several generations.
- xiii. Not elegance, not style, but meaning conveying pronunciation.
- xiv. Incorrect and/or unclear pronunciation should not be equated with inadequate knowledge of English, to certain extent.
- xv. Two or three categories of Students as well as Teachers dominate our English Teaching/Learning classes:
 - a. Rural Background
 - b. First generation Learners and Teachers
 - c. Tamil medium classes
- xvi. **FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE PRONUNCIATION – At Least 6 Factors:**
 1. The influence of the learner's native language.
 2. The learner's age.

3. The learner's exposure to English – length and intensity of exposure.
4. The learner's innate phonetic ability.
5. The learner's attitude and sense of identity.
6. The learner's motivation and concern for good pronunciation (Celce-Murcia and Goodwin 1991:137).

xvii. Consider these as well:

1. The socio-economic class of the learner,
2. Whether he or she comes from a family in which members already know and use some English,
3. Whether there are opportunities available in the community to continue to practice English outside the classroom.
4. In India, the socio-political attitudes towards learning and teaching English which prevail in the nation appear to influence the performance of students in the rural areas.

xviii. An important question: Several leading researchers want us not to focus on the meaning (of words, etc. as well as communication potential) when we teach pronunciation.

xix. In practice, I believe that this suggestion may not be effective in our school/college contexts. Our students look for the meaning and with meaning they tend to practice pronunciation.

TEACHER'S PREPARATION

xx. Teachers should be familiar with the basic sound system of English.

xxi. The basic system includes the individual consonants, consonant clusters, vowels, and diphthongs as well as stress, and intonation.

xxii. I would also recommend some fundamental knowledge of the sound system of the Mother Tongue (primarily Tamil in Tamilnadu) of the students. Sound system includes Tamil Intonation patterns.

xxiii. How is a question pronounced, how is an ordinary statement pronounced, how is an exclamatory sentence pronounced, how is a negative sentence pronounced, how is doubt raised and pronounced, how is happiness/agreement pronounced, and so on.

xxiv. That mother tongue should not be used, or that knowledge of the system of mother tongue need not be used to teach English is not a valid argument in our majority social and economic contexts.

xxv. It is good to use only English in teaching English, but this possibility is available in most expensive schools and colleges, where the backgrounds of the teachers and students seem to be qualitatively different from the majority social, economic, regional and generation factors.

xxvi. I believe that our English major college students, their teachers as well as the English teaching schoolteachers should never stop their effort to improve their pronunciation.

xxvii. We must recognize that there are differences in pronouncing consonants, vowels and diphthongs between English and Tamil. We must also recognize that English has sounds not similar to Tamil sounds. Pronunciation of certain vowels, consonants and diphthongs are different.

xxviii. There are also differences in how we pronounce the words, phrases and sentences.

xxix. As I mentioned above, college students and teachers as well as school English teachers should practice following the models available easily online, through Hollywood movies without

subtitles, episodes and TV serials and BBC news, etc. Listening and imitation become an important tool. We should make it a part of our career all through.

xxx. Yet, remember, we are not seeking perfect pronunciation. A pronunciation that others will follow and understand what we say, a pronunciation that will be understood wherever you go in India and other countries.

xxxi. While the intonation (pronunciation of sentences, in general) may be easier to acquire, mastering the stress and stress patterns will continue to be a problem.

xxxii. In all these, our goal, both for the students and teachers, should be to develop suitable fluency as well as pronouncing items in such a way our listeners are able to understand us, comprehend what we want to communicate. Let the students and teachers give up their shyness and reluctance to speak in English. Let the first generation college learners as well as rural students be bold and ready to speak continuous sentences, one after another. Mistakes and errors will abound, but with genuine and committed effort we all can overcome these problems.

2. Speaking

i. Asking and answering questions is an essential part of teaching, learning, and using any language.

ii. Our goal in teaching speaking in English is not developing accuracy of pronunciation.

iii. Adequacy of fluency and communicative effectiveness that becomes the focus of speaking skill.

iv. Imitation and repetition are important elementary steps in developing speaking skill in English.

v. Neither imitation nor repetition results in the mastery of any language. Use only meaningful words, phrases, and sentences for imitation and repetition.

vi. I believe that imitation and repetition are still necessary in our college classes. Our English lessons in the college level may be content oriented, focusing on literary aspects. We must remember that focusing on content and literature need not lead to skills in speaking, reading and writing – the skills our students would need badly in their career after they complete their studies.

vi. Substitution of a word, phrase, or sentence by another is an elementary method which helps students to produce new utterances and to develop speaking skill.

vii. Consider the following:

Let's go to the cinema. (theater)

Let's go to the theater (library).

Let's go to the library (football).

Let's play football (hockey).

Let's play hockey (pizza).

Let's eat pizza (milk).

Let's drink milk.

viii. DAY-TO-DAY EXPRESSIONS

Expressions of greeting, gratitude, small talk, introductions and making acquaintance, leave-taking, appreciation, expressions of regret and asking to be excused, etc., are very important communicative acts TESOL students need to master.

ix. Sentences you teach should be so framed that these are useful and extendable to a variety of real situations. Remember once again, our goal is to enable the students to use English in their jobs after graduation.

x. SIMPLE QUESTION-ANSWER DIALOGUES

Simple question-answer dialogues around a given context and object/objects is another elementary method to develop speaking skill.

xi. How do we teach a dialogue? There are three types of drills one could use in the class: choral drill in which the entire class participates in one voice with the teacher modeling the utterance; chain drill in which one student asks the question and another answers, and in this way the entire class participates as a chain; and individual drill in which individual students are pointed out and asked to produce the utterance modeled by the teacher.

xii. Eliciting long answers helps the student to compose his thoughts in English, search for appropriate words and structures and use them in the appropriate order. A question such as “Tell me about your work” results in a long answer. Questions on the previous lesson generally lead to long answers.

xiii. ELICITING

Eliciting is related to presentation of the lesson as well as asking questions. Eliciting is an important process which teachers must employ to get the class involved in what is going on in the class. For speaking practice eliciting is highly essential. It helps students to focus their attention, to think, and to use what they already know. It helps teachers to assess what the class already knew.

xiv. DIRECTED DIALOGUES

In Directed Dialogues, the teacher asks a student to make a comment to, or ask a question of, another student (Bowen et al. 1985).

xv. SHOW AND TELL

In this activity, students are encouraged to bring a favorite toy or object of any kind to class. Let the students bring only those objects which they can handle using the level of competence they have. They show their classmates what they have brought. They also tell them about it: how they got it, where it came from, what is it used for or what it can do, etc. Other students handle the object, try it out, ask questions about it, etc.

xvi. ROLE PLAY

Role play is perhaps the liveliest form to get the class involved in speaking. Role play brings situations from real life into the classroom. Students imagine and assume roles. They create a pretend situation, and they pretend to be some different persons.

xvii. USE OF ENGLISH IN REAL WORLD

While the role play gives practice in using English in situations similar to those outside the classroom, the situations are still controlled in some sense, because of the presence of the teacher and other prompts. On the other hand, use of English in the real world may offer features that are not captured in the classroom pretend situations.

viii. We would urge that you choose your contexts in such a manner that what you have chosen would be familiar to your students and would be appropriate to their level of competence in English. Note that it is not necessary for all the material culture facilities of the West to find a place in the English language lessons for the non-native speakers. You can find suitable contexts within India itself in which the use of English would lead to an appropriate diction and structure in English. Please prefer these contexts first.

ix. Since English plays a very crucial and important role in India in all walks of life, the Indian teachers of TESOL should identify situations that are relevant to life in India relating to a variety

of professions where English is ordinarily used. And use these situations to develop communicative competence in their students.

x. Translation is another helpful device to encourage students to speak in English. The students may be given some sentences in their own native language and asked to translate them and use these to answer or ask questions. There are several other ways of using translation as a tool to develop speaking skill.

xi. **Survival English** is basic English which one needs to use to get around places and meet some basic necessities of life in a native English environment. For example, one needs to know how to flag down a taxi and to tell the taxi driver where to take him. One needs to know how to get to the Underground station and to reach places in London. This kind of English focuses on the needs and problems of the student in his immediate environment.

xii. Survival English should not be taught separately as an end in itself in an English class in India.

xiii. Asking students to Present Oral Reports for some minutes in front of the class on a given topic will help the students to edit their speech beforehand to make it suitable for their audience.

Life history and testimony of the student is a good topic for the purpose. He will focus upon his birth, family, childhood, school, work specialization, marriage, travel, present activities, and plans, etc.

xiv. Oral reports, telling anecdotes, or jokes are some of the activities you should incorporate in every class. The ability to talk about an incident, tell an anecdote, joke, etc., is a valuable social skill. Presentation should always be followed by a question-answer session in which the class will raise questions and the presenter will answer.

xv. Combine speaking practice with other skills. What is taught for the development of one language skill could be used for the development of other language skills. Repetition of the familiar material in another mode will help students in quickly mastering the related skill.

3. Listening Skill

i. Listening in English is attending to and interpreting oral English. Listening is necessary to develop the speaking skill.

ii. There are three approaches to listening: **interactive** (listening to a message and doing something as a consequence) and **one-way communication** or non-interactive (just listening and retaining the message, in activities such as conversations overheard, public address announcements, recorded messages, etc.) and **self-talk**.

iii. Most students have difficulty with listening skills, even when listening to their native language. The listening skill is the most neglected one, both in first and second language teaching.

iv. Listening itself cannot be fully and correctly characterized only as a passive skill. It certainly is a receptive skill, contributing a lot to the productive skills, speaking and writing.

v. There is a need for an active involvement of the self for the efficient performance of listening. Listening becomes the steppingstone for action. Remember that fluent listening results only from wide exposure to the target language. Listening, like other language skills, is acquired only by doing it.

vi. Remember that fluent listening results only from wide exposure to the target language. Listening, like other language skills, is acquired only by doing it. Remember also that listening is an integral part of any type of language performance.

- vii. More often than not, English is taught through the eyes rather than through the ears in Third World countries.
- viii. We practice listening comprehension in all places and in all lessons and in all language skills (although at advanced levels of other language skills the role of listening could be minimal).
- ix. Begin with the identification of listening situations appropriate to the need and age of the students and the level of English competence already achieved by them.
- x. Identify the listening medium: is it face to face interaction, or is it a movie or a TV program? Or is it a lecture situation? Or is it a telephonic conversation? Face to face interaction requires a different listening orientation than watching (and listening) to a movie. In recent years, subtitles have become a worst obstacle to listening to English dialogues in movies.
- xi. The goals of teaching listening comprehension to a beginning student of English are different from those when teaching English to an advanced student. The advanced student has already mastered to some extent the discrimination of sounds and their combinations as well as various other aspects of phrases and sentences such as the significance of pauses between words and phrases, sentence intonation, etc. Therefore, she is geared towards following the flow of content of the message in such a way that she need not be conscious of the mechanics or the processes of listening.
- xii. Listening, thinking, and remembering go together. They are not separate acts.
- xiii. Neither you nor your students should think that listening comprehension exercises are miniature tests.
- xiii. Efficient Listening will go a long way in building the career of a new entrant in a company or government work. Seriousness of purpose is very important. Students and teachers have the need to develop their own listening skills.
- xiv. Some Communicative Classroom Activities. There are several types of exercises one could introduce here.
- a. Ask the student to listen to a short passage (an excerpt of a lecture) and then ask students to answer a few questions. This is to test the listening comprehension of the students.
 - b. Another exercise is called cloze dictation. This takes the form of asking the students to listen to a paragraph and to write the missing words. Leave the first few sentences as they are so that a proper context is established for subsequent blanks in other sentences.
 - c. Next comes the exercise which demands some inferential skill from the listener: Listen to the lecture and then evaluate the following statements as true or false. The student is not only asked to listen but also think over the matter and make inferences in this type of exercise.
 - d. Another inferential skill exercise focuses upon the nuances. Sometimes people say something they don't really mean. The insincerity may be signaled by intonation (tone of voice etc.: Wife: George, I think I'm pregnant again. Husband: Now, isn't that a pleasant thought (Bowen, et al. 1985:93).
 - e. Listening to radio plays and advertisements is yet another interesting activity.
 - f. Story telling or story reading. Follow this with questions, asking for factual information and inferential statements.

4. Reading

- i. Reading is a very complex activity which is mastered by the child, by God's abundant grace, with some ease. We must remember that reading is closely related to the development of writing.
- ii. Reading must become an automated habit in all of us. For college students and teachers, it is important they read materials in English every day without failure.
- iii. Even college students and teachers could continue to read all the sign boards in English they come across! They can read the advertisements in the magazines and newspapers, apart from reading the news reports, stories, cartoons, etc.
- iv. Unfortunately, both students and their teachers fail to make reading a strong habit.
- v. Oral reading and silent reading are equally important.
- vi. Do we read by ear or do we read by eye? All of us will agree readily that we read by eye, because use of the eye for reading is so obvious to us. On the other hand, the sound is never far from reading, and hence both in oral and silent reading, we do often move our lips and perhaps the tongue and other subvocal mechanisms. What we see by eye is to be converted into some sound values (Crystal (1987:209).
- vii. Extensive reading (teaching of reading through reading), intensive reading (actual teaching of reading skills in an instructional setting), and oral reading.
- viii. The teachers need to use materials which the learner of English may have to use frequently, materials such as public announcements (No classes next Friday, Report for duty at 6:00 A.M.), invitations to parties and weddings, telephone messages, guidelines to perform a task, instructions to assemble toys, recipe, etc.
- ix. The materials which focus on the learners' survival needs, social needs, and personal needs are presented to them for reading. Reading Games which use catchy phrases in ads, T-shirts, campaign buttons, posters, stickers, etc., are presented to the beginning reader, even when he/she is struggling to master the mechanics of decoding the English alphabet.
- x. Some Practical Steps:
There are four steps followed in a reading lesson:
 - a. Introduction. The teacher explains the purpose for reading the target passage, gives the students a setting for the text to be read, presents a background of appropriate information for the text to be read, and selects and introduces the new vocabulary necessary to comprehend the main ideas in the text.
 - b. The reading. This is generally an oral exercise for the beginners, usually consisting of listening to the passage read aloud, or listening and following along. Later on reading is silent.
 - c. Comprehension tasks.
Review and related exercises.
- xi. The following behavioral steps may be followed in the class:
 - a. Teacher reads while students listen.
Discussion.
 - b. Teacher reads while students listen and read along.
Discussion.
 - c. Student(s) read aloud (in small groups or in dyads).
Discussion.
 - d. Students read silently, or practice reading aloud individually.
Three types of questions are employed for discussion: information (what, when, where, who, how many, etc.), inferential (Did Juan know English when he came to the United States? How do

we know? Does Juan know how to drive?), interpretive (questions relating to author's opinion, reader's judgment concerning the content of the article, etc.) (Bowen et al. 1985)

xii. Brown (1993) suggests asking the students to do the following ten things before reading begins.

1. Look at the title and the headings for each section. What do you think this passage is going to be about?
2. Look at the pictures. What do you think this passage is going to be about?
3. Read the first and last paragraphs and the first sentence of each paragraph. What do you think this passage is going to be about?
4. Read the title. Now quickly scan the passage and circle all the words that have a connection to the title.
5. Scan the passage and cross out all the words you don't know. After you read the passage again carefully, look up the words in a dictionary.
6. After looking at the title, pictures, and so on, brainstorm the specific words you expect to see in the passage.
7. After looking at the title and pictures, make up some questions you think this passage might answer.
8. What kind of passage is this? (Fiction? Nonfiction? —what kind?) Why would somebody read this? For information? Pleasure?
9. Choose words from the passage and write them on the board. Ask students to scan the passage and circle them.
10. Tell a story about the background of the reading passage.

xiii. **Individualized Self-learning:** For individualized self-learning, there is no better method than encouraging the students to read on their own whatever that interests them. Through reading, diction, grammar, and communicative efficiency improve. Through reading, students develop an empathy not only for the language but also for the content of the text they read, as well as the best traditions of the culture the language comes to represent in their understanding. Through reading what is noble in English thought is appropriated.

5. Writing

- i. Writing is an individual effort, but it is more rule-bound.
- ii. Written language differs from oral language in structure and mode of functioning.
- iii. For many among us, English learning and English teaching seem to mean only Writing.
- iv. We also tend to speak as we tend to write. We also tend to speak with reading pronunciation.
- v. Most of us feel inadequate in the face of the writing task. Our tests and examinations mostly revolve around our writing skill. Answers to questions are often memorized and thus writing a test becomes easier! Most of us learn to write well once we join the workforce.
- vi. College students as well as college teachers really need to focus on writing correct English. They also need to focus on writing fluently on a topic given to them without grammatical and idiomatic errors. How about the teachers make it a habit of writing at least one page daily in English?
- vii. How about avoiding abbreviations when they write a letter, a brief communication message, etc.?
- viii. Well-structure writing classes have the potential to help consolidate and improve the students' (as well as teachers') speaking and reading skills.

- viii. Handwriting is also an important element of writing skill. Students and teachers should have the handwriting that is read and understood by others without much difficulty. Elegant handwriting is not necessary, but plain, easy to read handwriting is important.
- ix. Young students begin with copying, and copying becomes a game, a play for them. The adult students may not relish much copying, and yet some amount of copying is important even to retain in memory what has been learned. So, encourage your class to do some copying exercises.
- x. Writing improves our vocabulary power. Listing objects in pictures help learn and remember words.
- xi. Tamil speaking English learners and teachers commit several grammatical and spelling errors. They tend to write long sentences, and this results in more errors. Simple sentences should be preferred. Avoid as much as possible long complex sentences. Subordinate clauses should be limited in number. Gender and tense mastery are very important. Mixing tenses are often noticed. Singular and plural confusion is also noticed. High sounding words seem to be preferred. Simple words are better and more effective.
- xii. Use of dictionary is a must. But most students and most teachers do not seem to have their own dictionaries. We should develop the habit of checking dictionaries for spelling, meaning, usage, idioms, etc.
- xiii. Using dictionary will enable us to paraphrase a quotation, bring in greater emphasis in our writing where emphasis is needed.
- xiv. I would recommend that our college students as well as college teachers do the following:
- a. Make topical vocabulary lists.
 - b. Make associational pairs or groups of words.
 - c. Prepare antonyms.
 - d. Prepare synonyms.
 - e. Make familiar paradigms like the days of the week or the months.
 - f. Make personal lists, such as items on a shopping list, food served at a meal, and packing lists.
- xv. Students and teachers sit at home and recall words they know under each meaning category such as food, fruits, vegetables, kinship terms, natural events, natural surroundings, recall as many words as possible for a given topic, etc.
- xvi. Most textbooks written by well-known authors often de-emphasize the need to correct the writings of learners of English as a second or foreign language, and place an emphasis on meaning and free writing, or fluency in writing. However, I personally feel that if the teachers do not correct the students' writings in the Third World countries, a sense of self-sufficiency sets in and the students will not recognize the errors they have committed.
- xvii. Students should be encouraged to plan, polish, rewrite their passages several times. This applies also to the college teachers. We all need to improve our writing skill in English. Through daily practice we will be able to achieve this goal.
- xviii. Note-taking and story-writing will be a good exercise for both students and teachers.
- xix. Filling in forms of general nature, forms for registered or certified mail in the post office, writing letters to friends, newspapers, and other organizations, writing business letters, writing instructions for someone to perform a particular task, writing a journal/diary-writing, and even writing some creative short stories are all important steps. Let us focus our writing practice to meet the future demands the students would face when they join workforce.

xx. Most students are reluctant to write. Apart from the fact that writing needs more deliberate involvement than reading, students are afraid that what they write may be full of errors in a language with which they have just begun to gain some acquaintance.

xxi. Students will face great difficulty in composing their thoughts in English, a second or foreign language to them. As standards of writing are more stringent than in other skills, students need to be trained to proceed from writing short passages to longer essays. They need a lot of encouragement, and appreciation. They need good models, and modeling. They need to be exposed to standard written materials. The form and the character of such materials need to be explained to them.

xxii. I believe college teachers also learn a lot to write even as they begin to teach writing. At home they must short pieces and then exchange these with their coworkers to get corrected. No superiority complex, no inferiority complex!

xxiii. Teachers need to learn what a stylesheet is. Research journals have their own stylesheets. Teachers need to learn how to write their articles following the stylesheet of the journal to which they want to send their articles for publication. College teachers should set a good model for their students in all levels of English language use.

=====
Note: This presentation is based on the book given below under the Bibliography.

Bibliography

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D. 2002.

An Introduction to TESOL: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

<http://languageinindia.com/april2002/tesolbook.html>