УДК

**REINTERPRETING THE ROLE OF PRONUNCIATION**

**IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING**

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Teaching pronunciation is as important as teaching any other aspect of language (grammar or vocabulary) for a number of reasons. To start with, poor pronunciation can badly affect all major learners’ skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). However, pronunciation seems to be the most neglected aspect of teaching in the English language classroom. This is evident, Adrian Tennant argues, in the way that pronunciation is treated in most coursebooks. It is often the case that a coursebook lacks regular pronunciation activities in its units. Moreover, the research findings suggest that the overwhelming majority of teachers do either very little or no pronunciation in lessons.

One of the reasons why teaching pronunciation is often neglected is due to the misinterpretation of its teaching aim. For many years, the target has been the development of an RP accent or native-like pronunciation, which is seen pointless and unrealistic by many teachers. However, Antony Ash claims that even teachers who are native speakers are rather speakers of Estuary English than RP, therefore are unable to teach it.

Recently teaching focus has been shifted to the issue of intelligibility of learners’ speech. In other words, teaching pronunciation must be focused on what makes our speech intelligible or unintelligible.

A new teaching perspective has led to reconsidering the interrelation between pronunciation and receptive skills. It has long been known that pronunciation and listening comprehension feed of each other in a number of ways. Good pronunciation habits enhance listening comprehension whereas poor pronunciation results in failures to derive meaning from a listening text. Listening is a nightmare for students with limited pronunciation skills, either because they simply do not recognise key sounds or words in their spoken form, or because they have to concentrate so hard when listening that their brains very quickly overload and ‘block’.

The relationship between pronunciation (in broader sense speech production) and comprehension is often described in terms of phonological loop according to which “output” phonological processing provides information for “input” phonological processing. This “output-input” connectivity indicates that processes in language production directly affect processes in language perception. The term *phonological loop* (originally *auditory loop*) comes from the *working memory model* developed by Baddeley (1986), defined as a cognitive system for the maintenance, manipulation, and monitoring of information which is not currently available in the sensory environment. The working memory model consists of a central executive and two slave systems: the visuospatial scratchpad and the phonological loop, responsible for the storage of visual and verbal information respectively. As B. R. Buchsbaum claims, the two differ in their structure: while the visuospatial scratchpad is described as a single storage component, the phonological loop consists of two sub-components, a storage component called the phonological store and a maintenance component known as the articulatory rehearsal process. According to Walter (2008), phonological loop is “a short-term memory mechanism that stores information in phonological form and automatically rehearses that information by unconscious sub-vocalisation”. The phonological store holds about 2 seconds of speech, which is recorded automatically by listeners. The articulatory rehearsal process is based on the subvocal speech, which periodically refreshes the contents of the phonological store thus preventing them from being lost to decay.

According to recent research, the phonological loop has a say in the field of developing learners’ listening and reading comprehension skills. The phonological loop has already been linked to word learning. According to Baddeley (1998), in language acquisition the phonological loop serves the function of “a fundamental human capacity to generate a longer lasting representation of a brief and novel speech event – a new word”. This, C. Walter argues, enables learners to hold the phonological representations of new words in focal attention long enough to construct more stable, durable representations.

Reading and listening comprehension is another aspect of language acquisition where the phonological loop plays a role. There is evidence that comprehension is not a linguistic skill, therefore it cannot be transferred from L1 to L2. It is here that the phonological loop comes into play. In her article “Phonology in second language reading: not an optional extra” C. Walter (2008) describes the function of the phonological loop in the following way: “Strange as it may seem, L1 readers of languages with alphabetic writing systems store the most recently read material (about as much as the reader can say in 2 seconds) in their phonological loop rather than in their visuospatial sketchpad”. In other words, as we read we rather sub-vocalise and record the sound of what we are reading than see it. We do not see it, we hear it. Consequently, learners whose phonological representations are unreliable find it difficult to associate these sounds with meaning, and thus are unable to keep meaning in their short-term memory. This, in its turn, undermines meaning building processes on the text as a whole.

The findings discussed here have important implications for the English language classroom. Since reading and listening comprehension are the components of a cognitive skill that learners already possess, there should be more exposure to the spoken language in class, which will enhance their receptive and productive phonology.