

Pronunciationforteachers.com/ Key Concepts

The Role of NNESTs in Pronunciation Teaching

The relationship of non-native speaking English teachers (NNESTs) with pronunciation teaching is not an easy one. NNESTs have to deal with a language that is not the one they feel more deeply as their own, and even though they are likely to be quite expert in that language, many may have developed a reluctant attitude towards teaching pronunciation, in particular, because of a lack of confidence in their own ability to successfully incorporate the pronunciation component in their teaching. Such lack of confidence can, to a large extent, be attributed to the idealised native speaker model.

In the last 20 years, NNESTs have gained recognition; gradually they are becoming perceived as legitimate members of the ELT community. Still, however, some NNESTs accept the pervasive discourse that relegates them to the category of second-class teachers. These individuals are often inclined to focus on grammar and vocabulary rather than on pronunciation teaching (Medgyes, 1994), since pronunciation is a terrain that puts them more at risk of exposing their insecurity and feelings of inadequacy (Bernat, 2008; Llurda, 2009). To some extent, other aspects of language become a shelter to escape from pronunciation.

Two elements make pronunciation teaching challenging for many NNESTs. One is the obvious fact that, having learned English as a second or foreign language themselves, it is very likely that their pronunciation will be distinctively non-native. The second element to take into account in the case of teachers who work outside the Inner circle of English-speaking countries is that the diversity of pronunciation in Standard English presents a confusing landscape of pronunciation solutions to choose from. Both elements make teachers' pronunciation choices difficult. And yet, the combination of both may eventually bring some positive light to the challenge. The fact that the teacher's own pronunciation will be distinctively non-native cannot be separated from the diversity of pronunciation models among speakers of English. Therefore, what we encounter is a situation in which all teachers of English produce idiosyncratic phonological realisations of words and phrases, and each individual's pronunciation conforms to their own accent, be it a native accent widely spoken in the Inner circle, one of the accents spoken in Outer circle countries where English has been indigenized giving way to new varieties (Sridhar & Sridhar, 1986), or one spoken by second language speakers in the Expanding Circle, who also bring in the phonological rules of their L1. In this situation, a non-native teacher is no better and no worse than any other speaker/user of English, regardless of their native language and their accent. Research on accent and comprehensibility has clearly established that these dimensions are partially independent; thus many L2 speakers have a strong non-native accent but are fully comprehensible (Munro & Derwing, 2009). The opposite is possible, too. That is, we may encounter people with a fully native accent who are not easy to understand (Modiano, 1999).

Considering that each individual has an idiosyncratic way of speaking English, it is a matter of personal attitude whether they feel confident with their own way of speaking the language. Unfortunately, the superior status allocated to native varieties means some non-native teachers dislike their own way of speaking and feel embarrassed or

inadequate when using English, which results in a reluctance to devote time in class to pronunciation matters. And yet, pronunciation teaching is absolutely necessary. The point is to determine which pronunciation elements to focus on, how to do so, and for what purpose. And we must establish the purpose before we can incorporate the pronunciation elements and how to deal with them.

There are two consequences of having an L2 accent – first, in some instances, aspects of an L2 speaker’s productions will interfere with listener understanding, making it difficult to communicate successfully. Second, in most cases, listeners will also detect revealing information about the speaker’s linguistic biography. The way we speak, and in particular our pronunciation, can reveal our origins and our past language experiences.

These two consequences may trigger the establishment of two different goals in language teaching: the promotion of intelligibility or the hiding of one’s origin and language history. For a vast majority of learners of English, the priority goal will be to work on becoming fully intelligible. In fact, many learners of English as a second or foreign language do not wish at all to hide their origins and identity. Disguising where they come from may be somehow equivalent to betraying who they are. Likewise, a teacher’s essential contribution is to help learners become intelligible, rather than helping them to sound like native speakers.

A major development in applied linguistics that should be considered with regard to non-native speakers’ pronunciation is the gradual acceptance of non-native varieties of English as legitimate in the context of global expansion during the 20th century and the consolidation of English as the world’s lingua franca in the 21st. With this context in mind, English pronunciation ceases to be narrowly attached to two or three native varieties and can be freely associated with non-native varieties, as well. The displacement of the ownership of English and legitimacy in its use from the exclusive group of native speakers to the global community of English as a lingua franca users naturally brings a sense of empowerment to non-native teachers (Llurda, 2018). Non-native teachers who have avoided the teaching of pronunciation because of low self-confidence and a lack of clear goals may now introduce pronunciation teaching in their classes without feeling threatened or inadequate.

In conclusion, NNESTs would do well in planning their pronunciation teaching around two main concepts: comprehensibility (see Derwing’s entry on comprehensibility) and language awareness (see Kennedy’s entry on language awareness). With regard to placing the emphasis on comprehensibility, the non-native teacher can use empirical research to help identify aspects of the learners’ speech that interfere with ease of understanding. Furthermore, pronunciation taught by non-native teachers may be a source of empowerment by showing learners that they can become more comprehensible by paying attention to those features that research has shown to be closely connected to comprehensibility (Derwing and Munro, 2015). Also, deconstructing the myth that a native accent should be the goal of language learning will help learners develop their own voice in English. This entails developing awareness among students. If language awareness is in itself a desirable goal and fundamental tool in language learning (Garrett & Cots, 2018), pronunciation awareness must be included

in the framework to help learners develop awareness of their own pronunciation and establish the realistic goals of becoming fully comprehensible and intelligible. The myth of native speaker achievement, in addition to being a heavy burden, is potentially counterproductive if the learner focuses on imitating certain features that may superficially appear to sound more nativelike but which may actually cause the individual to be less comprehensible (Derwing & Munro, 2015).

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