Teaching Pronunciation to Gujarati Learners of English: Problems and Solutions

Dr. Paresh Joshi

Dept. of English, Christ College, Rajkot, India.

Corresponding email address
paresh.leo@gmail.com

Abstract: There are obvious issues with regard to teaching pronunciation to Gujarati Speakers of English (GSE). These issues have its root in the inherent difference between the phonology of Gujarati and English at both segmental and supra-segmental level. There is sufficient research evidence to prove that these phonological differences are largely responsible for problems in teaching English pronunciation. To add to this, issues concerning to speaker’s culture and identity also stand in the way of successful acquisition of pronunciation. Due to this phonological difference, GSE tend to show significant amount of negative L1 transfer while speaking in English. It is this presence of L1 transfer which renders the GSEs unintelligible in global communication. The present paper lists phonological as well as non-phonological issues which require attention while teaching pronunciation to GSE. Moreover, the paper also endeavors to provide pedagogical solutions for effective teaching of pronunciation considering geopolitical realities of Gujarat. Besides, the paper also aims at proposing solutions considering educational practices in Gujarat state. The proposed solutions will largely focus on reduction of L1 by effective teaching of pronunciation aimed at enhancing international intelligibility of GSEs.

Index Terms: Contrastive Analysis, Segmental Phonology, Supra-Segmental Phonology, Received Pronunciation (RP), General Indian English (GIE), Gujarati English Phonology (GEP), Non-native speakers (NNS), Gujarati Speakers of English
Gujaratis are known for the entrepreneurial vehemence in the rest of the world for centuries. There is hardly any place across the breadth and the width of the world map which has not seen the passionate expression of the entrepreneurship of Gujaratis. They have migrated and settled in almost all the countries small or big. They have surpassed all the odds; be it social, cultural, political or linguistic. They have somehow found ways to survive and adapt. Undoubtedly, they are undisputed honchos of international trade. Yet there is something that is bothering Gujaratis the most, and it is their competency in written and oral communication in English. More specifically the intelligibility of their English acts as a major limiting factor in their communication with rest of the world. For better global participation and access Gujarati speakers of English (GSE) will have to scale up their Intelligibility in English. To achieve the goal of scaling up intelligibility, the teaching of English pronunciation in particular and English language teaching as whole should go through a revolutionary change.

The prevailing intelligibility crisis of GSE has its root in the phonological differences at various levels between Gujarati and English. (Vyas: 112) It is apparent that these phonological differences amount for all the areas where L1 transfer is evident in speaking of English which ultimately renders non-native speakers (NNS) unintelligible in global communication (Jenkins: 23). And like any other NNS, GSEs show a very dominant L1 transfer which threatens their intelligibility in English. Essentially, Gujarati being one of the major Indian languages, it shares common features with the phonology of General Indian English (GIE). Dr. Bansal’s meticulous phonological contrastive analysis of GIE and Received Pronunciation (RP) compressively lists points of variation in segmental and supra-segmental phonology. Taking this as a guiding principle, a phonological contrastive analysis of Gujarati and English will be helpful to identify areas which require attention while teaching pronunciation. These areas where L1 transfer is at its maximum are gross common features which would act as indicators for working out the strategies for the reduction of L1 transfer in GSEs. Such analysis will be useful in finding out explicit areas of L1 transfer in GSEs and devising language specific pedagogical strategies which will be helpful to GSEs in attaining International Intelligibility. The language specific strategies are bound to usher better results for GSEs because as per Jenifer Jenkins, ‘in teaching pronunciation NNSs aimed at attaining International Intelligibility. These areas where L1 transfer is at its maximum are gross common features which would act as indicators for working out the strategies for the reduction of L1 transfer in GSEs. Such analysis will be useful in finding out explicit areas of L1 transfer in GSEs and devising language specific pedagogical strategies which will be helpful to GSEs in attaining International Intelligibility. The language specific strategies are bound to usher better results for GSEs because as per Jenifer Jenkins, ‘in teaching pronunciation NNSs aimed at attaining International Intelligibility. These areas where L1 transfer is at its maximum are gross common features which would act as indicators for working out the strategies for the reduction of L1 transfer in GSEs. Such analysis will be useful in finding out explicit areas of L1 transfer in GSEs and devising language specific pedagogical strategies which will be helpful to GSEs in attaining International Intelligibility. The language specific strategies are bound to usher better results for GSEs because as per Jenifer Jenkins, ‘in teaching pronunciation NNSs aimed at attaining International Intelligibility.

As a matter of fact the phonological difference between RP, GIE and Gujarati phonology manifest at both segmental and supra-segmental levels (Vyas: 68). On the segmental level the difference is obvious in the number of consonant and vowel phonemes further expanding in the manner and places of articulation. It would be evident by looking at some of the major phonological difference. The following inventory of the phonological differences between Gujarati and English is based on the Dr. Vyas’s (40-80) comparative study of both the concerned phonologies and researches own observations.

There many fundamental differences in both phonologies but it want be possible to provide a comprehensive list with in the limited space of the present paper. Therefore, only significant differences are mentioned here. For instance as against 24 consonants and 20 vowel in English, Gujarati phonology consists of 13 vowels and 32 consonants. Further, there are numerous differences in terms of manner and place of articulation as regards consonant phonemes of both the languages. Moreover, as against six plosives phonemes in English, there are sixteen plosive phonemes in Gujarati. Besides, English has nine fricatives phonemes as against three /s/, /ʃ/, /h/ in Gujarati. Surprisingly, English phonemes / f /, /θ/, /ð/ are articulated as plosives. Further, as against two /θʃ/,/ðʃ/ affricates in English there are four /θʃ/, /θʃθ/ , /ðʃ/,/ðʃð/ in Gujarati. English fricative /ʃ/ is not the part of Gujarati phonology and it is generally replaced by /s/.

In terms of vowels difference is more visible in the long vowels for instance as against five long vowels / iː, æː, əː, uː, / Gujarati has only two i.e. / e, ə / and as against eight diphthongs, Gujarati has just six. There is a tendency among GSE to use short vowels in place of long vowels. Gujarati phonology has six diphthongs as against eight in RP / iə/, /εə/, /aɪ/, /uɑʃ/, /ʊɒl/, /ɛəl/, /aɪl/, /æəl/. But GSE articulate only two diphthongs /ua/, /au/ properly, rest of the diphthongs are articulated with
some distortions. Especially the diphthongs ending in /u/ and /o/ are articulated either as monophthongs or they are shifted to pure vowels for instance /et/ and /au/ are articulated as /e/ and /o/ respectively. There is tendency among GSEs to use short vowels every time we speak words with a long vowels.

Gujarati and English (RP) are also different at supra-segmental level i.e. stress, rhythm and intonation. ‘Patterns of accent, rhythm are strikingly different in Indian English and RP.’ (Agnihotri: 178) RP has a very unique system of word stress which poses innumerable difficulties for NNSs and GSEs. This is so ‘because in an English word of more than one syllable, one of the syllables is pronounced with greater prominence than the other(s)…the syllable which is pronounced with prominence than other(s) is said to be accented.’ (Balasubramanian: 133) On the other hand, because most of the Indian languages including Gujarati are syllable-timed, GSEs tend to place equal stress on all the syllables in a given word. This very difference in the system of stress poses a challenge for the non-native learners. Broadly, languages of the world can be divided in two groups i.e. languages with stress-timed rhythm and languages with syllable timed rhythm. English is among a few rare languages namely Spanish and Russian following stress timed rhythm as against most other languages following syllable timed rhythm; most of the Indian languages including Gujarati. Most of researches on the Gujarati phonology of English have been on segmental phonology yet it can be said that unlike English, Gujarati being a syllable timed language GSEs tend to stress every syllable in an utterance and stress in Gujarati is not as prominent as English. The stress appears to be static in Gujarati, on the contrary English shows some dynamic stress patterns for instance syllable which is stressed in noun form of the word changes in the verb form. (Vyas: 150)

The syllable structure of both languages appears to be different. English language can have three releasing consonants, a nucleus and four arresting consonants i.e. CCCVCCCC, whereas Gujarati which has three releasing consonants, a nucleus and two arresting consonants i.e. CCCVCC. (Vyas: 88) In addition to this, certain clusters which feature in English do not feature in Gujarati. As result NNSs employ the cluster simplification strategy for clusters which appear unfamiliar to them (Jenkins: 33). GSEs like other NNSs generally use two cluster simplification methods like ellipsis i.e. deleting a specific phoneme from the cluster for example sponsor pronounced as /ponsor/ and special as /speʃl/ and other method paragoge i.e. insert short schwa /ə/ in order to simplify the unusual cluster film would be pronounced as /fɪlm/. Although same trend is seen among uneducated GSEs, it is very commonly perceived in the speaking of GSEs. This tendency according to Jenkins can lead to unintelligible pronunciation.

Gujarati and English as languages differ in the way the phonology and orthography are organized in both the languages. In Gujarati there is dedicated orthographic symbol for every sound in Gujarati alphabet. This means each letter is a reliable guide for each sound and therefore spelling are reliable guides for pronunciation in Gujarati which is not case in English. On the contrary, English as a language doesn’t have one to one relationship between its orthography and phonology, which means there, is a significant difference between, spoken and written English. There is a clear deficiency of letters in alphabet as against number of sounds. For instance, there are 26 letters as against 44 sounds; the deficit of letter against sound amounts to 18 letters. The result is that written English is often inadequate and misleading as far as pronunciation is concerned. GSEs are comfortable to pronounce the language in the way it is written due to their first language Gujarati being a phonetic language. This striking difference acts as the root cause of all the woes of learning pronunciation for an average Gujarati learner of English. This is equally applicable to any other learner in India. The above stated facts are given as small check list of major point of differences.

All these phonological differences and resulting L1 transfer negatively influence the English pronunciation of GSEs. These phonological peculiarities of both languages are broadly problem areas as far as teaching English pronunciation is concerned. A teacher should consider this while teaching pronunciation. Pronunciation of English has been a cause of con-
cern to all countries including India where English is taught as a second language, especially Gujarat. It is apparent that anyone who is not a native speaker of English learns English as a second language (third in case of GSEs) and before s/he learns English s/he has already acquired his/her mother tongue. The problems of learning English pronunciation have its root in the sticking contrast between one’s mother tongue and English.

The effective teaching of pronunciation is top-boom process. It should begin with teachers’ training to equip teachers in order to effectively deal with merging contexts of English EIL. The teachers also should contemplate on inevitability of international intelligibility in English for GSEs better access in this ever changing world. It is apparent that the sounds one hears are the sounds one articulates. More so, if one hears a word pronounced incorrectly, he/she is prone to mispronunciation, in other words unintelligible pronunciation with L1 interference. In keeping with this, it can be said that intelligibility of teacher pronunciation will have direct impact on the intelligibility of pronunciation of their students. Hence the teacher himself will have to improve his pronunciation considering it as his responsibility as a teacher of English. Ultimately, the quality of teachers’ pronunciation would reflect in the quality of learners’ pronunciation. Moreover, external factors such as school and friends play such a significant role in influencing a speaker’s accent. Especially, the influence of environment of schools is the most significant in determining one’s pronunciation. This is so because the learners spend most of their time in their formative years in school and everything about their pronunciation is decided in these formative years.

Considering the prevailing ELT scenario in Gujarat, it would be difficult to persuade the English teachers to neutralise their pronunciation because of the attitudinal issues. Teachers may run down the importance of learning pronunciation because on the one hand, they themselves speak in accents full of transferred features and therefore lack intelligibility, on the other, they don’t want to put necessary effort for improving their pronunciation. Teaching community should take special initiatives to make sure that the overall picture for teaching pronunciation improves. Teachers, considering it as their responsibility, may have to take rigorous training and improve their pronunciation first, so that they can stand as the role model for the learners. They should motivate the learners to improve their pronunciation by explaining them the importance of proper pronunciation in the EIL contexts.

In addition to change of the attitude of the teachers, the teaching of pronunciation needs to go through a major paradigm shift; it should become more and more customized in nature, and incorporate innovative methods like activity based teaching, flip the class and seek application of ICT in teaching pronunciation as far as possible. In this hi-tech IT century, use of language lab for teaching pronunciation can certainly help in bringing desired results. Realizing the importance of pronunciation some of the self-financed schools have started installing computerized-digital language lab and there is some improvement in teaching and learning pronunciation in the state. But language lab is not indispensable for teaching pronunciation. It is very much possible to create a language lab without installing extravagantly expensive infrastructure like interface of computers with software, acoustic interior, and recording and speech analysis software and hardware. A fairly simple and specious room can serve the purpose, if it has some basic audio visual equipment like a tape recorder and a television and some audio-visuals of the native speakers to provide the exhaustive listening to learners.

To be able to bring changes in teaching pronunciation for intelligibility, we would require some revolutionary changes and policy initiatives. The change has to be initiated from schools. The government should come forward and provide all the required resources in terms of facilitating the infrastructure, introducing the teaching of pronunciation right from the schools. As matter of fact, as long as teacher’s attitude towards teaching pronunciation doesn’t change it would be difficult to safeguard the intelligibility of GSEs. There are some visible policy initiatives for instance introduction of SCOPE programme although its success is still to be measured, but this can be taken as a welcome step in this direction. The govt. of Gujarat has funded 250 language labs in college; the provision for funding was more than 20 lacks. The regulatory body of
engineering education AICTE has also made language labs compulsory for all the upcoming colleges. But in the absence of proper governance and monitoring these initiatives can be termed as grand failures.

And such a change would also require amendments in the policy practices nationally. The way to bring teaching of pronunciation in the main stream; one should undertake motivating initiatives like resources creation and capacity building by building proper infrastructure and the other things would be like promoting research in the filed by sufficient funds and incentives. Government agencies like National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) should take pronunciation teaching as a national priority. Educational regulatory like NCERT, UGC and AICTE should mandate sizable component in syllabus of English language and communication skills. The affiliated training institutions for teacher should also incorporate pronunciation training modules to ensure that there is nationwide awareness regarding need of intelligibility to uplift the standard of teaching pronunciation and the way pronunciation is perceived among the educators and learners.

Finally, learners themselves will have to take the initiative as the stake holders and they should begin the diligent work to see to it that they come out of the deep influence of their mother tongue. While speaking in English, the learners will have to show the readiness and they should unhesitatingly ask more and more questions. The learners would need neutral accent and clear pronunciation if they want to survive in this competitive world. It is high time that they take the right steps into the right direction. The learners will have to come out of their comfort zone and look for the professional teaching and training in pronunciation because it is not only desirable but it is gradually becoming imperative as well.

The relevance of teaching pronunciation for intelligibility lies in the fact that intelligibility is a global concern in the ever changing contexts of English as an international language; especially when mutual intelligibility is the desired goal in the ever growing magnitude of English speakers. It is all the more relevant because in the emerging contexts of EFL and EIL, global mutual intelligibility is of perennial importance in the absence of which English language will fail to live up its role of being world’s lingua franca or link language. The pronunciation of teaching is aimed at enhancing intelligibility of GSE has special significance especially because the Gujaratis have greater access, mostly commercial, in the global affairs compared to rest of the world on one side, on the other hand the intelligibility of their pronunciation is at the lowest possible level compared to rest of the states of India given the history of the ELT within the state.

It is desirable that English teachers pursue research in the field of international intelligibility for being efficient teacher of pronunciation. There is an enormous potential for research in the area of international intelligibility in English in this era of globalization. This book has limited its scope to the phonological aspect of intelligibility. This suggests that there is lot of scope for research on intelligibility beyond its phonological implications. In addition to this phonological study, the issue of intelligibility in English can be studied with various other socio-psycho-linguistic aspects of language and communication at different level.

To sum up, it can be stated that teaching pronunciation to GSEs would require nothing less than a systemic change in the ELT as a whole in Gujarat. English teachers will have to recognize that teaching pronunciation for intelligibility in the emerging contexts of English as an international language is a need agreed upon but not acted upon. For effective teaching of pronunciation, the teachers need to grasp the inherent phonological difference in the both languages in first place. Further, they need to understand the nuances of L1 transfer and develop counter strategies for accent neutralisation aimed at facilitating international intelligibility. The teacher would need to develop language specific strategies for the benefit of the learners along with universal strategies for teaching pronunciations. Further, the systemic change should be accompanied by attitudinal changes. The teachers will have to develop research attitude and aptitude to able to achieve desired results in teaching pronunciation to GSEs. It is true that there are obvious bottle necks in teaching pronunciation. But what is en
References

Author Bio

PARESH B. JOSHI, PhD, is a Senior Assistant Professor in Department of English at Christ College, Rajkot-Gujarat. He teaches English Literature and Language, English Phonology, Media Studies, Creative Writing, Translation Studies, Communication Skills and Business Communication, among others. He is also a visiting faculty at Department of English and CLS, Saurashtra University (SU), Rajkot-Gujarat, India. Moreover, he consults various educational institutes as well as industries as Language Expert and Corporate Trainer. He is a Chief Editor of Terra Episteme – an International Journal of Integrated Knowledge in Humanities. He is vice-president of an NGO, NEEHIR - National, Environmental, Educational, Health, Irrigation and Research Organization. He is associated with Higher Education Forum (HEF), Asia—Teacher of English as foreign Language (ASIA-TOEFL), Saurashtra University English Teachers Association (SUETA). His varied contributions find expression in various public addresses that he gives across India as a resource person. As a trainer he has conducted training programmes with leading Corporates, Schools and Colleges on a range of topics including Soft/Life Skills, ELT (English Language Teaching) and Voice and Accent Training. With the passage of time, he has also established himself as a Trainer, Life-coach and Speaker of national repute. He has published research papers in national and international research journals. This apart, he is also a recognised voice-over professional and has done commercials and documentaries.