An Investigation of the Effectiveness of Teaching Pronunciation to Malaysian TESL Students

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Pronunciation has often been viewed as a skill in second language learning that is most resistant to improvement and therefore the least useful to teach. It thus comes as no surprise that scant attention is paid to pronunciation in the Malaysian school curriculum.

This article is the result of an investigation into the pronunciation training component of a TESL programme. Although it focuses on teaching pronunciation in a specific context in Malaysia, the article raises issues that will be of interest to ESL practitioners in other contexts. It begins with a description of the pronunciation training component under investigation. Then, based on students' responses to a questionnaire, it discusses three issues: can pronunciation be taught to near-adult L2 learners, should pronunciation be explicitly taught, and what should be the goal and focus of pronunciation teaching?

The context investigated is a TESL matriculation programme in a Malaysian institution of higher learning. This matriculation is a one-to-two-year intensive English programme, with reading, writing, grammar, and listening and speaking as core courses. The listening and speaking course, which is taught for five hours per week, comprises three interwoven components: listening skills, interactive skills, and pronunciation skills, the primary focus of this research. Students complete the matriculation programme prior to enrolling in a B.Ed. in TESL degree course.

Philosophy and practices of the pronunciation training component

The underlying philosophy of the listening and speaking course is to teach pronunciation as an integral part of oral communication. The rationale is that it is artificial and counterproductive to divorce pronunciation from communication and other aspects of language use.

The goal of pronunciation training in this course was not native-speaker approximation but "comfortable intelligibility" (Abercrombie 1991:93). The former goal was deemed neither realistic nor appropriate for these young adult Malaysian learners. Abercrombie (1991:93) defines comfortably intelligible pronunciation as "pronunciation which can be understood with little or no conscious effort on the part of the listener." With regard to selecting an approximate model, Brown (1986) points out two main considerations. First, it should reflect national or ethnic identity, and second, it should have a degree of international intelligibility. Thus, Standard Malaysian English, which is patterned on Received Pronunciation (RP), was chosen as a model, although students were frequently exposed to British and American English as other models.

The course design was based on the view that training in suprasegmental features may be more valuable than work on individual sounds or phonemes for accurate perception and production of the target language, even at the segmental level. This view hinges on the notions that suprasegmental features are the key to pronunciation teaching and that "accurate production of segmental features does not in itself characterize native-like pronunciation, nor is it the primary basis of intelligible speech" (Pennington and Richards 1986: 218). Thus, the course emphasized awareness-raising activities and training in stress, intonation, rhythm, weak forms, reductions, linking, and assimilation. Some examples of suprasegmental training are listed below:

Practice shifting the stress

e.g.	photograph,	photographer,	photographic
	politics,	political,	politician

the use of weak forms

e.g.	What am I doing?	Where are my glasses?	I'm happy as a king
	I'm doing it for fun	Charles has bought a car	It was a dark night *(from Ponsonby 1987)*

At the same time, students were exposed to important contrastive aspects of the English segmental system, as illustrated below:

Minimal pair practice, contrasting /l/ and /r/

e.g. flog - frog, bleed - breed, belly - berry, alive - arrive

Contrasting with other commonly confused sounds

e.g.	thin, tin, sin, shin	thank, tank, sank, shank	thick, tick, sick, chic *(from Ponsonby 1987)*

However, in line with the other core courses, this course focused on both form and function and on micro-level and macro-level skills (Morley 1991). The micro-level training highlighted discrete elements of pronunciation and voice (both segmental and suprasegmental features). Techniques used included language lab sessions; video and audio recording (to encourage self-monitoring); pronunciation games; the use of verse, rhymes, and jazz chants; plus the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols. Macro-level skills training featured oral communication activities like role-play, group discussions, problem-solving tasks, speeches, and drama.

Finally, because learning is a process, pronunciation learning was viewed as a progression from controlled to automatic processing. It was generally accepted that immediate results from

pronunciation training might not be a realistic expectation. Students who seemed to master an aspect of pronunciation in the class often lapsed into their original speech patterns outside class.

Results of the study

The effectiveness of this pronunciation training programme was measured through 74 student responses to a questionnaire administered after students had undergone between one and four semesters of pronunciation training in the matriculation programme. The questionnaire contained both open-ended and closed-ended questions. It sought to elicit students' opinions regarding the teaching of pronunciation, the importance they attached to it, and how helpful they had found pronunciation training. Course instructors' opinions and feedback were also sought through informal interviews. The results of the questionnaire are reported below and then followed by a discussion of several pertinent issues that emerged.

Questions and responses

1. How many semesters of pronunciation training have you had?

The number of semesters of training varied, depending on the level the student was placed in upon admission to the programme.

RESPONSE	NUMBER OF SUBJECTS	PERCENTAGE*
1 semester	2	3%
2 semesters	10	14%
3 semesters	52	70%
4 semesters	10	14%

* These percentages have been rounded and do not add up to exactly 100.

2. Good pronunciation means… (open-ended)

Most students defined good pronunciation in terms of speaking clearly and correctly and being understood by those around them. Pronunciation was viewed in rather practical terms, and none of the students defined good pronunciation by referring to an exonormative standard.

3. Is good pronunciation important?

Students in this study had strong beliefs regarding the importance of pronunciation. This augurs well for them since concern for pronunciation contributes to successfully learning pronunciation.

It is important to pronounce well.

RESPONSE	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
NUMBER OF SUBJECTS	58	10	4	2	0
PERCENTAGE	78%	14%	5%	3%	0%

4. Why is it important to pronounce well?
The main reason students gave is that it enabled others to understand them easily. Students also frequently pointed out that good pronunciation gave them confidence, enhanced their self-image, and ensured that they would not be laughed at.

5. Have pronunciation classes helped you?
The usefulness of pronunciation training was strongly supported in this study as 75 percent of the students agreed that pronunciation classes helped them.

Pronunciation classes have helped me.

RESPONSE	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
NUMBER OF SUBJECTS	24	32	16	2	0
PERCENTAGE	32%	43%	22%	3%	0%

6. How has pronunciation training helped?
The two most important benefits of pronunciation training were that it helped students correct their pronunciation in English and speak more clearly.

OPTIONS GIVEN	WEIGHT GIVEN (1 = most important, 7 = least important)
To correct my pronunciation of English	1.5
To speak more clearly	2.5
To be more conscious of my pronunciation	3.4
To be aware of pronunciation differences	3.5
To speak with more confidence	3.7
To speak with an RP (British) accen	5.5
To speak with an American accent	6.2

7. Which area of pronunciation work did you find most helpful? (Choose one)
When it came to training in segmentals and suprasegmentals, students overwhelmingly rated segmentals more useful.

RESPONSE	NUMBER OF SUBJECTS	PERCENTAGE
Segmentals (e.g., English consonant and vowel sounds	67	91%
Suprasegmentals (e.g., stress,	7	9%

linking, weak forms, intonation)

8. Do you enjoy pronunciation classes?
Almost two-thirds of the students reported that they enjoyed pronunciation classes.

I enjoyed my pronunciation classes .

RESPONSE	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
NUMBER OF SUBJECTS	18	30	24	2	0
PERCENTAGE	24%	41%	32%	3%	0%

9. Should pronunciation be taught to students?
The majority of students (86%) agreed that pronunciation should be taught.

Students should be taught pronunciation.

RESPONSE	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
NUMBER OF SUBJECTS	52	12	8	2	0
PERCENTAGE	70%	16%	11%	3%	0%

10. What is the best way to improve pronunciation? (from personal experience)
The most frequent answers given were to speak English daily and to listen often to good English. Students also answered that the IPA exercises done in the classroom and language lab activities were good ways to improve pronunciation.

Can pronunciation be taught to near-adult L2 learners?

For an 18-year-old, is it too late for second language pronunciation training to make a difference? In the context under investigation, more than 75 percent of the students agreed that pronunciation work had helped them, and this view is endorsed by course instructors. It appears that students and instructors agree that improvements in pronunciation had taken place for the majority of students.

The most important benefit gained as indicated by students was that the training helped correct their pronunciation of English, particularly in the area of segmental phonology. They felt that their pronunciation of English sounds—consonants and vowels—had improved substantially. While students were aware of the suprasegmental features of English, training in this area was not considered very helpful. As one student put it, "I can't change my rhythm and intonation now. Maybe if I had been taught English pronunciation in my early years…. Moreover, I'm not sure I want to change my intonation and 'accent'." Again instructors confirm that segmental aspects of pronunciation were more easily modified than suprasegmental aspects.

The second most important benefit students claimed they gained from pronunciation training was the ability to speak English more clearly. In particular, they felt they were better able to articulate English sounds—something they claimed they owed to language laboratory practice and to their increased confidence.

In addition, students felt that pronunciation classes had helped make them more conscious of their own pronunciation and aware of ways in which their pronunciation differed from the model offered. The language lab sessions helped the most to enhance students' abilities in perception and auditory discrimination. Students seemed more able to discern differences and were better able to monitor and evaluate their own performances as a result of their lab sessions.

Finally, students stated that pronunciation training had helped them to speak with more confidence. They were no longer afraid that their English would make them the laughingstock of the class, and they were no longer embarrassed to use English when speaking to classmates, lecturers, or even strangers.

The questionnaire results also show what the students did not consider important in English pronunciation training. Receiving training in order to speak with an RP or American accent was not a priority for most students. These models were not desired by students, a result lending support and justification for the choice of Standard Malaysian English as the model.

Although the students found the pronunciation training important and helpful, instructors point out that it is not uncommon for students to demonstrate commendable mastery of certain aspects of English pronunciation when engaged in such classroom tasks as reading aloud or participating in a radio play, and yet switch to semi-intelligible conversation with friends a few minutes later. This seeming paradox may be due to the fact that tasks like reading aloud call for an almost exclusive focus on form and allow students to concentrate on pronunciation skills.

This supports the call of some researchers (for example, Kenworthy 1987) to make monitoring and self-evaluation integral parts of pronunciation work inside and outside the classroom. Such an approach would help learners apply their knowledge and skills gained in the pronunciation classroom in the real world. As Pennington and Richards (1986:219) state, "the goal of any explicit training in pronunciation should be to bring learners gradually from controlled, cognitively-based performance to automatic, skill-based performance."

Instructors reported that improvements in students' pronunciation may occur in different areas, at different rates, and at different times. Some students show immediate improvement, which may not last, while others show definite improvement some time after instruction. Course instructors have often been pleasantly surprised at the vast improvements in students' pronunciation in their undergraduate years while enrolled in the B.Ed. course—more than a year after having pronunciation training in the matriculation programme. Clearly, some improvements take time to become a part of spontaneous language use.

Should pronunciation be explicitly taught to L2 learners?

In this study, 86 percent of the students stated that pronunciation should be taught, with most of them (70%) strongly agreeing that pronunciation should be taught. It is also interesting that two-thirds of the students reported enjoying pronunciation training.

When asked for the best ways to improve pronunciation, nearly all students said it was through constant use of and exposure to the language: to speak English and to listen to good models daily. The models they listed were their lecturers, TV, and English radio stations. The next best method mentioned by students was doing pronunciation work in class, which included the introduction to IPA symbols and dictionary exercises.

Some researchers have called for abandoning the teaching of discrete elements of pronunciation. But students in this study claim to have benefited from both the top-down approach, with its emphasis on macro-level skills, as well as the bottom-up approach, with its focus on micro-level skills and discrete elements. In short, while this study calls for teaching pronunciation as part of oral communication, it also acknowledges that students need to practice discrete aspects of pronunciation.

This idea fits in with Morley's (1991) suggestion that the pronunciation syllabus integrate practice modes that incorporate both macro-level and micro-level skills. Murphy (1991) makes a distinction between accuracy activities, which focus on oral production and aural discrimination, and fluency activities, which focus on listening and speaking activities. Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996) propose a communicative-cognitive approach that also integrates micro- and macro-level skills. Their framework includes awareness raising, listening discrimination activities, controlled practice and feedback, guided practice and feedback, and communicative practice and feedback.

What should the goal and focus of L2 pronunciation teaching be?

This investigation indicates that students value training in segmental production much more than training in suprasegmental elements. Students claimed that training in English consonants and vowels helped them improve their pronunciation patterns, heightened their awareness and concern for pronunciation, and enhanced their overall confidence in using English. While focusing on suprasegmental features helped them understand native speaker accents, students did not find these features particularly useful for their own pronunciation.

While this finding seems to conflict with findings of other studies that point to the primary role of suprasegmentals in pronunciation training, that role should not be summarily dismissed. First, it should be noted that in the Malaysian context, mispronunciation of words is often a source of jokes, and the person who mispronounces is frequently mocked and laughed at. This is one reason why pronunciation mastery is a much sought after goal. On the other hand, Malaysians would hardly notice words and phrases with misplaced stress, or without a clear stress pattern, and the lack of weak forms in speech. In fact, a Malaysian who speaks English with a stress-timed rhythm (as opposed to a syllable-timed rhythm) or with nativelike intonation patterns is likely to be met with suspicion and derision.

As researchers have noted, phonological features are among the most salient linguistic dimensions used by speakers to create a sense of personal identity (for example, Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor 1977). Thus, teaching suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation was found to be of limited value because students had little desire to modify their speech patterns in this respect. Corroborating students' reporting, course instructors also observed that explicit training in suprasegmentals has proven to be largely ineffective. The solution, they feel, is not to exclude it altogether but to integrate it into communicative activities. Perhaps these elements have to be

Other researchers have highlighted suprasegmental features as more valuable for achieving intelligibility than segmental features. But the question arises: intelligible to whom? Few of these students need to communicate orally with native speakers of English. What they need most is to be able to communicate effectively with other nonnative speakers, perhaps from different L1 backgrounds, given the multiethnic population of Malaysia. Research has revealed that most native speakers structure and decode spoken language via the suprasegmental system. However, there is insufficient evidence for us to assume that this is also true of the nonnative speaker.

This, of course, does not mean abandoning all pronunciation goals and models. Brown (1986), for instance, argues against adopting a model that is intelligible only to other local speakers. A model offered should not have restricted intelligibility but should strive to have international intelligibility. Jenkins (1998:121) offers a compromise by suggesting that teaching second language pronunciation should focus on "core areas." She identifies these as certain segmentals, nuclear stress, and the effective use of articulatory settings. However, whether her compromise can improve intelligibility and acceptability is untested.

Conclusion

This article has illustrated the benefits of L2 pronunciation training for young adult learners. Teachers need to incorporate both macro-level skills and the top-down approach, as well as micro-level skills and the bottom-up approach. Unlike a number of previous studies, this article endorses the value of pronunciation training in aspects of English segmental phonology, with a focus on consonants and vowels. While this does not imply totally abandoning suprasegmental training, the instructor does need to be more selective and integrative in teaching. Finally, it supports the view of pronunciation as vital to intelligibility and as an essential component of communicative competence (Morley 1991:513).

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