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On pronunciation teaching and semiotics

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Abstract

Pronunciation was defined as “the act or result of producing the sounds of speech, including articulation, intonation, and rhythm” by McArthur (1992, p. 810). However, different approaches and methods have held different and sometimes controversial views concerning pronunciation and its instruction throughout the language education history since the beginning of the grammar-translation method. One viewed pronunciation as irrelevant to teaching, the other regarded it as “meaningless non-communicative drill-and-exercise gambits” (Morley, 1991, pp. 485-486). Yet, the other saw little connection between teaching and learning of pronunciation and acquiring sufficient level of pronunciation competency. It can be also stated that the scope of teaching pronunciation has been significantly affected by different school of thoughts of that particular time. Current pronunciation teaching trends have been affected by varying disciplines such as psychology, sociology, computer technology and semiotics to a great extent. This paper aims at emphasizing the importance of semiotic elements in pronunciation teaching and suggests ways to implement it appropriately in language classrooms. Then, it describes a lesson plan of a pronunciation class for pre-intermediate level preparation class in detail.

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1. Introduction

Pronunciation has been a neglected part of the language learning as Kelly (1969) prefers to call it “Cinderella” area of EFL to point that pronunciation is neglected by teachers on purpose like Cinderella who is also neglected and discriminated from the society by her step-sisters in the well-known fairy-tale (as cited in Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin, 2010, p. 2). However; today, pronunciation is an integral part of language instruction in combination with other language skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) since the primary goal of language is seen as communicating in the target language (TL). There has been a prominent shift about the goal of pronunciation teaching from native-like competency to intelligibility which depends on both speaker and listener. Thus, language teachers should reassess learner needs, goals and their teaching methodologies and techniques.

Semiotics is the science of signs, of symbolic behavior or of communication (Lyons, 1981, p.17). As Sert (2006) suggests “The application of semiotic theories to education has recently gained significant importance and led to the emergence of a new field of study called educational semiotics.”(p. 106). It can be concluded that using semiotics to teach pronunciation is also related to the mutual relationship between semiotics and culture since teaching environments can never be drained of them. Recent discussions of pronunciation teaching have paved way for a number of important questions to answer such as do we, as teachers should teach the pronunciation directly?, if so, what should be taught and how? After discussing the importance and the goals of pronunciation teaching, different techniques adopted by language teachers will be shortly discussed with the aim of drawing attention to the crucial place of semiotics in these techniques. Immediately after this, practical applications, advantages, and also, disadvantages of semiotics in terms of pronunciation teaching will be specially mentioned. Finally, a sample lesson plan with the justification of the techniques used will be provided to make the issue clearer.

2. History of pronunciation teaching

There are two main approaches to teach pronunciation as it is stated by Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2010): “Intuitive- Imitative Approaches” and “Analytic- Linguistic Approaches”. The intuitive-imitative model suggests that learners can listen and imitate the sources-usually the teacher, audio recordings and so on. - to achieve correct pronunciation. The analytic and linguistic model, on the other hand, claims that learners should make use of some tools and techniques such as phonetic alphabet and transcriptions. It claims that we, as teachers, should explicitly teach pronunciation and does not deny the importance of intuitive methods (p. 8).

Until 1960s there are not many different views of pronunciation teaching, both situational language teaching and audio-lingual method considered pronunciation as a structured part of the language to master on it as the other components like grammar and vocabulary. They generally employed memorization techniques to build the desired behavior, correct pronunciation. They value direct and immediate correction of any mistakes and they also tend to bring native speakers to the classroom as a good role model.

From the end of 1960s till the beginning of the 1980s these methods faced criticism and questions concerning its applications and theoretical basis such as the necessity of pronunciation teaching, techniques to teach it. Eventually, pronunciation teaching lost its popularity and even ignored by some methods. They found the drills artificial and insufficient to teach correct pronunciation and omit pronunciation teaching from the curriculum.

With the direct method and more naturalistic approaches the direction of the pronunciation teaching changed once more through explicit instruction of it. Pronunciation was taught with the help of imitation and repetition, students were supposed to imitate the role model to get the correct pronunciation. They believed that only target language should be used in the class both by teacher and students to be able to achieve a full proficiency. Total physical response and natural approach can be given as other examples using these techniques after allowing a silent period for the students to get ready to speak in the TL.

As Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2010) suggest “The first linguistic or analytic contribution the teaching of pronunciation emerged in 1980s as a part of reform movement during which the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) developed and a lot of valuable classroom sources developed during this period (p. 8). However, with the emergence of *Communicative Approach* pronunciation reserved its place in the ELT curriculum since communication is accepted as the primary goal for this method and this goal cannot be achieved without the mastery of pronunciation. Today, the Communicative Approach is the most prominent method in terms of teaching

pronunciation due to the importance it attached to the communicating in the TL and during the pronunciation instruction equal attention is paid both to the segmental and suprasegmental parts of the pronunciation. In the following part we will examine the current terminology more deeply and its relation with semiotics.

3. Pronunciation teaching and semiotics

Pronunciation is one of the most important parts of ELT, even though a learner has a wide range of vocabulary knowledge or appropriate usage of grammatical structures, this knowledge remains redundant and insufficient unless they can communicate with the interlocutors of the target language. Yet, many adult learners find it really hard to acquire full proficiency in TL, at least in pronunciation aspect. However, the goal of teaching pronunciation is not to enable them to develop native-like proficiency but to be intelligible to ensure mutual understanding in TL. As long ago as Abercrombie (1949) suggested the aim of teaching and learning pronunciation should be being ‘comfortably intelligible’ (p. 120). On the other hand, ‘intelligibility’ cannot be considered as a linear process. Communication is itself a two-way process and therefore intelligibility depends on both speaker and the listener. A smooth conversation most probably occurs when the parties share or understand each other’s values, experiences, and cultures. In our globalized world “Communication is increasingly multimodal” (Christie, 2005, p.123), hence the importance of devoting attention to pronunciation and semiotic resources simultaneously with the verbal language cannot be denied.

Semiotics enables people to communicate the meaning in a better and clearer way with the help of signs, body language, facial expressions and etc. Pierce examines the signs under 3 different categories; symbol, icon and index. The first one is symbol which means that signifier has an arbitrary relation with the signified and it is usually culture oriented like a hand or head movement. The next one is icon in which the signifier resembles and reminds the signified in some way- onomatopoeic words are in this group. The last category is index meaning that signifier and signified are closely related to each other as the fire and the smoke (as cited in Şenel, 2007, p. 118). Altay and Ünal (2013) described the elements of semiotics in a detailed way some of them are “eye contact, posture, gestures and mimics, hand movements, proxemics, kinesics and clothing.” (p. 418). In language classrooms teachers should consider carefully making use of these semiotic elements to help students understand the lesson better, process their knowledge in the long-term memory and achieve a permanent learning.

Paying attention to the pronunciation and semiotics does not guarantee the acquisition of correct pronunciation by learners, as Tseng (2002) suggests “successful language learning requires language users to know the culture that underlies that particular target language.” (p. 12). According to Demirezen (2010) “preparing humorous tongue twisters and incorporating idioms, mottoes, cliché expressions by using minimal pairs are awareness raising activities and they increase the importance of meaning and contextualized practice.” (p. 132). “For Owens (1987) culture is “what one thinks is important (values); what one thinks is true (beliefs); how one perceives how things are done (norms)” (as cited in Hesar, Konca, Zarfsaz, 2002, p. 68). It should be stated that culture and the language are strictly interwoven and it is impossible to talk about a language without mentioning the culture it is spoken. Culture can affect the conceptualization of different semiotic elements pointing out the circulated relationship between a language, its culture, and semiotic elements pertain to that particular culture. For instance, as Abushihab (2012) exemplified “OK gesture has different meanings in different cultures” (p. 1152). Thus, it is fairly hard, if not impossible; to establish a border between speech and gestures since they interact reciprocally one another during each and every conversation processes.

3.1. Advantages of employing semiotics in pronunciation teaching

English teachers can easily employ semiotics in their language classes after studying the basics of it. Using signs, visuals and body language in a language class has a number of invaluable effects that cannot be underestimated. As Hişmanoğlu (2006) suggested “pronunciation teaching is of great importance for successful oral communication to take place since it is an important ingredient of communicative competence.” (p. 102). However, cultural diversity should be considered while applying semiotics because every language has different cultural codes and systems. The most prominent advantages can be listed as:

- **Effective teaching and learning:** With the help of appropriate visual aids students can both understand a topic easily and process the information faster and store it in the long-term memory. Using visuals, signs and body language enables better and permanent understanding for students and effective and easy teaching for the teachers. For example: If a teacher shows a striking picture while teaching “philanthropy”, which is a hard word for the beginner level students and even for the higher levels, they can make guesses that can direct them to the actual meaning of the word.
- **Activates previous learning easily:** Teachers can activate students’ previous knowledge easily by using a single representative picture since they learned that particular language items through meaningful contextualization and authentic materials. For example: If the teacher intends to reinforce previous lesson he can do this by showing appropriate pictures without talking about them for a long time or asking artificial questions about them.
- **Accelerates the learning process:** Utilizing appropriate signs and visuals a teacher can accelerate the learning process of the students enabling them to visualize the information in their minds. He can employ various techniques from semiotics especially for topics which are hard to teach and learn. For instance: students generally cannot easily understand complex instructions, but a teacher can handle the situation very easily just with a facial expression or hand movement. (Can you underline the incorrect grammatical structures? Drawing and imaginary line at the same time.)
- **Prevents communication breakdowns:** Students who get the knowledge of semiotics and awareness of existence of different cultures can easily interpret what the interlocutor means from the body language and intonation or even stress of the words.
- **Motivates students for the further learning:** The more students acquire the knowledge about the body language and cultural sign system of the target language the better they feel about that particular language and also culture. Thus, relying on their previous knowledge they tend to learn new aspects of it willingly.
- **Better classroom management:** Employing techniques suggested by semiotics make it easier for teachers to manage the class in a better way. They can easily ensure the silence and hold the attention of them with just an eyebrow movement or simply with eye contact.

Naturally, semiotics stays short for some aspects such as linguistic correction as it is stated in Şenel (2007, p. 125). Even though students have a chance to see natural language spoken by natives when it comes to production they don’t receive any correction in terms of pronunciation and also vocabulary choice unless they made a major mistake causing conversation breakdowns. Thus, linguistic awareness of the students’ remains low after even a long education period since semiotic approach avoids teaching it. In the end, taking into consideration of its advantages to the teaching and specifically to the pronunciation teaching, one can overlook the areas it may not be helpful that can be taught by other techniques.

4. Lesson plan

Class:	Preparatory class	Class Size: 20 students
Time: 45 minutes		
Materials other than the course book:	Worksheets, A balloon, 2 sacks, Speakers, Whiteboard, A box, Recordings, Pictures, PowerPoint presentation, Blocks	
Lesson focus and topic :	Pronunciation/ Silent Letters	
Learner profile (age + proficiency level /Number of students)	There are 20 pre-intermediate level students in the class. They are 18-19 years old learners.	

Pre- requisite condition of the learners:		Students should have... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • known certain vocabulary items reintroduced in this class. • pre- intermediate level of listening skills. • been familiar with Phonetic Alphabet to some extent (basic level). 	
Lesson Objectives :			
General Aim: The aim of this class is to encourage students to recognize and correctly pronounce the selected silent letters in English through communicative activities, visual aids and negotiating information between each other.			
As a result of this lesson, the students will be able to ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • describe what is a silent letter. • develop their listening and speaking skills. • recognize the silent letters within a text, listening activity or a conversation. • reproduce the correct pronunciation of silent letters, they learn during the lesson, in their own examples. • recognize the importance of emotions in pronunciation. • develop their group working skills. • improve their creative way of thinking. • interact with each other in the target language. 			
Stages	Time	Procedures	
		Activities	Interaction Pattern
Lead-in	2'	Teacher comes into the classroom and greets the students in an energetic way. He/she uses “Shhh” sound accompanied with body language to get their attention to the topic with the knowledge of gestures can help students understand the target items better and easily. He supports it with well-known vocabulary items having silent sounds in them. He also provides them some explanation about the silent letters without giving any rules or details with the hope of raising their motivation towards learning silent letter.	$T \leftarrow \rightarrow Ss$ $Ss \leftarrow \rightarrow T$
Presentation	8'	At this stage, the teacher uses semiotic elements to introduce the pronunciation of silent letters, instead of employing traditional presentation methods such as writing the target words on the board and asking the students to repeat after himself or a recording. With the help of colourful blocks he builds “know” and uses a different colour for “k” to draw attention to the silent letter. Then, he provides the students with more information about silent letters, definition and their advantages, to give students convincing reasons to learn these letters. During the presentation session much of the talk is supposed to be done by the teacher not only to provide the learners with a good exposure to target language and make the topic area clearer but also to make the classroom atmosphere more relaxing and to make the learners involve in the classroom. Most of the target language items are supported with visuals to enable the students to process the information faster, safer and longer through the long- term memory. Although, there is a teacher-led interaction in which the teacher exchanges a good deal of language; still the teacher can include students into the	$T \leftarrow \rightarrow Ss$ $Ss \leftarrow \rightarrow T$

		presentation process by asking questions and examples. Making their own guesses and seeing them on the board will develop their self-autonomy and it will also motivate them to do the target task. This section of the class will appeal to visual, verbal, and intrapersonal students.	
Activity 1 Building Words	8'	After presentation, students are divided into groups of four and each group is supposed to listen to the target vocabulary items containing silent letters and figure out what they hear to build it by using blocks and they are expected to use a different colour for silent letter. Teacher is monitor at this stage; he initiates the activity and then observes students before deciding who will get the plus at the end of each listening item. This activity encourages students to take more active roles in their learning and interact with each other in their groups. With the help of the authentic materials (blocks) students visualize the information better in their minds. This activity appeals to kinaesthetic, visual, auditory and interpersonal learners.	$T \leftarrow \rightarrow G$ $G \leftarrow \rightarrow T$ $Ss \leftarrow \rightarrow Ss$
Activity 2 Balloon Volleyball	5'	The activity is similar to volleyball, but the rules are a bit different than the usual one. There are two groups. Each group has a silent letter and they will try to say a word including this silent letter each time they hit the ball. Groups should pass the ball to the other one at once. If they fail to pass the ball to the other group or cannot say a word or touch the ball the rival group gets a plus. Teacher draws a border in the middle of the class. He sets the scene for the students and then he observes the students to make sure that they pronounced the vocabulary items correctly. During this activity; visuals, signs and body language enable better and permanent understanding for students. Thanks to the active involvement into the activity, students will not only learn about the pronunciation of silent letters but also enjoy at the same time.	$Ss \leftarrow \rightarrow Ss$ $Ss \leftarrow \rightarrow T$
Activity 3 Triple Echo	5'	In this activity, teacher divides the class into two groups. Students are supposed to listen to some words and repeat them in the manner the teacher asks them such as angrily, happily or disappointedly. After that, the other group will imitate them and pronounce it in the same manner, too.	$G \leftarrow \rightarrow G$ $T \leftarrow \rightarrow G$
Activity 4 Creative Drama	15'	At this stage the teacher can apply a communicative activity to foster students' creative way of thinking, create a context for the language items, engage their imagination and inspire, their thoughts, perceptions, express their inner world in the conversation. So, they have a chance to use what they have learnt throughout the class. Thanks to this activity, they can both comprehend and make use of the silent letters. As many body gestures help clarifying verbal language used during the conversation students will have the chance to practice culture-oriented speech acts, too. Teacher divides the class into two groups and introduces the activity before announcing the requirements. The students from both groups will try to carry on the same conversation till the end of the activity. Each group has a sack hold by the speakers. They will try to say something related to the conversation going on by using a word with a silent letter and they have all the target vocabulary items of today in their sacks. Each speaker can say pass once and choose another word from his/her sack. The speakers will change after they utter 2-3 sentences, so each member of the two groups will have the chance to be the speaker at the end. (Teacher arranges the time.)	$G \leftarrow \rightarrow G$ $Ss \leftarrow \rightarrow Ss$ $T \leftarrow \rightarrow Ss$
Asking for feelings	2'	Teacher finishes the lesson by asking the feelings of the students and their ideas about the lesson and certain activities since how they feel during the class or if they have any suggestions for further classes are crucial aspects for creating a positive classroom atmosphere.	$T \leftarrow \rightarrow Ss$ $Ss \leftarrow \rightarrow T$

5. Conclusion

Throughout the language teaching history, different approaches and methods view pronunciation teaching differently. It is sometimes seen as irrelevant to teaching and became a neglected part of language instruction and the other time gains its reserved importance in the curriculum again. Current pronunciation teaching trends have been largely affected by semiotics, educational semiotics as it is started to be named, to a great extent. Today, teaching of pronunciation is integrated into the curriculum in combination with four different language skills of language teaching at various levels of education (primary, secondary and tertiary level) with the aim of enabling students to communicate in the target language. However, the ultimate goal of pronunciation teaching is not a native-like proficiency, but mutual intelligibility which depends on both speaker and listener.

As Erton (2006) expresses in his article “Since semiotics is the combination of signs and symbols to communicate the information, the students and the teacher make use of a number of signs, some of which are iconic, index or symbolic.” (p.74). In this particular paper certain techniques and activities are suggested to emphasize the importance of semiotic elements in pronunciation teaching. However, applying semiotics to teaching pronunciation depends on the mutual relationship between semiotics, culture and language teaching as one cannot think of a teaching environment without them. This paper aims at showing that words and pictures are not semiotically "pure" in that the ones often exhibit some characteristics of the other. Thus, the combination of verbal and visual components interact each other to create a type of "language" that is more than a simple sum of the two separate parts.

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