Review of the Importance of Teaching Pronunciation in the Arab Society

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Abstract: *In spite of the long history of teaching English in the Arab world, little interest has been shown to English teachers. They usually consider teaching pronunciation in the EFL Arab classroom is less important than the other language skills such as reading and writing skills. This research is guided for three objectives. First: to describe the impact of pronunciation on the communication process in the classroom. Second: to illustrate the role of teaching segmental and suprasegmental features in the EFL classroom. Third: to provide some of classroom strategies through propounding some of pedagogical implications. The researchers depend on the secondary data sources. The researchers also suggested some pedagogical implications and recommendations for further research. Through second data analysis, the researchers tried to figure out the reasons that led to inefficiency in pronunciation among the Arab learners, to trace the effects of wrong pronunciation on the communication process. As long as showing the pedagogy that can be effective in teaching pronunciation.*

Keywords: (*Teaching Pronunciation, segmental and suprasegmental, teaching English in the Arab world*)

1. INTRODUCTION

The spoken version of language started numerous centuries before the written one was invented. Human beings depended on speaking for communication until written scripts were possible. These days, English language has become the language of choice in most countries around the world. It is believed that many foreign languages are difficult to learn; yet it is the English language as a foreign language that is the most difficult language to learn and teach. English as foreign language learners (EFL) have an interest in phonology and pronunciation (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994; and Linguagem & Ensino, 2000). They have pointed that teaching pronunciation is also an important oral skill same as other languages skills. In addition, EFL learners are delineating their own needs and setting their own criteria for communicative competence (Linguagem & Ensino, 2000). The importance of using English in the world is continuing to grow. For example, the numbers of people who speak English are increased specially for those international business, electronic communication, and academic texts.

Pronunciation is the most crucial oral communication skill (Fraser, 2000). At the same lines, Miller (2004) believes that pronunciation needs to be balanced with all other communication skills. Miller emphasizes that teachers in EFL classrooms should play an important role in developing such a skill. So that, EFL teachers should know exactly the English sound system and how it works as well as how English sounds system are different from other sound's systems.

Rababah (2003) has justified the significance of pronunciation as its effect the communication process. Fraser (2000, p7) argues that "*being able to speak English of course includes a number of sub-skills, involving vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics, etc. However by far the most important of these skills is pronunciation - with good pronunciation, a speaker is intelligible despite other errors; with poor pronunciation, a speaker can be very difficult to understand, despite accuracy in other areas. Pronunciation is the aspect that most affects how the speaker is judged by others, and how they are formally assessed in other skills*".

EFL learners consider pronunciation is the most difficult skill to be acquired. At the same time, Julia (2002) argues that pronunciation is one of the fundamental skills and the basis of oral communication

for learners of English at all levels. Julia (2002) emphasizes that without pronunciation; there would be no spoken language and no oral communication. The researchers have noticed that it is important to shed light on teaching pronunciation including segmental and suprasegmental features in the EFL classroom settings in Arab countries. The researchers aim to emphasize some of the communication problems that Arab learners face owing to their inefficiency in pronunciation.

Arab learners of English encounter problems in pronunciation. This fact has been clearly stated by many researchers such as (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Rababah, 2003; Al-Fakhri, 2003; and Shaker, 2004). In their studies on Arab EFL learners of English, Al-Fakhri (2003) and Shaker (2004) found that their Arab students have problems in pronunciation which affected their ability to communicate. Additionally, they claimed that teaching pronunciation is very often neglected by EFL teachers whose native language is Arabic. Zughoul (1977) adds that the aspects of phonology such as suprasegemental features is least emphasized by EFL teachers in their classrooms which are considered as non-natural situation. Moreover, Fraser (1999) points out that pronunciation is one of the most difficult areas for both learners and teachers. Fraser (2000) emphasizes one of the factors that makes pronunciation difficult to learn is the skill component because English is not just a knowing that, but a knowing-how. Fraser (2000) adds that what is the common agreement among the psycholinguists and phonologists regarding this pronunciation difficulty that this difficulty is cognitive rather than physical. In other words it depends on the way a learner thinks about words' sounds rather than the way a learner pronounces words. The researchers in the current paper have focused on how to overcome this problem through the pedagogical implications.

2. OBJECTIVES

- To describe the impact of pronunciation on the communication process in the classroom.

- To illustrate the role of teaching segmental and suprasegmental features in the EFL classroom.

- To provide some of classroom strategies through propounding some of pedagogical implications.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current study is intended to answer the following research questions:

- To what extend teaching pronunciation affects the communication process?

- What is the significant role of teaching the segmental and suprasegmental features in the EFL classroom?

- What are the pedagogical implications that should be taken into consideration in teaching pronunciation in the EFL Arabic classroom?

4. METHODOLOGY

The researchers depended on the secondary data sources. The researches made use of the previous studies which are related to teaching English pronunciation in general and on Arab learners in particular. Through the second data analysis, the researchers tried to figure out the reasons that led to inefficiency in pronunciation among the Arab learners. Also the researchers tried to trace the effects of wrong pronunciation on the communication process. As long as one of the research questions is related to the pedagogy that can be effective in teaching pronunciation, the researchers also tried to suggest some pedagogical implications and recommendations for further research.

5. TEACHING ENGLISH IN THE ARAB WORLD

Teaching English has started in the Arab world since 1920s, when different parts of the region came under the British and French mandates (Al-khatib, 2000). Recently, most Arab governments began to recognize its importance by including English as a foreign language into the school curriculum. Mahmoud (2000) points out that the Arab students learn English after they have mastered their non-standard Arabic 'colloquial Arabic' as a mother tongue. Waston (2004) confirms that English is already being used in substantial sectors of education in the Arab world.

Teaching English in the Arab countries have started at different stages, for example the Arabic learners of English begin at 7th grade (first preparatory class) in some Arab countries such as Libya, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Other Countries begin at 8th grade Algeria, whereas in Syria, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan and Iraq start in grade 5, and in grades 3 and 1 in Bahrain and Palestine respectively. This

reflects the importance of English for the Arab world (Rababah, 2003; and Shaker, 2004). For example: English is used excessively in the United Arab Emirates as people their use English in their daily lives because of the multilingual nature of the residents. In contrast, countries such as Jordan, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Saudi Arabia where Arabic is used in daily situations (Rababah, 2003; Al-Fakhri, 2003; and Shaker, 2004).

Rababah (2003) and Waston (2004) claim that formal instruction is the only way to learn English. For example, when the teachers at schools are native speakers of Arabic and the majority of them have a lack of the target language. This fact can lead to think about the importance of exposing students to real authentic sources. Students will never develop good pronunciation skills without listening to authentic materials and watching real life situations which can bring a vivid picture about the way a native speaker pronounces or articulate the language. Consequently, by taken into consideration both situations of teaching English whether inside the classroom and outside the classroom, the researchers agree with Rababah (2003) that there is a little opportunity to learn English through either formal instructions or natural interaction in the target language.

6. TEACHING PRONUNCIATION

Teaching pronunciation considers as an important skill in the EFL/ESL contexts. After revising the situation of English teaching in the Arab world, the following part will be concentrating on teaching pronunciation .The researchers tried to tackle the following points:

- What is pronunciation?

- Why is pronunciation important?

- What is the role of teaching segmental and suprasegmental pronunciation features?

6.1. What is Pronunciation?

Dalton & Seidlhofer (1994:1) state that pronunciation refers to "the production of sounds that we use to make meaning. It includes attention to the particular sounds of a language (segments), aspects of speech beyond the level of the individual sound such as intonation, phrasing, stress, timing, rhythm (suprasegmental aspects), how the voice is projected (voice quality) and, in its broadest definition, attention to gestures and expressions that are closely related to the way we speak a language".

The significance of pronunciation in regarding to Dalton & Seidlhofer (1994) point of view for various reasons, firstly: it is significant because it is used as part of a code of a particular language. So, we can talk about the distinctive sounds of English, French, Thai, and other languages. In this sense we can talk about pronunciation as the production and reception of sounds of speech. Secondly, sound is significant because it is used to achieve meaning in contexts of use. Here the code combines with other factors to make communication possible. In this sense we can talk about pronunciation with reference to acts of speaking.

Although Jenkines (1998) states that accurate production does not guarantee intelligibility or signal meaning, the researchers are in line with Fraser's (2000) view about the pronunciation skill as it's the most important skill compared with others such as grammar, vocabulary and pragmatics. On the other hand, Fraser (2000) argues that pronunciation is the most crucial oral communication skill. It can be consider that good pronunciation is intelligible despite the poor pronunciation. The speakers can be very difficult to be understood, despite accuracy in other areas.

Pronunciation affects the speaker who is judged by others or how they are assessed in other skills (Fraser, 2000). Additionally, pronunciation can be considered as the most difficult skill to be acquired. Despite on that some people with an ear for language can pick up pronunciation very effectively if they receive effective "special training". Miller (2004) argues that pronunciation problems lead to breakdowns the conversation; she refers to the importance of teaching pronunciation which should be balanced with teaching the other language skills.

6.2. The Importance of Segmental and Suprasegmental Aspects of Pronunciation

Segmental and suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation are complementary refer to each other when we usually learned them as an integral part of spoken language. Roach (2001) illustrates that the most important suprasegmental features of speech are pitch, loudness, tempo (that is, speed), and voice quality, but these are by no means the only ones. He further adds that the study of these features is

often referred to as the study of prosody. According to Roach (2001), stress and intonation are considered as the suprasegmental features which form the basis for especially important functions namely, consequently the researcher will move into a brief illustration to these two features only in the following paragraph:

6.2.1. The Suprasegmental Features

- Stress

Stress has been defined by the Adult Migrant English Center (2002, p.1). They claim that stress refers to "the prominence given to certain syllables within words, and to certain syllables or words within utterances. It is signaled by volume, force, pitches change and syllable length, and is often the place where we notice hand movements and other gestures when we are watching someone talking". Stress is an important suprasegmental feature at different levels: The word level is the first level which contains (multisyllabic words have one or more syllables that are stressed), the second level is sentence level (the most important words tend to be stressed), and the third level contrastive stress (the most important words carry greater stress).

- Intonation

Intonation defines as "the melody of speech and is to be analyzed in terms of variations in pitch" (Roach, 2001, p.33). He claimed that speakers can express various types of utterances such as questions and statements by using the intonation. To make it more clear the Adult Migrant English Center (AMEP) (2002) emphasizes intonation, and change of pitch as crucial features in signaling speakers meaning, particularly interpersonal attitudes. Additionally; AMEP (ibid) argues that since intonation patterns are language-specific, learners need to acquire new ones for English in order to avoid inappropriate transfer from their first language, and thus perhaps inadvertently causing offence.

6.2.2. The Segmental Features

Segment means that in regarding to Spencer (1996) points of view an individual sounds phonemes. These phonemes carry the potential to make meaning. These phonemes might be consonants, vowels, diphthongs which is composed of two vowel sounds, and triphthongs which are a combination of three vowel sounds. These consonants differ from each other's according to different concepts, such as the manner of articulation, place of articulation and whether these segments are voice or voiceless.

Cruttenden, (2001); Wong, (1987); Rivers & Temperley, (1978); Adams (1979); Jiang, (2000); Orton, (2000); and Al-Fakhri, (2003) highlight the importance of teaching the aspects of pronunciation including appropriate rhythm, intonation, and stress patterns (i.e. suprasegemental aspects). Teaching such skills will enable the ESL/ EFL learners to be more competent and effective in communication and make them able to speak fluently in the target language. Al-Fakhri (2003) confirms the vital role of segmental pronunciation in conveying the message accurately.

The researchers of this study believe that both segmental and supersegmental features are equally important. Since the researchers believe in the effect of both segmental and supersegmental features, any inefficiency in any of them can affect communication and may result in misunderstanding. For example if a learner in his/her conveying a message substitute one of the consonants or phonemes, which are related to the segmental level such as the pronunciation of [b] instead of [p] or the use the phoneme /s/ instead of the phoneme /θ/, a listener may misunderstand the message sent by the speaker; a listener may hardly figure out the word either it is 'thin' or 'sin'. Also if a speaker does not know the usage of stress, he can possibly pronounce "present as a noun when it should be stressed as a verb. So as teachers, we should pay equal attention to both segemental and supersegemnat features. This opinion is much supported by kim (2001) when he mentions that segmental pronunciation is as important as suprasegmental pronunciation.

7. TEACHING PRONUNCIATION IN THE EFL ARABIC CLASSROOM

Teaching English in the Arab world was from the long history, but little research was focusing on teaching pronunciation. Researchers have highlighted this fact such as Zughoul (1977); Kharma & Hajjaj (1989); Wahba (1998); Rababah (2003); Al-Fakhri (2003); and Shaker (2004). In the EFL Arab classrooms, Al-Fakhri (2003) argues that English teachers usually consider teaching pronunciation is less important than the other language skills. She has commented on the assessment process, for example teachers in the Arab classrooms are focusing on reading and writing in the final exams only, at the same time teachers have not focused on teaching pronunciation.

A study conducted on Arab learners of English who come from different backgrounds such as Iraq, Yemen and Libya. Shaker (2004) points out English teachers do not concentrate on pronunciation and communication skills. Rababah (2003) has illustrated that Arab learners have few opportunities to learn English as Arab learners have only one way to learn English through formal instruction i.e. inside the classroom where the language teachers at school are native speakers of Arabic and the majority of them have a lack of the target language or native-like pronunciation.

The researchers have found that research on the lack teaching pronunciation in the EFL Arabic is also found in the ESL classroom in the countries where English is used as a second language. Fraser (2000) mentions that majority of English teachers in the EFL/ESL classrooms are not confident and less effective in teaching pronunciation and they have major problems in teaching pronunciation. Fraser (2000) refers the lack of confidence among English EFL/ESL teachers to the fact that majority of them have not received training on how to teach pronunciation. Furthermore, many standard methods of teaching pronunciation are less than ideally effective. The researchers themselves as one of those EFL English teacher who did not received a training for teaching pronunciation when they were learning English in the university level. However, Fraser (2000) states that any English language teaching is better than none, and will have a beneficial effect upon the pronunciation of the learner.

The researchers view about teaching pronunciation as we can't blame the teachers only. The researchers believe that the schools and universities should be part of the teaching pronunciation process by providing teachers with equipment's such as cassette recorders, televisions or videos which often are limited. The shortage in this equipment's leads the school teachers to read the reading materials by themselves. Such practice, as Rababah (2003) mentions, is likely to prevent students from being exposed to the target language spoken by native speakers.

8. THE IMPACT OF PRONUNCIATION IN THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Pronunciation skill is one of the fundamental skills and the basis of oral communication skill among English learners at different level (Julia, 2002), but what is a good pronunciation is? According to Cruttenden (2001), a good pronunciation is to learn to produce connected speech which means to learn to produce more than one word continuously. Studies were done by Broughton et al. (1978) to Shen (2001) in Julia (2002) show that a good pronunciation does not need to be fully functional communicative, nevertheless; one can realize the importance of pronunciation in communication since the sub-branches of pronunciation such as segmental and suprasegmental aspects prevent the learners from communicating successfully.

9. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Teaching English in the Arab countries can be considered as a foreign language which consequently means that it is not a part of the linguistic culture outside the classroom. The researchers propound the following pedagogical implications to be taken into consideration by the EFL Arab teachers in their classrooms in order to teach English pronunciation well.

The researchers are agreed with Miller's (2004) point of view when he argues that teachers need to have knowledge of the English sounds system and how it works in terms of articulation and the manner of producing these sounds. According to Fraser (2000), in many cases the learners are able to produce perfectly acceptable versions of the target language if he or she could demonstrate the differences among the target language sounds. For example, in the case of the Arab learners of English who use the phoneme /b/ in place of the target English phonemes /p/, if they consider the differences between these two different phonemes in the target language, they would successfully utter them.

Miller (2004) points out those teachers would also seek to understand how the English sounds system differs from the sound system of the learners' mother tongue. Being able to recognize that, teachers could explain salient differences between the target language and the mother tongue sounds which can make it easy for learners to adapt the new nature of the target language. Moreover, the researchers believe that once the teacher is aware of the differences and similarities between the native language and the target language sound systems, he/she will be able to find out the problematic sounds that might face by the learners.

The researchers are also of the opinion of Rababah (2003) who emphasizes the importance of creating a good English learning environment and involving learners in real-life situations where they are

provided with listening materials and videos. The researchers believe that once the learners get exposed to these listening materials, they will be likely to acquire at least native-like pronunciation through imitation; they also can acquire the gesture and the body language through watching video materials. And these gestures and body language will help the learner to communicate naturally and give the speaker more self-confident in the communicative process.

Linguagem & Ensino (2000) mention that any classroom activity should include pronunciation elements such as listening exercises. The researchers believe that in order to achieve this kind of integration, the teacher needs to be flexible in her/his use of didactic materials in hand and to be alert to the possibilities for pronunciation teaching that almost any circumstance in the classroom will provide.

In order to change the wrong way a learner pronounce words. Fraser (2000) suggests that teachers need to change the way they think about the component sounds of those words by stopping thinking about speech in terms of the categories of their first language, instead of thinking about them in terms that are appropriate to the new language. This does not only apply on individual sounds, but also on bigger elements of speech, such as syllables, stress patterns and rhythm.

The researchers are of the opinion of introducing the phonetic transcription to the students provides the learner an accurate visual interpretation of pronunciation which in turn helps realize "what you actually say, rather what you *think* you say". According to Linguagem & Ensino (2000) the role of communicative practice should assume its place in teaching pronunciation. They assume that phonological skills will be developed better in the target language environment. They argue that the target language phonology will somehow spontaneously enter the learners' subconscious if they are placed in a context where that is what they hear. This target language environment according to Fraser (2000) could be attainable by involving learners in authentic conversations.

The English language teachers who are non-native speakers of English should be made aware of the pronunciation problems that the learners might face; moreover he/she should correct the learners whenever they commit pronunciation problems. The researchers see it is the responsibility of the ministry of education in the Arab world to provide special training for the EFL to know how to teach pronunciation in the EFL classroom; additionally it should provide the schools with sufficient equipment the help in teaching pronunciation and to acquire at least native-like pronunciation. These equipment's such as cassette recorders, televisions or videos

10. RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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There is a great need for increased scholarly research on ESL/EFL teaching pronunciation and for more systematic approach to resolve debates about the relative effectiveness of methods and materials. In addition, longitudinal assessment, for example, would seem to be fundamental to a new configuration of pronunciation teaching and evaluation, and this would imply recording and transcription techniques as mean to determine specific problems and overall improvement.

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