



Article Title

Teaching English Pronunciation Skills to the Asian Learner. A Cultural Complexity or Subsumed Piece of Cake?

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About the author - Paul Robertson received his Ph.D in 2002. He has lived in Korea since 1997

Introduction

For the last two decades academics and publishers have propounded theories on pronunciation acquisition and on pronunciation training. For the greater part, they have paid lip service to the critical issue underlying both the aforementioned, namely the culture behind the target of the pronunciation theory. With a broad sweep, all L2 learners were grouped as though there were no differences that could possibly affect the learner. Politzer and McGroarty's 1985 survey, fleetingly cited by Ellis (1996:559) notes the early suggestion that cultural differences are important. Carmichael (2001) identifies the issues that immediately precede the role of pronunciation teaching, whilst Robertson (2002a, 2002b) examines the Korean learner's characteristics and the impact of Confucianism on

the Korean learners learning style. Otlowski (1998) leads the future in Asian pronunciation teaching by arguing for pronunciation programs to be included in all L2 students training, and further believes there is optimism for success in the outcomes of such programs. Yet Dash (2002) researched and analyzed the Korean classroom and found that an English Only policy was seriously flawed.

Thus we have a chasm between what some believe is the academically ideal way to proceed in any pronunciation program, and those who consider clearly identifying cultural peculiarities within the target (Asian learning zone) leads to identification of alternate approaches in delivery of pronunciation programs in Asia. However, despite propounding the inclusion of pronunciation programs, (Otlowski, 1998, Kenworthy, 1996) the method of delivery is thrown into doubt by Dash's (2002) findings. This paper will submit, {i} based upon the evidence to date, that pronunciation programs in Asia must and can be delivered successfully by native speakers of English irrespective of their varying levels of educational background. This view is supported by Kenworthy (1996:69) whilst Fromkin and Rodman (1998:349) extend the category to those with near native speech. Secondly, {ii} that the mode of delivery of a pronunciation program must relate to that particular countries culture so as to complement, and not offend, cultural complexities.

Otlowski (2001) notes the oft cited view that little relationship exists between teaching pronunciation in the classroom and attained proficiency in pronunciation, which was supported by research done by Suter (1976, 233) and Suter & Purcell (1980, 286). They concluded that pronunciation practice in class had little effect on the learner's

pronunciation skills and moreover, 'that the attainment of accurate pronunciation in a second language is a matter substantially beyond the control of the educators,' Suter & Purcell (1980, 286). The findings were subject to the caveat (as also noted throughout literature in numerous places) that variables of formal training and the quality of training in pronunciation could affect the results, especially see Carmichael, (2001) for analysis of this issue. This seems, *a priori*, obvious, but definitely worthy of further research.

However Pennington (1989, 203) noted that there was no 'firm basis for asserting categorically that pronunciation is not teachable or that it is not worth spending time on...' (1989, 220) and Pennington and Richards (1986) suggest that there is little or no evidence to support pronunciation training, but that view must now be seen as out dated, and lacking credibility in the area of Intercultural L2 training issues. Between these divergent views, Stern (1992, 112) says, "There is no convincing empirical evidence which could help us sort out the various positions on the merits of pronunciation training." Yet one decade later that evidence is slowly being manufactured. (This is not to ignore the critical age hypothesis ramifications as discussed in Ellis (1996:492) and Robertson (2001) proposing a 'window of opportunity' theory, but that is for another paper.)

In highly specific research (compliant with the caveats of Saville-Troike (1989) of research in another culture, and Robertson (2002a)) conducted in a language laboratory in Korea in 2003, on 300 students aged 12-14 (Korean age) and 60 adults aged 24-55, results showed that those in both groups who undertook six hours of pronunciation training recorded noticeably higher computer analyzed results of pronunciation than those whose training

omitted the pronunciation program. Instructors were native English speakers, qualified and unqualified in EFL teaching. However, the software and language laboratory are something not generally available to the greater majority of educators. But the results supported the view that pronunciation training does help the student in his L2 mastery, and is an effective tool in the teacher's repertoire. This supports and advances the view of Pennington (1989.)

[Pronunciation Teaching & Presentation.](#)

But, nevertheless, as the above views represent the split in opinion on the teaching of pronunciation, what can the teacher do to improve their students' pronunciation, that is if we accept the position that the momentum begun by Otlowski (1998) is clearly worthy of advancement and we decide on the basis of the evidence before us that improvement in student's pronunciation can be obtained? The time has come to find further substantial empirical evidence and assuming that we educators determine that pronunciation training is effective, for we also know the end users want it, indeed demand it, as well, "...the teaching of pronunciation is so crucial to our students", (Goodwin, 2001:117) then how do we teach and present it?

- (1) Include it in government school curriculums?
- (2) Include it in private school courses?
- (3) Train and certify teachers in pronunciation teaching?
- (4) Carefully monitor results?
- (5) Draft new teaching programs?

- (6) Devise a new culturally considerate methodology?
- (7) Devise a culturally acceptable approach?
- (8) Draft new comprehensive books?
- (9) Teach the teachers about the target culture?

The options, not limited to the above, are numerous and in need of action. Publishing companies on the whole seem to avoid their responsibility in this area for it is said to be not a lucrative area to invest in, (Jones & Evans, 1995). According to Jones & Evans (1995:224) "most materials still have a long way to go in presenting pronunciation in a truly communicative and holistic manner." Examination of education department books in Korea and China shows scant attention paid to the subject, yet whilst graduate teachers note comprehensive L2 pronunciation training at university level, this does not translate into classroom presentation. However, it is clear that whilst the questions posed above are easy to formulate, until those persons whose native tongue is not English and who dictate the terms of curriculum processes, begin to admit and accept that native English speakers are well qualified to give opinions about L2 issues in Korea (in this case) then change will be piecemeal, ad hoc and relatively ineffective.

More recent research (University of Aizu, 1999) suggests that researchers are at least looking for ways that may help the educator in the quest to teach pronunciation in a meaningful way. After 7 years of observing Korean English teachers in the classroom, it is obvious that Korean school teachers are well aware of the student's shortcomings and pay attention to the problems, but usually long after they occur. Research carried by Dash

(2002) clearly shows that students in governments schools receive almost no opportunity to speak in the L2 in classes that are still teacher centered. In one month the student may get to speak for one minute only if lucky. Thus teacher centered classes are the norm, and whilst this is the wrong approach, it is easy to see why attention is not given to pronunciation issues so as to minimize the need for subsequent corrections. Again one merely glances through the poorly and ill-designed text books to see where the fault lies. However, even if the approach changed and students were to receive more opportunities to speak, the native Korean speaker is subject to the overriding silent yet powerful issue of Confucianism (Robertson, 2002b) and may be hesitant/scared to speak in the L2.

Generally speaking, changes in language learning and teaching have influenced a move from teacher centered to learner-centered classrooms. Chamot (L&R 92) says, "To develop classroom speaking skills, children need opportunities to participate in small group discussion, to present oral reports, and to respond adequately to teacher questioning..." No doubt the first aspect is easily arranged, but clearly the second element depends upon numerous factors not elicited in the phrase, namely the student's level of linguistic competency, inter alia.. The third aspect, whilst being an ideal, is no more for overriding rules of Confucianism dictate that silence is the norm. And whilst teachers talk of a shift towards student centered learning, this is more in lip service than practice, for it is not an aspect of classroom management widely understood.

Morley (1991,48) notes there has a shift from specific linguistic competencies to broader communicative competencies as goals for teachers and students. In particular, the Korean

education system is focussing much attention on student centered classes, with classrooms specifically designed for language teaching, whereby students occasionally work in groups in a well equipped and spacious rooms, sometimes stocked with reasonable reference materials for student use. However, Korean teaching staff on the whole are reluctant to speak in English and have little or no training in the appropriate methods of pronunciation teaching. Action research carries out by numerous EPIK (1) instructors clearly shows the Korean teacher not willing to speak English in his or her L2 lesson. And whilst Morley (1991) states the need for the integration of pronunciation exercises with oral communication, a shift from segmental to supra-segmentals, increased emphasis on individual learner needs, meaningful task based practices, development of new teacher strategies for the teaching and introduction of peer correction and group interaction, (also Castillo, 1977, 71) , the fundamental issues that underpin this theory have been ignored. In other words, the cart is well before the horse in Asian English teaching programs.

As well, the 'individual learner needs' must often be ignored when dealing with a large class size, with 35 - 45 students, though as noted by experienced NNS educators in Korea, class size should not be a valid reason to avoid individual student attention. The main factor identified and noted by numerous educators is that classes are 'test driven' and not 'learning driven.' This is also noted in Poole's (2003) expose' of the Japanese education system and Lee's (2001) expose of the Korean education system.

Cohen (1977, 71) argues that teaching of pronunciation goes far beyond the teaching of phonemes, thus with the emphasis on meaningful communication and Morley's premise

(1991, 488) that, "Intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communication competence,..." teachers should ideally include components of pronunciation in their courses, and according to Otlowski (2001) "...expect students to do well..." However if we consider the Asian classroom with its Confucian influence, (Robertson, 2002b) this 'expectation' should be qualified by first assessing what inhibitors are at work in the group before such claim can be made. However, it is undeniable, as Otlowski (2001) notes, that pronunciation training must be included in the students' learning.

It is also said that that without adequate pronunciation skills the learner's ability to communicate is severely limited. Morley (1991) believes that not attending to a student's pronunciation needs, '...is an abrogation of professional responsibility' (Morley, 1991, 489.) Unfortunately this requirement overlooks a list of criteria such as, curriculum needs, student's motivation or the countries educational demands, to mention but a few items of relevance. Other research gives support to Morley's (1991) belief in the need for 'professional responsibility' when the results show that '...a threshold level of pronunciation in English such that if a given non-native speaker's pronunciation falls below this level, he or she will not be able to communicate orally no matter how good his or her control of English grammar and vocabulary might be.' This seems logical, however, it can be argued that there are numerous factors at play if the student fails to communicate, and pronunciation is but one of many possibilities, and it is submitted, not the only factor.

[Good or bad pronunciation: The test?](#)

Of course this makes one thing crystal clear. Bad pronunciation is a communication that

cannot be understood by the listener. What it does not do is add to the definition of what is 'good or understandable pronunciation,' (Celce- Murcia 1987, 5). For example, if a student utters a sentence in English which lacks all the 'function words,' but the 'content words' make it clear what is being said, can we say this is good pronunciation, or is there some unseen mix of 'understandability level' to be added? Seemingly the utterance would pass the 'pronunciation threshold test' as being understandable, yet fail the fluency and syntactic tests. This then adds up to the exemplified conclusion that the term 'pronunciation' includes meanings not strictly limited to the definition supplied. However I do note the arguments associated with 'konglish' (Kim, (2002)) and in an e-mail communication on 12 May 2003, Mr. P. Dash pointed out that Chinese English 'chinglish,' often not understood by him, is readily understood between Chinese speakers using English.

Gilbert (1995, 1) believes the skills of listening comprehension and pronunciation are interdependent. "If they can not hear well, they are cut off from language. If they cannot be understood easily, they are cut off from conversation with native speakers." Nooteboom (1983, 183) also has suggested that speech production is affected by speech perception; the hearer has become an important factor in communicative discourse and suggests that body language (which varies between cultures) needs to be taught. Does this not add a new dimension to pronunciation? Should the listener now be faced with some 'test' to determine if what 'he hears/ sees' is of a satisfactory level to qualify him as a commentator on the pronunciation, or does the speaker have the added duty to determine that his utterance was understood as he wished?

This though, illustrates the need to integrate pronunciation with communicative activities, to give the students situations to 'develop' their pronunciation by listening and speaking. This begs the question, namely, what does 'develop' mean? The current research and the current trend reversal in the thinking of pronunciation teaching shows there is a consensus that a learner's pronunciation in a foreign language needs to be taught in conjunction with communicative practices for the learner to be able to communicate effectively with native speakers. Unfortunately, there is a significant difference in 'the thinking of what makes good pronunciation' and the applying of the thinking.

[Pronunciation and Communicative Teaching.](#)

Morely (1991, 496) submits that students can be expected to do well in the pronunciation of English if the pronunciation class is taken out of a 'meaningless isolation' and becomes an 'integral part of the oral communication class.' Of course that predisposes that 'communication' is part of the curriculum. Further, just what 'communication class' means is open to interpretation. Is it a teacher centered class where substance is first taught, as in the Czech Republic, then a student centered approach takes over for the second part of the communication class, or is it totally student centered with minimal teacher time apart from guidance? Or is it teacher centered as in Greece, complemented by learner centered when students enter the native English speaker's communication class?

It is argued by Morely (1991: 500) that the goal of teaching understandable pronunciation should be changed from the attainment of 'perfect' pronunciation, to the more realistic goals, but this imprecise term 'perfect pronunciation' is, at best, a slippery slope, for who

can say what perfect pronunciation is? What is the test, and who are the testers? In a world of numerous different accented native English teachers with localized dialects, one cannot begin to postulate even an image of 'perfect pronunciation' without meeting a barrage of questions, most of which will succumb to a different answer by a different nationality teacher. Kenworthy (1996:3) prefers to see the terminology reduced to a goal of a 'comfortably intelligible' pronunciation, but even this begs many questions when considered alongside a Chinese, Japanese or Korean speaker. Secondly, Morely's goal can surely only apply to an ESL situation, and have no relevance to a EFL situation such as exists in Japan, Korea and China where English usage outside the four walls of the English classroom is non-existent.

The teacher also has a specific role to play in the communicative learning program, a role that Morley describes as one of 'speech coach' or 'pronunciation coach' (Morley, 1991, 507) and supported by Otlowski (1998). Rather than just correcting the learner's mistakes, the speech coach supplies information, gives models, offers cues, suggestions and constructive feedback about the performance, sets high standards, provides a wide variety of practice opportunities, and overall supports and encourages the learner (Morley, 1991, 507.) It is also submitted that whilst the majority of teachers in Asia are not teachers in the normal sense of the word, they still have the local cultural knowledge and skills required to effectively carry out the speech coach program. Without an understanding of the student's culture, the application of Morely's premise per se' is meaningless and may even transcend culturally impermissible boundaries.

The Speech Coach.

Taking Morley's (1991) proposal one step further to reality, what is it that a speech coach should know and do? Furthermore, who can be the speech coach must be considered. And what differences must be applied to adult second language teaching as opposed to adolescent second language teaching? The teacher can be a native English speaker or can be a qualified teacher of that country. This is the 'ideal world' scenario. In practice it will not apply but will be tempered with a concoction of good professional teachers, bad professional teachers, good nonprofessional teachers and bad nonprofessional teachers in some ratio. Whoever has the task allotted to them must give attention to their role. Teachers must know their limitations, and not supply advice when they are no more than giving an uneducated guess. Like a football coach who has dozens of individual items to take his charges through, the speech coach is but part of the teacher's overall function.

Rein (1995) reports on a study carried out in Israeli high schools wherein teacher's perceptions for effective coaching of mixed ability classes were measured. Although the term 'coach' has wider connotations than just 'speech coach' and includes all teacher functions, the results showed that the teachers considered the coach's personality to be the critical factor in the coaching process. Mutual understanding, trust and respect were the prerequisite to the teachers' acceptance by students. The teachers were mostly interested in practical guidance and ideas directly applicable to their specific teaching situation, whilst staff development was also seen as a vital component to teaching. It is submitted this study

emphasizes that greater importance and more useful training must be given by School boards and School directors to the teachers and their particular roles if students are to receive the best second language acquisition.

One consideration the speech coach must give is to error correction. At the outset it should be decided in consultation with students (if age is sufficient to accept) that error correction is both a team effort and the coaches overall responsibility. Madden, Matt, Moore and Zena (1997) surveyed a group of university students to determine an opinion about error correction in Pronunciation. Overall, students valued pronunciation as an important part of their instruction, and wanted more correction both within and outside the classroom, and demanding more emphasis be placed on the pronunciation component within the course. (One wonders how a teacher can find a solution to student error correction outside the classroom?) But those students in their elementary years will find it hard to accept this principle, let alone understand it, so the coach will be more dominant in his/her role in the early years.

Of course most teachers encounter a class well after they (the students) have begun their training, that is they have been trained by one or more second language teachers in the past. This can cause problems, as style will differ in coaching. The teacher as coach must be aware then that his/her style and teaching philosophy will probably differ from the previous coach, thus it must be made clear to the students what his/her philosophy is and how they as a team can work together to obtain the new coaches standards. Student centered approaches will lower the inhibiting factors aforementioned. In particular,

pronunciation teaching should be implemented, at least to some degree, in pairs or groups. Crookes and Chaudron (1991, 46) note, "Contrary to a popular negative view of the outcomes of learner dominated activities, classroom centered research has demonstrated that at the same time that students have many more opportunities to employ the target language, they manage to perform equally successfully in terms of grammatical accuracy as when the teacher is leading the discussion." In Japan and Korea, research has shown that some students who actively communicate in a teacher centered class, will become passive in group work, and vice versa. This is for the teacher/coach to observe and utilize to the pronunciation program's benefit.

Whilst Do, (2001) seems to suggest a form of hopelessness in teaching Korean students, "Although EFL learners in Korea are silent and inactive in terms of English use, they do not want to feel like, as they say, ""an imitation, a copy, a stuffed figure, or a puppet with a talking mouth."" Their sense of being manipulated merely as objects of teaching has often left them psychologically self-defeating and self-alienated, which results in their poor self-image as English users...", is rather broad, vague and unsupported by research, yet does indicate that the teacher/coach must be acutely culturally sensitive to his students.

[The speech coach will be able to do the following:](#)

- a) irrespective of curriculum demands, he/she will design and implement a program to draw students' attention to their pronunciation, both strong and weak points. This program will complement the curriculum.
- b) Practice those areas that are identifiably causing problem.

- c) Be aware of the problems that adult students 'may' face if the fundamental concept of critical age period is accepted.
- d) Monitor at the outset the student's L2 speech production and regularly assess their progress and provide constructive feedback.
- e) Feedback. By providing effective feedback the teacher is giving attention to 'one of the most important aspects in pronunciation instruction...' (Celce-Murcia, 1991, 147.) Of course the underlying question is just what aspects of the student's pronunciation must the speech coach correct, and more importantly, how to correct it effectively? It is widely agreed that self-correcting is the most effective form of learning, but arriving at the 'how' does not present a unified answer, and it does depend upon the resources available to the speech coach, ranging from a well equipped and easy to manage language laboratory, to the more common and widely used classroom.
- f) Consider introducing lessons related to body language in various cultures.

[A Suggested Teachers' Guide to Pronunciation Monitoring.](#)

(i) Consider the student's rate of speech. Fast speech may increase the mispronunciation of syllables and change good English to poor English. This test is subjective, but the teacher must be aware of the factor. It does no harm to slow the rate of speech down of all speakers until their word pronunciation becomes clear. Examples of fast speech pronunciation are too innumerable to cite, but a professional teacher needs no list to know what spoken words are sounding 'bad' as opposed to what spoken words are sounding 'very nice.' Educators who hold that speech should be at a 'native rate' namely reasonably fast, miss the point completely when it comes to professional speech coach training.

(ii) Asian students need practice with identifiable areas of speech, namely country specific complex sounds, cluster problems, th' words, and linking words and sounds.

(iii) Students should be exposed to as wide a range of pronunciations as possible. This must include careful slow speech to normal North American speed speaking. Supplying a transcript of the words at first is suggested, with later playing putting more emphasis on the student's word perception. The teacher can design any one of a number of testing models.

(iv) As the 'listener understanding' plays an important role in pronunciation, strategies for listening, evaluating, calculating and responding meaningfully become part of the pronunciation program.

[The L2 Educator's Speech Rate.](#)

Learners of English, either juvenile or adult frequently say the hardest thing about learning English is understanding the native English speaker. The vast majority of Asian students lament that they cannot understand U.S. English, and have a clear preference for Canadian English. The rate of U.S. speech is, for them, too fast. Obviously it is the ultimate goal of proficiency to master the varied speech rates of the various English speaking countries, but that is at the end of the line, not in the formative stages. Thus the speech coach, if he/she is to teach pronunciation and to teach it successfully, will be critically aware of his/her rate of normal speech. A number of studies have been carried out which suggest that a slower rate of speech aids comprehension, however, according to Ellis (1996) "... in many cases the speech rate was investigated alongside other variables, making it difficult to assess the effect of speech rate per se."

Various speech rate tests, ranging from speeds of 450 words per minute to 196 words per minute were carried out by Conrad cited in Ellis (1996.) The subjects were native speakers, high-level non-native speakers and low-level non-native speakers. The test showed (as for the non-native speakers) that both groups displayed "...considerable difficulty ... even after the fifth reading." Griffiths (1990) tested varying speech rate, using rates of (a) 94-107 words per minute (b) 143-156 w.p.m. and (c) 191-206 w.p.m. The test required answers to true and false questions. The results note considerable difficulty with the fast rate, whilst the medium and slow rate showed no difference in comprehension.

According to Ellis (1996) "The studies suggest that there may be a threshold level - around 200 words per minute - below which intermediate and advanced learners experience little difficulty in comprehending and above which they might." However it seems various caveats must be placed on such a broad formulation. Despite Griffiths (1990) testing lower intermediate level English learners, the criteria for who falls in this group needs clarification. Similarly, the active vocabulary of the subject needs careful assessment. However, if we accept Ellis's premise (1996) that "...there is mixed evidence regarding the value of linguistically simplified input for promoting comprehension...whereas speech rate does have a clear effect, grammatical modifications do not always result in improved comprehension..." then the following should be applicable to the teacher in Korea, namely, materials that supply spoken input should be carefully assessed for speech rate according to both level, age and advancement of their learner. But it is nigh on impossible to imagine any publisher will pay so much attention to what is clearly required. Further, the teacher himself must be aware of his/her speech rate, (easily ascertained) and determine which

speed he/she desires to pursue for that level. It is suggested that the speech rate for Koreans who (in Korea) are classified as low to medium level language ability learners, would sit around the 120 words per minute rate. This would ideally be termed "foreigner talk with explicit teaching function" (Naro, 1983.)

Conclusion.

The TEFL teacher as speech coach or pronunciation coach has a vital role to play. For the speech coach to be effective he first must have the unfettered support of his employer (Board of Education) to embark upon the coaching program. The coach/teacher will then assess his students in relation to multiple criteria (ascertained by the coach, for each class may need different assessment criteria,) and finally prepare his/her program followed by the monitoring mode. And like any coach, monitoring may result in changes back and forth until an 'ideal' is found. The teacher will then implement a program inside of the cultural complexities to be found in that country, and should be acutely aware of the boundaries of cultural acceptability, even if that means a poorer pronunciation is the resultant. Loss of face is of far greater harm than poor pronunciation is to an Asian speaker of English. Though Douglas-Brown (1994:187) says language and culture are inextricably intertwined, it is submitted that view, albeit 9 years old, is subject to critical review, and that well fashioned research will untie the previously considered complexity.

What is clear from this paper and others, is that the teaching of pronunciation programs must be included in the students' training, yet that training must be country specific, and materials and research must now stop focusing on the 'general' and start considering the

'specific'. I note that Dash (2003) in support of Mangubhai, (2002) may well have take the opposite view as to the extent culture plays in SLA. (It remains to be seen if the two views might be reconciled in so far as pronunciation teaching goes, to which this paper only addresses.) But as Otlowski (1998) notes, pronunciation must be seen as "...a crucial part of communication." Yet what is deemed an ideal pronunciation program for a Korean learner is unlikely to be the program that should be applied to Japanese learner or Chinese learner. This statement clearly leads to one conclusion,- that the field of EFL research must intensify and be country culture specific, and materials that portray to cover the field of EFL/TEFL training must be seen as inherently flawed if they suggest a particular program is good for one and all.

Footnotes

(1) EPIK. English Program in Korea. A Korean government initiative to bring native English speakers to help train Korean teachers and assist in the Korean L2 classes. However, surveys show generally few EPIK teachers are qualified to do either role, yet should be utilized far more effectively in light of the above analysis.

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