

METHODS OF MASTERING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

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METHODS OF MASTERING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

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Absolutely, there are some shortcomings in my paper, but I will try my best to improve them in my future teaching.

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Raymond Spoto

The paper reviews the history of English expansion in China and some effective methods of mastering English pronunciation compared to grammar study.

The paper was divided into three parts: the importance of learning English pronunciation, the problems of learning English pronunciation and four efficient ways to master English pronunciation.

The purpose of the paper is to help ESL (English as a Second Language) students to choose English pronunciation study at first rather than grammar. And also, the paper will give the parents of students who are confused to decide what courses or books they should recommend or buy for their younger children.

It's hoped that the paper will inform those ESL (English as a Second Language) students, or even their parents, of the necessity of the very beginning of their ESL (English as a Second Language) study.

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Chapter I Introduction

(1) There are many factors for mastering English. For example; grammar, pronunciation, emotion, interest, and so on.

(2) Pronunciation is the most difficult aspect for English learners in China.

(3) Many English learners can do well in examination, but they are very poor in their pronunciation. This is what we call “feeling awfully disappointed when opening our mouth”.

(4) Mary Grantham O’Brien raised the point that it was not her grammar, her word order, her inflections, her individual sound, or her declensions to tip us off to the fact that she is a nonnative speaker.

Statement of the Problem

(1) Why is English pronunciation so important to English learners in China?

(2) What are the problems of mastering English pronunciation?

(3) What are the methods of mastering English pronunciation?

Definition of Terms

(1) RP:

Received Pronunciation or Standard American acts as a model for all native speakers. For example, people with a strong regional accent will ‘tone down’ or modify their accent when talking to people from other regions or countries in order to make themselves intelligible. So, the important thing here is not necessarily having an achievable target, but having a model that can be used in order to aid intelligibility.

(2) Prosodic:

The noun form of the adjective Prosodic is Prosody. So prosody is the rhythm, stress, and intonation of speech. Prosody may reflect various features of the speaker or the utterance: the emotional state of the speaker; the form of the utterance (statement, question, or command); the presence of irony or sarcasm; emphasis, contrast, and focus; or other elements of language that may not be encoded by grammar or by choice of vocabulary.

(3) Phonology:

Phonology is a branch of linguistics concerned with the systematic organization of sounds in languages. Phonology is often distinguished from phonetics. While phonetics concerns itself with the physical production, acoustic transmission and perception of the sounds of speech, phonology describes the way sounds function within a given language or across languages to encode meaning.

Purpose of the Study

The paper aims at provide English learners with some useful methods to help their English pronunciation.

Significance of the Study

The paper can guide the students who are in a dilemma where they don't know the first step to learn English. After seeing this article, people will choose studying English pronunciation as an entry-level method.

Delimitation of the Study

(1) This secondary research will be conducted through the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin- Platteville using the UW-Search tool.

(2) Key words would be “grammar, pronunciation, phonetics, English learners”.

(3) The search of the literature will be operated via the internet through JSTOR, Project Muse and Wikipedia as the primary sources.

(4) Since the paper mainly focuses on English pronunciation, some English learners will be picked randomly for their methods of mastering English pronunciation and the difficulties required for doing it. All the information will be regarded as secondary materials

Methodology

I choose to write a library research seminar paper. At first, I will start to enter some key words to the Karmann Library blank and gather some books which are good for my research. Second, I will look roughly through the references of these useful books and try to get some information in details from these books in the references.

Chapter II Review of Literature

English was introduced to China due to the large number of foreign missionaries doing their work dating from A.D.1500, during the middle period of the Ming dynasty. From that time on, English has sprung up all around China. Many linguists and educators are sparing no effort to help English learners to grab the essence of English, so here is the first element to master English. And that is what nowadays many scholars are debating. Most of them put the pronunciation in the first place based on their educational experience and as a conclusion based on teaching. For example, I, a master student of English Education, have already regarded the pronunciation of English as the “queen ant” among a group of ants, meaning that pronunciation is the most important element in language learning. With this opinion, the argument then arises over which aspect of teaching English should be selected as the most significant part for the English learners. Every linguist has the same views on this topic to some degree, but they have drawn different conclusions in addressing the following questions:

1. Why is English pronunciation so important to English learners?
2. What are the problems of mastering English pronunciation?
3. What are the methods of mastering English pronunciation?

This review of the literature on the Methods of mastering English pronunciation focuses on these three questions.

1. Why is English pronunciation so important to English learners?

In a very excellent article, O’Brien (2004) raised the point that it was not her grammar, her word order, her inflections, her individual sound, or her declensions to

tip us off to the fact that she is a nonnative speaker. Mostly it was a prosodic [rhythm, stress, or intonation] aspect that gave her away (p. 1). This is absolutely reacting to another unknown, but a famous educational blogger, announced that pronunciation is such a complex and important area for teaching that we should not just scratch the surface.

There is a massive lack of knowledge regarding the pronunciation teaching. I heard a large number of these cases in which my peers started English class by only memorizing words list again and again. The teacher turns a deaf ear to this difficult problem. I used to keep silent when a foreign language teacher asked me some simple questions due to my poor pronunciation because I could not speak English with any confidence. The best thing that ever happened to me was when I met the most important English teacher in my life to help me get out of the torture, and told me that without pronunciation, English would become like a dead language and communication would be difficult.

Maybe Gleason (1964) is correctly responding to the importance of mastering English pronunciation. He said in his authoritative article “What Grammar?” that a speaking knowledge of a language requires very close to a 100% control of the phonology and control of from 50-90% of the grammar (p. 120).

2. What are the problems of mastering English pronunciation?

Question 1: What should we master?

To answer this question, my supervisor, Miss He, the founder of the Dr. I-Kids English education center, once in a meeting, told us that, ” to start with, we need to think about the main aim of mastering pronunciation. Is it because we want to speak with an

RP1 (Received Pronunciation) accent, or is it that we want to be understood and to be able to communicate effectively? For most English learners, the first target would be both unrealistic and, to be blunt, pointless. Not only would very few learners be able to achieve such a goal, but very few native speakers speak with an RP accent, and thus it seems to be a rather unrealistic target. However, if the second aim – intelligibility – is the target, then we need to work out what it actually is that makes people intelligible or unintelligible; in other words, we need to work out what aspects of pronunciation are key. Of course, the mastering of pronunciation should not solely focus on the production of sounds, but also on receptive skills, i.e. understanding when listening. So, even if we think that we may not be able to speak with an RP accent, should we at least be able to understand one?” (Miss He, 2013).

RP1:RP (Received Pronunciation) or Standard American acts as a model for all native speakers. For example, people with a strong regional accent will ‘tone down’ or modify their accent when talking to people from other regions or countries in order to make themselves intelligible. So, the important thing here is not necessarily having an achievable target, but having a model that can be used in order to aid intelligibility.

Question 2: How do we master Sounds?

Also, Miss He said that “a lot of pronunciation work focuses on distinguishing between individual sounds. The obvious examples of this are things such as [ʃɪp] (ship) or [ʃi:p] (sheep) and [tri:] (tree) or [θri:] (three).

The first thing to ask here is whether it is necessary or useful to try to teach these differences or not. First of all, not all native speakers of English actually distinguish (many speakers say [tri:] for [θri:], for example); and, secondly, surely the context of these words is used in will, more often than not to be sufficient enough to help the listener distinguish which word is being used. For example, “We went to France by [ʃi:p]”. It is fairly obvious which word fits the context, and insisting that the

pronunciation of the word is essential for understanding is being ridiculous. Does this mean we shouldn't master sounds? No, not at all, but it does mean we need to think about why we are mastering them." This conversation helps to make the proper point regarding how we accomplish the first step in mastering pronunciation (Miss He, 2013).

Question 3: How do we master Word Stress?

Miss He also said that "In many cases, an incorrect word stress will lead to more problems than the use of an incorrect phoneme (sound) in a word. This is not only because word stress can sometimes alter the complete meaning of the word, changing it from a noun to a verb, for example, present (n.) vs. present (vb), but also because, in English, not every syllable in a word is necessarily the same length (especially in connected speech) and this is often the main cause of a sound being wrong, rather than a learner's inability to form the sound.

The unpredictability of a word stress is often the cause of problems. In many languages speakers know exactly which syllable is stressed as it is the same in every word, e.g. in Hungarian the first syllable is always stressed. Quite often students aren't aware of what they do in their own language and therefore don't understand why they are having a problem with English sounds and stress patterns" (Miss He, 2013).

Question 4: How do we master Sentence stress?

Again, Miss He asks that "Why do some students have problems with sentence stress in English? Probably the root cause is linked to the student's first language. Students whose language is syllable-timed - e.g. Italian, French, Hungarian – may have problems with English, which is a stress-timed language. Of course, stress in English sentences is

extremely important as it is often used to indicate the meaning and importance of certain information. When the stress is incorrect then there can be a breakdown in communication. These problems can be both in terms of speaking (productive) and listening (receptive) skills” (Miss He, 2013).

Question 5: How do we master Intonation?

“Intonation plays a key role in pronunciation. In many respects it’s not what we say, but how we say it that conveys meaning. However, it’s a little bit silly to talk about intonation in isolation as it is often affected by stress, tone and rhythm. This can be seen on a word level when one syllable is stressed for emphasis, the pitch falls from high to low.

If we look at intonation at the sentence level, we will notice that a particular sentence can have a number of meanings simply by varying the intonation. Here’s an example. Take the short phrase “It’s Ready”. If we go from high pitch on the word “It’s” to low on the first syllable of ready, and then to high on the last syllable of ready, this will probably indicate surprise. If on the other hand we go from high pitch on “It’s” and the first syllable of ready to low pitch on the last syllable of ready then this is probably indicating a matter of fact, or if the drop is quite large it might indicate frustration or relief from the speaker. Coupling these shifts in intonation with lengthening certain sounds, i.e. the /e/ phoneme in ready, changes the meaning again and now indicates a “Come on, we’re waiting or Hurry up! Meaning” (Miss He, 2013).

Quite clearly intonation is an important aspect of pronunciation.

All of these deal with most of the problem of acquiring the mastery of English pronunciation. Once one can master the sounds, word stress, sentence stress and

intonation, perhaps a learner will have another way to step into the study of English.

3. What are the methods of mastering English pronunciation?

O'Brien had a special taste for this question; in her article *Pronunciation Matters* pointed that:

- “1. Classroom pronunciation training should begin early.
2. Sound-symbol correspondence should be included in the training.
3. Training should take the form of contextualized practice when possible. Examples of such activities should begin at the perceptual level and should proceed to production. Activities should include focused information-gathering activities, skits, and role plays.
4. Pay more attention to the knowledge of the sound system when undertaking a successful communication rather than just focusing on grammatical, lexical, pragmatic and discourse purposes” (O'Brien, 2004, p. 7).

Other educators, He and Zhang, in their cooperative article *Native Speaker Norms and China English: From the Perspective of Learners and Teachers in China*, pressed in 2010, said that, Horwitz, in 2008, indicated that “classroom teaching still remains the major means for people to learn English as a foreign language. We students should not waste time digging into many grammar issues. We need to select the most appropriate model as our most important pronunciation” (He & Zhang, 2010, p. 770).

Within our new technical and industrial society, maybe it's good to ask for help for the system. Jorge dos Reis and Valerie Hazan have introduced a new vowel notation system aimed at aiding the mastering of English pronunciation. Jorge dos Reis and Valerie Hazan explained that this notation system, designed as an enhancement to orthographic text, was developed to use concepts borrowed from the representation of

musical notes, and is also linked to the acoustic characteristics of vowel sounds. And the result was proved by Jorge dos Reis and Valerie Hazan. According to their article, when “two teachers used Speechant system in their adult education classes, they commented that the learning process was successful and useful for the students who quickly acquired a good English pronunciation in an enjoyable way. The students liked learning in this way because it was appealing and easy to follow” (Reis & Hazan, 2011, p. 156-164).

Not long ago, Lord (2005) stated that “we spend much time struggling with vocabulary and grammar, but for the time being, we should focus on the task of mastering the most basic part of English, which is of course, English pronunciation” (p. 557).

Although the study of the methods of mastering English pronunciation continues to be explored, many linguists still assert that pronunciation has the main priority.

Summary

To aid the reader in recalling the many fine points you just made and to prepare him or her for the conclusions you will be drawing in the next chapter, summarize the content of this chapter in a few paragraphs. For instance, if your paper examines the role that negotiated interaction plays in second language acquisition, you may summarize the evidence as to why negotiated interaction facilitates second language acquisition.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

For ESL (English as a Second Language) learners, they will be in a dilemma if they can't take their first steps in the right direction. That's what I will solve in this article.

In this paper, 3 questions were answered in an authentic way ,such as the importance of mastering English pronunciation, the problems of mastering English pronunciation which contains word sounds, word stress, sentence stress, intonation and effective ways to master English pronunciation, which guides those ESL (English as a Second Language) learners to have a scientific manner to learn English.

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