# THE USE OF SOFTWARE TEXT-TO-SPEECH IN TEACHING PRONUNCIATION

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## A. The Importance of Teaching Pronunciation

A consideration of learners' pronunciation errors and of how these can inhibit successful communication is a useful basis on which to assess why it is important to deal with pronunciation in the classroom. Kelly (2006) presents a simple example of this case. When a learner says *soup* in a situation such as a restaurant where they should have said *soup*, the inaccurate production of a phoneme can lead to misunderstanding (at least on the part of the waitress). Moreover, it is stated that a learner who consistently mispronounces a range of phonemes can be extremely difficult for a speaker from another language community to understand. This can be very frustrating for the learner who may have a good command of grammar and lexis but have difficulty in understanding and being understood by a native speaker. The inaccurate use of suprasegmental elements, such as stress or intonation, are also possible to cause problems.

However, not all pronunciation problems always really hinder communication. That is why, teachers need to prioritize to help learners achieve intelligible pronunciation, and not to correct everything. Further, it is also stated that even if students are not having difficulties communicating, they often like to have their pronunciation mistakes brought to their attention.

There are actually a number of factors that can have an impact on one's ability to achieve intelligible pronunciation (Kenworthy, 1987). Those are:

- First language

  Learners whose first language is more phonetically similar to English will not necessarily have the most ease in acquiring the sounds of the new language. Other factors are equally important to consider.

- Age

  Studies on the effect of age on pronunciation in a second language have produced conflicting results. Generally speaking, however, learners exposed to English at a young age are likely to achieve a native-like accent in a second language.

- Motivation

  Motivation that derives from negative reactions from family members may be a cause for frustration rather than a positive motivation.

- Expectations

  Along with motivation comes expectations about how one wants to sound in a second language, which are oftentimes unrealistic.

- Exposure to English

  It is imperative that teachers provide abundant exposure to spoken English in ESL classes, and encourage learners to seek opportunities to listen to spoken language outside of class as well.

- Attitude and identity

  Accent has a strong impact on our identity, as first or second language speakers. Learners may have a stronger desire to sound like peers than to sound like the native speaking population; this can result in a resistance to work on pronunciation in English.

- Innate phonetic ability

  Some learners may be better than others at discriminating between sounds or mimicking sounds. All learners have acquired one language, so they are capable of acquiring a second. They may go about it in different ways, using different innate skills and abilities.

These factors come into play in different ways and to different degrees for each learner. Recognizing these variables help us to remember how complex the process of acquiring language really is. Understanding this complexity can help us to keep the goals of pronunciation instruction realistic.

What often happens in the teaching of pronunciation is that it tends to be neglected. When it is not neglected, it tends to be reactive to a particular problem that has arisen in the classroom rather that strategically planned.

For the shake of the success of the pronunciation instruction, in planning the pronunciation teaching, teachers of pronunciation need not only a good grounding in theoretical knowledge and practical classroom skills, but also good ideas for classroom activities. In relation to this, software text-to-speech can be a good idea to apply in the classroom, especially in providing models of intelligible pronunciation to the learners.

B. How is  software is integrated in ESL instructions?

Technology can be really integrated to enhance learning. One form of the technology that can be employed in the language instruction is the use of software. A great number of  commercial softwares are available for teachers to assist them in their classroom instruction. In spite of its number, ESL teachers must seriously select and evaluate the software. Citing Gaer (1998a) and Healey and Johnson (2002), Parrish (2006) provides some guidelines that can assist teachers in making the best choices possible for their learners.

- Does the language and content of the software reinforce my curriculum?
- Does the software meet the goals of the learners?
- Is the language and content familiar and relevant to my students?
- Is the software easy for my students to use?
- Does the software allow for pair activities in cases where I have few computers?
- Can learners use the software independently in cases where no teacher is available during self-access time?

The challenge arising in the selection and implementation of software is that the software needs to be simple enough to see so that learners can be trained to use it quickly as they enter the program.

In relation to the use of software is the cost of software, which can be prohibitive for small community-based program. Another thing to consider with the computer-based activities is in cases where a different teacher is in charge of the computer lab, there can be a disconnect between the computer-based instruction and in-class instruction. Besides that, teachers should also realize that a student new to computers may lose work if she or he is unfamiliar with the process of saving documents, so make sure that teachers or a more experienced learner frequently saves learner work (Bakin, 2003).

C. What is software text-to-speech all about?

NaturalReader Software is a professional text to speech program that converts any text into spoken words. It lets the user to listen instead of reading on screen. Just one click, the user can have the computer speak any text aloud in clear, natural sounding human voice. The complete information about this software can be reached through http://www.NaturalReaders.com.

This software provides the learners models of intelligible pronunciation. It covers both areas of pronunciation: segmentals, or the sounds of the language, and suprasegmentals, or the stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns of the language.

By using this software the learners can choose to copy and paste text to the reading area of the software, or more conveniently, with the add-in toolbars in the Internet Explorer, Microsoft Office Word, Power Point and Outlook programs. They can also listen to any online news, web information, Word documents, Presentation files and e-mails without copy and paste. The software also allows the users to convert text into an MP3 or WAV audio file, so they can listen later or burn it into a CD. By moving the Speed bar, the reading speed can be adjusted to one's preference. The speaker can also be changed by clicking the Speaker menu.

D. What pronunciation features can be taught?

Pronunciation is broken down into two areas: segmentals, or the sounds of the language, and suprasegmentals, or the stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns of the language (Parrish, 2006).

Segmentals consist of the phonemes of the language, or its smallest meaningful units.  The set of phonemes consists of two categories: vowel sounds and consonant sounds. However, these do not necessarily correspond to the vowels and consonants we are familiar with in the alphabet.

Vowel sounds are all voiced, and may be single , or a combination involving a movement from one vowel sound to another. Such combinations are known as diphthongs. English has 12 vowels whose qualities may, to some extent, be influenced by

the height of the tongue, the opening between jaws, and the tenseness and the laxness of the tongue.

Consonant sounds may be voiced or unvoiced. The English consonant consists of 24 consonants. All of them may be described according to the organs of speech in terms of the place and the manner of articulation.

Suprasegmental features are features of speech which generally apply to groups of segments, or phonemes. The features which are important in English are stress, intonation, and rhythm. There are two kinds of stress, namely word stress and sentence stress. Word stress is embodied in a word and usually happens in isolated words. This stress is worked out by the presences of certain syllable or syllables that stand out of the others. Sentence stress is based on the general assumption that in a normal sentence the speaker shall stress the significant words only. Another suprasegmental feature is intonation. It is the movement of the voice, between high and low pitches. English has two basic tunes, falling and rising.

Those two kinds of pronunciation features can be taught by using this software text-to-speech.

E. What activities can be done?

There are two key sides to pronunciation teaching – namely the teaching of productive skills on the one hand and the teaching of receptive skills on the other (Parrish, 2006). In terms of reception, students need to hear the difference between phonemes, for example, particularly where such a contrast does not exist in their L1.

A number of activities in teaching pronunciation can be done both inside and outside the classroom by the students themselves independently. The following are the various activities that teachers can do by using the software text-to-speech.

1. Drilling

Drilling can be useful in the development of both kinds of skill, while noticing tasks used with listening texts will be most effective in the development of receptive skills. Drilling aims to help students achieve better pronunciation of language items, and to help them remember new items.

## 2. Chaining

Chaining can be used for sentences which prove difficult for students to pronounce, either because they are long, or because they include difficult words and sounds. Chaining can be back chain and front chain.

## 3. Minimal pairs and related activities

The words used as minimal pairs can be from the teachers and from the students themselves. The students can make use of their active vocabulary in order to practice sounds. The students can be asked to provide or suggest their own minimal pairs to try.

## 4. Pronunciation and spelling activities

It makes sense to tie pronunciation work closely in with spelling work, in order to investigate the different ways in which sounds can be represented.

## F. What to conclude?

Considering that pronunciation should be an integral part of the English instruction, English teachers should adopt a policy on models, what techniques and activities to employ. Software text-to-speech can be one of the alternatives the teachers can apply in the classroom. There are actually two sides to pronunciation teaching – namely, the teaching of productive skills on the one hand and the teaching of receptive skills on the other. In terms of reception, learners need to hear the difference between phonemes, for example, particularly where such a  difference does not exist in their first language. Then, they need to carry that knowledge through into their production. Software text-to-speech can really facilitate this to take place in the teaching of pronunciation.

The key to successful pronunciation teaching is not so much getting students to produce correct sounds or intonation tunes, but rather to have them listen and notice how English is spoken. The more aware they are, the greater the chance that their own intelligibility levels will rise.

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