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A brief guide to resources for developing expertise in the teaching of pronunciation

Abstract

Pronunciation is once again finding its way back into the classroom as an integral part of the ELT curriculum. There is a growing need, however, for teacher preparation as many teachers feel inadequately equipped to deal with the many facets of pronunciation training. This paper proposes a basic plan to help novice (and experienced) teachers to be better prepared to face the formidable task of teaching pronunciation and to develop as professionals through a variety of activities and resources, including 1) education (both formal and informal); 2) self-studying; 3) membership in professional organisations; 4) attending and presenting at conferences; 5) reflection upon classroom pedagogical and theoretical issues; and 6) familiarity with computer assisted instruction, Internet programs, and discussion groups for pronunciation training and related issues. It also aims to inform teachers of the wide domain of skills under the rubric of pronunciation teaching and learning, as well as the array of resources available for pronunciation teaching and professional development.

Introduction

To the many teachers who recognise its important role in effective communication, the renewed interest in pronunciation over the past two decades comes as little surprise. According to Morley (1991: 490–91), this has been motivated by a number of factors. First, it has been sparked by the large number of immigrants moving to English-speaking countries in recent years and international students studying at anglophone universities. In addition, an ever-increasing number of non-native speakers (NNS) are entering the anglophone-dominated fields of technology, business, and industry. The renewed interest has also been influenced by the movement away from the audio-lingual, drill-dominated classroom, with a heavy emphasis on language laboratory practice, to a focus on intelligible communication with training between the individual sounds and prosodic features of pronunciation.

This interest in pronunciation has caused an awareness of the need for improved teacher preparation. However, in a survey questioning 33 teachers about their perceptions of how well their training courses in graduate school in the U.S. had prepared them for teaching pronunciation, over half of the teachers responded negatively, ranging from 'not very well' (nine) to

'not at all/hardly at all' (six) (Bradford and Kenworthy 1991). Most informants felt that too little time had been given to pronunciation and phonology, and that their training did not prepare them to make important decisions about course content and methods to employ in the classroom. The message is clear: many teachers feel inadequate when it comes to teaching pronunciation and are not getting enough training to teach pronunciation effectively. There is therefore a growing need for professional development in this area through a variety of modes such as distance education, personalised study, or access to other resources.

This paper presents a basic plan to help novice, as well as experienced, teachers to develop as pronunciation teachers and professionals both inside and outside the classroom. The paper covers seven basic areas: 1) academic training; 2) distance programs; 3) self-studying (a personalised reading plan); 4) professional memberships; 5) conferences; 6) utilising knowledge gained from teaching and research; and 7) Internet and CALL resources (see Table 1 for a list of the activities involved and the potential benefits of each section). Another objective is to familiarise teachers with the broad range of skills under the rubric of speech/pronunciation and with resources available for teaching and professional development.

Table 1: Key areas for teacher preparation and professional development, including activities involved and potential benefits

Training focus	Activities	Benefits
Academic training	❖ degree programs (MA/PhD)	❖ improved knowledge of linguistic/pedagogical issues ❖ teaching opportunities ❖ motivating to meet others with similar interests ❖ mentoring experience
Distance education	❖ correspondence courses ❖ Internet communication	❖ earn degree at home ❖ improved knowledge of linguistic/pedagogical issues ❖ work at your own pace
Reading program	❖ textbooks ❖ resource books ❖ linguistic books ❖ journal articles	❖ improved knowledge of linguistic/pedagogical issues ❖ classroom activities/exercises ❖ help in prioritising training objectives
Conferences/meetings	❖ attending talks/workshops ❖ paper presentation ❖ meeting like-minded people	❖ meeting like-minded people ❖ gather information and share ideas with other professionals ❖ access to a wealth of resources and information

Professional memberships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ conferences ❖ resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ contact with other professionals ❖ access to a wealth of resources and information
Pedagogy and research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ ideas from classroom teaching ❖ ideas from research ❖ writing article and/or review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ understand key problem areas ❖ prioritise training objectives ❖ publish findings
CALL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Internet resources ❖ CALL software ❖ electronic visual feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ expand contacts with others ❖ access to a wealth of resources and information ❖ improved teaching and learning

Pronunciation training goals

More recent trends in pronunciation teaching and learning have abandoned assumptions, current in the audio-lingual era, that native-like accuracy was the goal, and intelligible communication is seen as an achievable aim for most learners (Scarcella and Oxford 1994; Celce-Murcia et al 1996). Pronunciation professionals agree that training should include a balance in focus between suprasegmentals, segmentals, and voice quality settings. Second-language (L2) learners may experience difficulties through inappropriate or misunderstood intonation, rhythm, stress, or problems with word meanings due to misarticulation of vowels and consonants. Morley (1998: 6) maintains that instruction should contain a balance between speech production and performance. She feels that on a micro level or 'word/phrase-level domain', the three areas of speech that should be addressed are consonants and vowels, the phonetic features of reduction, linkage, elision, assimilation et cetera, as well as 'phrase-level prosodics'. On a macro or 'discourse-level', instruction should focus on the use of intonation, stress, rhythm, and overall oral communication and discourse skills. Scarcella and Oxford (1994: 221–23) emphasise the importance of learning stress (loudness, pitch, and vowel length), rhythm, linking and assimilation, and sounds (vowels, consonants and consonant clusters).

The teaching and learning of pronunciation involves a number of different areas of which teachers should acquire a basic understanding. Addressing all of these areas can be a daunting task. However, since pronunciation permeates almost every aspect of language learning, it must be tackled in the classroom. The teacher's role in providing models and learning opportunities is crucial: 'every word, every syllable, every sound uttered by the teacher may contribute to the learning of pronunciation, not only when the teacher is deliberately and overtly concentrating on teaching pronunciation, but equally when he believes that he is putting the weight of the teaching onto questions of grammar or vocabulary' (Stevens 1991: 96).

Academic training

Graduate programs

Garshick (1995) lists more than 350 ELT degree programs at the undergraduate, master's and doctoral levels in the United States and Canada, and 195 master's degree programs in the United States alone. The number of programs in the United Kingdom and Australia is also on a steady increase. Such programs offer teachers one way of improving their understanding of pronunciation theory and pedagogy through various course projects and studies, and discussions and reflection upon the language learning process. Many TESOL or applied linguistics graduate programs also require students to specialise in a particular topic in order to write a thesis, and this can provide students with a unique opportunity to expand their understanding of a pronunciation-related topic. However, graduate courses can vary greatly in focus and intensity. Of the 70 MATESOL programs Murphy (1997) studied in the United States, most require at least one course that deals specifically with phonology and/or phonetics. However, as Bradford and Kenworthy (1991) concluded in their study of MATESOL phonology courses, exposure to only one or two courses may not provide enough background and preparation for some teachers. They found that many teachers felt their training had not prepared them well enough to make important decisions about what to teach and how to teach it. Many teachers also felt the need for more practical demonstration and guidance by their trainers in how to apply their knowledge of phonology in their classroom. Murphy (1997) agrees that MATESOL candidates would benefit from this kind of input and assistance.

Distance learning programs

Distance learning will likely be one of the hottest education trends of the new millennium, and offers teachers who cannot take leave from their job a way of studying through correspondence courses using video, regular mail, or electronically through the Internet. Such programs also offer teachers access to language resources from professionals and libraries at institutions around the world. However, in choosing a distance learning program, it is important to examine the course requirements beforehand to ensure that the program is suitable.

Many programs require a fixed number of instructional modules, tests, mediated lessons and, often, an on-campus requirement. Moreover, distance programs are not suited to everyone. Some people have difficulty in planning, and find self-paced learning without the constant support of others a hard task. It is also important to keep in mind that some educational institutions may not recognise distance learning programs and require employees to seek education through a traditional on-campus education program (Feasley 1993). (See Appendix 1 for a list of websites offering in-depth information on distance education.)

Reading about pronunciation

Reading resources include: 1) *Pronunciation textbooks*, which include exercises for suprasegmental and segmental practice, 2) *Teacher resource books*, which provide ideas for creating classroom activities and exercises, diagnostic testing, and other pedagogical and theoretical issues, and 3) *Background knowledge books*, which provide information and discussion on linguistic issues of a theoretical and practical nature. Pronunciation textbooks can provide useful teaching materials that may be suitable for use in the classroom. Second, specialised information from books and journal articles on pronunciation-related topics can assist in understanding pronunciation problems, and recognising how to address them in the classroom. This information can also be helpful in understanding pronunciation research (See Appendix 2 for a list of readings.)

Journal articles

Journal articles provide exposure to significant teaching and research topics and to references to other publications on pronunciation-related issues. (See Appendix 3 for a list of journals that contain articles related to pronunciation teaching and learning.) In compiling the list of journals, there has been an attempt to maintain a balance between pedagogical and research-oriented journals and newsletters. For easy access, the homepage addresses are also included.

Professional organisations

Professional organisations provide a rich supply of resources and contacts that are essential for teacher preparation and professional development. The IATEFL Pronunciation Special Interest Group and the Speech/Pronunciation Interest Section of TESOL are two special interest groups (SIGs) exclusively devoted to pronunciation teaching and learning. Membership provides access to specialised publications and other resources that offer in-depth information on a variety of teaching, research, and conference information. Many organisations also have affiliate chapters that meet on a local level. Appendix 4 contains a list of pronunciation/speech-related organisations, many of which hold conferences on an annual basis.

Insights gained from pronunciation pedagogy and research

Teachers can enhance their classroom teaching through an awareness of pronunciation theory and pedagogy. Observations from classroom research can help teachers prioritise their professional development and training objectives by deepening their understanding of the difficulties their students experience (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991: 1–7). Having a NNS friend,

acquaintance, or spouse to act as a research subject can help to reveal problem areas of accented-speech. Teaching and research observations can be applied to classroom teaching and/or presented at a conference.

One way of deepening understanding of pronunciation or any other issue in language teaching is through publishing an article or book review. This can be a rewarding experience for the author, and one develops the ability to evaluate one's own ideas or those of others critically. It is also an effective way of communicating with other professionals with similar interests. (See McKay 1997 for more detailed information about writing for publication.)

Technological applications

The Internet

The Internet provides a wealth of resources for pronunciation training. New technologies, such as real-time audio and video display, have expanded the capacity of the Web for interactive learning (Brinton and La Belle 1997: 54). The Internet offers opportunities for development through discussion with other professionals via news and chat groups, email correspondence, resource groups, electronic journals and professional organisations. Appendix 5 provides a few Internet resources useful for accessing up-to-date information, and for expanding contacts with other professionals. (Also see Brinton and La Belle 1997 for a list of Internet resources for speech/pronunciation training, and sites for phonetics laboratories and professional organisations.)

Computer-assisted instruction (CAI) for pronunciation

During the past five years computer-assisted learning software has experienced enormous growth, and is ideally suited to pronunciation training. The range of software programs on the market includes traditional minimal-pair listening discrimination exercises, as well as interactive CD-ROMs that provide an overview of sound systems and prosodic features of various languages, and other programs for guided and self-learning instruction and practice.

One outgrowth of electronic technology that has received a great deal of attention is the use of electronic visual feedback displays for pronunciation training. Visual feedback programs enable users to record their utterances and perform an acoustic analysis of their speech with functions for showing and measuring intonation, duration and frequency range (see Molholt 1990 and Anderson-Hsieh 1992). Many programs include a dual display with top and bottom screens which help learners to evaluate their speech errors objectively and progress through analysing and visually comparing their own pronunciation with a native speaker's. (See Anderson-Hsieh 1998 for a survey of the different software/hardware programs currently on the market.)

Conclusion

This paper describes a variety of activities and resources available to teachers who want to find out more about pronunciation teaching. It is hoped that the appendices which follow will provide a useful resource which they can use to upgrade their skills in this most important and sometimes neglected area of language teaching and learning.

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