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## *An Introduction to Pronunciation Issues at Secondary Level in ESL Learners*

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### **Abstract**

English pronunciation is one of the most important parts of foreign language learning. But unfortunately, is granted the least attention by the teacher and learner. If the learner is not good at pronunciation, then he will lose his confidence level. His interaction with the fellows and society will be limited. If a second language is learned in childhood, the process of acquiring the second language will be unconscious. But, if language is learned in adulthood, the learner will put great effort to attain the native-like abilities but it is very unlikely to every learner because this is based on the learners' intelligibility. ESL teachers should take an active part to enhance the skill of oral proficiency among the students of secondary level. The aim of this paper is first to review the importance of pronunciation, issues that ESL learners face, factors that affect the learning of pronunciation, then suggestions in form of strategies or methods that can be applied differently according to the weak areas of the students and get better results after the implementations of these rules.

**Keywords:** pronunciation, social interaction, intelligibility, importance, factors affecting pronunciation, strategies, implementations



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## **1. Introduction**

It is generally observable that teaching and learning English both are difficult to teach and learn respectively. Because English is considered a second language so it is not easy to learn it as learners learn their first language. English is a language that needs clear pronunciation so that it is easy to understand. Learners, who learn English after their school time, face many difficulties in acquiring intelligible pronunciation. And this degree of difficulty increases over time as age passes. Problems regarding pronunciation can be both with vowels and consonants. But most ESL learners are in a very bad situation when they are supposed to pronounce words or make readings of long paragraphs.

Pronunciation is one of the most important parts of teaching and learning English because it is considered as an oral skill of communication so it affects learners' communicative competence and performance. According to Elliot (1995), pronunciation is one of the most important features of an individual's speech, but a lot of teachers do not explicitly teach it. It is seldom taught by teachers in foreign language classrooms. In addition, it is one of the most difficult challenges that language teachers and learners face. If teachers understand the characteristics that impact their learners' pronunciation, they can effectively improve their instruction to increase the accuracy of their learners' pronunciation.

In Pakistan, English is taught as a compulsory subject from pre-nursery to graduate level and the curriculum sets upon the needs of the students like Grammar knowledge, reading-based material, comprehension of the text, vocabulary items, and the learning and practicing of the proper pronunciation. But unfortunately, teachers pay to focus on grammar teaching rather than pronunciation. As English is taken as a burden for most of the students, so they do not pay much attention to the actual learning. They just take English as a subject matter whom they have to pass out. English has become a global language in the current era (Shahzad, 2020). So, it is the need of the people especially the need of the students to learn it and understand it. But unfortunately, ESL learners fail in this section.

As speaking facilitates the learner in good communication. Learners' confidence also develops while interacting with the other fellows. The usual sequence for learning any language is the acquisition of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (LSRW) (Richards, 2008). But in Pakistan, the focus of teaching is on reading and writing skills. They just ignore the other two skills of speaking and listening. As speaking and listening both are inter-connected with each other one is nothing without the other. If learners are good at listening it means they are good at speaking. And pronunciation is considered as a sub-skill of speaking. Good pronunciation increases the level of confidence among the students. Gong (2002) stated that pronunciation is one of the

basic skills and the foundation of oral communication for EFL learners. Gong (2002) continued that without pronunciation there would be no spoken language and no oral communication. The learners at the secondary level are supposed to speak short sentences in their daily conversations. They are also supposed to not only be good in reading but also communication at a minor level (Sarwat, 2021). As I discussed earlier, teachers tend to teach them grammar and the pronunciation process lags far behind.

This paper aims to make awareness about the importance of pronunciation, mention some factors that affect the learning pronunciation, and finally to declare some ways and techniques by which ESL learners can cope with the pronunciation problems easily.

### **1.1 Pronunciation, its importance**

According to Gilakjani (2012) pronunciation has an important social value and it should be related to prestige like intelligence, professional competence, hard work, and social advantage. Pronunciation provides information about the speaker's geographical and social characteristics and it is the most important feature of the non-natives. Zielinski and Yates (2014) stated that pronunciation is the way of producing the sounds that are used to make meaning when speakers speak. It involves vowels and consonants of a language, features of speech beyond the level of the individual segment, like stress, timing, rhythm, intonation, and further phrasing (supra-segmental features), and how the voice is described (voice quality). All of the above parts work together when speakers talk so that problems in one part can make a person's pronunciation easy or difficult to comprehend.

Pronunciation has a great vitality in all the parts of learning English as a foreign language. It has great importance for good communication and interactions. As pronunciation is considered a sub-skill of speaking so, it is mandatory to be good in pronunciation. There is no need to be fluent with the correct pronunciation. If a learner is good at pronouncing words but not as fluent as native-like then it is acceptable, because there is a need just to be pronounced well mannered. Fluency can be taken as an extra skill of the learner. Most of the students try to speak fluently and make mistakes that result in misunderstandings of communication. According to Morley (1998), "when speakers talk to other persons, the first thing that can create a good impression about the quality of their language ability is their pronunciation. ...."

Fraser (2000) declared that pronunciation impacts the speakers who are judged by other people and it is the most difficult skill to be learned. Teaching and learning English both are difficult for teachers and learners of SL respectively. The process of learning begins from the age when a child starts uttering the words. Non-natives take time to consider the words as compared to natives. The learning process is long for the

ESL learners but pronunciation is the only skill that differentiates the natives from non-natives.

## **1.2 Issues in Pronunciation for the learners at the Secondary level**

Pronunciation is an important as well as difficult problem that ESL learners face while learning English. If good pronunciation raises the confidence level of the learner, then on parallel, bad pronunciation also leads towards a negative impact on others and causes misunderstanding in the communication. Different issues come under different levels of the learners. Mostly, learners at the secondary level make mistakes just like primary students. The simplest words that they are speaking from their initial stages of learning pronounce badly.

Major issues that are observed among the students of secondary level are discussed below:

### **1.2.1 Problems with vowels**

Cilice-Murcia, Brinton, and Godwin (1996) state there are different types of vowels' sounds in English pronunciation. There are twelve mono thongs and eight diphthongs. In the English language there are main five vowel letters which are (a, e, i, o, u). But they have different pronunciations according to the different settings in different words. There are different pronunciations in the given words ahead; (boot, hook), (out, bought). [boot and hook] both have the same long vowel sound 'oo' but here according to different settings, they are pronounced differently with short and long sounds. Similarly, in the second example, there is the same diphthongs setting [ou] but are pronounced differently. There are hundreds of words that have the same vowel letters settings but are pronounced differently. ESL learners encountered such problems in pronunciation.

### **1.2.2 Problems with Consonants**

It is observed that English consonants are less difficult than vowels. Learners feel uncomfortable with some consonants sounds like [b, v, p], with the combination of these sounds in the sentences, students sometimes are not able to pronounce fluently. Because /b/ and /p/ are bilabial sounds and create problems for the learners. Similarly, problems with [th, sh, and ch] also create hurdles in pronunciation.

### **1.2.3 Rhythm and Cadence**

Rhythm and Cadence are the elements of pronunciation by which learners can get help. But without knowing the actual patterns this can affect pronouncing the words

correctly. Brown (2001: 121) pointed out that “cadence is the pattern of stresses within a sentence and rhythm refers to the “beat” syllabus. Most words are the same but according to different stress patterns on different syllables, they are pronounced differently. For instance, [present and present] both are different according to the stress pattern like: the word [present] has different pronunciation with the stress on the first syllable and [present] has different pronunciation with the stress on the second syllable. And this slight stress difference from one syllable to another also changes the meaning of the word. Secondary level learners make such mistakes while reading English books.

### **1.2.4 Syllable Structure**

A syllable has three parts; onset, nucleus, and coda. The onset and the coda are consonants [CC] while the nucleus refers to vowel [V]. Every syllable ends with a vowel. Mostly, learners do not know the pattern of the syllable or have little knowledge about syllables. This thing causes poor pronunciation in the sense that if they are unaware of the actual syllables in a single word then there will be an issue in pronouncing well.

### **1.2.4 Intonation**

As intonation is the rising and falling pitch of the voice while pronouncing words or syllables. Intonation enables speakers to express their emotions and attitudes when they speak. Mostly, the secondary level learners feel difficulty in intonation as they are unaware of the rising and falling pitch of the voice, they make mistakes and cause misunderstanding in communication.

### **1.2.5 Problems with silent letters**

As the English language is studied as a compulsory subject all over the country, learners encounter mostly with the words that have silent letters. For instance; [knowledge, often, know, doubt, wrong, nestle, lamb, climb, knife, and so on. As these are easy words and familiar to the students of primary level but secondary level learners pronounce them wrongly.

## **2. Factors Affecting the English pronunciation**

### **2.1 Behavior or attitude**

One of the major issues in bad pronunciation is the students’ behavior towards the particular goal of learning English. In Pakistan, most of the students just take English as a subject matter. They just take general ideas even from the grammar perspective.

English is not as easy as the ESL learners take it. It needs much intention and consideration. Students that study in class 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> show negative behavior toward English, as they are fleeing from it. The aim of their learning is to get passing marks nothing else so they pay attention to cram the knowledge rather than to understand it.

## **2.2 Accent**

Accent is the “cumulative auditory effect of those of pronunciation that identify where a person is from, regionally or socially” (Crystal, 2003, p. 3). It is a clear observation that When learners are supposed to read a paragraph in loud voice, their accent or pronunciation depicts their background that where they come from. Some of the students have a grip on good pronunciation and this thing identifies them as non-native speakers. So accent is also the major issue in acquiring actual native-like pronunciation.

## **2.3 Motivation**

Some of the students have less interest in learning. Internally they have been fed up with the daily routines of the study. They take readings as a burden and always look for excuses to escape from it. They are less motivated internally and externally and show a negative response towards learning pronunciation.

## **2.4 Prosodic Errors**

Prosodic errors mean errors in stress pattern, pauses in speech, intonation (rise and fall of the pitch, rhythm, and variation in the speech that how they have to speak differently. Mostly, learners at the secondary level do not have an idea about these main components of pronunciation. They always make readings without following these majors constitutes.

## **2.5 Teaching methodology**

In Pakistan, the way of teaching courses depends upon the course outline. Courses that have long syllabus are supposed to teach selective. ESL school learners' English syllabus includes many things like reading, translation, question answers, essays, grammar portions, etc. The focus of the teacher is to complete the syllabus in the given time. They do not pay attention to correct the pronunciation or to teach the learners to compete with the problems regarding pronunciation. It results in bad pronunciation of the school children.

## **2.6 Age**

Age has a great influence in acquiring a second language especially when a learner works on pronunciation. It is observable that children require less effort in acquiring pronunciation than adults. They need great effort to pronounce like natives. Secondary level learners need great effort to cover up the previous mistakes because at this level they are habitual of pronouncing the words mistakenly. Here teachers' role is with great working to leave out the mistakes and moved towards improvements.

## **2.7 Mother tongue influence**

In Pakistan, mother tongue influence in acquiring a second language is no doubt considerable. Secondary level ESL learners try to adopt the language in the manners of their first language that results in poor and unfitting pronunciation which is not acceptable. Avery and Ehrlich (1992) claim that the sound patterns of the learners' first language are transferred into the second language and are likely to cause foreign accents.

## **3. Strategies (Methods) to Improve Pronunciation**

This paper aims to find some ways or solutions by which secondary level ESL learners will be able to correct the pronunciation and their confidence level will be developed by adopting some rules regarding pronunciation by which they are still unaware. Pronunciation no doubt is a conscious effort to learn it thoroughly. But it is the essential feature of good speaking like natives.

Some considerable tips and elements are given here to improve the pronunciation skill among the students of secondary level:

- Aware the learners of the elements of pronunciation that can help out them greatly in acquiring good pronunciation.
- Students must imitate their teacher again and again and try to speak the words as same as their teachers pronounce.
- If there the teaching level is as low as in some areas of our country is, then students can take help by listening to the videos of natives. This listening will give them a platform to improve their pronunciation skill.
- Insist the learners practice it daily by which there will be a great change in their speaking with good pronunciation.
- Pursue the positive behavior of the learner towards accuracy.
- Learners' main focus should be on developing communicative competence.

#### 4. Prosodic elements of the pronunciation

Important elements in pronunciation like; stress, intonation, and rhythm are mandatory to learn and apply while reading or pronouncing the words of the target language. Here the role of the teacher in teaching these elements is quite helpful.

##### 4.1 Focus on word stress

Practicing the words of stressed and unstressed on the daily basis at a specific time to the ESL learners can be considerable. Learners may use words that have different stress patterns like primary stress on the first syllables in [**l**aptop, **air**port, **kn**owledge, **cl**imate, etc]. These exercises help the learners to recognize the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables.

##### 4.2 Focus on intonation

Intonation is a term used to refer to the rising and falling of the pitch. It is about how to say something rather than what to say. It can change the meaning of the sentence just with little error in falling and rising of the pitch while communicating. If learners are unaware of the actual pattern of intonation then it leads towards the misunderstanding of the communication.

[R] Stands for rising

[F] Stands for falling

e.g. (1) **Are you going** to Lahore?

[R] [F]

(2) **Are you going** to Lahore?

[F] [R]

There are different expressions of exclamation and feeling about this uttering. May the listener can be wondered about heading to go to Lahore or may show a negative attitude or aggressiveness by listening. So, intonation falls upon the weak and strong feelings of the speaker.



### **4.3 Focus on Rhythm**

When the learner follows the pattern of the stressed and unstressed word syllable and the correct rising and falling of the pitch then it creates a regular interval within the correct word. This is called the rhythm rule.

### **4.4 Imitation of the words**

As far as the learning of the target language is concerned, it can be easily acquired through the imitation of the words as they are pronounced by the natives. For this purpose, secondary level learners can also repeat the words after their teachers or may listen to the videos of natives that are great platforms for learning well.

### **4.5 Insist the learners to practice**

Practice daily can be very helpful regarding pronunciation improvement. Students and teachers must follow the given timetable without any gap. If practice will be carried on for about one month at least then improvements can be seen through good performance by the learners.

### **4.6 Pursue the positive behavior of the learner towards accuracy**

For this purpose, a teacher can create an atmosphere in which both teacher and student can affiliate with the native group. They can physically be present there if possible; otherwise, online interaction can be suitable for oral proficiency and accuracy in English pronunciation.

### **4.7 Emphasis on developing communicative skill**

The purpose of pronunciation both teaching and learning is to create or develop communication skills among the learners. The focus is on accuracy and oral proficiency, no need to adopt the native-like accent. The purpose of speech should make sense of ideas what the learner wants to deliver. Savignon (1997) stressed the need for meaningful communicative tasks in the language classroom, including those that focus on pronunciation.

## **5. Conclusion**

Pronunciation is an integral part of communication. ESL learners may have challenges and some issues in acquiring the oral skill of speech but great hard work and consistency can lead towards the goal. By applying the methods given above both teacher and secondary level students can adopt and get oral proficiency. By

incorporating the current strategies, the teacher can help the learner in acquiring the oral skills of communication with accuracy. No doubt it will take a lot of time to change the bad practices of the learners but due to strong determination, both teacher and learner can cope with this problem and will be successful. Teachers must know the linguistics features and training in pronunciation instruction that can be helpful for ESL learners.

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