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The importance given to the teaching of English pronunciation in language schools in Villa María, Córdoba. Is pronunciation taught taking advantage of our digital era?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to state whether teachers focus on pronunciation when teaching the English language at local private language schools, known as “academias privadas de inglés”. The study was developed to discover and determine in what place in the scale of priorities the teaching of pronunciation is considered and to reveal teachers’ opinions and perceptions about the relevance of the explicit/direct teaching of pronunciation (whether it is important or not to teach pronunciation) to develop an integral mastery of language. Even though the enquired teachers strongly believe that the teaching of pronunciation is of paramount importance, they leave -in many opportunities- the topic aside and/or just not consider it when planning their classes, giving priorities to other areas of knowledge, especially grammar. The study took place during the pandemic. As many new technological devices and several applications emerged at that moment, it was worth discovering whether the teaching of pronunciation was considered since many tools started to be at disposal to approach the field.

Key words: language schools, teachers’ perceptions, the teaching of pronunciation, the status of pronunciation.

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I. Introduction

Nowadays we are immersed in an interconnected world where we need to learn foreign languages to be part. English has become one of the most important tools among many. As an international language, it has served as a crucial means to communicate all around the globe. That is the reason why the study of English appears to be a task to be tackled by a great amount of people, especially in the realm of labour, professional and academic contexts.

Given that the purpose of the paper is to enquire, mainly, about the importance given to pronunciation, the instrument included open questions so that teachers could freely state their ideas about the teaching of the topic and if they included it in their plans of class.

II. Theoretical Framework

We believe it is appropriate to start this paragraph with the same phrase Jenkins started her introduction of her remarkable book to highlight the role of English as an international language. "For the first time in history of the English language, second language speakers outnumber those for whom it is the mother tongue, and interaction in English increasingly involves no first languages speakers whatsoever." (Jenkins, 2000, p.1). We mentioned at the beginning of this paper that we are part of a globalized community. Technology has allowed us to have access to many people, places, information and so on and so forth all around the world and we have realized how crucial is to share a "lingua franca" to interact and be successful at the moment we desire to communicate. "The term English as a lingua franca (ELF) has emerged as a way of referring to communication in English between speakers with different first languages." (Seidlholfer, 2005, p. 339).

If we were back in time and place ourselves in the 60s and 70s, we would perceive the importance given to the teaching of English grammar as one of the first topics to deal with. Throughout subsequent decades and after extensive research, it has been concluded that pronunciation plays its significant part in the communication process. We teach and learn a language with the purpose of getting our messages and ideas across. If we concentrate on that thought we cannot neglect the teaching of pronunciation since it, definitely, contributes to intelligibility, "in practical terms this means we are aiming for something close enough" (Kenworthy, 1987, p.13) and not necessarily sound as native speakers as we used to believe. Besides, at the moment we use the language, we do it with the objective of feeling part of a group people, sharing cultural aspects, exchanging knowledge and experience. We wish to succeed when communicating and a suitable pronunciation will absolutely foster this success.

Pronunciation is not only a central and necessary aspect of communication to master, but in the best case is an aspect of spoken language that can result in positive interactions and add value and impact in aspects of life that depend on language and effective interaction with others. It is therefore an important basic as well as value-added factor for much of social, academic, and professional life centering on spoken language communication. (Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019, p.23)

Experts on foreign language didactics have highlighted that the teaching of just pure grammar is not enough for the subsequent use of the language in its practical manifestation. In this opportunity we would like to translate Vez's (2011) ideas about this issue. He has expressed that language is not used in isolation but whenever we speak we do it in certain specific contexts (p.87). As teachers, we should focus not only in grammar but also in functions, notions, pragmatics, lexis and, needless to say, pronunciation in an even way to establish a constant relationship between our thoughts and the actual words. Students will feel motivated since they will be building up their own identity through their discourse; a discourse that has been developed from an integral perspective of language use. (p. 91)

The last idea we would like to state is the one expressed by Barreido (2008) when she analyses Jenkins. The pronunciation is crucial when learning an international language. It fosters intelligibility, as we have mentioned, and the shaping of students' identity. Once we understand the importance of pronunciation we would stop leaving it aside. (p. 932) Once we become convinced of the importance of the teaching of pronunciation, we would include activities, explanations and practice related to the area of study and we will, eventually, realize how much it contributes to the students' development at the moment of speaking English.

III. Methodology

Our research originates from the assumption that the teaching of pronunciation is most of the times neglected. It has been observed that many teachers give priorities to the teaching of grammar and lexis, primarily, and they somehow forget that we also transmit messages through the correct use of several aspects related to pronunciation. That is to say, by producing different phonemes incorrectly or by using some of them instead of others we can be misunderstood. The same occurs with an unsuitable use of the suprasegmental features. In other words, if we stress utterances incorrectly, our genuine idea will not come across.

The methodology of this study is based on a qualitative approach. A questionnaire was carried out to reveal the above expressed assumption. The inquired teachers were nine who work in different "academias privadas". We have selected that context since

we believe that it can be understood that sometimes in public schools, for example, the teachers are not that free to choose the topics and priorities of the curriculum. As teachers in private school of languages are more autonomous, we thought that it was a perfect situation to evaluate what decisions they make as regards the teaching of pronunciation.

IV. Data and Discussion

After analysing the answers provided by the enquired teacher, we could discuss the following.

As regards question one, one out of nine teachers confirmed that he considers pronunciation as the main aspect to deal with. Eight of them are convinced that the teaching of grammar together with notions and functions go first. One teacher said that she tries to include everything whenever she plans. In this opportunity we observe the value given to grammar when the teachers design their plans so the idea of learning the language from an integral perspective is not visible here.

Regarding question 2, teachers believe that they can include pronunciation with other areas. For example, when they are teaching grammatical structures, they focus on how to pronounce a sentence well. Most of the times, they assume that they do it if they have time. They would say that by learning just grammar together with notions and functions students will be able to communicate in a short period of time. We can notice here that pronunciation is not a priority but just something we can include “by the way” spontaneously. Activities and/or games including pronunciation are not actually considered for the classes.

For question three, four teachers said that they focus on all aspects mentioned. Two teachers focus mainly on suprasegmental features. The rest give importance to sounds (phonemes) and word stress. Even though, the teachers are aware of the topics related to pronunciation, they do not include all of them when they teach. That is to say, they concentrate on one part (segmental features) or the other (suprasegmental features) but they do not consider the area of study as a whole to be taken into account.

In question four, we observed many different responses. Teachers focus on phonological aspects when they teach adults and /or advanced students, when they are dealing with grammar, when they are introducing new vocabulary, after students are familiar with “basic patterns of grammar”, when students ask about pronunciation, every two classes, when they do the “speaking part” and as soon as pupils start studying English. This last response was given by a teacher who said that pronunciation can be taught to children. They can study phonemes associating them with drawings, for example. In this opportunity, we also notice how teachers include the

teaching of pronunciation as something not crucial. In other words, it becomes part of another activity but not the main concern of a plan of class.

Among the answers for question 5, we can highlight that teachers resort to tongue twisters, minimal pairs (they compare the pronunciation of two words) and drillings. The teachers work somehow on pronunciation. They do it, specially, when they are working with a grammar exercise, for example. Students read aloud to correct it and teachers guide them to pronounce what they are reading properly. There is work done on pronunciation but there is no deeply concentration on the topic. There isn't a really controlled activity to perfect pronunciation.

Five teachers definitely considered that the teaching of pronunciation is not tough. Two teachers were convinced that you need to be really prepared to teach it. One expressed that it is too "abstract". Another teacher said it is tough since English is not a phonetic language and the last teacher pointed out that many students "are in a hurry" to learn English and they do not give priority to pronunciation. They believe that other aspects (grammar, especially) are more important to become able to communicate in a short period of time. It is important to highlight here, that teachers keep in mind the idea of learning the language to communicate; nevertheless, we do not see exactly that they consider the teaching of pronunciation as an important aspect to contribute.

Regarding question seven, three teachers asserted that the learning of pronunciation on the part of the students will depend on each student. Some of them do not have difficulties and they can articulate properly as soon as they imitate the teacher. They also added that sometimes it is tough for adults to pronounce correctly. They need more time to incorporate and polish English sounds. Two teachers answered "no". One of them stood out the fact that it is the teacher the one who has to motivate so he/she can make students involved with games, for example. Another teacher explained that if students can become familiar with the sounds and suprasegmental features but it is time consuming to work on pronunciation. Two teachers did not answer. The issue about motivation appears for the first time and it is crucial to remember that it is teachers' responsibility to motivate students to polish pronunciation. We know that it takes time to work on it but it is necessary to develop a good command of the language.

The nine teachers considered the teaching of pronunciation important to develop an integral mastery of language, "to make the whole", to succeed in communication, to be intelligible enough and to be definitely understood. We appreciate that teachers believe that. Even though they do not prioritize the teaching of pronunciation, they are conscious of the fact that pronouncing well is necessary.

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