

УДК 42/48 (07): 378

DOI 10.51955/2312-1327\_2025\_1\_207

## DEVELOPING STUDENTS' RECEPTIVE AND PRODUCTIVE PRONUNCIATION SKILLS IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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**Abstract.** The paper focuses on developing students' pronunciation skills in conditions of distance learning in higher education. The authors analyze the specifics of online EFL lessons (their advantages and disadvantages), list the main mistakes in teaching pronunciation and suggest the ways for teachers to avoid making them. The authors applied several methods during their research, i.e. comparative historical analysis of the up-to-date approaches to teaching pronunciation in English Teaching Methodology, observation, learning experience and project-based learning method. Special attention in the paper is given to the most efficient forms of student work during an online lesson in the aspect of acquiring natural English pronunciation and to the right way for teachers to motivate students and organize their unguided pronunciation practice activities. The importance of fostering students' pronunciation skills is proven along with the vital role of pronunciation aspect in students' communicative competence. The aim of teaching pronunciation is established with the term «threshold level of pronunciation». The article also concentrates on specific stages of online listening exercises and on the importance of doing them in the right order. Several options of facilitating the process of acquiring pronunciation skills during distance learning are offered in the article, i.e. shadowing technique, scaffolding, project work and individually-oriented approach.

**Keywords:** threshold level of pronunciation, oral communicative competence, phonological competence, communicative approach, pronunciation skills, distance learning, listening, connected speech, scaffolding, shadowing, project work.

# **ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ РЕЦЕПТИВНЫХ И ПРОДУКТИВНЫХ НАВЫКОВ ПРОИЗНОШЕНИЯ НА ДИСТАНЦИОННЫХ ЗАНЯТИЯХ ПО ИНОСТРАННОМУ ЯЗЫКУ В ВЫСШЕЙ ШКОЛЕ**

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**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена исследованию методов и способов формирования и развития произносительных навыков у изучающих иностранный язык в условиях дистанционного обучения. Авторы анализируют специфику проведения занятий по иностранному языку в дистанционном формате (достоинства и недостатки данного формата обучения), рассматривают основные ошибки, потенциально присутствующие в процессе обучения правильному произношению, а также способы их устранения. В ходе исследования применялись следующие методы: метод сравнительного анализа подходов к процессу обучения произношению с точки зрения современной методики обучения иностранному языку, метод наблюдения, метод проектного обучения. Особое внимание уделяется наиболее эффективным формам работы обучающихся на занятиях в условиях дистанционного обучения, направленным на приобретение естественного иноязычного произношения, а также способам формирования мотивации обучающихся и организацию самостоятельной работы над произношением. В статье описывается необходимость формирования и развития произносительных навыков обучающихся иностранному языку в дистанционном формате, а также важность данного аспекта как составляющей коммуникативной компетенции. Цель обучения произношению сформулирована с опорой на термин «пороговый уровень произношения». Доказана важная роль аудирования в обучении произношению, а также необходимость выполнения стадий аудирования в правильном порядке. В статье предложены и детально описаны практические способы, облегчающие процесс приобретения произносительных навыков обучающимися в условиях дистанционного обучения иностранному языку: метод теневого повтора, скаффолдинг, проектная работа и личностно-ориентированный подход.

**Ключевые слова:** пороговый уровень произношения, устная коммуникативная компетенция, фонетическая компетенция, коммуникативный подход, обучение произношению, дистанционное обучение, аудирование, связная речь, скаффолдинг, метод теневого повтора, проектная работа.

## Introduction

Developing students' pronunciation skills is one of the most challenging aspects of teaching English as a second language [Asrul et al., 2022; Kuzmytska, 2021] along with fostering students' communicative competence due to the rapid development of information technologies and the wide introduction of distance learning in the pandemic times [Advances..., 2023].

Firstly, there is an enormous stream of multimedia information regularly coming through our mind [Majeed et al., 2020], which, undoubtedly, boosts our skills of reading for gist and scanning for information [Setiawan et al., 2023]. Unfortunately, at the same time it slows down our ability to concentrate and to read for detail [Чернышов и др., 2022]. It hampers contextualization and active usage of new lexical items because students quite often ignore a significant amount of words new for them (in cases when their meaning is unclear from the context). Many students today tend to avoid using dictionaries and consequently they acquire lesser learning burden of the recently met vocabulary item [Nation, 2001]. *Learning burden* of a word includes collocations, connotative and denotative meaning, stylistic sphere of use, the correct way to pronounce it etc. [Nation, 2001]. For example, if you take the word “*fair*”, its learning burden will include several collocations (***fair** hair/skin, fair game, fair way, fair share, to play fair* etc), positive connotations (*fair = proper, legal, light in color, direct, straight, consistent with rules and logic*), stylistic sphere of use (*neutral*, meaning “light-coloured” or “honest”; *sometimes archaic*, meaning “beautiful”), the right way to pronounce – [feə].

Secondly, the communicative nature of learning a language might be impaired in the conditions of distance learning [Troitskaya, 2021]. Working in pairs (and getting instant feedback from other students) is sometimes complicated due to possible technical bugs of the process.

Nevertheless, conditions of distance learning can have positive effect on students' pronunciation skills:

1) students and their teacher can easily immerse into another language and into the world cultural context regardless of where they live geographically (by using educational resources and platforms, mobile apps in English, watching films and TV series in the original etc.);

2) students have quite a lot of opportunities to communicate with native speakers (i.e. using instant messaging social platforms, social networks). This kind of experience boosts students' motivation [Kulinska, 2020], along with efficiency of the language learning process and their readiness to communicate;

3) distance learning is an opportunity for students to continue attending classes without a break in case of a lockdown;

4) a lot of teacher's attention goes to organizing students' independent work, to ensuring individually-oriented approach to teaching (in the aspects of task assignment, time limits etc.).

### **Materials and methods**

The following research is based on several theoretical and practical methods, i.e. comparative analysis of existing literature devoted to the problem of developing students' pronunciation skills, method of observation and analysis of authors' own practical experience of teaching English in higher education to adult students in the times of COVID-19, method of learning experience and project-based learning method. For 1 year 85 students from 3 faculties (IT, Primary Education and Pre-School Education) at South Ural State Humanitarian and Pedagogical University had been observed and subjected to teaching pronunciation distantly with the methods described in the article and almost all of them reported a significant improvement of their pronunciation skills.

### **Discussion**

The idea of developing students' skills of speaking and listening comprehension simultaneously appeared in the middle of the XX century. The method also suggested case studies for making dialogues and fostering students' speaking skills [Журий, 2008]. Later on, communicative approach proved the necessity of promoting students' pronunciation skills by introducing the term «threshold level of pronunciation» [Celce-Murcia et al., 1996]. The idea came up about a different, more realistic goal of teaching pronunciation to EFL students – not making them sound like a native speaker but evolving their pronunciation skills beyond the level where they can be understood by any English-speaking person, native and non-native alike.

Nowadays pronunciation practice is a significant part of EFL teaching approach being a component of oral communicative/phonological competence [Журий, 2008]. When overall intelligibility of a student's speech is below the threshold level of pronunciation, oral communication will be impossible regardless of this student's grammar/vocabulary skill. Consequently, one of the main goals in foreign language teaching is to develop students' pronunciation skills so that they would exceed the threshold level of pronunciation. Based on both classroom teaching and distance learning experience, it is quite efficient to combine pronunciation drill exercises with listening and communicative tasks [Al-Jarf, 2022]. Listening activities are indispensable in this case as our goal in developing *students' phonological competence* (i.e. teaching pronunciation) is not restricted purely to the mechanics of the English sounds but it also includes dealing with the complexity of the English phonological system (e.g. connected speech, linking, phonetic phenomena, – nasal/lateral plosion, linking r etc.; existence of many English accents and varieties and students' ability to understand their speakers and lead communication with them *above the threshold level* of what can be understood). Thus, the updated perspective on teaching pronunciation to students is becoming more and more practice-oriented and cannot exist isolated from listening and speaking activities.

## Results

In the context of distant learning, shaping students' phonological competence might be roughly divided into developing students' listening skills (i.e. receptive pronunciation activities) and speaking skills (i.e. productive pronunciation activities). For instance, an online lesson can revolve around properly designed tasks based on a video/audio in the original (a fragment of TV series, a movie trailer, a podcast etc.) [Киселев, 2020], listening flowing into speaking. Modern software allows all participants of an online session to watch videos without loss of quality/sound. The main mistakes, which we can make while teaching listening during an online lesson, are:

1) irregular use of listening activities or complete absence of them/replacement by other «more important» tasks (grammar, vocabulary etc.). As a result, students lack the habit and ability to perceive information in English in the oral form, and, most importantly, the skill of recognizing separate words in a conversation. It leads to possible psychological discomfort and tension in intercultural communication;

2) failure to give students the clear set of objectives before the listening part of the task begins. Students must completely understand what the aim of the listening is, what kind of information they are looking for. It ensures their success and effectiveness while completing the listening task. Listening for gist is an inseparable stage of any listening task, which should include a generalized question on comprehension of the general idea of the text. It increases students' motivation, their ability to get the general idea of the oral message, makes them foresee the general meaning of the text. A teacher should give detailed instructions, read the task with the students, elicit the meaning of any unclear vocabulary from them and check students' understanding of the instructions;

3) wrong sequence of the stages in a listening exercise (Pre-Listening, Listening for Gist, Listening For Detail, Vocabulary Discussion etc.) leads to decreased students' concentration [Guliyeva, 2024], erratic focus of their attention (e.g. when they try to do listening for gist and listening for detail at once), which, in its turn, results in failure to do the task. The mentioned stages of a listening task should be presented separately to students and in their own time;

4) prohibition against students using a script of the audio at the final stages of listening [Ryu et al., 2020]. The main problem of beginners and elementary students is that they lack the skill of recognizing already acquired vocabulary items in the connected speech. Using a script tackles the problem and creates positive psychological environment. What's more, it promotes students' own skills of linking words and therefore producing connected, naturally sounding speech. From the grammatical point of view, it might help them analyze sentence structures better (with «to be» forms and full auxiliaries lost in speech of the natives) and develops their grammar skill. Moreover, it makes it possible to discuss the lexical aspect of the typed script after listening (any new words, useful collocations etc.) and activate them later on by making students' own sentences with them/answering the teacher's questions;

5) ignoring any new vocabulary/grammar structures/useful communicative clichés met during listening. «After Listening» stage should include work with lexical

and grammatical aspect of the text. For low levels, the best way is to present the new vocabulary separately to the students and elicit the meaning of the words from them (they can get it from the context/use a dictionary, give L1 equivalents or English synonyms). It is possible to continue by asking students to use the new vocabulary in their own sentences/to make up a story with them. The teacher can also suggest doing a gap-completing exercise here;

6) lack of articulatory practice (i.e. repeating potentially difficult sounds/intonation patterns in pairs, individually etc.). Natural intonation patterns are necessary for successful communication. In students' spontaneous speech, we might hear quite a lot of L1 intonation patterns that give them out as non-native speakers faster than any wrong sound articulation. Intonation patterns used while speaking a foreign language should become natural and intuitive for students with the minimal control of the mind [Scherba, 1958]. In many aspects, learning pronunciation can be compared to learning how to play a musical instrument, which takes a lot of practice and multiple repetitive actions [Zharkova, 2016]. Thus, online English lesson also requires regular practice of pronunciation skills in various forms (e.g. dividing students into breakout rooms and organizing pronunciation drills etc.). A practice like that may include either exercises of the «listen, repeat and copy intonation and rhythm» type or detailed practice of specific intonation patterns.

7) absence of the final speaking phase of the lesson. Speaking is considered to be one of utterly motivating activities for students during which they can see the “result” of the whole process of learning a foreign language and apply the whole complex of language skills (pronunciation ones included) acquired in the process.

Keeping in mind our experience of teaching English to adult students we can suggest several recommendations how to make a speaking activity an effective part of the lesson.

A. The tasks and questions should have simple design and they should totally correspond to students' level of English (they should be understood by them on their own easily without referring to dictionaries/translating them into L1). They should not contain new words/collocations except for those learnt during the lesson.

B. Work in pairs is preferable before assessing students' speaking by the teacher. It relieves psychological tension of being assessed and allows even more practice.

C. Before the speaking phase starts, the clear set of objectives for students should be made. For instance, it might include:

- answering the given questions about the content of the video;
- giving their personal opinions on the subject;
- comparing two or more photos/concepts (e.g. *going away for holidays vs. staying in*, listing advantages and disadvantages of both ways);
- discussing a list of given problems;
- sharing their personal experiences on the topic of the lesson;
- choosing one item from the list and persuading the partner to do the same etc.

Furthermore, on higher levels we might give an *additional objective* (especially when we speak about future English teachers) which is closely connected with pronunciation. It might be:

- observing intonation patterns and trying to imitate natural intonation of English-speaking people especially while reacting to your partner's statements (which might be a problem for students in most cases);
- imitating linking between words in syntagmas and tone groups;
- following the rhythmic pattern of the English language (the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables);
- observing the correct pronunciation of one “problematic” sound – interdental “th”, for example.
- using grammar contractions (*I'll, we're, it'd*) in speech naturally.

D. It's a good idea to revise clichés for effective speaking, i.e. clichés for expressing one's personal opinion (in my opinion, personally, I guess, I believe etc.), speech connectors (because, that's why, although, but etc.), linking phrases (moreover, furthermore, nevertheless), and pause fillers (actually, well, let me think, give me a moment). Pronounced with right intonation, such clichés make students' speech sound natural and help them go beyond the threshold level of pronunciation in communication.

E. Setting the timer might also prove useful as speaking is only a part of the lesson and we need to keep it dynamic and as concise as possible. Sufficient time limit for actual speaking in pairs on low levels is 1-3 minutes depending on the task. 1 minute is enough to express an opinion and prove your point of view or describe a picture, 3 minutes – for discussing a list of items and persuading each other. Higher level students might undoubtedly require longer time.

F. In assessing students' speaking teachers must pay attention not exclusively to mistakes in grammar/vocabulary but also to pronunciation mistakes which hamper their understanding by other English speakers, namely:

- wrong pronunciation of single sounds (e.g. [æ], [w], [θ]);
- wrong pronunciation of single words (incorrect stress, wrong sounds);
- wrong intonation (among Russian speakers of English falling tones prevail), general lack of reaction to what the other person said;
- wrong division of statements into tone groups which loses the meaning of the whole sentence;
- wrong choice of stressed words in a sentence (the ones, which are meaning-contained, should be stressed while the others should be left unstressed).

Free speaking allows students to immerse in English-speaking environment without barriers and fully put their foreign language skills (pronunciation skills included) to practice.

Building a lesson around video fragments in the original proved as being highly effective in the aspect of developing students' skills of connected speech comprehension. Such video fragments may include extracts from films, TV series, movie trailers, documentaries, YouTube videos etc. For low levels, it is a good idea to include English subtitles, which creates a situation of success and promotes students' cognitive interest. Regular exercises in listening lead to psychological comfort in communicative situations and increases students' motivation.

Current approach to learning English regards teaching pronunciation as an inseparable part of teaching not only listening and speaking, but even grammar and

vocabulary. For instance, G. Kelly suggests two possible schemes for introducing new grammar or vocabulary – MFP (Meaning, Form, Pronunciation) and MPF (Meaning, Pronunciation, Form) [Kelly, 2001]. E.g. while teaching Past Simple we need to focus on the three options of pronouncing *-ed* [d] (*called*), [t] (*looked*), [ɪd] (*waited, started*). By leaving the pronunciation aspect out at the stage of introducing new material teachers give way to typical students' mistakes in speech, such as devoicing of the end consonants/ wrong middle vowel (*food=foot, walk=work*) or imminent pronouncing of *-ed* in Past Simple verbs (*signed, walked*).

As for the methods of teaching purely pronunciation, one of the most popular activities which proved to be quite effective and convenient for the conditions of distance learning is *shadowing*. The technique was offered by A. Arguelles and it includes listening to a fragment of native speech and repeating it without any pauses. The aim here is to copy the intonation, rhythm and pronunciation as much as possible. There are several stages to this activity:

1. Choosing a model. At this stage the teacher has to choose a video/audio with a speaker that can serve as a role model/reference for targeted pronunciation ideal (usually one of the native accents, RP/GA). The fragment should not be very long (2-5 minutes) and it should be in the frame of the English course content (at best it should include vocabulary chunks and grammar constructions familiar to students).

2. Students doing a Listening Task with the chosen fragment. To keep it short, we might narrow it down to 2 parts: Listening for gist (general understanding) and Listening for detail (filling in the gaps).

3. Shadowing the speaker. Students listen to the whole sentence first, then to the first syntagma, teacher presses pause, students repeat after the speaker, copying all the phonetic aspects (intonation, manner of pronouncing separate sounds etc.), listen to the second syntagma, repeat and so on.

4. Working with the script. Students work in pairs or individually, read the script to each other without listening. The aim here is to get as close to the model as they can, imitating natural English speech.

As a result, we have a significant increase in Student Talking Time in the course of a lesson. Students might work individually, nevertheless, they are completely immersed in the language. By repetition, they subconsciously acquire not only intonation patterns and skills of connected speech but also collocations, phrases and vocabulary chunks. Shadowing technique is perfectly suitable for self-study and makes pronunciation practice more diverse.

Shadowing technique can be used in distance language learning in the form of project activity, e.g. «Movie Dubbing». Students dub a short (30 sec to 2 min) fragment of a video (a film/TV series episode/animated film) [Hai Yen, 2021]. This project can be done in pairs or in groups of three. According to the language level, the teacher might optionally follow the stages of the project, i.e. listening to the original excerpt and discussing pronunciation peculiarities represented in the speech of characters (intonation patterns and potentially difficult sounds); reading the script aloud and practicing connected speech, the dubbing of the fragment and online presentation of the results to the group. Chosen video excerpts should correlate with students' language level, they should be semantically complete and independent from



the main plot of the film. As for the assessment criteria, it should include separate points for synchronization, natural intonation, correct pronunciation and overall intelligibility of the lines recorded by the students.

Such project activities definitely boost students' motivation [Коньшева, 2002], let them express their creativity [Петрова и др., 2017], acquire English pronunciation in a natural way by repetition and, most importantly, in case of online learning, make them feel as part of the team and learning process.

### **Conclusion**

Fostering students' pronunciation skills is considered one of the most challenging aspects of English teachers' work. In the framework of communicative approach, students' phonological competence seems to be inseparably connected with their communicative competence and it has two sides – receptive pronunciation (the act of listening) and productive pronunciation (the act of speaking). The main goal of teaching pronunciation is becoming more down-to earth and includes going beyond “threshold level of pronunciation” which would make students' speech intelligible to others in the process of communication. Distance learning of the English language, on the one hand, facilitates teaching pronunciation because it offers us a limitless choice of language resources in the original. On the other hand, it calls for thorough organization of the learning process on the teacher's side such as logical sequence of the lesson stages and various scaffolding techniques (e.g. pre-teaching the vocabulary etc.). The typical mistakes inhibiting the development of students' pronunciation skills include lack of listening activities, not setting a clear objective before the task, prohibition against using a script at the final stage of listening, insufficient articulatory practice and lack of the final speaking activity, which is crucial for putting pronunciation skills to practice. Online development of pronunciation skills requires permanent constructive feedback from the teacher and various forms of student interaction. A significant part of pronunciation practice can be done individually (shadowing technique is perfect for that) and in the form of a project (Movie Dubbing project).

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