

Pronunciation difficulties, Phonemic Awareness, and fine motor skills concerns

30th November 2020



Communication Skills for Professional - Case Study
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Abstract

Effective communication has been the backbone of strong relationships, be it political, corporate or any other field. It is the first step in forging ways that lead to trustworthy client relationships. Its importance has been amplified by the current scenario. The corporate world is on the precipice of change in the way it handles and manages situations and also what they stand for. Therefore, effective communication skills are becoming a must, more than they are already.

Focussing on a few of these skills viz. pronunciation, phonemic awareness and fine motor skills, it is intended to identify the different aspects of it, along with the concerns and problems that people face in these areas. Also, ways to overcome these problems are examined in order to be a better communicator.

1 Pronunciation Difficulties

"Pronunciation" refers to the way in which we make the sound of words. 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. But there are some times when we might not be able to pronounce the words in the exact way in which they must be spelled

1. Stressing individual words incorrectly

If you usually speak with native English speakers, this will be the number one reason why they misunderstand you. It's very hard for native English speakers to 'translate' a word spoken as 'caLENDAR' to the way they would pronounce it, 'CALendar'. Non-native English speakers don't have as much of a problem with this, and will probably still understand what you're trying to say.

2. Stressing the wrong words in a sentence.

Remember that you can completely change the meaning of a sentence by stressing different words in that sentence. For example, you could say this sentence in a number of different ways: "I didn't say we should drive this way." If you stress I, you emphasize that taking that route wasn't your idea. On the other hand, if you stress drive, you emphasize the mode of transport. If you don't pay close attention to the words that you stress, you could end up sending a completely different message than the one you intended.

3. Pronouncing certain consonant sounds incorrectly

If people are misunderstanding you, it could very well be due to you confusing what we call 'voiced' and 'unvoiced' sounds. You might substitute 'p' for 'b' or 't' for 'd', for example. These sounds are so easily confused because their only difference is whether or not you use your voice to produce them. If you aren't careful, you could be making mistakes like saying 'tuck' for 'duck' or 'pay' for 'bay'.

4. Mixing up short and long vowel sounds

Vowel sounds, like consonant sounds, can also be confused easily. The main problem with vowels happens when you mix up long and short vowel sounds. For example, the long 'ee' sound in 'seat' with the short 'i' sound in 'sit.' If you confuse these sounds, you end up saying completely different words. This can get confusing in conversation and forces people to draw much more from the context of your speech than the speech itself.

5. Forgetting to finish your words

Do you have a tendency to let your word endings drop? I often hear people drop the 'ed' ending off of words in the past tense, for example. This is a dangerous mistake because not only is your pronunciation wrong, but it also sounds like you're making a grammatical mistake. People could judge you based on this type of error.

1.1 Types of difficulties faced in different environments and situations

Learning English Pronunciations is very important for all professionals in today's market. Good pronunciation makes a professional a good orator which in turn helps on one's career. But certain difficulties in pronunciations can make a huge impact on a person's confidence. Research shows the people with English as a second language have been noticed to have much more difficulties that hinder the learning process in terms of proficiency in the oral and auditory skills. Many research papers have also shown that phonetic difficulties affect older, but not younger, speakers who stutter and that older speakers experience more difficulty on content words than function words.

1.1.1 Voiced Alveolar Approximant Sound

The first four of the six words shown below demonstrate the use of the turned R or voiced alveolar approximant sound in their pronunciation. Represented by letter r, this sound in English can be seen in red or zero. The pronunciation of the last two in the table, however, is somehow different from the first four. Being at the end of the words factor and car, the voiced alveolar approximant sound becomes less stressed in English. From the data analysed by the researchers, it was found out that the students pronounced the letter r as voiced alveolar trill /r/. As the researchers were observing the presentations delivered by the students, the voiced alveolar approximant sound looked more like that of Indonesian voiced alveolar trill sound.

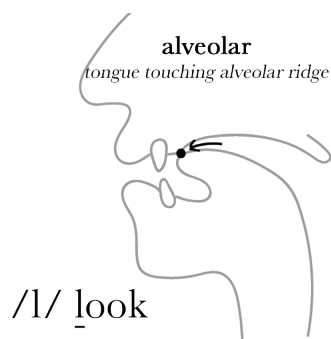


Figure 1: Voiced Alveolar Approximant Sound

1.1.2 Voiced Dental Fricative Sound

The data found and analysed by the researchers showed that the learners also had problems with voiced dental fricative sound ð. For this sound, among other variations that appeared in the data, there are two common pronunciation errors they made. The first type of mistake they made is by assuming that the sound ð/ is pronounced like voiced alveolar plosive sound /d/. Other kinds of mistakes are also seen from the data. They can be seen from how the students pronounced the words /textit{although} and /textit{brother} and compared them to the standard pronunciation of the given words. In addition, they also made mistakes in treating other consonant and vowel sounds.

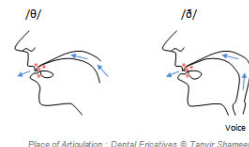


Figure 2: Voiced Dental Fricative Sound

1.1.3 Voiceless Dental Fricative Sound

Still about dental fricative sounds, the students also found it difficult to produce the voiceless type of the sound. Compared to the previous kind discussed above, this sound is much more difficult for them. This is seen from the interview done and from the fact that they sometimes made it right in pronouncing voiced dental fricative sound but they hardly made it right when articulating the voiceless dental fricative sound. Just like in the data presenting voiced dental fricative sounds, the students also make mistakes related to sounds other than voiceless dental fricatives.

1.1.4 Voiceless Post-alveolar Fricative Sound

The last common mistakes made by the students related to phonological issues of consonants is about voiceless post-alveolar fricative sound. In English, this sound is represented by the combination of letters s and h in succession. It is obvious from the data

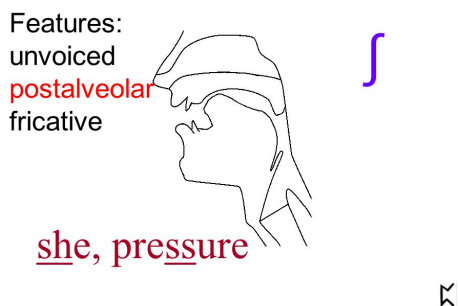


Figure 3: Voiceless Post-alveolar Fricative Sound

reported that this and other kinds of phonological errors are potential to cause misunderstanding from the listeners. The pronunciations /si/ and /wcs/, might be misunderstood as they sound more like see or sea and was rather sound like she and wash as the actual words being used. Problems with this voiceless post-alveolar fricative sound always occur whenever the students found s and h being grouped and pronounced together.

1.2 How to overcome Pronunciation Difficulties

Overcoming the pronunciation barriers:

- One Phoneme at a time

While "improving pronunciation" as a goal might seem unattainable, helping your students improve their pronunciation one phoneme at a time is much more doable. Instead of taking up most of class time practicing pronunciation, practice a different phoneme every day, or every week.

- Practice the **Schwa**

The schwa sound [ə] is the neutral vowel sound that typically occurs in unstressed syllables, for example in words like choc(o)late, sep(a)rate, cam(e)ra, elab(o)rate, etc. There are languages that pronounce these syllables differently and students might be tempted to pronounce them as they do in their native tongue (this is usually the case with Spanish speakers, where

the central o in "chocolate" is pronounced clearly). Teach students to be aware of the [schwa sound] and learn to identify it as it will be tremendously useful in improving their pronunciation.

- Same Spelling Different Sounds

Students should learn that the same consonant combination may have different sounds, for example the ch in chicken and character. The sound [k] in character, in fact, may be spelled with a k, ck, c, ch or que. The th combination is another example: it is pronounced [ð] in this, that, these, those; but it is pronounced [θ] in thin, thank, think, theory, for example. The gh combination is yet another example, as it pronounced as a g (ghost) or f (rough). Practice each of these combos and others one at a time.

- Use Visuals

It's hard for students to simply imagine the difference in spelling, not to mention remember all the different phonetic symbols; try to use visual aids like [consonants flashcards] or [IPA flashcards]. Use them for introduction and practice, and make sure students become familiar with the symbols.

- Learn to use the dictionary

You won't always be around to tell a student how a word is pronounced. Teach them where to find the pronunciation for a word in the dictionary. The best tool in this case is a [dictionary app] with sound, so that the student can hear the pronunciation with a simple click. These tools help students become more independent and more responsible for improving their pronunciation.

2 Phonemic Awareness

2.1 What is phonemic awareness and what is its significance

Ans: Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds in spoken words and the understanding that spoken words and syllables are made up of sequences of speech sounds, essential to learning to read in an alphabetic writing system, because letters represent sounds or phonemes. Without phonemic awareness, phonics makes little sense. Fundamental to mapping speech to print. If a child cannot hear that /man/ and /moon/ begin with the same sound or cannot blend the sounds /rrrrrruuuuunnnnn/ into the word /run/, he or she may have great difficulty connecting sounds with their written symbols or blending sounds to make a word. Essential to learning to read in an alphabetic writing system. A strong predictor of children who experience early reading success.

Phonemic Awareness Significance:

1. It requires readers to notice how letters represent sounds. It primes readers for print.
2. It gives readers a way to approach sounding out and reading new words.
3. It helps readers understand the alphabetic principle (that the letters in words are systematically represented by sounds).

2.2 Benefits of phonemic awareness

Once you become phonemically aware, phonics comes much more naturally. From there, spelling words will become a lot easier — when you split words into sounds, you will know which letters make up a word. Children starting elementary school with a high level of phonemic awareness become more confident readers, making the process of learning to read a lot easier and more fun — when they come across new words, they can sound them out using their phonemic abilities. Phonemic awareness improves our reading abilities. Various studies show the benefits of benefit of phonemic awareness and children who perform phonemic awareness activities are able to read more accurately and made “more substantial” pro-

gress in reading. The increase in accuracy results in improvement of comprehension. These children who perform these activities showed a remarkable ability to read new words. They could read words they’d never read before. So, overall knowledge of language with increase with increase in phonemic awareness

2.3 How to develop phonemic awareness

The development of phonemic awareness starts right from the moment in which we are born. We hear different sounds and try to know the meaning and try to replicate the sound. That how our journey starts. But it is important to have a formal training in phonemic which will further help us in reading and writing also. We start by dividing the word in greater chunks rather than dividing into smaller individual alphabet at very beginning. It is much easier to hear the bigger units of language versus the individual sounds in a word. For example, asking children to segment pencil into two syllables, /pen/ /cil/, is an easier task when compared to segmenting the word pen into three individual sounds, /p/ /e/ /n/. The largest unit of language is a word. Instruction in phonological awareness begins at the word level when children learn that compound words can be blended, segmented, and manipulated. For example, we can blend the small words class – room together to the compound word classroom. Or the opposite, we can segment compound words into two separate words. We can say the whole word and take it apart into two smaller words: raincoat, rain – coat. We can also substitute one small word in a compound word. Say sunshine, change shine to glasses and the word is sunglasses.

Once students can blend, segment, and manipulate compound words, we narrow the unit of language they hear and do the same work with syllables. For example, we blend the three syllables /cal – en – dar/, to say the whole word calendar. Students can segment a word into syllables: elbow can be segmented into /el/ – /bow/. We can substitute a syllable in a word to make a new word: reading; change /read/ to /talk/ and the word is

talking.

We can narrow the unit of language again when we focus on the onset and rime. Onset-rime is breaking apart a syllable. The onset of a word is all the sounds that come before the vowel and the rime is the vowel and all the sounds after. Students blend the onset and rime into a whole word or segment a spoken word into the onset and rime.

1. Phoneme Isolation-Phoneme isolation is a skill where students hear and isolate a sound at the beginning of a word, middle of a word, and end of a word, often referred to as initial, medial, and final sounds. The first sound in the word name is /n/. The final sound in the word bark is /k/. The medial or vowel sound in the word cup is /u/.
2. Blending (parts to whole)-Blending is a skill that directly correlates to phonic decoding. Students hear sounds spoken aloud and they blend the sounds to make a word. During instruction, the teacher provides the phonemes and the students blend the phonemes into a whole word. /s/ /u/ /n/, sun, /b/ /r/ /ā/ /k/, break, /p/ /r/ /i/ /s/, price
3. Segment (whole to parts)-Segmenting is a skill that directly correlates to encoding or spelling. Students hear a whole word and they segment the word into all the individual sounds they hear. During instruction, a teacher would say a whole word and students segment the word into individual phonemes. week, /w/ - /ē/ - /k/, fox, /f/ - /o/ - /k/, swim, /s/ - /w/ - /i/ - /m/
4. Phoneme Manipulation (Add, Delete, Substitute): Phoneme manipulation is practiced with adding a phoneme, deleting a phoneme, or substituting a phoneme in spoken words. Adding an initial sound to make a word: Add /s/ to /-at/ and the word is sat Deleting an initial sound from a word: Say cup. Without /k/, what's left is, /-up/. Substituting an initial sound: The word is top. Change /t/ to /m/ and the word is, mop.

3 Motor Skills

Fine motor skills are the ability to make movements using the small muscles in our hands and wrists. Kids rely on these skills to do key tasks in school and in everyday life.

What are fine motor skills? We use fine motor skills to make small movements. These movements come so naturally to most people that we usually don't think about them. Fine motor skills are complex, however. They involve the coordinated efforts of the brain and muscles, and they're built on the gross motor skills that allow us to make bigger movements. Fine motor skills aren't specific learning skills like reading or math are. But they directly impact how well kids are able to learn and show what they know. For instance, kids need fine motor skills to circle an answer in a bubble on a test or write an essay or response. Kids need to use fine motor skills to do many school-related tasks. These include: Holding a crayon or pencil Drawing pictures and writing neatly Stacking blocks and stringing beads Using scissors, rulers, and other tools Kids also need fine motor skills to do daily tasks like getting dressed and brushing their teeth.



Figure 4: Learning Fine Motor skills

3.1 Improving Motor Skills

3.1.1 Steps to improve fine motor skills in children:

1. Play-dough
2. Puzzles
3. Drawing, colouring in and painting

4. Using kitchen tongs or tweezers
5. Cutting with scissors
6. Toys and Games : Many toys develop fine motor skills, including those for infants and toddlers. For school-aged children, board games with pieces and parts to pick up and move are ideal for developing these skills. For instance, Jenga is a strategy game using fine motor skills that focus on the pincher grip, which is used in writing.
7. Origami: Origami is a paper-folding art that builds skills and is a fun family craft. You can use construction, wrapping or other decorative papers to make fine motor skill building origami shapes. Papercutting activities build skills and control and can be as simple or complex as you need. Beginners can start with cutting out paper chains and progress to more complex projects.
8. Sewing. Kitchen Counter Chronicles.
9. Weaving. Hands On As We Grow.
10. Lacing. Journey into Unschooling.
11. Beading.
12. Balancing.
13. Spooning Marbles.
14. Paint with Water.
15. Trace with Water.
2. Drawing a picture graded by changing the size of the paper. Bring in different materials stampers, finger paint, etc
3. Folding clothes (wash cloths, socks), ADL board (button, zippers bra hooks etc), opening containers (toothpaste, lotion), clothes pins, rainbow rings for crossing midline, velcro board, keys and locks, theraputty, digiflex, beading craft
4. My bin of various empty grocery containers is my go-to for fine motor control skills to open/close, and having patients reach for them in cabinets/refrigerators/shelves of various heights is one of my favorite gross motor control activities.
5. I take them straight to the kitchen and do bathroom stuff! I get them to open their make-up containers, shampoo/conditioner bottles, wearing weights while organizing shelves in the bathroom and or kitchen...make meatballs, bread, pies for meal prep...opening different containers of milk, using the manual can opener. Sorting dry a bag of dry beans for meal prep...decorating cookies and cupcakes.
6. Theraband activities or squeezing a ball are some of my favorite fine motor activities to work on. - Noreena Ishtiaq
7. I had a patient who had a stroke that was a retired banker. I brought in all sorts of coins/dollars he really enjoyed sorting them into various piles, placing them in stacks, etc.
8. One easy fine motor activity I really like is to take a piece of paper and using one hand, make it into a ball, then spread it out flat.

3.1.2 Steps to improve fine motor skills in adults:

1. Nuts and bolts, lacing beads, using clothespins to pick up Pom poms to paint or just sort, buttons, zippers, snaps, putting marbles or rubber balls on golf tees, making small balls with putty or play doh, sorting jewelry, squeezing water out of sponges or towels, using different types of tongs to pick up small objects
9. But Rachel Hall, had a suggestion to take it one step farther to grade it by starting with the paper on table then raise it up once in the hand so no "cheating."
10. My patient cleaned a tray table of shaving cream and told me she liked doing a functional task.

11. Playing video games.
12. Using squirt bottles for cleaning.
13. Squeezing a rubber ball or tennis ball.
14. Pushing the affected fingers against a mattress.
15. Fanning the fingers.
16. Making a fist and holding as long as possible.
17. Bouncing and catching a ball.
18. Crumpling and uncrumpling paper.

3.2 Concerns related to fine motor skills

- **Bilateral Integration:** Using two hands together with one hand leading (e.g. opening a jar lid with hand while the other hand helps to by stabilising the jar).
- **Crossing Mid-line:** The ability to cross the imaginary line running from a child's nose to pelvis that divides the body into left and right sides.
- **Hand and finger strength:** An ability to exert force against resistance using the hands and fingers that allows the necessary muscle power for controlled movement.
- **Hand eye coordination:** The ability to process information received from the eyes to control, guide and direct the hands in the performance of a task such as handwriting.
- **Hand Dominance:** The consistent use of one (usually the same) hand for task performance which allows refined skills to develop.
- **Hand division:** Using just the thumb, index and middle finger for manipulation, leaving the fourth and little finger tucked into the palm not participating but providing stability for the other 3 fingers.
- **Object Manipulation:** The ability to skillfully manipulate tools (such as the ability to hold and move pencils and scissors with control) and the controlled use of everyday tools such as a toothbrush, hairbrush, and cutlery.
- **Body Awareness (Proprioception):** Information that the brain receives from our muscles and joints to make us aware of our body position and body movement, so we can accurately control our movements.

Activities can help improve fine motor skills

- **Threading and lacing:** with a variety of sized laces and beads.
- **Tongs or teabag squeezers:** to pick up objects (e.g. put marbles down a marble maze).
- **Manipulation games:** such as 'Pick up Sticks' and 'Connect 4'.
- **Play-doh:** Using the fingers, not the hands as whole; working with the Play-doh up in the air, not flat on the table.
- **Construction:** that requires pushing and pulling with fingers (e.g. 'Mobilo', 'K'nex' or 'Lego').
- **Storing construction materials** in jars with screw lids that need to be opened and closed as the materials are needed and when packed away.
- **Craft:** Make things using old boxes, egg cartons, wool, paper and sticky or masking tape.

4 Conclusion

Pronunciation difficulties were defined and assessed. The main reasons were found to be stressing wrong words, mixing up short and long vowels, not finishing your words etc. Along with this, different type of difficulties faced in different situations and environments were defined. Ways to improve this skill were proposed such as using visuals, using dictionary, learning schwa, practising etc.

Phonemic awareness was defined and its significance was highlighted. It primes the readers for print and makes it easier to understand sounds. Ways to improve along with the benefits of this skill were proposed such as phoneme isolation and blending.

Finally, motor skills were defined and the concerns related to it were assessed. Finally, ways to improve motor skills were proposed separately for children and adults.