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A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF APPLYING MODERN DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN TEACHING THE RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION (RP) OF ENGLISH

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Abstract:

In order to teach the much sought after standard pronunciation also called as Received Pronunciation (RP) of English there are multiple ways and means deployed by the teachers. This paper explores the application of modern ICT-enabled tools for teaching the Received Pronunciation. The ICT tools and techniques incorporating the precepts of phonetics for aligning the pronunciation of the students with the Received Pronunciation (RP) are in vogue in teaching fields. The languages laboratories, the software, the mobile application are reviewed along with the pros and cons of the same. The tools selected for review are described in detail along with guidelines for usage and possible learning outcomes. Despite Phonology being a course in the university syllabus, there is no provision for the exposure of the target accent through listening sessions in RP. As such, the digital tools and techniques that can fruitfully solve the problem are explained in the paper. The digital tools are explained along with their usage for the purpose of teaching RP. Along with the mobile applications, websites and software, the paper also deals with the criteria for the selections of digital tools for teaching the RP to the students as well as the necessities of applying the ICT tools.

Keywords: *Teaching Received Pronunciation, ICT Tools for Teaching Language, Educational Technology, Computer Assisted Language Learning, etc.*

Introduction:

Teaching the Received Pronunciation (RP) enjoyed its hey-days when Audio-lingual method of teaching language was in vogue in the English departments all over the world. It was seen as a final solution to the tasks of teaching English or any other language as a second or target language. However, it has lost its momentum after other methods of language teaching have replaced the Audio-lingual method. There was also one more contributing factor that minimized the stress on teaching RP— it was a hypothesis that to set a goal for the learners to acquire a native-like pronunciation was an unrealistic goal. Consequently, the focus was shifted in using the teaching time for developing other linguistic skills rather than the Received Pronunciation. For instance, in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) less importance was given to teaching RP. The focus was shifted towards teaching *Suprasegmentals* or, rhythm, stress, and intonation. These were seen as more useful aspects of communication. Problems with the teaching of pronunciation are compounded by the fact that in order to teaching pronunciation you need to know about phonetics and phonology. These subjects are filled with horrifying terms such as phonemes, segmental,



supra-segmental, bilabial plosives, fricatives, allomorphic variation—the list goes on and on. Moreover, it has been opined that, “For a long period of time, grammar has been the focus for second language teachers and researchers but less is known about how pronunciation is taught and learned (Lightbown & Spada, 68). Audiolingual approach gave central importance to teaching pronunciation. The technique used in teaching pronunciation was pronunciation of *segmentals*. Teaching Segmentals is defined as, “getting learners to perceive and to produce distinctions between single sounds in minimal pair drills (Lightbown & Spada, 68).

The research on the teaching and learning of pronunciation is not as extensive as on the other language domains (Lightbown & Spada, 68). Still there are some processes recognized by the researchers that involve in the phonological development in the second language learning and also there are ways found out by the researchers to find out the impact of first language on the acquisition of the pronunciation of the second language. For example, *contrastive analysis* helps in explaining the influence of the first language on the acquisition of the pronunciation of the second language. We notice in that the students whose first language is Marathi pronounce the words like bird /bɜ:d/ as /bærd/ while the Punjabi speakers pronounce the word ‘school’ /sku:l/ as /səkul/ because Punjabi language doesn’t have consonant cluster /sk/. Again, there have been studies about the perception and production of sound. The relationship between the two is called as complex. “It is hypothesized that a greater difference between the learner’s native language and the target language can lead to greater difficulty (Lightbown & Spada, 69). The evidence supporting the hypothesis comes from the observation that it takes learners longer to reach a high level of fluency in a particular second or foreign language if that language is substantially different from the languages they already know (Lightbown & Spada, 69). Lightbown and Spada also mention the study by Theo Bongaerts which found that only those speakers whose native language was similar to the target language could produce native like accents. The learner’s first language plays an important role in the acquisition of the second language. Other factors such as amount and type of exposure to the target language and the degree of use of the first language have been identified as influential contributors to pronunciation (Lightbown & Spada, 69).

Lightbown and Spada refer to Thorsten Piske, Ian Mackay, and James Flege (2001) that they have reported that longer periods of exposure to the second language can lead to improved pronunciation. It has also been observed that adults who continue to make greater use of their first language may have stronger accents in the second language. There is an unusual finding that learner’s affiliation and their sense of identity are also related to how they produce the sounds and rhythms of second language. Lightbown and Spada mention a study done by Elizabeth Gatbonton, Pavel Trofimovich and Micahel Magid that those who had high accuracy in pronouncing the second language were perceived as being less loyal to their ethnic group than those who had strong foreign accent in second language.

A research by Trofimovich concluded that when learners focus primarily on meaning, they may not be able to also pay attention to the sounds that make up the words (Lightbown & Spada, 70). There have been few studies which focus on the effectiveness of the teaching of pronunciation however the research suggests that suprasegmental teaching can have better effectiveness than the segmental pronunciation (Lightbown & Spada, 70). Even though the learners are well trained in the reception and production of the individual sounds, what was found was that though those learners who were trained in individual sounds were better in their accurate usage were seen as not helping it in their perception of the intelligibility of the second language (Lightbown & Spada, 70). Decontextualized pronunciation instruction is not enough and that a



combination of instruction, exposure, experience, and motivation is required if learners are to change their way of speaking (Lightbown & Spada, 71).

A Process of Teaching Pronunciation:

1. Show them what they need to do with their mouth to make the sound
2. Create/give drills for them to build muscle memory
3. Give feedback throughout the process

Digital Tools: Apps:

Sounds of Speech app is developed by the University of Iowa under the title of Phonetics Flash Animation Project. Available first on the website many years ago, now it has is available on android and iOS devices as a paid app. The app is useful in teaching the students how a sound is pronounced in English, Spanish, or German language. (<https://www.teachingseslonline.com/teach-english-pronunciation-online/>)

Moreover, The Phonetics app developed Tokyo University of Foreign Studies is also a similar app that provides video demonstration with customizable features like male or female voice as well as setting the speed of the recording by the learners. The app is not recommendable as it is paid and available on iOS platforms only. Listening to the individual sounds is not enough, what is needed is the communicative aspect of a pronunciation in order to learn the suprasegmental features of a language. The daily usage of a language in a connected speech teaches the learners the rhythm, stress and intonation patterns of a language. There are multiple websites and services that provide this facility. TED, National Public Radio broadcasts, and BBC's broadcasts and podcasts. The videos on YouTube by the BBC, VOA (Voice of America), British Council, have videos with subtitles. There is one more technique called shadowing. It is defined by Marla Tritch Yoshida as, "Authentic videos provide useful material for shadowing—an activity in which learners watch a short video multiple times, repeating after the speakers with the goal of precisely imitating the sounds, pauses, and intonation of their speech" (Yoshida 200).

There are other websites also that provide videos designed to provide models to learn from like, www.englishcentral.com, www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/, www.voicetube.com where the first website provides videos with subtitles, the second one has additional features like transcript of the whole dialogue of 6 minutes. The dialogues are not formal or based on the artificial situations but actually based on the current issues and informative both. It contains videos on various aspects of English language like grammar, vocabulary, current affairs and pronunciation also. The last website in the list has links to the selected contents from the other websites. Though the videos are with subtitles, most of them are for the learners who are at an advanced stage in their listening with comprehension skills.

Sounds: The Pronunciation Appis available both on the Android platform as well as on the iOS platform. Developed by Macmillan, the app has most downloads than any other on the Play store. The app, like the Oxford University's rival app English File Pronunciation provides a facility to not only to listen but also to record the voices of the learners in the app. While the former app has an interactive Phonemic Chart, the later has limited features for free to the users. Both of these apps are handy to use for model pronunciation of the sounds. Cambridge University has also released an app entitled 'Pronunciation: Clear Speech' available only on the iOS platform. The app has interactive games to choose. 'Howjsay' is one more notable app which claims to have the largest database of English words pronunciation recordings.



Dictionaries:

Apart from the apps solely dedicated to the pronunciation of the English words, there are dictionary apps like Merriam Webster Dictionary and Oxford dictionary apps which provide sounds of words with their meanings. BBC iPlayer Radio App. The app provides an easy access to the model pronunciation of RP of English. The newsreaders on the radio service BBC World Service are deemed to be ideal for imitating. English has 44 sounds represented by 26 letters. The spellings quite often mislead the learners. The languages which are phonetic are simple to read because the readers need to know only the sounds of the alphabets. In reading English, the readers need to remember the pronunciations also. The teaching of pronunciation or of any other component of language teaching is hard to be handed over to the technology, rather than treating technology as competitive to the teachers or being dependant of the digital tools, what is most desirable, now is to treat as a tool to be used as per the necessity. The teacher is still the best model to choose from, because it is very difficult to accurately produce the sounds of a language accurately similar to the native speakers of a language. The learners learn best by imitating their teachers from their own linguistic background rather than by listening to the model pronunciation from a native speaker.

Recording Tools:

Sound Recorder for Windows, QuickTime Player for Mac, Voice Memos for iPhone, Voki, photobabble, puppet pals, narrated slideshows, Adobe Spark and many other recording services are provided but recording facility on mobiles is now easiest to use as it is the most user friendly and ready to share. A whatsapp group can also be created to share and review the pronunciation of the students. The websites mentioned above are also useful in recording and evaluating the pronunciation of the students.

Besides, *Spoken Skills* is a website that provides a feedback and testing forum for pronunciation. The consonants, words and sentences are provided for listening tests and the pronunciation of the students is also recorded for comparison. The website provides speaking activities, self-study quizzes, model pronunciation of vowels, consonant sounds and sentences. The learners can solve the quizzes, listen to the model pronunciations and get their pronunciation corrected. Similarly, Cambridge Online website also has model sounds for the learners to listen to and imitate. The website is interactive and it has many games to make the learning funny. The website contains an interactive phonemic chart. The students can click any sounds and listen to its pronunciation as well as a word containing the sound. There are many other games and charts which are designed to train the learners for listening with comprehension and speaking in acceptable English.

Chomsky proposed a new theory in which he learning a language was differentiated from learning other non-linguistic behavior. The other learning was subject to stimulus-response-reinforcement-association. He was of the opinion that learning a language is different because it does not involve only imitating and reproducing the same. He argued it involved the of the underlying knowledge of abstract rules. The drills were seen as teaching the language like behaviour but not teaching the competence. The cognitive code learning could not develop further because no clear-cut methodological guidelines came out.

After the rise of communicative theory of language learning in 1970s, the theory became unpopular. This does not however mean that the theory has been fully wiped out. In Places it is still being taught. The reason behind the fall of the theory was that the teachers are not provided



with a professional training. If a teachers own knowledge of the target language is limited or he lacks the accent or the skills of the language then the students do not leathers the language well (Lightbown & Spada, 73-74).

In order to learn the Received Pronunciation it is not enough to listen to the English sounds, words and sentences with proper rhythm and intonation, it is also important to know the mechanism of the articulation of the sounds in a language. There are some sounds exactly common in the target language and the native language of a learner but there are some sounds which are similar but pronounced with a difference for example the sound /dʒ/ as in Judge and hindi word 'Jara' both sounds are similar but not exactly alike. Therefore a model of pronunciation should have been there. Now with technology it is possible to put a model of pronunciation of a sound before the learners. The digital technology has enabled the learners to get a model pronunciation of sounds through digital dictionaries. There are dozens of dictionaries available on android platform and iOS platform. There are also scores of websites which provide the model pronunciation of the sounds which is in alignment with the RP.

English being an international language, the pronunciation of the language is seen different as per the nations. There are multiple varieties of English today. The nations are standardizing their national varieties of English however; India does not have a standard national variety of English even though it is very essential to have our own variety of English. In this regard the variety which is prescribed for us as Indians is the British standard variety of English as heard on BBC (Arora, 206). The materials produced by the EFLU for the teaching of Pronunciation is also recommended by Krishnaswamy as well as they have suggested the use of digital technology in listening the standard British variety of English through listening to the BBC and learning American variety of English by listening to the news on CNN (Krishnaswamy, 81).

What Tools to Choose?:

Marla Tritch Yoshida form the University of California, Irvine suggests criteria for the selection of the digital tools and technologies for the purpose of teaching pronunciation.

1. **Appropriateness to learning objectives:** Does the tool achieve a specific teaching or learning task?
2. **Quality and accuracy:** Does it provide accurate information in keeping with principles of phonetics and phonology
3. **Practicality of use:** Is it easy to learn and use and also reliable?
4. **Cost:** Is it free or at least inexpensive? (Yoshida, 196).

Additionally, what must be checked is the tool or audio/video model recommendable to the learners?

Why should Technology be used in Teaching Pronunciation?:

To show mechanics of articulation of a sound: Without a proper understanding of the mechanics of what happens in the mouth when a certain sound is articulated. In the university syllabus, rather than the digital tools the printed books are prescribed. The books do have diagrams demonstrating the articulation. The digital tools are very useful in showing the whole process of the articulation of a sound. Where a diagram can show only a position in the articulation, the technology can show the movements of the speech organs involved in the articulation. It has been proved that digital tools are useful in teaching pronunciation (Inamdar & Dixon, 2003).



1. The Ease of Teaching and Learning
2. Getting benefits of accessibility of technology
3. Listening practice
4. Correct RP Models
5. To make them self-dependent in learning
6. To record and review the pronunciation of students

“Receiving feedback is a necessary guide to students in identifying pronunciation mistakes and trying to make their pronunciation more intelligible” (Hincks, 2003). Some researchers recommend *Schoology* as a tool (Yoshida, 201) however, the tool is not so useful as it does not have recording facility in the same app. *WhatsApp* group has both the recording and sharing facility which makes it more useful. Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) technology is available these days which can be used effectively.

Conclusions:

- Syllabi units of English phonology at UG level in the major universities are inadequate and do not incorporate the digital technology
- Phonology plays a major role in making the learners conscious of their pronunciation
- Practice in both Segmental and supra-segmental features necessary for improving pronunciation
- Technology is a tool, not an independent method of learning RP
- Teacher is the first and best model of pronunciation before the students
- The technology provides accessibility, ease and economy of efforts for the learners
- Native-like pronunciation is an incorrect task hence, focus should be on intelligible and staying close to RP
- Students find it useful and enjoyable both to use technology for learning pronunciation

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