Abstract

This paper tries to show the importance of exposure of the learners of English, especially those in the military field, to non-native models of pronunciation. English has become a widely used language, a “global” one, and we can not expect it to be the same in places that are very far from one another. English is the language of command of NATO, it is the official language of international aviation, it is one of the main languages spoken at the United Nations and it is largely used by numerous televisions and radio programmes, by the internet and by the authors of scientific literature. One can clearly see the need for preserving the “cleanliness” of the language by means of standardizations, but at the same time the fact that the new speakers are also shaping the language, not only from the point of view of vocabulary and grammar, but also from the point of view of pronunciation, must be taken into account particularly by the teachers of English.

English – a global language

It is well-known that English is the main vehicle of globalization and in an article entitled “Not the Queen’s English. Non-native English speakers now outnumber native ones 3 to 1 and it’s changing the way we communicate”, published in the March issue of “Newsweek”, Carla Power emphasizes the fact that there are hundreds of millions of people learning English, which has become “the planet’s language for commerce, technology – and empowerment. Within a decade, 2 billion people will be studying English and about half the world – some 3 billion people – will speak it, according to a recent report from the British council” [Carla Power, Not the Queen’s English. Non-native English speakers now outnumber native ones 3 to 1 and it’s changing the way we communicate, published in „Newsweek“, March, 7, p. 47].

The emergence of so many different varieties of English has caused a number of linguists to question the use of native speaker pronunciation models in the teaching of English.

Nowadays English is being used in every part of the world, both by speakers who have it as a first language, and by speakers from different countries who have different first languages. This was one of the factors that has contributed to the appearance of the term “global English”.

Jennifer Jenkins, lecturer in sociolinguistics and phonology at King’s College, London, says that “English is no longer spoken only by its native speakers in the UK, North America, Australia and New Zealand, and by
those who learn English in order to communicate with native speakers. It is also spoken among non-native speakers within countries like India, the Philippines and Singapore and internationally among non-native speakers from a wide range of countries/first languages throughout the world”, this last use of English being referred to as “English as an International Language” or EIL, comprising the largest group of English speakers, approximately 1.5 billion [Jennifer Jenkins, *Global English and the Teaching of Pronunciation*, http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/pron/global_english.shtml]. The native speakers of English are now outnumbered by the non-native ones 3 to 1, as David Crystal affirms in his “English as a Global Language” [David Crystal, *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge University Press, 1997].

The numerous “varieties” of international English have caused many linguists to question the “use of native speaker pronunciation models in the teaching of English. Their argument is that native speaker accents are not necessarily the most intelligible or appropriate accents when a non-native speaker is communicating with another non-native speaker” [Jennifer Jenkins, *Global English and the Teaching of Pronunciation*, http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/pron/global_english.shtml] David Crystal, clearly demonstrates that the desire for a globally common language and the desire to preserve local languages which are the carriers of cultural identities do not exclude each other. The author of “English as a Global Language” shows that English can fulfill both roles equally well. It can function as what he defines World Standard Spoken English and it can appear in the form of “New Englishes”, English local informal dialects.

Jennifer Jenkins identified which pronunciation features are crucial for mutual understanding when a non-native speaker talks to another non-native speaker and which are not at all important, often not the same features that are crucial and unimportant for a native speaker of English. After doing a lot of research, the aim of which was “to find out which features of British/American English pronunciation are essential for intelligible pronunciation, and which are not, the British linguist concluded that the important features are:

- all the consonants, except for “th” sounds as in “thin” and “this”;
- consonant clusters at the beginning and in the middle of words;
- the distinction between long and short vowels;
- nuclear stress (the stress on the most important word (or syllable) in a group of words).
She also studied some pronunciation items that are usually taught on English courses but which appear not to be essential for intelligibility in EIL interactions. According to her findings these are:

- the “th” sounds;
- vowel quality;
- weak forms;
- features of connected speech such as assimilation;
- word stress;
- pitch movement;
- stress timing.

All these things are said to be important for a native speaker listener either because they aid intelligibility or because they are thought to make an accent more appropriate [Jennifer Jenkins, Global English and the teaching of pronunciation, http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/pron/global_english.shtml]

The implications for pronunciation teaching

Students should be allowed the freedom to choose. That is, when they learn English in order to be able to use it in international contexts with other non-native speakers who have different first languages, they should be given the choice of acquiring a pronunciation that is more relevant to EIL intelligibility than what most of the pronunciation syllabuses offer. “Up to now, the goal of pronunciation teaching has been to enable students to acquire an accent that is as close as possible to that of a native speaker. But for EIL communication, this is not the most intelligible accent and some of the non-core items may even make them less intelligible to another non-native speaker.

The non-core items are not only unimportant for intelligibility but also socially more appropriate. After all, native speakers have different accents depending on the region where they were born and live. So why should non-native speakers of an international language not be allowed to do the same?” [Idem]

Thirdly, students should be given plenty of exposure in their pronunciation classrooms to other non-native accents of English so that they can understand them easily even if a speaker has not yet managed to acquire the core features. In Jennifer Jenkins’ opinion, this is much more important than having classroom exposure to native speaker accents. [Idem]

Some of the most frequent difficulties encountered by foreign learners of English pronunciation
When teaching English pronunciation one must always be aware of the most frequent difficulties that a foreign learner will encounter. The most important of these are described in “English Language Learning and Teaching. Pronunciation”:

**Consonant phonemes**

The English language does not have more single consonant sounds than the majority of other languages. Nevertheless, /θ/ and /ð/ (the sounds written with th), which are fairly common in English (for example in *Thailand, thalamencephalic, thunderclap, thriftiness* etc.; and the, thus, those etc.) are extremely rare in other languages, even in those belonging to the Germanic family (e.g., English *thousand* = German *tausend*, and these sounds are missing even in some English dialects. Some learners substitute a [t] or [d] sound, while others shift to [s] or [z], [f] or [v] and even [ts] or [dz]. Even experienced second language speakers, and we are given the example of the francophone Canadian politicians, retain this pronunciation long after mastering vocabulary and grammar.

Another sound that is likely to cause problems because it is not too often found in other languages is /ŋ/ (as in *singing*).

Speakers of Japanese and Chinese varieties may have difficulty distinguishing [r] and [l]. Japanese does not have the sound [l] and Chinese does not have the sound [r]. The distinction between [b] and [v] can cause difficulty for native speakers of Spanish, as well as Japanese and Korean.

**Vowel phonemes**

The exact number of distinct vowel sounds depends on the variety of English: “for example, Received Pronunciation has twelve monophthongs (single or “pure” vowels), eight diphthongs (double vowels) and two triphthongs (triple vowels); whereas General American has thirteen monophthongs and three diphthongs. Many learners, such as speakers of Spanish, Japanese or Arabic, have fewer vowels in their mother tongue and so may have problems both with hearing and with pronouncing these distinctions”.

**Syllable structure**

In its syllable structure, English allows for a cluster of up to three consonants before the vowel and four consonants after the vowel (e.g., straw, crisps, glimpsed). “The syllable structure causes problems for speakers of many other languages. Japanese, for example, broadly alternates consonant and vowel sounds so learners from Japan often try to force vowels in between the consonants (e.g., desks /desk/ becomes “desukusu” or milk shake /milkʃeIk/ becomes “mirukushēku”). In SLA, this effect has also been attributed to early reading in English; the reader
believes each letter must be sounded out, but is yet to learn clusters, so resorts to inserting vowels between the consonants to pronounce everything they see. Learners from languages where all words end in vowels sometimes tend to make all English words end in vowels, thus make /meɪk/ can come out as [meɪkə]. The learner's task is further complicated by the fact that native speakers may drop consonants in the more complex blends (e.g., [mʌns] instead of [mʌnθs] for months)”.

**Unstressed vowels**

Native English speakers frequently replace almost any vowel in an unstressed syllable with an unstressed vowel. Stress in English more strongly determines vowel quality than it does in most other world languages.

**Stress timing**

English tends to be a stress-timed language – this means that stressed syllables are roughly equidistant in time, no matter how many syllables come in between. Most of the world's other major languages are syllable-timed. Learners from these languages often have a staccato rhythm when speaking English that is disconcerting to a native speaker.

In English there are about fifty words that have two different pronunciations, depending on whether they are stressed. Most students tend to overuse the strong form. Some of these are

**Connected speech**

Assimilation, elision and epenthesis, not clearly marked off word boundaries are some of the processes that can cause confusion to the learners who listen to natural spoken English. On the other hand, they can sound too formal if they do not use them [English Language Learning and Teaching. Pronunciation, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_language_learning_and_teaching#Pronunciation]

The Romanian learners, sometimes even those that have reached a high level of English, encounter difficulties:

- when having to pronounce the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds,
- they overemphasize the [r] sound,
- they do not always make the distinction between the parts of speech that are homographs and that are differentiated only by the morphological accent: For example many will not be able to distinguish between the following verbs and nouns:
they do not always make the distinction in pronunciation between long and short vowels (when listening to a text they very often rely on the context to distinguish between these two types of vowels)

● the unstressed vowels and the connected speech may cause problems too.

An experienced Romanian teacher of English will be aware of the above mentioned aspects and will try to draw his students’ attention to these. When listening to non-native speakers of English, the principal characteristics that make their speech obviously foreign should be mentioned as well. In order to increase the learners’ awareness of these characteristics they could be given as a short class activity to imitate some of the accents.

The necessity of non-native pronunciation models in the teaching of military English

The Romanian cadets will certainly participate in missions abroad, will interact with various foreign officials and will fight in theatres of operations where they should be able to interact with military whose mother tongue will not always be English and whose pronunciation of the language will sometimes be far from perfect.

There have appeared courses of military English that try to cater for the need of the students to listen to various foreign speakers. One of these is Campaign. English for the Military by Simon Mellor-Clark, Yvonne Baker de Altamirano, Randy Walden, Nicola King and Charles Boyle, published by Macmillan. The description of the listening materials shows that one can find “realistic listening scenarios” and “a wide variety of accents” that reflects the reality of international operations. [http://www.macmillanenglish.com/default.aspx?id=329]
The difference between *Campaign. English for the Military* by Simon Mellor-Clark, Yvonne Baker de Altamirano, Randy Walden, Nicola King and Charles Boyle and other English courses (e.g. *Focus on Advanced English C.A.E.* by Sue O’Connell with additional Grammar and Listening material by Mark Foley and Russell Whitehead, 2001) from the point of view of non-native pronunciation speaking models is that listening material containing various accents is introduced from a very early stage, from the first level.

**Pronunciation – assessment criteria according to STANAG 6001**

The importance of pronunciation can also be seen from the STANAG 6001 descriptors:

**LEVEL 1 (ELEMENTARY)**

LISTENING COMPREHENSION

“So even native speakers used to speaking with non-natives must speak slowly and repeat or reword frequently. (...) Can only understand spoken language from the media or among native speakers if content is completely unambiguous and predictable”.

SPEAKING

“Frequent errors in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar often distort meaning”.

[http://www.clssibiu.ro/english/docs/level%201.pdf]

**LEVEL 2 (LIMITED WORKING)**

LISTENING COMPREHENSION

“Can reliably understand face-to-face speech in a standard dialect, delivered at a normal rate with some repetition and rewording, by a native speaker not used to speaking with non-natives”.

SPEAKING

“Can interact with native speakers not used to speaking with non-natives, although natives may have to adjust to some limitations”. [http://www.clssibiu.ro/english/docs/level%202.pdf]

**LEVEL 3 (MINIMUM PROFESSIONAL)**

LISTENING COMPREHENSION

“Demonstrates, through spoken interaction, the ability to effectively understand face-to-face speech delivered with normal speed and clarity in a standard dialect”.

SPEAKING
“Pronunciation may be obviously foreign. Errors may occur in low frequency or highly complex structures characteristic of a formal style of speech. However, occasional errors in pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary are not serious enough to distort meaning, and rarely disturb the native speaker” [http://www.clssibiu.ro/english/docs/level%203.pdf]

STANAG level 3 is the highest English level that a person working in the military can get in Romania. Level 4 is certified only by accredited teachers abroad.

LEVEL 4 (FULL PROFESSIONAL)
LISTENING COMPREHENSION
“Readily understands utterances made in the media and in conversations among native speakers both globally and in detail; generally comprehends regionalisms and dialects”.

SPEAKING
“Speaks effortlessly and smoothly, with a firm grasp of various levels of style, but would seldom be perceived as a native speaker. Nevertheless, any shortcomings, such as non-native pronunciation, do not interfere with intelligibility” [http://www.clssibiu.ro/english/docs/level%204.pdf]

LEVEL 5 (NATIVE/BILINGUAL)
LISTENING COMPREHENSION
“Able to fully understand all forms and styles of speech intelligible to the well-educated native listener, including a number of regional dialects, highly colloquial speech, and language distorted by marked interference from other noise”.

SPEAKING
“Pronunciation is consistent with that of well-educated native speakers of a standard dialect” [http://www.clssibiu.ro/english/docs/level%205.pdf]

Analyzing the descriptors we see that the quality of the pronunciation is one of the elements that helps to discriminate between the levels. The only difference between level 4 (full professional) and level 5 (functionally native proficiency) is the accent. A level 4 speaker will always be detected as speaking with a foreign accent. It is said that the moment we acquire the accent of the language we learn, we lose the accent of our mother tongue. There are exceptions to this rule and these are represented by the bilingual speakers.

On a site which is a co-production between the British Broadcasting Corporation and the British Council and which can be found at
http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/talk/vote/vote28_pron.shtml, we can study the results of a vote regarding the importance of teaching pronunciation:

**Should we teach a simplified version of English?**

Results of vote

1: Yes, I think pronunciation is a high priority. 85%
2: No, I don’t think it’s a priority. 11%
3: I don’t know. 4%

Total votes: 830

**Conclusion**

There is no doubt that pronunciation is an important factor in the teaching of English, but it is not possible for all of us to get a perfect pronunciation. This should not stop us from trying to improve it. Without minimizing the importance of native models, we consider that non-native pronunciation models are necessary especially in the military field. One must teach an English that is easily understood by native speakers, insisting upon vocabulary and the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

4. ***, *English Language Learning and Teaching*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_language_learning_and_teaching#Pronunciation