The awareness of phonetics in ELT

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Abstract

The most distinctive feature of a language that makes it different from another language is it’s ‘sound scheme’. Phonetics began a century ago in foreign language teaching. It offers the means to develop good pronunciation through enhanced awareness of relevant aspects of speech. How beneficial it will be depends on motivation and long term goals, Comparing with most European languages, English is not a phonetic language because words can have structural vowel letters and pronounced in different ways. Inherently, studying pronunciation may be difficult, but if we reduce everything which is difficult we may end up doing very little with language learning. This study clarifies the consciously use of phonetics in ELT and give useful methods to practice phonetics in long term goals.

Keywords: Phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonetics, why English is not a phonetic language

1. Introduction

Before you commence teaching the alphabet to your students, STOP! There are some other things to be aware of. Phonetics began a century ago in foreign language teaching. It offers the means to develop good pronunciation through enhanced awareness of relevant aspects of speech. Some languages are phonetic. That means you look at a written word and know how to pronounce it or you hear a word and know how to spell it. For this reason, there is a direct relationship between the spelling and the sound of phonetic languages.

The learners of languages which are not phonetic like English have difficulties to acquire the language because of the sound scheme of the language. They encounter difficulties like pronunciation and spelling.

This study attempts to investigate the reasons of the difficulties in pronunciation and spelling in English and emphasize the phonemic awareness in ELT.

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2. Is English phonetic?

Comparing with most European languages, English is not a phonetic language because words can have structural vowel letters and pronounced in different ways. That means that the words are not always pronounced the way they are spelled, e.g. *great, treat,* and *threat.*

There are also words the way you spell is differently but they can be pronounced in the same manner.

For instance, the word “read” is pronounced differently in these two sentences:

- I like to read newspaper.
- I have read the yesterday’s newspaper.

On the other hand, some words are pronounced precious the same, but spelled differently. For example “‘way’” and “‘weigh’” in these two sentences:

- The way to cope with social problems.
- How much do you weigh?

The following features show that English appears to be idiosyncratic which includes various features that are eccentric;

1. Large and detailed vowel system including complex process of length succession and weakening (compete, competitive and competition)
2. A consonant system that includes dental fricatives - unusual sounds – and voiced consonants, which cause problems for learners:

   /ð/ Lenis
   Articulation: The same for the fortis dental fricative, with less muscular tension and weaker friction. Sometimes the vocal cords vibrate.
   Spelling: Regularly represented by *th,* as in *this.* Note that this is also true of / θ/

   Examples:
   That /θæt/
   Mother /mʌθə/
   Soothe /su:θ/

3. Word stress placement, the syllable or syllables that are stressed can vary depending on the structure and function of a word. The first language speakers can usually predict accurately to put the stress correctly. However, it can be very difficult for second language learners. For example:

- Economy
- Economic

In the word economy, the stress goes on the third last syllable unlike in economic the stress goes on the second last syllable.

4. The intonation system. This means that there is rising tone and falling tone when you ask questions. The former is used in a question that is answerable with “‘yes’” or “‘no’” while the latter is used in a question that is not answerable with “‘yes’” or “‘no’” but is answerable by a simple sentence or statement:

   **Rising intonation:**
   1. Do you like your new teacher? Yes, *I do.*
2. Are your classmates friendly? No, they’re not.

**Falling intonation:**
1. What’s your new teacher like? He’s friendly and outgoing.
2. Where do you live? I live around here.

3. Is English difficult to pronounce or to spell?

   The difficulties the English language learners encounter is the way they pronounce the word. They usually ask why English is so difficult to pronounce. But is that the right question?
   
   The pronunciation in spoken English is easy, however, the difficulty comes when the written word is spoken the same way as you write it. When practising pronunciation, the focus is not on the written words but on the sound of the words.
   
   To exemplify this point, the spelling of ‘‘ough’’ can be pronounced with seven different sounds. But it would be appropriate to say that the seven different sounds can be represented in writing by the same spelling. Therefore, it is more helpful to consider the seven sounds:

   1. Tough (like off in offer)
   2. Enough (like uff in puff)
   3. Though (like o in no)
   4. Through (like oo in zoo)
   5. Borough (like a in abacus)
   6. Ought (like aw in dawn)
   7. Bough (like ow in shower)

4. **Phonological awareness**

   Phonological awareness plays a crucial role to cope with phonetics and phonemic. It is the ability to attend the sound structure of language as distinct from it’s meaning. It is teachable and promoted by paying attention to instructional variables (Smith, Simmons, & Kame’enui, 1998). Students are exposed to the sound structure of the language and teach them to recognize, identify and manipulate in three stages as syllables; building blocks of words, prosody; rhythm, stress, and intonation of sound, phoneme; smallest unit of sound. Phonological awareness includes phonemic awareness. That means the ability to focus on and manipulate phonemes in the spoken word (Ehri, Nunes, Willows, & Schuster, 2001).

5. **Importance of phonemic awareness**

   The ability to hear and manipulate phonemes plays a causal role in the acquisition of beginning reading skills (Smith, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 1998). Phonemic awareness is a major factor to learning to read in an alphabetic writing system, because letters represent sounds or phonemes. Without phonemic awareness, phonics makes little sense. It is essential to mapping speech to print. The best predictor of reading difficulty in kindergarten or first grade is the inability to segment words and syllables into constituent sound units (phonemic awareness)” (Lyon, 1995). A child hears and recognizes much more sounds of a language than he can produce himself. If a child cannot hear that "dark" and "dog" begin with the same sound or cannot blend the sounds /fflaaaaassstt/ into the word "fast", he or she may have great difficulty connecting sounds with their written symbols to make a word. Therefore, phonemic awareness requires readers to notice how letters represent sounds. Then, it makes readers productive for print. There is respectable confirmation that the primary difference between good and poor readers lies in the good reader's phonological processing ability.
Following the same ideology Shaywitz claims that effects of training phonological awareness and learning to read are mutually supportive. "Reading and phonemic awareness are mutually reinforcing: Phonemic awareness is necessary for reading, and reading, in turn, improves phonemic awareness still further.

**Examples of Phonemic Awareness Skills**

- **Blending:** What word am I trying to say? Lllllllll...oooooo...t.
- **Segmentation (first sound isolation):** What is the first sound in lot? /l/
- **Segmentation (last sound isolation):** What is the last sound in lot? /t/
- **Segmentation (complete):** What are all the sounds you hear in lot? /l/ /o/ /t/

6. **Lack of phonemic awareness**

Learner having difficulty acquiring phonemic awareness will not be able to take advantage of the alphabetic principle. Given that he or she know the letters somehow connected to the spoken word, but without phonemic awareness, he is bewildered by what that relationship might be.

Secondly, exposure to print is important for excogitate the relationships between letters and phonemes. When the learners have a great opportunity to pair printed and spoken words, they will have the opportunity to learn the relationship between letters and phonemes.

**Children lacking Phonemic Awareness Skills cannot:**

- group words with similar and dissimilar sounds (mat, mug, sun)
- blend and split syllables (foot)
- blend sounds into words (m_a_n)
- segment a word as a sequence of sounds (e.g., fish is made up of three phonemes, /f/ , /i/, /sh/)
- detect and manipulate sounds within words (change r in run to s).

*(Kame'enui, et. al., 1997; see References)*

**Conclusion**

All in all the awareness of sound gives readers a procedure to approach sounding out and reading new words. It helps readers understand the alphabetic principle that the letters in words are systematically represented by sounds. As a result, children become a strong predictor who experience early reading success.

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