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Factors influencing English pronunciation learning and suggestions for pronunciation teaching

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Introduction

English is regarded as an international or global language for communication and is used in many areas such as military, politics, education, business, diplomacy and science (Crystal, 2001; Heng, 2017; Igawa, 2008; Qi, 2016). Being able to communicate in English is advantageous as it is a passport for communication across languages and cultures. English was officially introduced into Cambodia's education system by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports (MoEYS) in 1993; however, many Cambodian teachers and students are still unable to use English appropriately and accurately (Mao, 2013).

In recent years, English has been increasingly used in Cambodia, but Cambodian English teachers and learners encounter a number of significant challenges, and one of these challenges is related to pronunciation (Moore & Bounchan, 2010). Research has provided evidence for challenges and problems in producing accurate pronunciation confronted by Cambodian teachers and learners (Keuk, 2008; Moore & Bounchan, 2010; Set, 2017). Yet, the specific factors influencing pronunciation learning and suggestions to improve pronunciation teaching seem to have received little attention in the literature on pronunciation learning and teaching in Cambodia.

Therefore, this paper attempts to provide insights into the factors that influence English pronunciation learning. It also suggests some practical suggestions to improve the teaching of English pronunciation.

Factors influencing English pronunciation learning

In language learning, pronunciation refers to the production and perception of the important sounds of a specific language in order to successfully use language in meaningful contexts (Seidlhofer, 2001) or to gain communicative competence (Brown, 2007). English sound system has been divided into two different groups known as segments and suprasegmental features (Goodwin, 2014). Segments are made up of consonants and vowels, including stressed and unstressed syllables, while suprasegmental features include stress, length, tone, and speech melody/intonation (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2011). How we produce sound is, therefore, influenced by various factors, such as voice quality, speech rates and overall loudness.

In addition to the sound system, the increase in the number of English users is also another factor to take into consideration. English users have increased tremendously and the growing acceptance of different English varieties (Englishes) has "given rise to concerns that speakers of different English dialects will cease being intelligible to each other" (Yazan, 2015, p. 202). Our pronunciation is responsible for intelligibility and whether or not we can communicate our meaning (Seidlhofer, 2001). Furthermore, in teaching pedagogy, our ultimate goal in pronunciation teaching is to help students attain accent-free speech. Accent-free speech refers to a wide range of accents produced by speakers speaking a foreign language. Speakers who come from different sociocultural backgrounds are likely to retain their own accent when speaking English because it is part of their identity or an indication of their membership in particular communities (Harmer, 2007). In this regard, a person's accent highlights the significance of the sociocultural background from which they come, making an attainment of a nativelike accent irrelevant. Therefore, language teachers should really pay attention to clear, precise and comprehensible pronunciation (Brown, 2007).

Undeniably, different problems with pronunciation teaching and learning have been found in different contexts and it is not surprising that teachers and students find it difficult to master English pronunciation. However, there are several key factors that affect pronunciation learning. Kenworthy (1987, as cited in Brown, 2007, pp. 340-341) summarizes the most important learner variables that influence pronunciation learning, such as native language, age,

exposure, innate phonetic ability, identity and language ego, and motivation and concern for good pronunciation.

- **Native language:** It is crystally clear that the major influential factor impacting learners' pronunciation is the essential role of the native language. All languages in the world comprise a wide range of phonological elements. These variations will cause some difficulties for learners to pronounce in the target language well. Thus, learners' awareness and efforts made to overcome these difficulties and their familiarity with the sound system of their native language will significantly help them better improve their English pronunciation.

- **Age:** Generally speaking, children under the age of puberty have the ability to maintain perfect or native-like pronunciation in a foreign or second language if they have continuous exposure to authentic contexts. Beyond the age of puberty, also known as a critical period, the acquisition of the normal language would be impossible. However, adults may also be able to attain a native accent as children do. Research by Singleton (2005) also concluded that it remains unclear whether the critical period hypothesis is likely to be considered as a logical hypothesis for acquiring perfect native pronunciation due to many controversies surrounding this critical period.

- **Exposure:** Social environment is very important since learners have a great chance to expose themselves to the target language. The language learning theories of Postovsky (1974), Asher (1977), and Krashen (1982), among others, maintained that learners acquire language through input and they must receive numerous comprehensible input, defined as "whatever of L2/target language that learners are exposed to" (Saville-Trolke, 2006, p. 74), before they are able to speak. If valid, exposure to the target language is a factor that will critically determine learners' success. Learners need to be provided with ample opportunities to adequately receive comprehensible input. They need to surround themselves with input in the target language through opportunities inside and outside of the classroom, such as in language laboratories and learning center environments, to experience samples of the authentic oral discourse of native speakers of the target language.

- **Innate phonetic ability:** Innate phonetic ability is sometimes called phonetic coding ability (Brown, 1992). The common view is that some language learners are able to discriminate between two sounds more accurately and imitate sounds better than others. In many cases, if learners are born and live in an English-speaking environment, the chance to acquire and be exposed to native-like pronunciation is better than those who are not. However, not all learners being born and living in native speaking environments are able to achieve native pronunciation all the time due to the fact that learners are born with various phonetic abilities, biology, and physiology. Therefore, their success in sounding like native speakers will be predominantly determined by the amount of their daily exposure to the target language.

- **Identity and language ego:** Speakers' attitude toward the target language and the extent to which the language ego identified with those speakers are also another key factor influencing pronunciation learning. Speakers use language to display their identities and membership of particular sociocultural settings and it is of paramount importance for them to master their target language when they have positive behaviors toward people using that target language whom they are communicating with. More importantly, language ego also plays a central role in helping learners to develop their native-like pronunciation in the target language as they become self-conscious and confident in using it. A great deal of pronunciation-related research on the relationship between identity and language ego and pronunciation also indicates that learners with positive attitudes and being open-minded toward the target language and the people speaking the target language are likely to learn and improve their pronunciation faster and more successfully (Ahmed, 2017; Brown, 1992; Dörnyei, 2003).

- **Motivation and concern for good pronunciation:** Perhaps, this is the strongest influence of all these six factors. Some learners will achieve nativelike pronunciation when their intrinsic motivation is high. On the other hand, if they do not pay much attention to their pronunciation, they may not be motivated to do well. Some studies place motivation as an

essential factor in acquiring good pronunciation (Luchini, 2006; Meléndez, 2006; Tanner, 2012; Ute & Christiane, 2000).

Suggestions for enhancing English pronunciation teaching

Pronunciation poses many difficulties for teachers and learners; however, teachers play a very central role in helping students to improve their pronunciation. Kelly (2000) suggests that good pronunciation teaching requires a good grounding in theoretical knowledge, practical classroom skills, and access to good ideas for classroom activities. Below are some practical suggestions to improve pronunciation teaching.

- **Provide pronunciation training courses for teachers:** Many experienced teachers would admit to having a lack of knowledge of pronunciation theories. Professional development in pronunciation teaching should therefore be valuable for teachers since it provides them with background knowledge of phonetics and phonology, which will help them to teach pronunciation confidently and effectively as well as communicate naturally. Pronunciation courses should be included as part of the school curriculum. However, the major problem here is the main teachers/trainers. The main teachers/trainers teaching pronunciation courses must be chosen selectively and they must be knowledgeable about pronunciation teaching because their teaching will have a great impact on teacher trainees. More importantly, the trainers who teach well should be motivated through certificates of appreciation or financial incentives. Previous studies have shown that in-service teacher training in pronunciation teaching is crucial for enhancing language teachers' pronunciation teaching (Breitkreutz et al., 2001; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

- **Integrate authentic teaching materials into school curricula:** Teaching materials like coursebooks should be selected carefully and should be supported by supplementary materials such as CD-ROM and video lessons which give students and teachers the opportunity to get exposed to authentic language input. Moreover, students should be given a sufficient amount of time to practice learning phonetic symbols. However, this can be set as extra practice in the class with some guidance from the teacher. Incorporating authentic materials in the curriculum has been found to have

a huge influence on promoting correct pronunciation (Aufderhaar, 2004; Cakir, 2012).

- **Make use of available technology:** Technology helps learners to be autonomous. Technological tools such as smartphones, audio and video lessons, pronunciation software and the internet provide instructional support for students to improve their English pronunciation. Through technology, students can be exposed to a variety of accents; they can also practice imitating real speakers on the internet. There are some good websites targeting the teaching of English pronunciation such as *BBC Learning English* and *Sounds of American English.* The former offers "tips on pronunciation" covering individual sounds with brief lessons on connected speech. The latter focuses on American English and helps with the articulation of consonants. There are many other websites that teachers and students can find on the internet to improve their English pronunciation teaching and learning. Surely, although technology cannot be used to replace teachers, research has suggested that it is a valuable tool to support the teaching and learning of pronunciation (see Foote & McDonough, 2017; Yoshida, 2018).

- **Accept varieties of accents:** As English becomes an international or global language, the growth in the use of English has rapidly increased. Nativelike accent, therefore, becomes irrelevant as there are more non-native speakers of English than native speakers. Students can speak with different accents either American or British accents or any other accents depending on their preferences and backgrounds. However, the goal of spoken communication is to achieve mutual intelligibility or successful communication; thus, teachers have to keep this in mind when teaching. They should allow different varieties of accents as long as the intelligibility is maintained.

- **Provide ongoing feedback:** One way to guide learners to self-correct is to point out their errors implicitly. Feedback offers learners a sense of their progress and indicates where they need to focus their attention for improvement. As research has shown, corrective feedback has a positive effect on pronunciation development (Baker & Burri, 2016; Brown, 2007; Wang & Young, 2014).

Conclusion

It is undeniable that pronunciation is considered to be a difficult area to master as it consists of segmental and suprasegmental features that function as an interdependent system. Effective pronunciation teaching places great responsibilities on language teachers. Thus, we need to ensure that teachers have a thorough understanding of the subject matter and teaching pedagogy. Moreover, teachers need to be aware that the ultimate goal of teaching pronunciation is to help students communicate confidently and effectively as well as help them to monitor their speech and make adjustments to improve their pronunciation. This process involves introducing tasks progressively, focusing on form, providing corrective feedback, giving students enough exposure to authentic texts, and using technology with a clear pedagogical reason to aid teaching.

This article has offered insights into factors influencing pronunciation learning and put forward some suggestions to enhance pronunciation teaching. No doubt, there are many more factors and suggestions available in the vast literature on pronunciation learning and teaching. However, given the limited academic discussion on this topic in the Cambodian context, I would like to encourage Cambodian scholars, teachers, and postgraduate students to conduct research and write articles to contribute to the academic discussion in this field.

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