

English Teacher as a Performer: Spoken Skills Through RP Sounds

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Language, a system of signs for encoding and decoding pieces of information, has been entrenched in human culture. Of all the skills, the spoken medium has a phonological structure which establishes how sounds are used to form sequences known as words or morphemes and a syntactic structure that shows how morphemes and words form phrases and sentences. The conspicuous truth about language is that it evolves and diversifies over time.

Down the ages, man has learnt from the environment and as a corollary, he has taught the environment too, thus teaching and learning have become integral parts of human culture. Human culture contributes to the development of the state too. To put it precisely, even the Greek philosopher Diogenes states that the foundation of every state depends on the education of its youth. Hence it is essential that the youth should be given a stronger foundation in general and communication skills in particular, for after all, an individual should win over another by communicating only. Accepting the parameters that communication skills are significant for human enlightenment, the presence of the teacher comes to the fore. Teaching, thus, is an inevitable aspect of mankind.

Teacher- teaching and learner- learning are obvious paradigms of the profession, and if the educational scenario is observed with care and concern, one can witness a shift in such a paradigm. A teacher is not a monotonous presenter of ideas; nor are the learners morons in the classroom. Both the teacher and the taught should be alive to the situation. The paradigm shift referred to here is that teaching could become performance in a classroom so that the teacher, through his performance, can enlighten his students through his teaching.

Thus all great teaching in one way or other is performance in general and acting out in particular. In fact, every teacher in his class acts his role in such a way that he is an influence for his wards. In addition to his preparation for his class, a teacher can energise himself on the immediacy of his students; hence, then and there in his class, he should devise and modify his plans to suit to the environment. That is what an actor does on stage. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the classroom is the stage, the teacher actor and

the students the audience. Accepting the parameter that the classroom is a stage, the teacher cannot afford to stand before his students/ audience and mono-act; instead, he must act out and his enactment would drive his wards towards achievement, which is visible in the practice the wards undertake.

Performance of sorts is always not only a conspicuous entertainment, but also educative in nature. Acting out, in particular, makes the actor intimate to the audience and the eventual result is that the actor tries to excel himself. Obviously, his present performance is better than the previous one. In like manner, every teacher teaches better than the previous time. By doing so, the learners stand to benefit more and the teacher achieves a mental satisfaction which in the long run accumulates itself to count his professional integrity.

Coming to the teaching- learning syndrome of English language, it should be honestly accepted that learning English is facile, easy to grasp and the process is pretty comfortable. In fact, it is easier than learning a subject like mathematics, physics or engineering. Yet, there is always a hesitancy or “its always difficult to learn English” attitude among the learners. The reasons for such a situation are many. Apart from the students’ interest, there always exists the teachers’ interest as well. Only when there is equal interest, relationships sprout; in like manner, only when the teacher and the taught are co-equal in the process, learning takes place. To put it clearly, the teacher must impart the skills in a way corresponding to the receiving ability of the learners. Thus the attitudinal acceptance of teaching English is in an easy way – performance based way- through which the learners learn the English language just as they learn their mother tongue.

There is an understanding that actors are the people who are aware of their emotional and physical resources, possibilities and limitations. This ability is also crucially important for teachers. In other words, this emotional preparation process is highly important because the only way of creating a believable identity depends on a careful analysis of the self and the target identity.

There is yet another suggestion that cultural performance is centrally concerned with issues of social efficacy reforming our values in relation to the culture that surrounds us, and / or transforming the culture itself through performative actions.

In most of the third world countries in general and India in particular, English

language teaching has been undertaken with religious fervour that the teachers impart the students all the skills except the spoken skills. To a greater extent, Listening, Reading and Writing are taken care of by the teacher and the taught. On the contrary, Speaking has been neglected and hence the failure of the learners to voice out their opinions when called for.

After establishing in the first part of this paper the eventuality of the teacher being an actor in the classroom, it is now essential to prove where exactly would a teacher become an actor. Teaching of grammar and other paraphernalia connected with ELT apart, it is significant that the teacher should teach the sounds of English language as well. If a second language instructor proposes to teach English like a mother tongue, it is the bounden duty of the teacher to teach the sounds to his wards.

To drive the point home, it is imperative to understand that in English classes, the teacher and the taught must strive to usher in a kind of Englishness; in other words, both the teacher and the taught must assimilate the English culture and must try to improvise in such a way that at times it may even appear to be an exaggeration; but such an exaggeration is what is required in the sense that when the sounds are produced like a native speaker, there would be a hue and cry initially, but the teachers and the learners must not mind that and must encourage themselves to obtain the precise sounds and must practise that. In the long run, the obvious result is enthralling, for after all, when you speak English with a good accent and intonation you are looked up as a person speaking the language differently.

Notwithstanding the debate over the *raison d'être* of RP, it is a universal fact that RP still enjoys the privilege and prestige of being the natural accent for the world. As this paper presenter is a believer in the concept of mobility from the particular to the general, he applies the principle that if one manages to obtain the RP sounds creditably, it is easier to understand the other varieties of English to his/her advantage, because RP represents the voice of education, authority and social status. To put it in other words, associating oneself with RP sounds would produce a solid approximation which is what the desired basic parameter is for a non-native speaker, viz., to learn to master his pronunciation.

It is no gainsaying the fact that the varieties of the accent most of the non-native speakers use have a closer approximation to RP. In this connection, it is interesting to point out what Arthur J. Bronstein says: “To a greater or lesser extent, RP has been an

influence in all English speaking nations of the British commonwealth” (The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, xvii). The use of RP variety can be justified because even within England, there are varieties like Cockney and in America, varieties like Ghetto. To give an example, expressions like ‘ I think they are’ and ‘ both of us’ are pronounced as ‘ I think dey are’ and ‘bof us’ respectively. Time passes by and the native speakers continue to change their language; that is why English still enjoys the priority of acceptability in the global situation. As indicated earlier, a non-native speaker can win over the world by using RP and can interact with the whole world successfully.

If RP is to be taken as a model to be taught in his classes, the teacher must naturally try to imitate the native speaker; in other words, the teacher must act out. A systematic and committed teacher can impress on his students by his performance in the class and it is certain that a motivated learner will achieve, after a continuous effort for some time, a fair degree of approximation to RP. With considerable concern and empathy towards the learners, success is not far off. In fact, the role the teachers have to assume now is that of Professor Henry Higgins towards their Eliza Doolittle.

In a graded way, the following methodology may be adopted as prioritised recommendations for acquiring correct speech sounds;

1. All the appropriate IPA phonemic symbols may be taught systematically.
2. The learners can be trained to associate each symbol with a model utterance, the pronounced example being monosyllabic to start with.
3. The students can be trained to identify complex consonant combinations preferably in monosyllabic words.
4. The students may be trained to identify sound segments in some nonsense words, thereby encouraging them to identify the vowel structure in words.
5. The students may be given proper and sufficient ear training so that they realise the stress patterns in English. They must be made to understand that English language is stress timed and not syllable timed as in the case of many languages. At a later date, the students may be given training in the exact English stress pattern.

6. The listening comprehension of the students may be tested through dictations. A suggestion could be made here; while taking down the dictation, the students may be trained to identify the vowel segments first and then the other segments in the uttered statement.
7. Teachers must concentrate on the matters that most impede intelligibility while encouraging fluency and confidence in the learners.
8. Another essential feature is not to neglect the need to interact with native speakers.
9. Teachers should exploit the findings of contrastive analysis to help pinpoint the likely areas of difficulty.
10. Listening is crucial because students cannot produce a sound they cannot hear. Hence, descriptions of the sound and mouth position can help the students increase their awareness of subtle sound differences.

There lies the teachers' contribution to the enhancement of the spoken skills of his students.

III

In the acquisition of the spoken skills of English through RP sounds, it is important to learn certain supra segmental features which are also known as prosodic features. Of all the features, the following are the most significant and easy to acquire.

1. Getting to use the weak forms in normal day to day utterances. There are approximately about 60 weak forms which are essential for a second language learner of English. Potential words that contribute to the grace of English language are: was - /wəz/; were - /wə/; can - /kən/; some - /səm /; at - /ət/; for - /fə /; from - /frəm/; of - /əv/; to - /tu/ (v), /tə/ (c); but - /bət/; are - /ə/.

2. Stress shift and stress change are quite relevant for the ESL learners.

academy - /əˈkædəmi/

academic - /ˌækədəˈmɪk/

academician - /əˈkædəˈmiʃn/

photograph - /ˈfəʊtəɡrɑːf/

photography - /fəˈtɒɡrəfi/

photographic - /fəˈtɒɡrəˈfɪk/

present - /ˈprezənt / (n)

present - /ˈprezənt / (v)

protest - /ˈprɒtɛst / (n)

protest - /prə'test / (v)
 subject - /səbdʒɪkt / (n)
 subject - /səbdʒekt / (v)
 progress - /prəʊgrəs / (n)
 progress - /prə'grɛs / (v)
 increase - /'ɪnkri:s / (n)
 increase - /ɪn'kri:s / (v)

3. English is a stress timed language whereas many languages in the world are syllable timed. Hence the intonation of the English language is another important aspect one must bear in mind when learning a language.

4. The aspirated variety of the voiceless consonants /p/, /t/, /k/ are essential for international intelligibility: [p^h], [t^h], [k^h].

5. /v/ and /w/ are quite often confused:

Very - /verɪ /; van - /væn /

Well - /wel /; white - /waɪt /

6. Fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ are replaced by 'th' and 'd'.

7. The past tense in the spoken form is different from the written form in

English:

/t/	/d/	/ɪd/ or /d/
Crushed - /kraʃt /	saved - /seɪvd /	fainted - /feɪntɪd /
Walked - /wɔ:k /	cried - /kraɪd /	decided - /dɪsə'dɪd /
Parked - /pɑ:k /	lied - /laɪd /	waited - /weɪtɪd /

8. Again, the plural form in English is different from the written form:

/s/	/z/	/ɪz/ or /z/
Rats - /ræts /	shoes - /ʃu:z /	washes - /wɒʃɪz /

Books - / bʊks / dogs - / dɒgz / boxes - / bɒksɪz /
Taps - / tæps / names - / neɪmz / dishes - / dɪʃɪz /

9. Most of the ESL learners pronounce the silent letters while speaking in English. For example:

Plumber - / plʌmə /; yacht - / jɒt /; blackguard - / blæɡɑːd /
Honest - / ɒnɪst /; psalm - / sɑːm /; listen - / lɪsn /; debt - / det /;
Colonel - / kɜːnl /; rendezvous - / rɒndɑːvuː /; debris - / deɪbrɪz /
Island - / aɪlənd /

If a learner is conscious of the above mentioned items of significant contribution to spoken English, he/she is bound to obtain better pronunciation.

CONCLUSION:

Whatever are the arguments on the importance and dissemination of English language, its presence in the world is unquestionable. In fact, it has become the sine qua non for individuals who propose to move up in their life. At that it is imperative that English is taught in its entirety including the spoken skills with the use of RP sounds. To obtain such a position, the teacher's performance, in the form of acting out, in the class should be exemplary. My question is, why not emulate the native speaker to instil in the students a penchant for correct accent, intonation and other supra segmental features which would take them a long way?

Work Cited

Bronstein, Arthur J. *The Pronunciation of English*. The Random House Dictionary Of English, College Edn.
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