

## Review

# Teaching pronunciation in Benin primary schools through syllabification to enhance the speaking skill

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The main aim of this article is to study the importance of teaching pronunciation in the primary level to help primary EFL students be confident in speaking English. Pronunciation teaching is a prominent factor in FL teaching. Since sounds play an important role in communication, foreign language teachers in general, and primary ones in particular must attribute proper importance to teaching pronunciation in their classes. Yet this fact seems to be desired. It's obvious that communication is a mutual relationship between the speaker and the hearer. It's a common notice today that elementary (primary) schools almost everywhere are offered English as one school subjects and thanks to reforms, Benin is jumping on the bandwagon. Consequently, more and more English teachers are needed. On the one hand, this is a good opportunity for English education graduates to get job quickly. Just a conventionally accepted statement that the more demand arises the more supply is needed. However, besides its good impact, the teaching of English pronunciation in primary schools can also result in a bad impact. This is mainly due to the lack of professionally well trained teachers.

**Keywords:** Teaching, pronunciation, primary school; young learners, syllabification.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, one of the most difficult problems for EFL learners is learning pronunciation in order to be confident in communicating easily in the target language. It is commonly the biggest obstacle to overcome when trying to achieve fluency.

Pronunciation is the first thing that a speaker notices during a conversation, and speakers who make pronunciation mistake are less likely to be understood

even if they use vocabulary grammatically well. It is obvious that pronunciation cannot be underestimated in a language classroom and most importantly in a primary language classroom where young learners have their very first contact with the target language.

In fact, Harmer explains: "almost all English language teachers get students to study grammar and vocabulary, practice functional dialogues, take part in productive skill activities and become competent in listening and reading. Yet some of these same teachers make little

attempt to teach pronunciation in any overt way and only give attention to it in passing" (Harmer, 2007: 248).

Based on this aspect of the language, it is important to remark that, as Morley states, "intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence" (Morley, 1991: 513). This consideration suggests that pronunciation is crucially important to help the students develop the skills necessary to communicate in the target language.

With regard to this research work, the decision to focus on primary school learners is based on two reasons:

Firstly, it is commonly accepted that age is a factor that affects the learning and the teaching of pronunciation in the Teaching-Learning-Evaluation process. In fact, it's assumed by research that children up to 12 years of age seem to have a higher sensitivity to phonetic detail in speech than older learners, and therefore are presumably better at imitating what they hear. (Slattery and Willis, 2001).

Secondly, as Nixon and Tomlinson claim, "it is much easier to teach and correct pronunciation at an early stage in the learner's development than it is to correct time-compounded pronunciation error at a later one." (Nixon and Tomlinson, 2005: 9). These key points suggest that phonetic training for primary school teachers is very important; in fact, Dawes and Lavarone state "it is vital that children receive a good model of pronunciation from the very beginning of their foreign language experience" (Dawes and Lavarone, 2013: 83). Based on those assumptions, we can say that the teaching of pronunciation is of a paramount importance in primary language classrooms.

### **Pronunciation teaching and intelligibility**

This chapter accommodates some key concepts of pronunciation and discusses its importance in oral communication in English. Furthermore, it presents some elements that teachers should take into account in order to decide what pronunciation model to teach to their learners.

### **What is pronunciation?**

The word pronunciation can be defined in several ways. According to Oxford dictionary, it refers to the formal or informal way in which a word is made to sound when spoken. It is also defined as the way in which the words of a language are made to sound when speaking or the act of pronouncing or uttering something or simply put, the manner in which someone utters a word. This may refer to generally agreed-upon sequences of sounds used in speaking a given word or language in a specific dialect (correct pronunciation), or simply the

way a particular individual speaks a language.

According to Lynda Yates, and Beth Zielinski, "pronunciation refers to how we produce the sounds that we use to make meaning when we speak. It includes the particular consonants and vowels of a language (segments), aspects of speech beyond the level of the individual segments, such as stress, timing, rhythm, intonation, phrasing, and how the voice is projected (voice quality). Although we often talk about these as if they were separate, they all work together in combination when we speak, so that difficulties in one area may impact on another, and it is the combined result that makes someone's pronunciation easy or difficult to understand" (Yates and Zielinski, 2009: 11). Moreover, Christiane Dalton and Barbara Seidlhofer state that "we can define pronunciation in general terms as the production of significant sound in two senses. First, sound is significant because it is used as part of a code of a particular language. Second, sound is significant because it is used to achieve meaning in context of use.

To pronounce words; we push air from our lungs up through our throat and vocal chords, through our mouth, past our tongue and out between our teeth and lips. All this works together to help learners achieve a good pronunciation.

### **Why is it crucial to have good pronunciation?**

Nowadays, English language is viewed as the "lingua franca". It is the language used for international communication and speakers need to be able to exchange information effectively, both orally and in writing.

According to Joan Morley, "intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence" (Morley 1991: 513)

Intelligibility is claimed by Kenworthy (1987: 13) to be the most important goal when pronunciation is taught. The definition that Kenworthy gives of this term is as followed

Intelligibility is being understood by a listener at a given time in a given situation. According to Kenworthy, teachers must set intelligibility as a goal, it is more important than having a native pronunciation. The aim of the foreign speakers should be being intelligible so that they can communicate a message. (Kenworthy 1987:15)

This term has also been used by other authors such as Smith and Nelson (1985) who affirms that intelligibility is the listener's ability to recognize words or utterances, and use comprehensibility to the ability to understand those words or utterances in their given context.

Celce-Murcia et al agree with Joan Morley's statement and claim that "intelligible pronunciation is one

necessary components of oral communication." (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996: 8). As Yates explains, « learners with good pronunciation in English are more likely to be understood even they make errors in the other areas, whereas learners whose pronunciation is difficult to understand will not be understood, even if their grammar is perfect. 'Yates, 2002: 1). Similarly, Burns claims: "clear pronunciation is essential in spoken communication. Even where learners produce minor inaccuracies in vocabulary and grammar, they are more likely to communicate effectively when they have good pronunciation and intonation" (Burns, 2003 :5).

To show how crucially important pronunciation is in a genuine communicative interaction, Yates claims, "learners with poor pronunciation may be judged as incompetent, uneducated or lacking in knowledge even though listeners are only reacting to their pronunciation" (Yates, 2002: 1). From the different views aforementioned, it implies that pronunciation plays a key role in the development of the speaking skill and helps to enhance learners' communicative skill since mispronunciation can easily lead to miscomprehension. It is then incumbent upon the EFL language teacher in general and the primary one in particular, to take steps to teach the right pronunciation so as to help learners acquire a good pronunciation.

### How good learners' pronunciation needs to be?

Recent researches on English language teaching argue that the improbable idea that learners should sound and speak like native speakers is fast being deprecated. In fact, Celce-Murcia et al., believe that, "with the exception of a few gifted and motivated individuals such a goal is unrealistic. A more modest and realistic goal is to enable learners to surpass the threefold level so that their pronunciation will not detract from their ability to communicate." 'Celce-Murcia et al., 1996: 8). Harmer agrees as he states "students should be able to use pronunciation which is good enough for them to be always understood in order to communicate effectively". (Harmer, 2001: 184)

Based on the above statements, we can say that the belief about the correct pronunciation of a word does not always result in a native like pronunciation.

According to Burns, it is important that speakers of English can achieve:

- Intelligibility (the speaker produces sound patterns that are recognisable as English)
- Comprehensibility (the listeners is able to understand the meaning of what is said)
- Interpretability (the listener is able to understand the purpose of what is said) (Burns, 2003: 5)

When we think about the importance of pronunciation in a primary language classroom, one question remains crucial.

What pronunciation should be taught to learners and why ?

### Choosing a model for teaching pronunciation to young learners.

According to Harmer, the key reason why teachers only make a little attempt in teaching pronunciation, is possibly, because they are nervous when dealing with sounds and intonation. For EFL teachers, this may be a common phenomenon as English is not their first language and perhaps teachers are more careful in order not to make mistake.

Choosing a model for teaching pronunciation is not a matter of personal choice. It's all designed by the curriculum.

It is generally known that the most common pronunciation models are: Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA). Concerning British pronunciation models, RP is no doubt the most frequently used.

According to Martin and Hewings, deciding on what model of English pronunciation to teach English learners is something complex. (Hewings, 2004). In our French speaking context, in Benin, we are more inclined or let's say, bound to teach the RP. So, even if the teacher accent is GA like, he is advised to teach the RP. The key goal should be to teach a maximally comprehensible by non-native speakers of English as a Lingua Franca.

According to Jenny Jenkis (2000,2002), In EFL, communication between speakers of different L1s, the most important considerations to take into account for mutual intelligibility are:

- Consonants do not cause intelligibility problems, except for the dental fricatives /ð-θ/;
- The aspirations after word initial voiceless plosives / p /; / t / and / k / needs to be maintained
- The contrast between long and short vowels should be maintained (example the vowel in words like *ship* and *sheep*)
- The production and placement of nuclear (tonic)stress is vital especially when used contrastively example

John is **here**

John **is** here

**John** is here (Jenkins, 2000: 159)

Since our educational system requires the competency-based approach, characterised by the Teaching-Learning-Evaluation process, another question needs to be considered.

### What affects pronunciation learning?

Many things contribute to learning pronunciation, from students' ages, motivation and personality (which depends on the learners themselves) to the quality of the teaching and the students' first language which are outside factors. Therefore, primary language teachers need to take into account those factors which can significantly affect the learning of pronunciation.

### The age of the learners

We have all noticed how easily babies and very young children learn languages. They just seem to absorb sounds and words they hear around them and little by little, learn to imitate them accurately. Linguists call this time in a child's life, lasting up to the age of about 12 to 14 years, the critical period for language acquisition. Children can learn the sounds of language more naturally than adults and can approach native speaker pronunciation. Young children who hear English only a couple of hours a week lose much of their learning advantage.

Based on those assumptions, it's mandatory to keep in mind that the amount of time devoted to the teaching of English language in primary school is of great importance.

Learners' age is important but that is not sufficient. Motivating them is another factor that plays a great role in the target language pronunciation acquisition.

### Motivation and attitude

Motivation is another key factor that influences the success in pronunciation. Learners in any subject area tend to make more progress if they want to learn. No teacher can force students or learners to learn if they are motivated. Just as the proverb has it, "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink". This also applies to teaching pronunciation.

According to Balboni, motivation constitutes the energy responsible for the memorization of new information and it's vital for the acquisition of a second or foreign language. (Balboni, 2012). There is a strong link between motivation and attitude. As Kenworthy claims, "in many new studies of attitude, and motivation in language learning, it has been shown that those learners who show positive feelings towards the speakers of the new language tend to develop more accurate, native-like accent" (Kenworthy, 1990: 8). In

the same token, (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010, p 21) have suggested three general sets of goals or desires that can motivate students in language learning.

These are:

- Learners want to be accepted into a group that uses the language. The group might still recognize the learners as "outsiders, but they can function well in the group. This is sometimes called *integrative motivation*.
- They want to be accepted as real members of the group. They don't want to be thought as "outsiders". This is called *assimilative motivation*.
- They want to be able to reach a goal: to get a job, to conduct business, to pass a test, or travel easily in a foreign country. This is called *instrumental motivation*. In addition to the motivation, the quality of the teaching also influences the learner's pronunciation.

Teaching pronunciation to young learners;

It is commonly argued that age is a factor that affects the learning of pronunciation. Hence, in order to make decisions on how to teach English pronunciation to young learners, it is de rigueur to take into consideration the characteristics of young learners and propose some activities for developing the English pronunciation skills in young learners.

### The characteristics of young learners.

As a rule, the term young learners are used to refer to children of primary school age (approximately 5 to 12 years old). According to Brewster et al., young learners:

- a) "Have a lot of physical energy and often need to be physically active,
- b) Have a wide range of emotional needs
- c) Are emotionally excitable,
- d) Are developing conceptually and are at an early stage of their schooling,
- e) Are still developing literacy in their first language,
- f) Learn more slowly and forget things quickly,
- g) Tend to be self-oriented and preoccupied with their own world,
- h) Get bored easily;
- i) Are excellent mimickers;
- j) Can concentrate a surprisingly long time if they are interested;
- k) Can be easily distracted but also enthusiastic" (Brewster et al; 2002: 27-28)

In addition to the list above, Slattery and Willis claim that children:

- a) “learn in a variety of ways for example, by watching, by listening, by imitating, by doing things;
- b) Can generally imitate the sounds they hear quite accurately and copy the way adult speak;
- c) Are naturally curious;
- d) Love to play and use their imagination;
- e) Are comfortable with routines and enjoy repetitions;
- f) Have quite a short attention span and so need variety” (Slattery and Willis, 2001:4).

These characteristics suggest that the best way for young learners to learn pronunciation is to have constant input in the target language, provided by a variety of sources and to do activities that involve imitating and repeating. What’s more, it is clear that they need to be always motivated since they have a short attention span.

In this regard, according to Slattery and Willis, in order to provide the ideal conditions for learning, English language teachers should:

- a) “make learning English enjoyable and fun and remember that they are influencing their attitude to language learning;
- b) Not worry about mistake, be encouraging, make sure the children feel comfortable and not afraid to take part;
- c) Use a lot of gestures, actions, pictures to demonstrate what they mean;
- d) Talk a lot to the children in English, especially about things they can see;
- e) Play games, sing songs, say rhymes and chants with children;
- f) Tell simple stories in English, using pictures and acting with different voices;
- g) Not worry when the learners use their mother tongue, since they can answer a mother tongue question in English and sometimes recast in their mother tongue.;
- h) Constantly recycle new language but not be afraid to add new things or to use words children do not know;
- i) Plan lesson with varied activities, some quiet, some noisy, some standing and moving”. (Slattery and Willis; 2001:4)

To put it more simply, language teachers need to use the target language frequently in the classroom, sing songs, do ear and pronunciation training. Beyond the traditional repeat after me method, teaching pronunciation requires then learner’s exposure to the target language.

### **Learner’s exposure to the target language**

Besides the aforementioned factors, learner’s pronunciation is also affected by how much English input they have the chance to hear in their daily lives. It goes without saying that those who live in an English speaking country where the target language is constantly spoken or heard, will be more accustomed to the sounds and melodies they are trying to imitate than those who, in our socio-linguistic environment, have few opportunities to hear spoken English, perhaps only during English classes for a few hours every week.

Since the acquisition of English input also depends on how creatively the language teacher portrays the target language, it is then incumbent upon teachers in primary schools to find strategies to help learners get the right pronunciation. One we find interesting is the syllabification or shortly put, the syllabication.

### **Teaching pronunciation to young learners through syllabication.**

#### **Definitions of syllabication**

Syllabication can be defined as the process of dividing a word into its component sounds, called syllables. It can also be defined as the separation of a word into syllables, whether spoken or written.

#### **What is a syllable?**

A syllable is a unit of pronunciation that includes a single vowel sound and that may or may not include the sounds of surrounding consonants. In other words, a syllable is a unit of spoken language larger than a phoneme which is one of a small set of speech sounds that are distinguished by the speakers of a particular language. In short, a syllable can be a vowel, a diphthong, one or more vowels contained with one or more consonant.

Syllables have a significant role in spoken English, because they greatly affect the rhythm of the language, its poetic meter and its stress patterns.

As the basic units of speech sounds, syllables are often considered the phonological building blocks of words. We generally distinguish six types of syllables summed up into two main categories: open syllables and closed syllables.

#### **Open syllables vs closed syllables**

The main difference between open syllables and closed ones is that, open syllables end with a vowel whereas

closed syllables end with a consonant. A word may be made up of both open and closed syllables.

The key differences are summarised in the table underneath.

Open syllables	Closed syllables
Open syllables end in a vowel	Closed syllables end in a consonant
Have a long sound	Have a short sound
Vowel is not followed by any consonant	Vowel is followed by a consonant
Sound is similar to the name of the vowel	Sound may not be similar to the name of the letter
Examples: no, he, she, be, me, go, hi, spy.	Examples: but, bed, sock, pat, mat, truck, hip, men.

NB: A word can also have more one closed syllable. These are some examples: combat, dentist, contact, happen, insect, kitchen, rabbit.

To succeed in dividing words into its different syllables is one important thing in teaching and learning pronunciation. Being able to put the stress on the right syllable is another kettle of fish.

**Syllabication and word stress**

**What is word stress?**

When a word has more than two syllables in English, one syllable will receive more importance than the others when it is pronounced. This is the syllable that receives the *primary word stress*. This means that, compared to the other ones, the vowel sound of that syllable will be slightly:

- Louder
- Longer
- At a higher pitch.

For example, the word *chapter* is stressed on the first syllable. The first syllable, *chap*, will be louder and slightly longer than the last syllable *ter*. The intensity of each in this example can be illustrated as follows.

CHAP ter.

**Syllable stress**

Languages are learnt in general for a communicative

purpose. Language is first spoken, therefore it is important to well pronounce every word we use to facilitate understanding. There are plethora of rules used to stress a syllable in a polysyllabic word but in the framework of this article, we'll just pick a few ones to help teachers in a language classroom in general and those in primary level in particular cope with their difficulty to teach pronunciation.

English words that are polysyllabic or multisyllabic always have an accentuated syllable. In most English dictionaries, the stressed syllable is indicated by a stress mark ( ` ), a symbol that looks an apostrophe. The stress mark follows the syllable that is stressed.

For example, in the word *primary*, the first syllable is stressed. [pɹɪ]

Here are some examples

2 syllables	3 syllables	4 syllables
ex `it	op `posite	Con `gratu late

More explanation is coming up next section

There are a fricassee of rules governing the syllable stress in English language.

Here are four key rules which are important to understand and apply to be able to correctly pronounce English words and spell them as well.

**Four word stress rules to improve pronunciation.**

The following rules are neither exclusive nor exhaustive.

**Rule N° 1**

Stress the first syllable of

- Most two-syllable nouns ( `win-dow; ) ( `cou-sin); ( `grand-mother)
- Most two-syllable adjectives ( `la-zy); ( `cle-ver)

**Rule N° 2**

Stress the last syllable of

- Most two-syllable verbs (re- `quire; de- `cide ; re- `cord)

**Rule N° 3**

Stress the second to last syllable of

- Words ending in -ic (geo- `gra- phic); (his- `to-ric); (eco- `no- mic)
- Words ending in -sion and -tion (ex- `ten- sion);(in- vi- `ta- tion)

**Rule N° 4**

Stress the third from last syllable of:

- Words ending in -cy; -ty ; -phy and -gy (de-`mo-cra-ty); (ge-`o-gra-phy); (ra-di-`olo-gy) Un-`cer-tain-ty)
- Words that end in -al (ex-`cep-tion-al) (cri-ti-cal) (prac-ti-cal)

These are a few practical rules to keep in mind that will help language teachers to be more confident in their pronunciation classroom.

**CONCLUSION**

All in one, the teaching of pronunciation in a Foreign Language classroom in general and its teaching in a French speaking country primary school is not a mere task. Primary EFL teachers must spend time to teach pronunciation overtly and not covertly regardless of the type of teaching approach they use in their classroom.

Teaching pronunciation takes time because as teachers, we can't just teach something once and expect our students to master it right away. We need to come back to the same point again and again, giving students lots of review and continued practice.

Second, before entering a pronunciation classroom, teachers have to make sure that they are confident by consulting dictionary for correct pronunciation to give learners, most importantly for new words that they may be unsure with, so as to promote knowledge-based teaching as well as to avoid teaching based on belief.

In terms of pedagogy, since pronunciation is an integrated element of speaking and listening, and therefore crucially important in communication, it should be included in EFL syllabus from the primary school and should be incorporated into communicative activities. In general, the goal of pronunciation teaching should not necessarily be native-like pronunciation, which is normally not attained in most contexts, rather the main objective should be functional intelligibility in the target language (TL). This is mandatory because if EFL learners do not develop satisfactory command of TL pronunciation, they may not be capable of hearing spoken language well.

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