The importance of pronunciation teaching.

It is common knowledge that many learners ignore pronunciation in language learning. Unfortunately, a large number of teachers also ignore it. However, the reasons for this negligence vary greatly.

According to Szynalski and Wójcik (www.antimoon.com), almost all learners of English claim that they do not need to study pronunciation. Many of them are convinced that it is simply a waste of time. They just want to communicate in English and, as long as they are understood, little else matters. It is obvious that the main purpose of teaching and learning any foreign language is to enable students to communicate in the target language. If this is the case, the meaning of the word ‘communication’ is worth explaining. In brief, it means to understand and be understood. A considerable number of learners think that they can communicate in English because they can converse with their teacher and other students. However, they err in their thinking. First of all, as Szynalski and Wójcik (www.antimoon.com) argue, a teacher can understand his students much more easily than an average person because his ear is used to ‘bad English’. Secondly, other students are often speakers of the same language, have similar pronunciation patterns and make the same mistakes so it is easy for them to understand each other. Thirdly, the classroom situation is not ‘real’; it takes place at school and students generally do not have an opportunity to talk to native speakers. In this connection, it is beyond doubt that going to a foreign country and talking to ordinary people, is the best way to practise speaking skills. If they can understand a learner, then he can rightly say that he is able to communicate in English. Unquestionably, it is a significant achievement.

Unfortunately, numerous teachers are not aware of the importance of pronunciation. In the first place, they emphasize the role of grammar and vocabulary learning in the acquisition of a foreign language. The overwhelming majority of English language teachers help students become competent above all in listening and reading (Harmer, 2001: 183). Secondly, many of them think that pronunciation study is too difficult and worse, boring for young learners. Besides, teachers complain about the lack of high quality and suitable teaching and learning materials and about the lack of time to practise pronunciation. According to Harmer (2001: 183), ‘they feel they have too much to do already and pronunciation teaching will only make things worse.’ Moreover, Harmer adds (2001: 183) that there are teachers who claim that students acquire quite good pronunciation in the course of their studies without specific pronunciation teaching.

However, the acquisition of reasonable pronunciation by some students without any effort from the side of the teacher depends on a number of factors. Kenworthy (1987: 4-9) specifies some of them, in particular the phonetic abilities of learners, integrative motivation and ‘achievement motivation.’ Equally, it appears that the number of students who appreciate the importance of good pronunciation is limited. Taking these facts into account, teachers ought to convince their students of the need to study pronunciation rigorously and help them to learn how to pronounce English sounds correctly. What is more, it is tempting to suggest that the very first English lesson should deal with pronunciation. If students do not have an opportunity to practise good pronunciation at the beginning of their learning, they may build their habits in the wrong way. For this reason, learning words without pronunciation during beginning lessons is potentially damaging to their overall success.

It is generally recognised that pronunciation is the first and most important thing native speakers notice during a conversation. Knowing grammar and vocabulary is important but useless if the speaker is unable to pronounce those structures or words correctly. Additionally, native speakers are more likely to understand someone, even in spite of grammatical errors, if this person uses correct pronunciation. When mispronounced, the simplest words will prevent the speaker from communicating effectively in English.
In order to emphasize the importance of this problem, I would like to present one anecdote about poor pronunciation. After returning from a vacation in the USA, a friend of Tom’s said the following (Szynalski-Wójcik, www.antimoon.com, ‘Whenever I spoke to a person in America, they kept asking me “What? What?”’. I would repeat my sentence again and again. Finally they would say “Ah-ha!” and then say my sentence, using exactly my words! It was very humiliating. My words and grammar were good, but nobody would understand me, just because of my pronunciation. I am very motivated to learn English now.’ This example demonstrates that correct pronunciation guarantees communicative efficiency. Such experiences emphasize that pronunciation is an integral part of communication. One may conclude that without proper pronunciation nobody can say that he or she knows the English language.

Harmer (2001: 183) also argues convincingly that it is thanks to pronunciation teaching that students not only become aware of different sounds and sound features, but can also improve their speaking immeasurably. Subsequently, he claims that (Harmer, 2001: 183), ‘concentrating on sounds, showing where they are made in the mouth, making students aware of where words should be stressed – all these things give them extra information about spoken English and help them achieve the goal of improved comprehension and intelligibility.’

Some teachers claim that pronunciation teaching is discouraging because very few learners achieve native-like pronunciation. But it is worth emphasizing the fact that native-like pronunciation may be a goal only for some, and not all learners. According to Kenworthy (1987: 3), ‘for the majority of learners a far more reasonable goal is to be comfortably intelligible’. Even though in this case pronunciation is not ideal, strong phonetic interference from the native language is not present and we are able to understand a learner. Harmer (2001: 184) also maintains that ‘perfect’ pronunciation is achieved extremely rarely by students. What is more, some of them do not want to sound like native speakers. Frequently, they prefer retaining their foreign accent, which is a part of their identity.

Taking everything into account, it appears that native-like pronunciation is an inappropriate aim for most learners. Achieving pronunciation which is good enough for students to be always understood should be one of the main goals of foreign language learners. To sum up, I would like to present a list of realistic goals of pronunciation teaching that need to be addressed in order to develop communicative competence. According to Morley (after Wrembel, 2002: 175), these are the following,

- ‘functional intelligibility - developing spoken English that is easy to understand for listeners;
- functional communicability - developing spoken language that serves communicative needs effectively;
- increased self-confidence - developing a positive self-image;
- speech-monitoring abilities and speech-modification strategies that will allow students to develop intelligibility, communicability and confidence outside the classroom.’

The overall aim is for learners to develop spoken English that will serve their individual needs and allow them to form a positive image of themselves as speakers of a foreign language.

References:

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