Teaching Children English Pronunciation

Jookyung Park(Honam University)

<Contents>

1. Introduction
2. Teaching children
3. Goals and objectives for teaching pronunciation
4. Pronunciation teaching approaches
5. Conclusion

<국문초록>

초등학교 어린이를 위한 영어발음지도

박 주경(호남대)

　이 연구의 목적은 초등학교 어린이들을 대상으로 의사소통 능력 중심의 영어 교육을 하기 위하여 그 기초가 되는 영어발음지도와 관련된 문제점들을 살펴보고 아울러 그 해결방안을 모색하는 것이다. 먼저 초등학교 어린이를 위한 영어교육의 특성과 제문제를 살펴보고, 보다 효과적인 발음지도를 위해 구체적인 발음지도 목표와 그 목표에 맞는 발음지도법을 알아보았다. 발음지도 목표로는 우선, 영어를 모국어로 하는 사람들이 알아듣고 이해할 수 있는 정도의 발음을 갖추도록 하며, 이를 위해 (1)영어자,모음 식별 청취 및 발음, (2)올바른 강세와 억양 식별 및 구사, (3)연음 및 기타 주요 발음 현상 식별 및 구사 등을 지도하되, (1)보다 (2)와 (3)을 보다 집중적으로 지도할 것을 제시하였다. 아울러 이들 각각의 내용을 보다 효과적으로 지도하기 위하여 의사소통 능력을 중심으로 한 여러가지 지도법 및 어린이들을 위한 학습활동들을 소개하였다. 끝으로 자질을 고루 갖춘 초등학교 영어교사 양성이야말로 성공적인 영어교육의 제일조건임을 강조하고 보다 실제적인 교사교육 프로그램에 포함되어야 할 사항을 제시하였다.

1. Introduction

Historically, pronunciation has been pushed in and out of the main arena of language teaching along with the different factors involved including changing models of second language learning, changing focus in second language teaching, and changing models of linguistic description. As Celce-Murcia and Goodwin (1991) points out, in grammar-translation and reading-based approaches pronunciation is considered irrelevant but in direct approach and audio-lingual approach, it is important. But the goal of teaching pronunciation in these approaches is to produce speakers with native-like accuracy. The cognitive approach de-emphasized pronunciation in favor of grammar and vocabulary because the conventional idea of the late 1960s and early 1970s held that nativelike pronunciation could not be taught. And many practitioners devalued pronunciation teaching. However, communicative competence has emerged as a new primary goal in language teaching/learning in 1980's and teaching pronunciation began to take more attention from language teaching theorists and practitioners than ever before, with a belief that intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence.

As Morley (1987, Preface, p.2-3) states, there are the themes that the new trend of teaching pronunciation is geared toward: (1) A focus on working with pronunciation as an integral part of, not apart from, oral communication; (2) A focus on the primary importance of suprasegmentals and how they are used to communicate meaning, with a secondary importance assigned to segmentals; (3) A focus on syllable structure, linking, phrase-group divisions, phrasal stress and rhythm patterns; (4) Learner involvement including speech awareness and self-monitoring; (5) Meaningful practice set in speech activities suited to the communication styles in the learners' real-life situations; (6) A focus on providing speech modeling that is natural and contextual. These are the areas that the language teachers of new age should work on in order to meet their students' needs and wants.

In Korean EFL classrooms, teaching pronunciation has posed one of the most difficult problems to Korean teachers of English more than any other areas of English teaching such as vocabulary, grammar, and translation. The problems resulted from different aspects of teaching EFL in Korea: First, the extreme difference and the nature of difference between the sound systems of Korean and English; Second, insufficient opportunities for the teacher and students to be exposed to and use the natural sounds of the target language in real situations; Third, lack of English competence for the teacher to be a good role model for her/his students and lack of professional knowledge and strategies for her/him to

teach with; Last but not the least, lack of confidence in teacher's own linguistic and pedagogical competence.

There have been very little endeavors made in the classroom settings for the purpose of teaching pronunciation in English. If any, 'Listen to the tape/Repeat after me' was the only approach used. Recently, we have been experiencing the influx of many foreign English-speaking teachers, and yet unlike the expectation of many people, they also seem to be confronted with the same difficulties in teaching pronunciation as their Korean colleagues for more or less different reasons from those mentioned above.

The purpose of this paper is to probe into what features of pronunciation should be taught and how can they be taught in order to help our students, the young ones in particular, acquire their English pronunciation at the level of intelligibility, let alone the level of near-native accuracy. The major features of teaching children will be also discussed and some suggestions will be made in order to make pronunciation teaching and furthermore English teaching in general more productive.

2. Teaching Children

According to the Korean Ministry of Education, English will be taught for third graders as one of the regular subjects in elementary schools starting 1997. Teaching English has started in the early 1980's in Korea in formal classroom settings. There have been controversial perspectives and concerns with teaching English to young students expressed anecdotally as well as through professional publications. Now that teaching English at the elementary schools became unavoidable, many studies and workshops including the present one are being conducted in TEFL area in order to find ways to make it effective and productive one.

Celce-Murcia and Goodwin (1991) suggests the 6 factors of the aquisition of a reasonable pronunciation in English based on Kenworthy (1987): (1) The learner's native language, (2) The learner's age, (3) The learner's exposure, (4) The learner's innate phonetic ability (5) The learner's attitude and sense of identity, (6) The learner's motivation and concern for good pronunciation. Among all these factors, (2) the learner's age provides a good rationale for implementing teaching English at the elementary schools in Korea. They state that the younger the age when the learner begins to acquire English, the better the learner's pronunciation. However, this is true only when they have good and proper learning environment

including teacher, peers, and tasks. Young children are likely to adapt easily whatever they are exposed to, even the negative ones. Once they acquire improper pronunciation via poor model or inappropriate learning strategies and fossilize it, then it is much difficult for them to be corrected later.

According to Rivers (1968), it is believed that children of elementary school age love making strange noises, mimicking other people, using secret code languages among their friends. They delight in the unusual sound combinations and rhythms of nonsense and counting rhymes and invent strange inversions of people's names. Most elementary students are uninhibited in the imitating of foreign-language sounds, however, even at this stage they mimic with varying degrees of accuracy according to their natural talents. Some children might show some physical and psychological problem. Unless the teacher is conscious of the problem facing the student, he may become tense and anxious himself as he attempts to reach the student. This tension compounds the tension the student is already experiencing and causes a feeling of panic in which the student ceases to hear anything distinctly in a blur of sound. This stage is detectable in dictation particularly. The only remedy for this situation is for both teacher and student to relax completely. Above all, he must not be made to feel that this test or exercise is a vital factor in success or failure.

3. Goals and Objectives for Teaching Pronunciation

Our teaching goal should be something realistic and obtainable for general students: not to produce accent-free, native-like speakers, but to produce communicatively competent speakers whose pronunciation is somewhat comprehensible and acceptable to the native-speakers of English.

What should be covered to teach pronunciation will be varied, first of all, depending on the type of the class: an intensive pronunciation class or an integrated EFL class with a focus on pronunciation. The latter will be more dominant case in Korean classroom settings. Secondly, teaching objectives should be set up based on the students' level and the time avaliable.

The major areas of pronunciation include consonant/vowel discrimination, word stress, sentence stress, intonation, reduced speech pattrerns, syllable structure and voice quality. Students need to be taught for perception and production of each area, with more focus on suprasegmentals rather than segmentals. Studies on the relationship between native speaker judgments of nonnative pronunciation and deviance in segmentals, suprasegmentals, and syllable structure have shown that

suprasegmentals rather than segmentals affect intelligibility of nonnative pronunciation more significantly (Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson, and Koehler, 1992)

4. Pronunciation Teaching Approaches

The differences in age and maturity will involve different techniques and varying emphases: The younger the child the more he enjoys sheer mimicry and the more frequently he may be engaged in activities which largely repetitive. Teachers might use several techniques or a combination of techniques to teach them. Finocchiaro (1989) suggests as follows: (1) a description of the speech organs as the sound is being produced, (2) a diagram of the speech organs, (3) a comparison with the nearest sound in the students' native language (if you know the language), (4) a modification of a known English sound.

The following are some pronunciation teaching approaches. When these are actually used, the teacher needs to keep in mind that all the languages used in the classroom, preferrably English, should be simple and clear enough to provide the students with comprehensible input as much as possible.

1) Cardboard description of articulation

Finocchiaro (1989) suggests this very effective device to teach articulation which is to sketch a large profile on cardboard, indicating the lips, teeth, palate, and bottom of the mouth. Omit the tongue. Cut out the cardboard to show the mouth cavity. Make a red mitten for your right hand. As you teach a sound, use your gloved hand in the open mouth cavity to simulate the tongue. Move it against or between the teeth, bunch it up in the back, curl it up to the palate for /r/, or indicate movement from one sound to another.

When the teacher explains articulation using cardboard, children should not be given practice in all the elements of articulation all at once. Instead, this needs to be used for an incidental articulatory explanation where needed and occasional drilling in areas of special difficulty. The teacher can also combine this activity with teaching body parts such as 'nose', 'mouth', 'teeth', 'lips', and 'tongue'.

2) Korean/English comparative sound practice

In order to overcome the natural tendency of the student to hear and make sounds in the categories made familiar by the native language, the teacher will

need to give aural/oral-discrimination exercises in which near-equivalents in the native and in the foreign language are clearly demonstrated and in which near-equivalents in the foreign language are distinctly differentiated. English borrowing words used widely in Korean language can be used as effective devices to show the sound difference to the students. It also needs to be reinforced that even the same English words cannot be understood by the native English speakers when they are spoken with some Korean sounds or in the Korean syllable structure. For example, 뻐쓰 for 'bus', or 밀크 for 'milk' will not be acceptable when it is said in English utterance because the use of wrong consonant and unnecessary additional vowel at the final position of each word.

3) Minimal-pairs

Minimal pairs are one of the best ways to introduce and reinforce sound discrimination, by using words which differ only in pronunciation of the sounds being practiced. Minimal pairs can also be used in many different ways including within songs, rhymes, and role plays.

The following shows a couple of short dialogues that I made up for my students, in which minimal pairs are used to reinforce r/l and f/p contrast respectively:

(1) Mother: Do you want some *rice*?
    Girl: Yummy! Yes, please.
    Father: Do you want some *lice*?
    Boy: Uh-Yuck! No, thank you.

(2) Teacher: What is it?
    Girl: It's a *pine* tree.
    Boy: It's a *fine* tree, too.

4) Rhymes and poems

One of the good devices for pronunciation practice is the learning by heart of rhymes and poems, carefully chosen so that the vocabulary, thought content, and structures are appropriated to the level which the children have reached. Many nursery rhymes and counting rhymes are suitable. The following is a nursery rhyme which can be used for teaching /i/ and /u/ with some other possible teaching focus:

BAA, BAA, BLACK SHEEP

Baa, baa, black *sheep*, have you any *wool?*
Yes, sir, yes, sir, *three* bags *full:*
One for my master, one for my dame,
And one for the little boy that lives in our lane.

5) Jazz chants

According to Graham (1979), jazz chants are catchy repetitive drills that draw attention toward the rhythm and kinesthetic properties of utterances. Jazz chants are the rhythmic expression of standard American English as it occurs in situational contexts. this is an innovative and exciting new approach to language learning which link the rhythm, stresses, and intonation pattern of the spoken language and the expression of feelings and the intent of the speaker. The primary purpose of jazz chanting is the improvement of speaking and listening comprehension skills, it also works well in reinforcing specific structures used in an situational context. The natural rhythms and humor of the chants are highly motivating and may be used effectively for both classroom practice and individual home study.

In performing the chants, the students are actually learning to distingish difficult vowel and consonant contrasts while they are actively engaged in a verbal exchange which can easily be related to their own experience. The chants are particularly useful in developing listening comprehension skills.

The essential element in presenting a jazz chant is the clear, steady beat and rhythm. A student practicing a specific rhythm and intonaton pattern within the chant form should be able to use that same pattern in normal conversation and be readily understood by a native speaker.

It is extremely important that the students have a clear understanding of the meaning of the words they are saying and the appropriate situations in which they might occur.

The following is an example of chants in which we learn the different ways in which you tell someone to be quiet.:

SH! SH! BABY'S SLEEPING!

I said, Sh! Sh!, Baby's sleeping!
I said, Sh! Sh!, Baby's sleeping!
What did you say?
What did you say?

I said, Hush! Hush!, Baby's sleeping!
I said, Hush! Hush!, Baby's sleeping!
　　　　What did you say?
　　　　What did you say?
I said, Please be quiet, Baby's sleeping!
I said, Please be quiet, Baby's sleeping!
　　　　What did you say?
　　　　What did you say?
I said, Shut up! Shut up!, Baby's sleeping!
I said, Shut up! Shut up!, Baby's sleeping!
　　　　WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
　　　　Not any more. (Graham, 1978)

6) Songs and games

Songs and games are very effective teaching device depending on how to use them. In order to use them effectively, the teacher needs to keep in mind the followings: (1) Set your teaching objective clearly, (2) Choose songs and games to teach or reinforce your teaching focus, (3) Get familiar with the songs and games of your choice and the procedure to use them, (4) Be flexible with the time limit, (5) Plan to evaluate your students' achievement of teaching objectives while or after you use songs and games. Otherwise, they might have some fun but not necessarily know what they are supposed to learn.

7) Role plays and drama

Celce-Murcia and Goodwin (1991) suggests that role plays and drama scenes are always fun and are an ideal vehicle for practicing pronunciation. They are fully contextualized, include gestures and body language, and provide a multitude of opportunities for practicing natural speech. They also state that it seems that the taking on of a new identity releases certain students from their inhibitions and allows them to overcome constraints that might affect their pronunciation. However, these activities work better for those students who have certain level of communicative competence rather than for the very beginners, particularly when those activities are to be original and creative. For the beginners, the teacher can provide them with a ready-made script written in a simple language and have them memorize it and act it out.

8) Tape recorder and language laboratory

Tape recorder and language laboratory can play a very effective role. Even more so in Korean classroom settings where most of teachers are not confident in their own language competence. Rivers (1968) states that the tape can provide an authentic model for imitation, an untiring and unvarying model which is clearly heard by every student. However, she prefers the teacher to any electronic or mechanical device for the first presentation of the new material. The only situaton is which we can justify the use of a tape or record before the teacher's live presentation is one in which the teacher feels that his or her command of the language is not at all adequate.

If the laboratory is to be effective in the developing of acceptable articulation and intonation, the way in which it is to be used must be carefully studied.

Children must be given instruction and practice under supervision particulary in Some laboratory tasks that require a certain maturity. Younger children cannot be left to work unmonitored in the laboratory.

6. Conclusion

So far, I have discussed the major areas in teaching children English pronunciation: First, major characteristics of teaching children; Second, goals and objectives of teaching pronunciation; Third, pronunciation teaching approaches. Pronunciation teaching materials and evaluation are two other major areas not covered in this paper and yet equally important.

Many EFL professionals in Korea are concerned with the effectiveness of teaching English in elementary classrooms as they face the new era of teaching English. They do not want to expand the same frustration and despair as they have had about teaching English at secondary school classes to elementary classes. Some English teachers are so challenged by the new goal of communicative competence-oriented teaching that they try to empower themselves by polishing up their pronunciation and eventually building up their own language competence, while others are so despaired with their own incompetence that they reserve their professional commitment. Whichever case they may be, they all know that teachers play a vital role in the success of education.

In conclusion, good teachers are the key to the successful education and so effective pre- and in-service teacher training workshop should be developed and provided. The following is what I suggest to be included in such teacher training

services in which dual goals are to be accomplished, one is for improving teachers' own knowledge and language competence and the other is for furnishing them with effective teaching strategies:

1) A course of the principles of articulatory phonetics taught in a simple and clear language not in jargons, preferrably in English. That teachers apply both to their own language and to the language they are teaching, so that they may be able to explain to his students the particular difficulties they have.

2) A course of the concept of a phoneme and sound discrimination with contrastive sound analysis between Korean and English. Teachers should be able to explain what phonetic feature of their students makes them unintelligible to the native speakers of English.

3) A course of the suprasegmentals and some other significant English sound features including linking and reduced sound pattern. It is often in the area of stress and intonation that the Korean teachers of English have the most difficulty themselves. It is essential that they work consciously and constantly at keeping his control of these aspects of the language at a high level.

4) A course of teaching methodologies and communicative activities. Teachers should be able to teach their students in a diverse and creative way. Fun and meaningful teaching methods and activities should be developed and provided.

5) Micro-teaching courses. Teachers should feel experienced and confident in their teaching. They need to be given many opportunities to have hands-on experiences about the theory and practice, and further to come up with their own teaching strategies about how to select, present, and evluate the teaching focus.

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