

The Role of Teaching – Learning English Pronunciation; the case of Education Colleges in Coimbatore

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Abstract: *The general understanding is that the teachers of English as a second language would compulsorily have a sound knowledge of phonetics and phonology. The reason for this being they hold an Undergraduate Degree in English language and Literature along with a one year course in the field of Education. Hardly any study has been conducted to evaluate the pronunciation skills of the teacher trainees who major in English. 150 teacher trainees from five reputed Colleges of Education in Coimbatore formed the samples of my study. Teacher Trainees and their teachers are the participants to this study. A triangulation method was adopted to collect data, analyse and it and reach the findings. From the findings it is found that teacher trainees had minimal knowledge of phonetics and that reflected in their pronunciation too. Among the findings it has been also found that none of the colleges of education emphasized on the pronunciation teaching, in spite of them having phonetics and phonology as a part of their course. This paper aims at revealing why pronunciation teaching is not given equal importance with the texts taught and how teaching of pronunciation can be improved in teacher education colleges.*

Key words: *pronunciation teaching, phonetics, phonology, Education College*

I. Introduction

English language made its way into India when India was made a colony by the British Empire. Since then English has been used as second language in India. English has a status of associate language, but in fact it is the most important language of India. English is the most commonly spoken language in India after Hindi and it is probably the most widely read and written language in India. English in India is used not only for communicating with the outside world, but also for inter-state and intra state communication. English Language is taught from the primary education onwards till the child graduates. Teachers of English in the schools are expected to have an understanding of phonetics and phonology for being able to teach children pronunciation of English they learn as a second language. Language experts advocate that the teachers should possess sound knowledge of phonology and phonetics and be familiar of the approaches, methods and techniques to practice pronunciation in the classrooms. Baker and Murphy (2011) recognised that “an overall neglect of pronunciation teaching has been observed in teacher preparation programs”, and “scarcely any research has been conducted that explores pronunciation teachers’ knowledge of phonology.” In India, Ganapathy (1980) in his study has elaborately discussed the problems connected with the pronunciation of English by the Tamils, Komali Prakash (1992) studied the problems faced in pronunciation by the speakers of English in south India. Dilda Grace Suneetha (2007) in her study explains how the English pronunciation of Asians are difficult to understand. No studies have been attempted to evaluate the status of pronunciation teaching and learning in India. The present study is more of an eye opener on the pronunciation standards of teaching and learning that takes place in Indian classrooms. This paper is a small portion of my doctoral research that reveals the role of pronunciation in the teaching and learning process in education colleges.

II. Research Methodology

Coimbatore district of Tamilnadu state in India is known as the educational hub of the south. The city has the best ranking schools and colleges that caters to the educational requirements of not only the state, but also the neighbouring states and rest of the country. There is a huge inflow of students from other countries, who come down to Coimbatore for higher studies. Hence the city formed the place of research. From here the five best Education colleges were chosen for the study. These colleges produce teachers, who later work in reputed schools across the country. This was yet another reason for narrowing the study to the future teachers of English language, who make the samples. The samples were chosen using stratified sampling technique. A total of 150 teacher trainees were chosen for the study from the five colleges. The classification of the samples is presented below.

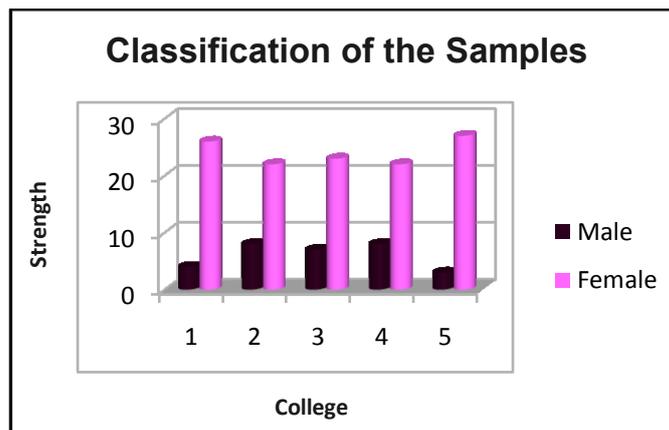


Fig. 1 Classification of the samples

Females constituted about 80% of the population and the remaining 20% were males. Tamil language is the mother tongue of all the samples. Therefore English is learnt as a second language by all the students. They begin learning English when they are in their primary classes and that goes on till their 12th standard. All these students have a bachelor's degree in English language and literature. 26% of these students have a master's degree in English language and literature.

Triangulation is employed, as the methodology of this study. Cohen, et al (2000:12) defines it as the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour." In research terms, the "desire to use multiple sources of data is referred to as triangulation" Mills, (2003: 52). Through the use of methodological triangulation and three data collection instruments such as questionnaire, semi-structured observation checklist and open-ended interview were used for the collection of data. The questionnaire was pilot-tested and revised at various stages of its development to optimize its reliability and validity. Separate questionnaires were prepared for the teachers and the teacher trainees. All the questionnaires were filled in the presence of the researcher, hence a 100% response rate was achieved. The classes were observed and filled in duly by the researcher based on the checklist. Finally a one to one interview was conducted for the teachers and selected students. The students were selected on the basis of their performance in the classroom learning situation. The classes and interviews were recorded and the audio was transcribed. Content analytic procedure was used for the qualitative analysis of the data.

III. Results and Discussions

Based on the results drawn from the questionnaire, it was found that 78.6% of the teacher trainees are not aware of the phonetic symbols in spite of the fact that they have had a paper in phonetics and phonology during their under graduate degree programme. Those who have completed their master's degree in English and a few other students have been able to transcribe words into phonetic script. The questionnaire had exercises to test their knowledge on the use of phonetic scripts, from which the above result was found. Further, it was also found that they were unaware of the IPA charts and of the symbols they represent. The teachers who teach these trainees unanimously were of the opinion that knowledge of phonology and phonetics to be a mandatory requirement as they would have learnt it during their under graduate programme. Therefore the students who have been introduced to phonology find that pronunciation comes easy to them when compared to their counterparts. During the interview with the teachers two among the five were unaware of pronunciation teaching methods and approaches. Their claim is that since they were not taught they don't follow it in their teaching. They believe that teaching the trainees more about English grammar would help them to handle English classes in school. Three others were of the opinion that pronunciation classes have to be taught investing time and importance, but the practicality of the current teaching learning situation in education colleges does not allow it.

The five teachers who were interviewed separately were uniform in their answer, that they need more training and professional development in teaching pronunciation. On the other hand the teacher trainees found phonology too theoretical and a dry subject to learn. One of the trainee commented that "phonetics is very difficult for one letter many sound and it is very confusing." This is because they know that there are differences to the sounds but they do not know how. The "knowing how" of the sounds would help them learn phonology better which in turn would help them with their pronunciation. For example, Tamil language speakers have only two sounds that represent the grapheme 'a'. one is the /ʌ/ as in hut, up etc. and /a:/ as in father, part etc. Whereas English language has three short and one long vowel sounds that represent the grapheme 'a'. This

unless taught with ample practice along with the theory can be confusing to the learners irrespective of the age group they fall under when learning the language. Henderson et al (2012) point out that the teachers who have phonological knowledge are unable to apply the knowledge acquired in classrooms. The 47% of the trainees could not differentiate sounds of the minimal pairs in /p/ and /b/. They often interchange the sounds while using the language. For example /**p**Alb/ for bulb and /**b**Alp/for pulp. Instances have been found when there are trainees who pronounce /f/ in the word initial instead of /p/ as in /**f**æn/ for /**p**æn/. When such error occur it not only affects the pronunciation, it also affects the meaning of the word intended.

In short, the researcher through this paper has identified the role of teaching and learning of pronunciation. English language teachers' lack of phonological knowledge and lack of training in the teaching of pronunciation indicates the need for more pronunciation education and training is required for both the teachers as well as the teacher trainees to produce a generation of well pronounced speakers of English as second language.

IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the results, it can be said that the department of higher education should either make it mandatory that at least teachers, irrespective of them being school or college teachers of English language should undergo a course in pronunciation pedagogy and phonology. This would curb the major pronunciation problems that are found with regard to English as a second language. Pronunciation must be viewed as more than correct production of individual sounds or isolated words, instead it must be viewed as a crucial part of communication that should be incorporated into classroom activities. English pronunciation instruction should be seen in the same light as the other aspects and skills of the English language, such as vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing since it is an important part of communication, particularly through listening and speaking.

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