Should We Teach Pronunciation Explicitly in L2/EFL Classrooms?

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to discuss whether explicit teaching of English pronunciation in second language (L2) and English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms is helpful for learners or not. This study aims to review the studies on pronunciation teaching to synthesize the literature. In this way, connections between research and practice will be formed and the implications for language teaching will be mentioned. In this study, a literature review (of around 40 articles, books and book chapters) has been done first and then, in accordance with the findings, the emerging themes (e.g. intelligibility, Lingua Franca Core and students' background) from the review were further reviewed and a synthesis is provided taking the findings regarding different perspectives into consideration. The results suggest that recently pronunciation teaching has shown great improvements and the aims of it have changed from attaining a native-like proficiency to being intelligible. The review suggests that the aim of pronunciation teaching should be to teach for functional and meaningful contexts and it should be a part of communicative approaches to provide students with a fluent speech. The findings also suggest that the focus in explicit pronunciation teaching should be on not only perception, but also production and only the relevant and useful parts of phonology should be taught to learners.

Key words: Pronunciation, English as an L2, Lingua Franca Core, Teaching pronunciation

Introduction

Kelly (1969) calls pronunciation teaching the Cinderella of foreign language teaching as it has not been studied thoroughly unlike grammar and vocabulary components of languages. It was only after the 1980s that the first linguistic contribution was made to pronunciation teaching (Rogerson-Revell, 2011). This contribution is the development of International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) as a part of the Reform Movement. This Reform Movement has radically changed the nature and aims of language teaching. Four objectives were suggested by the Reform Movement for a successful teaching (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996, 3):

- The spoken form of a language is primary and should be taught first.
- The findings of phonetics should be applied to language teaching.
- Teachers must have solid training in phonetics.
- Learners should be given phonetic training to establish good speech habits.

This new perspective gave way to a better and modern perspective on pronunciation teaching and its importance was acknowledged in the field. Since then, pronunciation studies and pronunciation teaching have experienced an immense increase in popularity (Atli & Bergil, 2012; Demirezen, 2010; Derwin & Munro, 2015; Gimson, 1994; Scarcella & Oxford, 1994; Silveria, 2013). However, despite this proliferation, various approaches and methods took pronunciation teaching into consideration differently. Accordingly, this paper aims to review research on pronunciation teaching to synthesize the literature. In this way, connections between research and practice will be formed and different views on pronunciation teaching will be discussed. Then, the comparison and contrast of the studies which support and oppose explicit teaching of pronunciation will be presented and the implications of this discussion for L2/EFL pronunciation teaching will be mentioned.

In order to realise the objective of the study, a literature review (of around 40 articles, books and book chapters) has been done as a first step to find out. Then, using Content Analysis these studies are classified and analysed.

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Content Analysis deals with analysing contents in different situations. Some instances of content in Content Analysis are articles, political debates, books and interviews. Accordingly, as content, articles, books and book chapters are included in the data of this study and they are analysed using Content Analysis in order to understand the issues surrounding explicit teaching of pronunciation. In accordance with the analysis, three main themes emerged: intelligibility, Lingua Franca Core and students' background. Consequently, these themes were further reviewed and expanded, and a synthesis was provided taking the findings regarding different perspectives into consideration.

Pronunciation Teaching

In this section, in accordance with the aims of this paper, the history and goals of pronunciation teaching will be discussed in order to lay a foundation for the Discussion section. At the outset of the 20th century, traditional methods such as Grammar Translation and Reading Approaches ignored communication skills and pronunciation teaching. The focus was more on the formal aspects of languages (Atar & Seedhouse, 2018). However, in the 40s and 50s Audio-lingualism favoured explicit pronunciation teaching as it saw oral production essential in accordance with the Reform Movement. It was essential to attain native-like pronunciation according to this view. However, the typical methods used for pronunciation teaching were Behaviourist in nature and they heavily focused on imitation, repetition and drilling (Rogerson-Revell, 2011). The aim here was to form useful habits and segments of sounds were the focus.

However, after the emergence of the Cognitive Approach, explicit pronunciation teaching was deemphasized and grammar and vocabulary teaching was preferred over pronunciation. The underlying motive for this was the belief that native-like pronunciation is impossible. Consequently, it was concluded that teachers should not spent much time on it, rather they should spend most of their time on the teachable and improvable parts of the language which are vocabulary and grammar (Scovel, 2000). This is the period when pronunciation teaching came to a stagnation and it was ignored in language acquisition studies. However, too much emphasis on vocabulary and grammar teaching was also highly criticized in the 80s. After that, the Communicative Approach and Task-Based Learning emerged. This was the continuum of the Reform Movement, because oral proficiency was highly valued and one of most important aims of language teaching, as Morley (1991, 488) put it, was: "Intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence." However, the problem here is that the Communicative Approach favours a good pronunciation, but it likes neither explicit teaching of phonemes and suprasegmentals nor provides clear answers to how to teach pronunciation. The Communicative Approach simply rejected pronunciation teaching for the reason that it is not a suitable way for teaching language as communication (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). Although pronunciation teaching was negatively affected by the emergence of the Communicative Approach, the importance of pronunciation teaching was never totally lost and especially in the 21th century, researchers and teachers have started to find out new ways to incorporate pronunciation teaching into the Communicative Approach in order to achieve better speaking skills for language learners (Jenkins & Setter, 2005).

Along with different views, the goals of pronunciation teaching also changed in the last century. Audio-lingualism and the Communicative Approach supported native-like proficiency as it enables the learners to achieve intelligibility and communicative competence (Demir, 2018). Then, especially starting from the 70s, intelligibility was seen as an essential objective of pronunciation teaching (Munro & Derwing, 2015). Finally, in the last decade, a more balanced view is adopted (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). This new perspective is an eclectic one which suggests that intelligibility is a satisfactory objective, but pronunciation teaching should also be available in order to deal with the inherent problems of pronunciation teaching/learning. Accordingly, in the next section, intelligibility in relation to standardization will be discussed.

Standardization and Intelligibility

The label standard accent is something artificial and relative (Esling, 1998). Accents tell about where people have lived, what they do as a job or what their education level is. Then, having an accent is something mostly social and it is the result of the hierarchical society (Esling, 1998; Trudgill, 2008). Received Pronunciation (RP) is regarded as the formal accent of English not only for native speakers but also for L2 learners. It is taken for granted that RP should be the goal in language teaching and all the non-native speakers (NNS) should learn it. The reason for this was the idea that RP is the best accent. However, this had some historical and sociological reasons. RP was used by a small minority in Britain and it was a symbol for being in a higher position in the community. As a result, English L2 learners were taught in accordance with the RP accent so that they acquire a more popular and prestigious accent. In addition, Trudgill (1999) claims that RP is the most widely studied

accent and it is prestigious throughout the world. Consequently, it was argued that it would be wise to teach it to the learners of English.

However, as mentioned in the previous part, along with methods, goals of pronunciation teaching have also changed in the recent decades. The researchers who support teaching a standard accent for pronunciation teaching claim that L2 learners of English learners should have a native-like pronunciation and this is especially apparent in the 1980s in the Communicative Approach. However, the goal of being native-like has changed to being intelligible lately (See Morley, 1991). Cook (2009), for example, claims that native-like accent should not be the purpose of pronunciation teaching, because it is already impossible. As L2 learners already have set-up the phonological module of their mother tongue in their mind, it is nearly impossible for learners to sound like a native. Jenkins (2000) further claims that RP is only used by a little minority in the British society and its usage is very confined. Moreover, she claims that RP has already lost its reputation and it is even associated with negative perceptions like being overly formal or reminding of a hierarchical structure in the society. Finally, the sound inventories of all languages are in the process of change. In his book, Gimson (1994, 90) demonstrates how changes in different accents of English occur. For example, a recent trendy change is the dropping of /j/ after alveolar consonants. To exemplify, words such as allude /əˈlju:d/ has become / əˈlu:d / or luminous /ˈlyu:minəs/ has become /ˈlu:minəs/. From these arguments, it can be concluded that accents are relative and they change throughout time. Consequently, a native-like standard accent is no more the goal of pronunciation teaching and acquiring an intelligible accent is a more reasonable goal.

So, what exactly does intelligibility mean? Kenworthy (1987, 13) defines intelligibility as "being understood by a listener at a time in a given situation". Gimson (1994, 329) defines three criteria for minimal intelligibility in any model designed for learners. These are:

1. It should be at least as easy for the foreign student to learn as any natural model.
2. It should be readily intelligible to most native speakers of English.
3. It should provide a base for the learner who has acquired it to understand the major natural varieties of English.

Intelligibility is the main aim of pronunciation teaching now (Jenkins, 2000). It is a quite reasonable aim considering the claims of the two eminent researchers in the field of Applied Linguistics: Cook (2009) and Krashen (1981) argue that native-like pronunciation is nearly impossible for L2 learners. However, as Kenworthy (1987) mentioned in the definition, the term intelligibility is a relative one and it depends on the context. This is because of the properties of the target language and the native tongue. In fact, this is why Jenkins (2000) aims at forming an international English as a Lingua Franca which is intelligible to learners from different language backgrounds.

To sum up the argument, one of the fundamental aims of pronunciation teaching today is to have learners have an intelligible accent by which they can communicate throughout the world. Having a standard or a native-like accent is devalued as it does not conform to the reality and as it is not feasible in a globalized world where needs and goals vary immensely. Today, the number of people using English as non-natives is more than the natives throughout the world.

The Camp of Pro(NON)ciation: Why should not We Teach Pronunciation?

As mentioned in the introduction part, after the 1980s the Communicative Approach and Task-Based learning rejected explicit pronunciation teaching and studies about pronunciation teaching were very scarce. Those against pronunciation teaching have several reasons for this.

Firstly, in his book Krashen (1981) claimed that most of the language teaching fails because this teaching is against the nature of language learning. He claims that learners should learn languages just like the children: with natural input without any explicit teaching. This is because, learning can never be converted into acquisition and learned rules always decrease a learners' performance, which he calls the monitoring. Krashen and Terrel (1983) claims that learned rules fail because:

A) Learners must have time to monitor their utterance before speaking.
B) Learners are expected to consciously aim for being grammatical.
C) Learners have to have the explicit knowledge of a particular rule.

These conditions are rarely met in daily spontaneous spoken language. So, Krashen (1981) strictly rejects explicit teaching of pronunciation as the learned segments and phonological rules will only make learners' speaking performance harder.

Another criticism to the explicit teaching of pronunciation is based on the idea that phonological features are not easy to learn. This suggests that learners must master many rules to learn a phonological property (Krashen, 1982). For example, rules for stress seems quite complex for English and they are difficult to learn. In fact, even if learners learn them, it is very unlikely that they will be able to use them during a spontaneous conversation. Therefore, researchers like Wells (2006) claim that pronunciation teaching in accordance with English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) of Jenkins (2000) is also problematic. The reason is, it ignores parts of English in which NNSs have difficulty and this is against a natural language acquisition process.

Critical Period Hypothesis (Penfield & Roberts, 1959; Lenneberg, 1967) is also used as a counter argument for explicit pronunciation teaching. The ideas of Neufeld (1980) and Tarone (1978) are in conflict with researchers such as Jenkins (2000) and Cook (2009) in that Neufeld and Tarone claim that learners cannot acquire pronunciation neatly if they have passed the critical age. They claim that adults cannot acquire pronunciation perfectly unlike children, which is because of the psychomotor skills rather than psycholinguistic obstacles caused by the critical period. What they suggest is that as adults are used to pronouncing sounds according to their L1, their nerves and muscles cannot do the necessary movements for the exact L2 sounds. For example, according to their claim, a Turkish learner of English will not be able to pronounce /w/ correctly, because his/her psychomotor nerves will tend to pronounce it like the labiodental sound /v/ which exists in Turkish. Therefore, rather than rounding his/her lip while saying /w/, s/he will still use teeth along with lips. As a result, Tarone (1978) concludes that native-like proficiency is practically impossible. Hence, there is no need to teach pronunciation.

Finally, to teach pronunciation, not only learners but also teachers should be familiar with phonology and the International Phonetic Alphabet. However, Gimson (1994) claims that phonology is a daunting word for both learners and students, and even if students can be taught pronunciation, the most important problem is teachers. Most of the teachers throughout the world do not know the phonological alphabet or they do not have enough capability to teach it.

The Camp of Pronunciation Teaching: Why should We Teach Pronunciation?

Pronunciation teaching has gained popularity over the last decades and interest in integrating pronunciation teaching into the Communicative Approach has soared. Many researchers such as Cook (2009), Jenkins (2000), Gimson (1994), Cenoz and Lecumberri (1999) support pronunciation teaching. However, as mentioned in the Introduction part, these researchers are aware of the problems caused by the methods in Audio-lingual Method. Therefore, rather than using repetitive activities without any functions, they tried to incorporate pronunciation teaching into the Communicative Approach and Task-Based Learning with communicative and meaningful activities. For instance, Celce-Murcia, (1996) suggests that pronunciation can be taught via communicative activities such as games, problem solving activities or role playing. The point here is that pronunciation should have a function in these activities and students must use pronunciation to work out the activity. For example, a problem-solving activity which requires ordering something on phone may be designed. In this activity, the things to be ordered can be chosen in a way that they have minimal pairs and the wrong use of these minimal pairs results in misunderstanding. As a result, students will try to solve the problem and this activity provides comprehensible input for L2 learners, which as Krashen (1981) suggests is essential for successful language learning. As a result, it can be argued that the target pronunciation teaching should be an integral part of communicative activities.

As for the theoretical and practical reasons which make pronunciation teaching necessary, in her study Jenkins (2000) found out that out of the communicative problems observed among language learners, most of them are caused by pronunciation errors. This means that pronunciation is the area which threatens intelligibility the most. In addition, in their study Hinofotis and Bailey (1980) found that even if learners have a good competence in grammar and vocabulary, as long as they do not have good pronunciation abilities, they fail much more frequently than those who have a good understanding of pronunciation. This suggests that pronunciation teaching is essential and as Gimson (1994) argues, it is inescapable that at least rudimentary aspects of English should be taught to learners.

The Discussion and Evaluation of the Review

As mentioned in the previous section, in the 80s Krashen (1981) claimed that no teaching can be converted into acquisition. However, Bialystok (1996) claims that some students make it to turn learned items into acquisition and they can achieve an automatic and fluent accent. Bialystok (1996) suggests that this can be achieved through continuous use of language. Even if learners learn rules for sounds and segments in pronunciation teaching, when they have the chance to use their knowledge in natural settings over a prolonged time, these rules become automatic just like most of our motor abilities. In this respect, although the Communicative Approach was against pronunciation teaching in the 80s, pronunciation teaching can be incorporated into communication and learned phonology can be converted into fluent speech by taking part in various communicative activities. At this point, Krashen (1981) puts forward the idea that there is no need for pronunciation teaching, because students will just take it in through comprehensible input and communicative activities. However, this idea has some flaws. First of all, people are not usually aware of the suprasegmental features or the properties of sounds they use. Cook (2009) and Jenkins (2000) claim that most of the phonological properties of phonology are subconscious. For example, most ordinary people can use language successfully, but when they are asked to explain how phonological features such as stress and intonation may change meaning, they cannot do it. People with no background in Phonology are not even aware of how sounds are produced even though people utter thousands of words each day. A concrete example of the subconscious feature of Phonology comes from Jenkins (2000). Japanese learners do not have an /l/ and /r/distinction and they are not minimal pairs in Japanese. As a result, when they learn English, unless they are taught explicitly that these two sounds are different phonemes, most of them even do not recognize the difference. In my own English teaching experience in the Turkish context, too, almost none of my undergraduate students, who had had at least 8 years of English teaching, were aware of the difference between [ð] and [θ] and in fact, they were quite surprised to hear that they were different than /t/ as this does not exist in Turkish. My students also could not recognize the difference between /w/ and /v/ and usually they just used /v/ for both of them. Then, it can be argued that if there are differences in the phonological inventories of the first and L2, it is really difficult for learners to realize these differences. This is because, it is almost impossible for them to distinguish these sounds as their first language has already shaped their brain and phonological perception (Revell-Rogerson, 2011).

In response to Krashen's (1981) claim that explicit teaching hinders L2 learning, Esling (1998) claims that consciousness raising can be very useful for learners to deal with both the transfer errors and universal errors. In addition, it contributes to the automatization of the rules and it helps the students turn their learned knowledge into an acquired one. Esling (1998) claims that learners can learn just by taking part in communicative activities, but if they are given a well-structured task, it can make things easier for them. In fact, it may be suggested that this is the general aim of the L2/EFL teaching: making the learning process easier and more efficient. Esling (1998, 27) gives an example to better explain it: People can learn playing tennis 'just by doing it', but in addition to demonstration, if they are given good structured instructions such as: "first, how to hold the racket, then, tossing up the ball, after that striking the ball and placing the ball and finally, varying the speed and direction of it.", the learning process will be easier. Of course, the student will initially do these steps slowly, but it is quite possible that after playing tennis for a long time s/he will be able to use it spontaneously without thinking about the mentioned steps at all. In the same vein, if learners are given good and guided instructions in pronunciation, they can also acquire a fluent style via practice.

As for the criticisms of Neufeld (1980) and Tarone (1978) in the previous section regarding the Critical Period Hypothesis, Scovel (1969) suggests that Critical Period Hypothesis does have a great effect on the phonology inventory of learners. While most adults can successfully acquire and surpass young learners in mastering syntax, grammar and vocabulary, they almost never succeed in achieving a native fluency (Revell-Rogerson, 2011). Some other studies also suggested that age is a considerable factor in pronunciation teaching (Aydın & Akyüz, 2017; Roohani, 2013). This shows that Critical Period Hypothesis is indeed at work for language learning, especially for pronunciation. This is attributed to the brain's loss of plasticity after a certain age and as a result, foreign accent is nearly inescapable (Lenneberg, 1967). This also gives way to the idea that foreign accents are to be accepted as natural as it is already very difficult for L2 learners to achieve a native-like pronunciation in their L2 while having another L1 in their brain (Cook, 2009).

Another important point to mention is Cook's (2002, 2003) Multi Competence Theory which claims that interlanguage is the indispensable outcome of L2 learning. This suggests that an L2 cannot be independent of a first language and vice versa. Consequently, it can be argued that interlanguage for phonology is very strong. Those against pronunciation teaching assume that L2 phonology can be acquired just like babies do the first language, but the point they miss is that L2 learners already have a first language in their mind and this will

have an effect on the acquisition of an L2 (Atar, 2014, 19). This also implies that the aim of pronunciation teaching should be intelligibility as it is almost impossible to acquire an L2 perfectly while having another language in the mind. Moreover, the universal errors which are seen across learners from many different language backgrounds also suggest that Critical Period Hypothesis is active and universal errors such as epenthesis or deletion occur in the languages of learners regardless of their first language. Then, it can be concluded that these universal errors should be considered carefully and used in language teaching books and materials (See Jenkins, (2000) for a detailed reading.). Moreover, these errors support Jenkin's (2000) Lingua Franca Core, because these universal errors of NNSs can be used to achieve intelligibility as much as possible.

One another point that is worth mentioning is that as Jenkins (2000) suggests, the most important factor in pronunciation teaching is the learners. The goals must be set up in accordance with their needs. For example, if they use English only in NNS environments, there is no need for wasting time on trying to achieve a native-like proficiency. In addition, Jenkins' (2000) minimum requirements for intelligibility suggests that differences which do not cause meaning differences such as [ð] and [θ] may not be taught. The point here is not to ignore them, but to postpone them until learners acquire more essential issues first. Still, Jenkins (2000) acknowledge the fact that it is quite acceptable if learners want to learn these differences. In fact, these minute differences may be taught in the later stages and this is what is meant by postponing. Jenkins (2000) found out in her studies that learners have stage-like developments in pronunciation learning and minute differences such as the interdental sounds are not learned in the initial stages even if these are taught to students. Accordingly, it may be argued that in pronunciation teaching, learners should only be given essential and meaningful phonological properties and very detailed properties should be ignored or postponed until they reach a specific level.

One more issue that is worth discussion is the importance of the students and their background. This is because, no theory or method neatly satisfies their needs (Dalton & Seidhofer, 1994). To exemplify, Jenkins (2000) suggests that the differences between /l/ and /r/, and /ʒ/ and/ʃ/ must be maintained. This is a valid argument, because these are the problematic sounds. However, these are irrelevant for Turkish learners of English as Turkish already has the distinctions between these sounds. In other words, not only teachers, but also language teaching books should align themselves with the needs of the students and only relevant points must be given priority. For example, while I was teaching English at a state university in Turkey, the course book *Success (*Parsons et al., 2007*)* was used for the main course and *Contemporary Topics (*Kisslinger, 2010*)* for listening and speaking. However, *Success* has no coherent way for teaching pronunciation and from time to time it solely presents some minimal pairs to teach different phonemes. However, these are neither in a context nor embedded in an activity. As for *Contemporary Topics*, it was totally designed according to the Communicative Approach in the 80s and it has no explicit teaching for pronunciation. It merely presents listening parts and provides communicative activities for speaking. As discussed above speaking alone does not improve students' speech as much as a successful and efficient interaction requires.

As for what to pay attention to in pronunciation teaching, systematic and simple rules should be taught to students. For example, final devoicing is a universal error of English L2 learners and if they are made aware of it, this can work and prevent communication problems. For instance, as Cook (2009) suggests, if students are given the rule that vowels are a little bit longer before voiced plosives word-finally, this can enhance students' intelligibility. Another example is stress. If students are told to stress only content words, this also profoundly enhances their intelligibility. For instance, in Turkish inflections, modals or pronouns are also stressed. Hence, if they learn not to stress these words in English, this helps the intelligibility of their English.

Finally, it can be argued here that Jenkins' (2000) Lingua Franca Core is very useful, because even if there is a negative attitude towards standard accents or having a native-like accent, there is this problem that if students are not given any pronunciation teaching and if they do not at least learn the rudimentary aspects of English, they will end up with being only understandable to a very restricted community. To exemplify, if Turkish learners are not given any phonological training, their Turkish accent will be very hard for most of the native speakers and NNSs of English. Consequently, Lingua Franca Core (for a detailed reading on the subject, see: Jenkins, 2000) can supply the universally necessary sounds for intelligibility and learners can acquire the necessary sounds which are essential for a satisfactory communication.

Conclusion

In this paper, the issues around pronunciation teaching and its history has been presented first and then, whether pronunciation should be taught explicitly in English L2/EFL classrooms has been discussed via reviewing the literature from the perspective of those who support and oppose pronunciation teaching. The review has

suggested that pronunciation teaching has shown a great improvement in the recent decades and its aims have changed from attaining a native-like proficiency to being intelligible. The review and its implications for real life practice in L2 classrooms are also mentioned by considering the review of the literature. The analysis and synthesis suggest that the aim of pronunciation teaching should be to teach phonology for functional and meaningful contexts and it should be a part of communicative approaches to provide students with a fluent speech. The focus should be on not only perception but also production and only relevant and useful parts of phonology should be taught to learners. In this sense, this area should further be supported with studies and research in order to have a clear understanding of how students acquire phonology of an L2 and what is exactly meant by useful and relevant. Finally, at the end of the Discussion section, specific instances from English and Turkish are provided to demonstrate the implications of the discussion. As a conclusion of the analysis, it may be suggested that explicit pronunciation teaching should be further supported with research in order to have a clear understanding of the benefits and disadvantages of explicit pronunciation teaching.

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