Applications of Suprasegmental in EFL Classroom: A Short Review

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Abstract- Although there have always been controversies around the importance of two levels of phonology (segmental and suprasegmental) in language teaching history, today there is a general consensus that both of these should be taken into consideration to reach the goals of pronunciation instruction. However, time shortage is a factor that forces the teachers to set priorities and be selective of materials that have more crucial role in understanding and being understood than others both in segmental and suprasegmental level. The touchstone of this review is to examine the degree to which suprasegmentals affect comprehensibility. This work concludes that suprasegmentals play an important and crucial role in pronunciation teaching.

Index Terms- Segmental, suprasegmental, teaching pronunciation, phonology, EFL

I. INTRODUCTION

Phonology has played many different roles in the English as a foreign language (EFL hereafter) classroom, from a virtually non-existent role in the traditional grammar translation approach to being the main focus of the audio-lingual method through its emphasis on minimal pairs, phonemes, drills and dialogue works. Until recently, phonology and other aspects of language were thought to have been best learned through a building-block, "bottom-up approach." Over the years there has been, however, a shift away from this atomistic view of language learning towards a more holistic, "top-down approach" which has been reflected in both syllabus and material design, as well as in testing and in classroom practice (Thornbury 1993). The current emphasis on *pronunciation* teaching is on the broader phonological aspects of connected speech, and their link to meaning on discourse level, and has resulted in renewed interest in the place of pronunciation in communicative language teaching (Evans & Jones 1995). It is a holistic and integrated approach to pronunciation teaching through focus on the suprasegmental aspects of phonology.

II. SUPRASEGMENTAL DEFINED

In phonetics and phonology, any speech may be divided into two: segmental and suprasegmental (Ladefoged 2006). The term *segment* is "any discrete unit that can be identified, either physically or auditorily, in the stream of speech. Vowels and consonants are considered as small segments of the speech, which together form a syllable and make the utterance. Therefore, segmental features are related to vowels and consonants (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992; Ladefoged 2006). *Suprasegmental* is a term used in phonetics and phonology to refer to a vocal effect which extends over more than one sound segment in an utterance, such as intonation, stress or juncture pattern. Therefore, the specific features that are superimposed on the utterance of the speech are known as suprasegmental features (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992; Ladefoged 2006; Crystal 2008). The word "supra" means above or beyond the segmental value. It refers to properties of an utterance that apply to groups of segments, rather than to individual segments. Suprasegmentals

are also called **"music of a language"** and they are not limited to single sounds but often extend over syllables, words, or phrases (Ladefoged 2006). Suprasegmental features are aspects of speech that involve more than single consonants or vowels. They are features of spoken language which are not easily identified as discrete segments. If learners know features from the smallest component of spoken language or segments to the larger one or suprasegmental units, they are likely to achieve better listening and speaking. The alternative terms of suprasegmentals are 'plurisegmental', 'non-segmental', 'Prosody' and 'superfix' (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992; Ladefoged 2006; Crystal 2008).

III.   SIGNIFICANCE OF SUPRASEGMENTALS

The importance of suprasegmentals may be denied in the teaching and learning of pronunciation. Firstly, it improves English accent and pronunciation which play key factors in accent reduction and speaking ability in general. If we want our speech to be understood in the classroom, we need to help our students learn and practice both individual sounds and the overall musical pattern of the language. Secondly, the researchers have proved that roughly one half of people's communication is taken up by listening and listening is; therefore, an essential skill that students need to develop foremost when studying English as a second or foreign language. Thirdly, suprasegmental is the basic structure of spoken language which is different from the written language which is usually marginalised in day to day learning and teaching of English. Finally, Students of language and those who plan careers in language teaching, coaching, therapy, acting, and speaking benefit greatly as they can influence meaning by intonation, stress, rhythm and other suprasegmental features. Hence, the knowledge of seven major types of suprasegmental features that exist in almost all languages of the world (assimilation, intonation, stress, rhythm, elision, linking, and juncture) are very significant for learning pronunciation of a language.The different languages of the world make their own choices of suprasegmentals which differ from each other.

IV.   APPROACHES OF TEACHING SUPRASEGMENTALS

Where is the place of pronunciation instruction in language teaching programs? Which level of pronunciation – segmental or suprasegmental – should be emphasized? These are some of the few doubts that come into the minds of instructors of pronunciation. In fact, pronunciation instruction has had a changing status in language teaching history. In Jones's words (1994), it has waxed and waned within different approaches. Today, this field is experiencing a new period in which segmental aspects are emphasized along with suprasegmental features. How the teacher designs the lesson for teaching suprasegmentals is a challenging task. The nuances of rhythm, sentence stress and intonation are incredibly complex and difficult to master. One reason for the students' difficulty is the sound system of English. In many settings, areas like pragmatics and pronunciation get passed over for vocabulary and grammar. This is often due to lack of time or syllabus demands. Fortunately, this is changing and English teachers across the world have begun devoting more and more class time to discourse level communication.

One area of English pronunciation that is worth focusing on is the stress-timed quality of English. The amount of time it takes to say a sentence depends on the number of syllables that receive stress in the sentence - not the total number of syllables. Many beginning learners focus on reading and pronouncing each word correctly and fully. By assigning equal weight to each syllable, they give their speech a choppy-sounding, unnatural rhythm that can affect their comprehensibility. Therefore, focusing students' attention on the stress-timed factor of English may assist them in sounding more natural and fluid in their speech.

Today, with the new generation of the Communicative Approach, the International Phonetic Alphabet is re-introduced in textbooks. Concerning suprasegmentals, teachers do sometimes let learners know about the special rhythm of English as a stress-timed language by giving regular taps on a desk, or by clapping their hands. Yet, a regrettable lack of a more thorough teaching of suprasegmental is widely observable.

V.   METHODS OF TEACHING SUPRASEGMENTALS

By its very nature when we teach English pronunciation, segmentals appear to be studied at the expense of suprasegmentals. Vowels and consonants are the basis for English pronunciation. Usually, it consists in the same repetitive exercises, that is, minimal pair drills (e.g. beat vs. bit, leave vs. live), spotting the odd one (e.g. break, great, steak, breath), or simply repeating words after the teacher. Brown (1995) challenges the very usefulness of the most widespread type of exercise that is the minimal pair drill, which he describes as a "not very meaningful exercise". The scope of pronunciation teaching is all the more reduced as it displays not only an enormous advantage of segments over suprasegmentals, but also of vowels over consonants.

The authors assert that suprasegmental features are treated by EFL teachers as "peripheral frills" and their remarks are not worth rejecting. Studies have proved that EFL teachers very often see suprasegmental features as difficult to teach and learn, even if they are aware of their paramount importance. In fact, many authors and researchers acknowledge that suprasegmentals should be granted a more important status than segmentals in English pronunciation teaching, in as much as they are the basic structure of spoken language. It is found that the suprasegmentals control the structure of information", and they are "far more important" in communication. As a justification to that it is remarked that individual sounds can be inferred from the context, whereas suprasegmental errors cannot be helped or lessened by the context.

For example, if a learner says I cooked the meat in a pen, with pen instead of pan, the context makes it possible to guess the intended word straight-away without too much mental correction from the listener. On the other hand, in response to he went on holiday, a rising intonation or misplacement of the nucleus in where did he go? Unequivocally expresses surprise or the need for confirmation, and not a real question asking for new information.

VI.   METHODOLOGICAL GAP

Literatures reveal that there is a clear cut methodological gap in teaching and learning suprasegmentals and they are as follows:

1. In practice, even in English studies at university level where pronunciation is thoroughly taught, syllabi usually start with articulatory phonetics, the phonemes and the teaching of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), then transcription practice, and only in last position suprasegmental is taught, with syllable structure and stress in the middle position. In the proposed pattern, segments are put in the backdrop and are only attributed a secondary role.

2. According to Birjandi & Nodoushan (2005), "it is clear that improvement of students' production of rhythm must start with the improvement of our understanding, closely followed by a much needed revision of what teachers are taught". The origin of the problem here is what teachers themselves are taught, as is only when they will be able to teach what should be taught primarily, and assign to segmentals a more secondary role. This just shows that English teachers are often not trained enough in phonology.

3. One of the major problems that still subsists and is raised by many researchers is the lack of integration between research findings and language classes, i.e. the need for collaboration between researchers and teachers. As it is argued that the approach to any discipline should be governed by "theoretical findings in the sciences on which the discipline rests". Despite the growing research on prosody and the acknowledgement of its importance in communication, EFL teaching methods still do not integrate the findings.

The need for a re-evaluation of the teaching of suprasegmentals in ESL and EFL contexts has been very much praised. A better place given to rhythm, stress, and other prosodic aspects is believed to make learners improve both their production and perception skills. A short term pronunciation course should focus first and foremost on suprasegmentals as they have the greatest impact on the comprehensibility of the learner's English. Many recent investigations have concluded that the suprasegmentals should be made aware of as early as the very beginning of the L2 learning process, even before vowels and consonants are studied.

Resulting from this overview of English pronunciation teaching, it appears that a revised version of EFL teaching should first and foremost put pronunciation before the teaching of grammar and vocabulary, and prosody before segments. It cannot be denied that further research should investigate these claims in more detail.

VII.   TECHNIQUES OF TEACHING SUPRASEGMENTALS

Avery and Ehrlich (1992) suggest **conducting,** which refers to moving the arms and hands in concert with the rhythm, stress and intonation of a sentence, word or phrase. This technique works quite well, especially if it is done in an exaggerated manner.

Other techniques such as **tapping out** the rhythm of a phrase or **using nonsense syllables** to illustrate difficult intonation patterns, or **slowing down and speeding up utterances** as a technique to help develop fluency, are also quite effective. By exaggerating the elements of connected speech at different speeds, students who are hesitant or pause inappropriately in their speech can be helped to sound more natural and fluent. **Back chaining** is extremely helpful when students are having problems with the rhythm of an utterance, especially longer than usual ones. By beginning at the back, the intonation contour of the original sentence is preserved. **Shadowing,** which makes quite a demand on students as they try to keep up with the recorded voice and eventually are left with to their own devices as the sound is lowered, is always enjoyed and can be extremely beneficial as students are stretched and pushed towards native speaker speed and delivery.

VIII.   MATERIALS FOR TEACHING SUPRASEGMENTALS

Content Words and Function Words

In English, there are two types of words: content words and function words. Content words are principle words that express meaning. They include nouns, main verbs, adjectives, question words, demonstratives and adverbs; and they all receive stress. Function words are those words that have little or no meaning themselves but help express grammatical relationships. These words include articles, prepositions, auxiliaries, and pronouns.

Step I: The teacher reads an example sentence aloud to students, first by pronouncing each word carefully (i.e., teacher talk,) and then a second time using natural speed and intonation.

Step II: The teacher asks students, which seems more natural. Pair students and have them discuss the differences between the two readings. Then using the ideas the students come up with, explain the concepts of stress - timing and how English makes use of this device.

Step III: Talk about the differences between stressed words and non-stressed words. Point out to students that content words (nouns, most verbs, adjectives, etc.,) receive stress, where function words (determiners, prepositions and pronouns) do not.

Step IV: Lay the content/function game. Pair students and hand out a sheet to each pair. Ask students to identify which words are content words and which words and function words. Check the answers as a class.

Examples

1. birds (c)	6. just	11. doctor	16. he
2. as (f)	7. quickly	12. next to	17. in order to
3. many (f)	8. worms	13. however	18. slam dunk
4. went	9. the	14. activity	19. cambridge
5. with	10. mustard	15. eat	20. in front of

Then, using some of the words from the exercise, write out two sentences on the board underlining the stressed words in both. Ask students to try reading the sentences aloud. Point out how each sentence seems to take approximately the same length in 'stress time.' For example: Say, 'Birds eat worms.' Then say, 'The birds will eat the worms.'

Content Sentences and Function Sentences

Step I: Pair students and hand out the following content/function example sentence. Ask students to look over the example sentences and underline the words that receive stress.

Examples

1. The cat chased the mouse across the street.

2. I'd like fries with that, please.

3. Could you tell me the quickest way from here to London station?

4. France is bracing for fresh mass protests over a controversial new labor law.

5. Of course, Olivia is not at all sleepy.

Step II: Ask students (in pairs,) to read the sentences with the appropriate intonation after they have decided which words need stress. (It may be helpful to show students how to mark sentences for intonation using dots-for-emphasis and slashes / for pauses.) Encourage students to add as many dots above the content/ function words as possible until the sentence takes an almost sheet music appearance.

Step III: Next have students read the sentences again, first with each word pronounced equally (syllable timed) and then again using their stress-timed versions.

Nonsense Sentences

According to Avery and Ehrlich (1992) by working with nonsense words rather than English words, students can be trained to listen for the acoustic signals of stress-particularly those words that are said more loudly, more clearly and more slowly. Further, by using nonsense words the teacher can ensure that students' full attention is on the words that receive stress.

Read the sentences aloud, with students marking the stressed and unstressed words. To help illustrate the function of suprasegmentals, the use of dots to indicate stress and length may be helpful for this exercise. Again, encourage students to mark the stressed words with bigger dots, smaller dots for those words that receive less emphasis. For savvy or advanced students, teach intonation arrows for pitch change and slashes and sharp marks to indicate juncture or pauses.

For example, the teacher could read the following sentences with the stressed words as indicated by the dots (or, if students are more comfortable using an underlining method, have them continue to underline content words). Be careful to reduce the nonsense function words:

- **Model:** The pilots flew their planes expertly.
  - Son geefies flugged min hox wazily.

- **Model:** My dear old friend is busy in the garden.
  - Hy fiss pold deesh tut looty wo um trewy.

Examples

1. a. Kai dupe chu me lo runt, Sprunt

1. b. Model: I'll meet you at the bank, Frank.

2. a. la rove dirk um tink.

2. b. Model: The X marks the spot.

3. a. don me wanana fil yo zeeking to la pillypolally.

3. b. Model: It was another day of losing for the 76ers.

4. a. Boa my wee jah bloppy-go.

4. b. Model: Six times seven is 42.

5. a. Germ twa lee bosen ra choley.

5. b. Model: "John," said the teacher, "is lazy."

IX. PARADIGM SHIFT

New approaches to language teaching shift the focus of attention in language instruction from individual phonemes to suprasegmentals and other features of the larger context of utterances. These include prosody, phonological fluency, voice quality, and gestures. A basis is provided for instruction and student practice of the entire communicational complex in which pronunciation is situated (Pennington, 1989). As a result of this shift, researchers' focus has also been changed from segmental features to suprasegmental characteristics of pronunciation. By way of Cross (2002) seeks to compare the suprasegmental features of Japanese with English to illustrate that an analysis of the similarities and differences between English and Japanese pronunciation is a useful, and perhaps necessary, starting point for gaining a better understanding of those suprasegmentals in English which require particular attention. In another study Shelton (2008) tries to raise awareness of how voice quality and intonation can convey meaning. Among other researches which relate to the role of suprasegental features in pronunciation teaching reference should be made to Jones and Evans's (1995) study dealing with the role of voice quality in pronunciation teaching. The authors in this study explore the role of voice quality in the teaching of pronunciation and argue that since voice quality encompasses so many aspects of phonology, it provides a useful point of departure for pronunciation work. They describe a teaching technique in which the concept of voice quality is used in communicative practice to give students the opportunity to identify meaningful aspects of suprasegmental pronunciation, and see how they fit into the overall pattern of connected speech.

X. CONCLUSION

By starting with the suprasegmental areas of pronunciation, we can put pronunciation practice in its rightful place, viewing it in the same light as grammar, syntax, and discourse: as a crucial part of communication. Pronunciation needs to be seen as more than correct production of individual sounds, and should be integrated into the communication class, linking pronunciation with listening comprehension, and allowing for meaningful pronunciation practice. In fact, a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step!

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