

The Role of Phonetics in Teaching ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Phonetics is usually regarded as a subject by itself and teachers of English consider it a tool in accent neutralization at the most. In this context, this paper shows the essential role of phonetics in the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) with focus on segmental (phonemes) and suprasegmental (stress, accent, rhythm and intonation) features. For teachers, who have had a good model of English pronunciation in their growing years, the awareness may be intuitive and the features may have become part of their language. But for the others, who teach ESL, learning the nuances of phonetics may be considered a part of their continuing professional development (CPD).

Introduction

Most often, the English teacher's pronunciation becomes the only model that students adopt. This puts a great onus on the teacher. It is here that training in phonetics will stand them in good stead. A teacher trained in phonetics will be able to pronounce the words correctly, using the right rhythm and intonation in their rendering of a poem or a prose piece. This paper examines how knowledge of phonetics helps both the teacher and the learners.

The Role of Phonetics (Phonemics) in Making Speech Intelligible

For all second language learners of English, there are some areas where they are likely to go wrong. It behoves the teacher to identify these problematic areas and correct them. Unless students feel the necessity to learn something, they will not be motivated

enough to learn it. They should be made aware of the lacunae in their pronunciation, so that they become eager to fill those lacunae. It is the responsibility of the teacher to show the students how certain sounds are missing in a person's speech and how they might try to substitute them by using other sounds, thereby making their speech unintelligible. If the teacher is familiar with phonetics she can take the time to prepare phoneme inventories of the students' mother tongue and compare them with the sounds of English (Received Pronunciation). This will also help the teacher adopt a comparative approach while teaching the sounds of English. One possibility is to make the students refer to the list of all the sounds in English and make them read example words given for each sound. This exercise will also show where the student is going wrong and

teaching material may be prepared accordingly. If the students are given adequate practice, they are likely to acquire the correct sounds in a very short period.

The Role of Phonetics (Intonation) in Communication

Intonation has a communicative function and, as such, knowledge of intonation is essential in discourse, too. It shows the speaker's purpose in saying something: whether he is telling, requesting, asking, ordering, apologizing, greeting or thanking a listener. Usually a falling tone denotes 'speaker-dominance' and a rising tone indicates 'speaker-deference'; this means that the speaker does not know and so asks, does not have authority and so requests, etc. Intonation is employed to present ideas and information in utterances and conversations. Similarly, a conversation is governed by interactional tactics, i.e. by turn taking norms. Participants in a conversation evaluate each other's utterances to judge the right time when the speaker hands over the floor, and the listener takes his turn. Through intonation the speaker can deduce what is shared knowledge (given information) or what is a new piece of information.

Intonation also helps indicate if a sentence is complete or if there is something to follow. A falling tone has an implication of finality and a rising tone, an implication of non-finality. Even in the reading of a prose passage, intonation plays an important role. The essence of a passage is conveyed to the students only if it is read employing all the

rules of intonation. Usually, finding the tone group boundaries is quite easy and the teacher may not make a mistake in that. When it comes to tones, the low-rise tone is oratorical and is the usual tone employed for reading aloud. But if a passage is read with a wrong tonic and tone, it may not have a great appeal to the students, and they may lose interest in the text. But, by using the right tones on the correct syllable along with other prosodic and paralinguistic features like voice quality, tempo, and facial expressions and gestures, the teacher can make the reading of a prose piece lively and absorbing.

Apart from this, knowledge of different tones and attitudinal meanings associated with each tone should be taught to students. A person's personality, his upbringing, his psychology and so much more is revealed through what he says. In other words, intonation is an indicator of his character and personality; as Tench (1996) puts it, what matters is not what someone says, but how he says something.

The Role of Phonetics (stress, accent and rhythm) in Teaching Rhymes and Poetry

One of the most commonly taught rhymes at school is **Twinkle, twinkle, little star**. Most often, the significance of the segmental features, word stress and rhythm which contribute to the musical quality of the rhyme are overlooked. English has, what is called, a stress-timed rhythm. Therefore, when it is read with syllable-timed rhythm (as most of the Indian languages have syllable-timed rhythm), it sounds un-English.

ˈTwinˈkle ˈtwinˈkle ˈlitˈtle ˈstar
How ɪ ˈwɒnˈder ˈwʌt ˈju ˈɑː
ˈʌp ˈɑːbʊv ˈði ˈwɜːld ˈso ˈhaɪ
ˈLiːk ˈɑː ˈdiːɑːmɒnd ˈɪn ˈði ˈskaɪ.

As shown above, each syllable is given the same emphasis, which results in a syllable-timed rhythm. It suppresses the original rhythmic characteristic of the English language which has to be brought out by the varying degrees of stress carried by syllables. The rhythm of English is mainly a matter of syllables and stresses. These two operate together to give the language the rhythmic drive that it naturally has. Only some syllables are produced with extra energy, and there is a regularity of these stressed syllables. In other words, in the English language, stress plays a dominant role. The desirable rendering should be as follows:

ˈTwɪŋkl ˈtwɪŋkl ˈlɪtl ˈstɑː
ˈHaʊ I ˈwɒndə ˈwʌt ju ˈɑː
ˈʌp ɑːbʊv ði ˈwɜːld sɔ ˈhaɪ
ˈLiːk ɑː ˈdiːɑːmɒnd ɪn ði ˈskaɪ.

This rhyme has been shown as a simple example but it is true of any poem in literature. Meter, whether in music or poetry, is a way of organizing rhythm. In other words, meter is a way of organizing syllables and stresses resulting in a recurring pattern – a pattern in which the stressed syllables are perceived as beats and the weak syllables as off-beats between the

beats. In a metrical poem, the most likely place for beats to occur is on the stressed syllables. Most kinds of verse in English are in stress meter where the stress rhythm of the language dominates the syllabic rhythm. Thus, the number of syllables between beats varies even as the number of beats remains constant.

Nursery rhymes, popular ballets and other kinds of poems have four-beat meters. In most of the poems, the number of unstressed syllables between stressed syllables is consistently one or two. Although the stress-timed nature of English rhythm means that we can squeeze and compress the unstressed syllables into a shorter time so as to maintain the isochrony of stressed syllables, it puts a strain on the reader if there are more than two syllables. It is here that the knowledge of rhythm is essential for a teacher of English. They should know which syllable is stressed and which is unstressed. A non-native speaker teacher needs to acquire this awareness. When we learn to speak English, it is not just a matter of learning only the sounds of the consonants and vowels but also internalizing the use of muscles in the speech organs in a certain way so as to produce a sequence of sounds. Just as one learns activities like swimming or playing the piano, one has to learn the unique rhythm of English speech, which is different from the rhythms of other languages. All languages have their distinctive rhythm and each language has its own way of harnessing the energy of the body.

The purpose of teaching English rhymes and poems to students is to make them familiar with the rhythm of English. Poetry, in particular, intensifies and regularizes the natural rhythm so as to make it possible to experience beats and hence the study of poetry cannot exclude this rich experience. The ESL teacher may use online resources for teaching stress, rhythm and intonation (e.g., <https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/stories-and-poems>).

Conclusion

This paper examines how awareness of phonetics, especially rhythm and intonation, enriches the teaching of English. RP (Received Pronunciation) provides the teacher and student a good model as it is most widely researched and in which there is abundant instructional material available. Questions may be raised as to why include RP and who speaks RP. With years of experience in learning and teaching English to Indian and foreign students, I can say with confidence that RP is more a means to an end than an end in itself.

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