Teaching English pronunciation at the secondary school level

Review of Teaching English Pronunciation at the Secondary School Level

Reviewer: Ildiko Porter-Szucs
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Author: Karolina Janczukowicz
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SUMMARY

The author, Karolina Janczukowicz, intended “Teaching English Pronunciation at the Secondary School Level” for teachers of English in junior and senior secondary schools who would like to teach pronunciation in a way that does not interfere with the regular school curriculum. In the introduction, she clarifies some concepts fundamental to the ensuing discussion: communicative efficiency (definition based on Hawkins, 2004), phonetic vs. phonemic transcription (settling on using the term ‘phonetic’ to refer to ‘phonemic’, a usage that will be adopted in this review as well), the phonetic systems of English vs. that of select European languages (i.e., French, German, Italian, Polish, Spanish), and standard vs. native English. The actual book consists of four chapters (pp. 17-132) on the following topics: (1) phonetic transcription, (2) teaching the phonetic system, (3) teaching individual vocabulary words, and (4) going beyond communicative efficiency. Chapter 1 argues fervently for the necessity of introducing phonetic transcription into the classroom. After discussing some strategies for doing so, the author examines the advantages and disadvantages of several conventions of transcription. Chapter 2, the longest, discusses various aspects of teaching the phonetic system of English. It begins with select aspects of pronunciation that are important to foreign learners (vowel and consonant sounds, word stress, and sound-to-spelling relationships). Chapter 2 continues with a discussion of the conscious (based on Chomsky, 1965; Chastain, 1971; and Marton, 1975) and unconscious (Krashen, 1981) learning of languages. The chapter closes with a chapter-by-chapter examination of five textbooks used in European secondary schools. The author points out opportunities each textbook presents to focus on pronunciation in English class. Chapter 3 is devoted to the learning of vocabulary. The author briefly offers advice on which aspects of words to include when teaching students new vocabulary before methodically analyzing the treatment of words whose pronunciation has already been learned incorrectly. This includes an examination of the difficulty involved in changing incorrect pronunciation, the automaticity of incorrect pronunciation, habit-forming mechanisms (i.e., mental vs. behavioral learning), and steps to be taken to reverse a bad habit. Special emphasis is placed on the attitudinal and motivational aspects of changing one’s pronunciation. Chapter 4 presents two activities – public speaking and theater – that allow students with some proficiency in English to shift their attention away from communicative
efficiency yet engage in meaningful practice of the language. In the Conclusion, the author offers case studies of two learners who benefited from explicit pronunciation instruction. The book contains a list of references, an author index, and a select list of subjects. The book concludes with two appendices. They include one transcript of a student’s persuasive public speech and excerpts of four plays performed by secondary-school students. In each transcript words are marked up whose pronunciation presented challenges for the student performers.

EVALUATION

As demonstrated by the summary above, the book contains a puzzling selection of topics on the teaching of English pronunciation at the secondary-school level. Regrettably, Dr. Janczukowicz does not justify her choice of these topics over others. The book reads like a collection of essays, loosely connected by the thread of pronunciation. There are enough omissions of fundamental concepts to leave the novice teacher under equipped to teach pronunciation comprehensively. Yet the number of basic concepts discussed at length is likely to cause the practicing teacher to skip over various chapters. On the issue of comprehensiveness, the last fifty years of the 20th century witnessed the pendulum swinging between (on the one hand) prioritizing proper pronunciation, as if equating the teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) to the teaching of pronunciation, and (on the other hand) the questioning of the utility or even feasibility of teaching pronunciation, leading to the abandonment of the enterprise in many ESOL classrooms and textbooks (Morley, 1991). A reference to the late 80s and especially in the decades since Morley’s article, most of the field has moved on. The pendulum swings have become less extreme. An examination of the texts used to prepare teachers to teach pronunciation (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Brown, 1991; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010; Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994; Kenworthy, 1987) reveals a striking agreement on the fundamental concepts needed to accomplish the task. They typically include discussions of the basics: segmental features (vowel sounds, consonant sounds, and their transcription) and suprasegmental features (connected speech, word stress, sentence stress, tonic stress, rhythm, and intonation). Topics that further develop the future teacher of pronunciation include discussions of speech, intelligibility, spelling, common learner errors, and pedagogical techniques (such as drills, chants, and drama). Dr. Janczukowicz has included some idiosyncratic additional topics and excluded some of these fundamental topics. For example, of the basics, segmentals, phonetic transcription, and to a lesser extent word stress are covered. However, sentence stress, rhythm, and intonation are omitted. This is unfortunate because many have noted the important role suprasegmental features of speech play in intelligibility: nonnative English speakers with intelligible pronunciation of segmentals and standard grammar can still be incomprehensible if their suprasegmental patterns are unnatural (e.g., Munro & Derwing, 1999). Thus, there seems to be a consensus in the field that novice teachers require a grasp of all of the aforementioned fundamentals to effect positive change in their learners. Experienced teachers, however, will already be familiar with most of the basic themes, which leads to the question: who might benefit from reading Dr. Janczukowicz’s book? I would cautiously recommend it to anyone who is interested in a) the treatment of mispronounced words, b) the role motivation and attitude play in the study of pronunciation and c) the incorporation of public speaking and drama into English class. These three areas may be of interest to teachers.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE REVIEWER:
Ildiko Porter-Szucs is Assistant Professor of TESOL/ESL at Eastern Michigan University, USA. She prepares teachers of ESOL at the undergraduate and graduate levels. She teaches courses on introductory linguistics, pedagogical grammar, second language acquisition, and teaching methodologies. Her primary research interest includes teacher formation. She is also interested in formulaic language and second-language assessment.

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Which aspects are emphasised in English pronunciation teaching in the context of Finnish schools? To answer these questions, classroom observations in Finnish schools were arranged and the study described in Chapter III was conducted. She is a formally qualified EFL subject teacher, and teaches English at the basic education level and also in upper secondary school, i.e. to pupils aged 13 to 16 and 16 to 19. Her teaching groups averaged 11 pupils. She has 10 years of teaching experience. A questionnaire for teachers teaching in secondary schools in Poland is a tool which gathers qualitative data. Another two tools gather quantitative data, these are: a classroom observation and a short interview with a teacher which will be conducted after the observation. Students at different levels comprise the biggest problem to face; those at the beginner level may not understand a teacher or students at higher levels. Harmer (2007:127) Another problem of teaching pronunciation is that it is introduced only when errors occur (reactive). Morley (1991:489) mentions an important issue that arises from the concept of intelligible pronunciation: the focus is on communication not pronunciation.