

## The Role of Pronunciation in Teaching Spoken English in the Era of Communicative Language Teaching

**Kati Poul, M.A., B.Ed., M.Phil., CELTA., (Ph.D.)**

Faculty of English, Department of Freshman Engineering

Institute of Aeronautical Engineering, Dundingal, Hyderabad, Telangana State, India

[keshavkati@gmail.com](mailto:keshavkati@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

The role of pronunciation in teaching spoken English has come in for renewed praise from some quarters and criticism in others. While proponents of linguistic human rights such as Philipson (1992,1998), Suresh Canagarajah ( 1994,1999,2002) , Pennycook (1994) speak in favour of teaching pronunciation which is comprehensible, others, such as Stern ( 1983), Quirk( 1998), Hahn (2004), favour the teaching of native speaker norms to ensure mutual intelligibility among and between native and non-native speaker users of English.

In India, which has been a generous host to English language, there appear traces of support for the native speaker principle when teachers are advised to teach R.P. to students to remove any trace of mother tongue influence (M.T.I).

At a time when Communicative Language Teaching (henceforth CLT) is still holding forth, textbooks recommend the teaching of phonetics where students are put through a battery of tests to check them for proper pronunciation, leading to a situation where students find it rather difficult to cope with the challenges of spoken English. While the syllabus and materials prescribe RP as norm, the onus is on teachers to teach only those aspects of pronunciation that learners have use for.

To determine teacher views on teaching RP, a question was asked that established the prevailing view about the necessity of teaching English with stress, rhythm and accent. This was deemed necessary because any method or ideology is promoted or dispensed with depending on the powers and logic the followers have in them.

The study revealed that we have come a long way since the time native speaker norms were endorsed as the only way to teach or look at pedagogical practices.

**Keywords:** Role of Pronunciation, Teaching Spoken English, Communicative Language Teaching, ELT, EFL, ESL, M.T.I., CLT, EIL, Nativeness, RP, ICT, ELCS.

## Introduction

Vivian Cook (1999) makes very appropriate observations about the prevalent discourse in ELT with regard to teaching language in general and pronunciation in particular:

Language professionals take for granted that the only appropriate models for a language's use are those that come from its native speakers. Linguists look at the intuition of native speakers or collect quantities of their speech; language teachers encourage students to be like native speakers (p.185)

This is seconded by Jenkins (1998) who maintains that:

We no longer regard English as being taught mainly for communication with its native speakers (the goal of EFL), or the target of pronunciation teaching as a native-like accent, with the eradication of all traces of a 'foreign' accent, however unrealistic that target always was. We acknowledge that the EFL-ESL distinction is beginning to blur as the two merge into English as an International Language (EIL). Nowadays English most frequently serves as a worldwide lingua franca for its vast numbers of non-native users, and as Widdowson (1994) so forcefully argues, it is no longer the property of its native speakers. However, faced with a lack of clear-cut alternatives, we have not been able to move on in any practical way... (p.119)

Yet when it comes to classroom practices, ideological or sociological constraints are brushed aside and teachers are either compelled to teach what they know in their heart of hearts is not useful to students or forced to teach what they think is sensible without letting the authorities know that they are violating the rules in the rule book.

It needs emphasising that for the sake of students one needs to adopt best practices and employ common sense where rules fail or are illogical.

## Method

20 teachers from four engineering colleges who had been teaching English for more than a decade were asked to state their views on teaching stress, rhythm and accent to students of engineering. This was because first year students have *English Language Communication Skills* lab in addition to theory and one of the modules prescribed is phonetics, where students are taught the rules of stress, rhythm and intonation. They were given a questionnaire and asked to answer a question besides being asked to take part in an informal interview with researcher who was collecting data for the purpose. The questionnaire was adapted from Vishwanathan (2019) and Timmins (2011). The questionnaire had just one question which wanted to know what kind of model they wished to emulate and why.

## Questionnaire for teachers

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## Teacher questionnaire

I: Which teacher would you prefer to be like?

(Teacher A) : I want to sound like a native speaker to both native speaker and non-native speaker students.

(Teacher B): I can speak English clearly, but I retain a clear accent of my state/country. Please explain the reasons for your answer.

## Analysis

Of the ten teachers data was collected from, only 4 teachers believed that students need not be taught the nuances of rules of stress, rhythm and intonation since it was not necessary for students, all of whom were non-native speakers of English.

Some views figure below:

Teacher 1: I would prefer teacher B for teaching pronunciation and motivating them to speak and use English fluently, not emphasising certain standards of sounds, like RP. I strongly believe that in the era of globalization and ICT, there is no such standard variety of English.... And nowadays, English is used as vehicle of communication as proposed by Widdowson. Therefore accent/pronunciation is not homogeneous .... Students need to be orally proficient and they need to use English which is intelligible.

Sadly, this view of using English for communicative purposes and of RP being an option was somehow not seconded by all teachers. Six of them or 60 % of teachers maintained that to speak English one needed RP and the rules of rules of stress, rhythm and intonation.

According to one teacher, “British accent is the standard for promoting speaking skills of students. Starting from primary classes to PG, it is suggested that teachers should have British accent. Listening oriented learning leads to better skills in speaking.”

But when asked if this teacher spoke English with a British accent, the answer was studied silence, implying that the teacher was merely trying to endorse norms without giving the idea of native speaker norm much thought. She was only trying to sound politically correct by emphasising what the system had put in place.

## Teacher Interviews

An informal interview followed the administration of questionnaire. Teachers were also asked whether they actually taught suprasegmental features and surprisingly, only three teachers claimed they did though six teachers spoke of the importance of teaching it.

When asked why they did or did not teach suprasegmental features, some teachers rightly answered that it was a waste of time and that students did not find any use for it after lab hours. Those who taught it claimed they needed to do it because of the demands of syllabus and also because they did not want to be seen as casual in their attitude to teaching. Most students used Telugu or Hindi for speaking with their classmates and those who used English never saw the necessity of speaking it with stress and intonation. Teaching stress, rhythm and intonation was a waste of efforts, which could have been better directed elsewhere, teachers felt.

Teachers also voiced their helplessness in not being able to avoid teaching units prescribed for study since the colleges they worked for were not autonomous and they were not at liberty to determine what could be taught and what omitted.

### Conclusions

The following conclusions may be reached based on the small experiment with regard to teaching phonetics to students of engineering as part of ELCS lab.

1. It is very pertinent to record the observations of Levis, J.M (2005) insofar as pronunciation teaching is concerned :

More fundamentally, pronunciation research and pedagogy have long been influenced by two contradictory principles, the nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle. The nativeness principle holds that it is both possible and desirable to achieve native-like pronunciation in a foreign language. The nativeness principle was the dominant paradigm in pronunciation teaching before the 1960s, but its influence was rapidly diminished by research showing that nativeness in pronunciation appeared to be biologically conditioned to occur before adulthood (Lenneberg, 1967; Scovel, 1995), leading to the logical conclusion that aiming for nativeness was an unrealistic burden for both teacher and learner. Despite extensive ongoing research into a critical period for acquiring pronunciation, in practice very few adult learners actually achieve native-like pronunciation in a foreign language. (p.370)

This is what teachers need to know about pronunciation teaching- that “(A)lthough most native speakers of English speak neither General American nor Received Pronunciation (RP), published materials rely on these accents for examples, giving a skewed view of pronunciation that may not serve learners' communicative needs.” (Levis, J.M, 2005, p.371)

2. Students need to be able to use a dictionary to know how words are pronounced and aim for a pronunciation that approximates the recommended model. For example, the word onion is pronounced /ʌnjən/ in RP. Indians tend to say /vnljen/. The difference in pronunciation is not very marked and since everyone gets by with Indian English accent, not much is lost. Teachers need to emphasise that the most important objective of learning and

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teaching pronunciation is clear communication, not native speaker like accent, which is impossible anyway.

This is what teachers need to keep in mind when teaching phonetics: aim for spoken English that is intelligible to the listener. Any brand or model that is both unattainable and unrealistic must be discarded in favour of a model that is achievable and sensible.

3. Students need to be taught speech sounds- vowels and consonants- but not tone, tonicity or tonality since 95 % of the time, Indians use English to communicate with fellow Indians for which RP is neither necessary nor warranted. English has now acquired a status of its own in India and we have Indian English which is English spoken and used by Indians in India for a variety of purposes.

4. Teachers need to also understand that in CLT, *learner-centeredness* is important and the needs of learners have to be respected. As all teachers replied that their students did not see the necessity of learning suprasegmental features, it is enough if basic phonetics that a learner needs to speak well is taught.

5. Last but not least, it would be very instructive to cite a native speaker, Abercrombie (1991) who speaks of teaching English that is both *intelligible* and *comfortable* to the listener, i.e. “ pronunciation which can be understood with little or no conscious effort on the part of the listener. “ (p. 93)

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