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Teaching Pronunciation & CAP (Computer-Aided Pronunciation)

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ABSTRACT

Pronunciation teaching is an area receiving a great deal of attention worldwide in different languages. The present study was undertaken in this intriguing area of linguistics and is in relation to the educational scene in Cyprus. It concerns public secondary schools, i.e. Gymnasia. The purpose of this study was to investigate views and practices in the area of English Language Teaching (ELT) with respect to Pronunciation Teaching. Results showed that pronunciation is generally undermined by teachers, most of whom view it as the least important of all skills. The final part of the paper discusses practical applications and suggestions on using new technologies in the classroom to practice pronunciation, following current research in the area that proves its effectiveness in pronunciation instruction.

KEYWORDS: *Teaching pronunciation, CAP, Cyprus*

INTRODUCTION

“...both TEFL and TESL, by and large, meet with lack of success in the realm of pronunciation” when compared to the teaching of other language skills (Chela-Flores 2001:99). This is a general conclusion that researchers in the area of pronunciation share, as it is a skill that tends to be rather neglected in ELT and that is why it is sometimes cited in the literature as the *Cinderella* of language teaching (Kelly 1969, Dalton 1997) when compared to other skills like grammar or vocabulary.

The purpose of this paper is to describe views and practices in the area of English Language Teaching (ELT) concerning the teaching of pronunciation in Cyprus public secondary schools, indicate what technological advances are available in pronunciation instruction and how these can help in pronunciation practice and improvement.

FINDINGS

A questionnaire was prepared and distributed to English teachers of public secondary schools in order to see how they view and practice pronunciation. It was made evident that there are indeed statistically significant differences in the way English teachers view and practise the teaching of pronunciation (for detailed results, see Kyprianou 2007). It seems that 73.8% of the teachers asked (N=61) believe that pronunciation is the least important of the skills listed, indicating how they view the teaching of pronunciation in relation to the other skills. This is a significant difference compared to the other skills and this indicates the fact that pronunciation is seen as inferior.

An interview was conducted with the inspectress of English teachers as well, and it was made evident that the Ministry and the inspectors of English do not pro-

vide teachers with concrete, specific guidelines as far as the teaching of pronunciation is concerned. It lies up to the teacher whether or not to use pronunciation tasks in the classroom.

The review of the ELT textbooks taught at Gymnasia indicated that *Magic Moments* (Kane 2003) do include pronunciation material for students. Each unit of each student's book includes specific pronunciation tasks that include listening, repeating and drilling. Follow-up activities to reinforce the item taught are also included to provide practice and activate the new information that the students receive. Furthermore, listening and speaking activities are also introduced in each unit to expose students to authentic audio texts in English and train their ears.

As far as the syllabi collection is concerned, no pronunciation component was included (special reference only to grammar and writing). The English curriculum does not mention pronunciation either, only the other skills are stressed and described extensively (Department of Secondary Education 1999).

DISCUSSION

Although there is evidence that suggests the importance of pronunciation, intelligible pronunciation that is, in communication, many teachers are reluctant to teach it and it tends to be generally neglected (MacDonald 2002, Fraser 2001). The present study conducted in Cyprus secondary schools indicated that pronunciation is indeed neglected, there are no formal instructions by the Ministry of Education on how to teach it and it and many teachers believe that pronunciation is the least important when compared to the other language skills listed.

A current trend in pronunciation instruction is CAP (computer-aided pronunciation), which according to Pennington (1999) has many advantages in relation to language teaching. It is "quick, repeatable, precise, reliable, authoritative, highly salient, multi-modal, individual, variable" (1999:430), provides feedback and analysis and can be used for individual work, whole class work, group or pair work. It can also potentially increase students' motivation, effort, awareness, confidence and understanding, and ultimately help them develop their pronunciation skills. Neri et al. agree, claiming that CAP "... can be beneficial to second language learning as it provides a private, stress-free environment in which students can access virtually unlimited input, practice at their own pace and ... receive individualist, instantaneous feedback" (2002:441).

Pronunciation Power, published by Clarity (2006), comprises of 2 CD-ROMs (Pronunciation Power 1 and 2), aiming at helping learners master the individual sounds of the English language. It provides practice at the phoneme, word and sentence levels, with some additional activities on stress. Sounds are introduced, students can hear them pronounced and then they can view videos of how each sound is produced. Speech analysis is also available (wave forms of sounds), and students can also record themselves and compare with the instructor's pronunciation.

Protea Textware (2007) have also published 3 CD-ROMs that practice pronunciation skills named *Connected Speech*, suitable for lower intermediate to advanced learners. Their content focuses on suprasegmentals – pause groups, pitch change, word and sentence stress, linking, syllables and the IPA. Their aim is to help learners connect the theory of speech production to the actual speaking process, and ultimately produce natural English.

Streaming Speech software, published by Cauldwell (2002), was followed by online courses on pronunciation (SpeechinAction). The online courses include many aspects of British and American pronunciation, ranging from intermediate to advanced courses. Extensive linguistic research lies behind the production of Streaming Speech, and all the packages aim at extensive pronunciation practice.

Electronic dictionaries also employ technology as a tool in pronunciation instruction. Many publishers have produced CD-ROMs to accompany the hard copies of their dictionaries, which promote “learner autonomy in the acquisition of pronunciation” (Jenkins, 2004:119). They offer the learner the opportunity to listen to the pronunciation of words in isolation and also in connected speech, to record and listen to the learner’s own production and compare with the native pronunciation.

Another interesting source of materials on pronunciation instruction is the World Wide Web. Many sites focusing on pronunciation are available online, targeting various levels and age groups. A very interesting site that includes links to a breadth of pronunciation sites is Sunburst Media (n/d), with a page dedicated to pronunciation web resources. It includes sites that practice pronunciation using Shockwave, Quick Time, RealAudio, sound files, text files and also academic resources, phonetics labs and professional organisations.

The Internet has a significant advantage over commercially available software mentioned before: Most websites provide free and easy access to everybody, and can be used both in class and for individual study at home. The significant disadvantage of both software and websites available today is that there is no material that focuses specifically on the difficulties that Greek Cypriot learners of English face, especially due to mother tongue negative transfer, interlanguage impact and spelling interference. There is an impending need for material to be produced based on the Cypriot reality, especially today that there is relatively easy access to computers and the Internet almost everywhere.

Although new technologies are currently being employed in the teaching and learning of English around the world, CAP is an area that tends to suffer in Cyprus. There is an impending need for curricula to be revised in order to include a pronunciation component. Teachers should be trained to teach pronunciation, prepare their own material based on their classes’ needs and employ new technologies to accomplish that. Software should be developed that would focus on individual needs for both classroom use and further consolidation at home. As mentioned before, new technologies can be very motivating and can therefore increase students’ effort to improve their pronunciation, always in relation to the other language skills.

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