

ONLINE PRONUNCIATION RESOURCES: HOBBIES OR FOBBIES OF EFL TEACHERS?

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at revealing whether language teachers use online resources to teach pronunciation to their students or not, what they think of using online pronunciation teaching resources, whether there is a correlation between age and using online pronunciation teaching resources, and whether there is a correlation between teaching experience and using online pronunciation teaching resources. 109 language teachers working in preparatory schools of five different universities in North Cyprus participated in the present study. The results of the study exhibited that 36 (%33) of language teachers made use of online resources to teach pronunciation to their students. However, 73 (% 67) of the language teachers responded that they did not use online resources to teach pronunciation to their students. It was also revealed in the study that language teachers who are seniors and more experienced had never used online pronunciation teaching materials, and that they needed training as to how to use online pronunciation resources. However, those who are young and less experienced stated that online pronunciation resources were beneficial for both students' pronunciation development and language teachers' professional development. Moreover, it was clearly seen that while language teachers who are seniors showed a reduced tendency towards using online pronunciation resources, those who are young were more enthusiastic about using online pronunciation resources. Furthermore, it was overtly seen that while language teachers with more teaching experience showed a reduced tendency towards using online pronunciation resources, those with little teaching experience were more enthusiastic about using online pronunciation resources.

Keywords: Pronunciation teaching, pronunciation materials, online pronunciation resources, online professional organizations.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many pronunciation teachers have begun to employ online resources as a substitute for traditionally printed materials, such as course information, lecture notes, exercises, quizzes, and others. Instead of distributing pronunciation materials in the form of printed handouts in the language classroom, teachers make them available to students via the electronic medium by changing how students receive L2 specific phonological input. The effect of online resources has permeated through all aspects of pronunciation teaching in colleges and universities throughout the world. Today, online resources are regarded as not only technological but also pedagogical devices to promote pronunciation teaching and the learning process. Since online resources provide language teachers with minimal pairs, tongue twisters, songs, sound animations, step-by-step phonetic descriptions, and video animations specific to segmental (i.e. consonant and vowel phonemes of English) and suprasegmental (i.e. pitch, loudness, tempo, and rhythm) aspects of English pronunciation, they have been appealing for pronunciation teachers who are seeking ways to include vital, authentic, and interesting materials into their lessons.

The underlying reason for our engaging in this investigation is that foreign language teachers in North Cyprus, especially those who are young, have begun to use online pronunciation teaching resources, to some extent, recently to make their pronunciation lessons colorful, entertaining, and thus more motivating for students by

viewing the prominence of incorporating such resources into their lessons. The paper presents background of pronunciation teaching materials, lists the advantages and disadvantages of using online resources as an educational tool in pronunciation programs, presents the findings of a research study and makes recommendations for language teachers who try to incorporate online resources into their pronunciation courses.

BACKGROUND OF PRONUNCIATION TEACHING MATERIALS

Pronunciation teaching materials have changed significantly over the past fifty years from stressing the correct articulation of discrete sounds to focusing more on the broader, more communicative aspects of connected speech (Jones 1997: 112). Most commercially produced pronunciation materials today, while still retaining many of the characteristics of traditional audiolingual texts in which pronunciation was practised through listen and repeat exercises from prescribed dialogues, include more meaningful and communicative practice, an increased emphasis on suprasegmentals, and other features, such as consciousness raising and self-monitoring. However, it should be stated that such pronunciation materials are mainly designed for a foreign language classroom where a teacher decides the sequence of material to be learned, chooses the items to be practised, and provides immediate feedback to learners. Their options are limited for learners who want to promote their pronunciation but are not in a suitable classroom context, who have limited access or no access to teachers but who have access to a computer, or who want to work on their own (Bott 2005: 12). This situation is one in which online resources might provide an answer.

In our times, online resources are used as a tool for those interested in autonomous pronunciation learning. Pennington (1999: 431) emphasizes that computer-aided pronunciation (CAP) through which online resources can be usable and practical has a great power to promote individualized pronunciation instruction, therefore, maximizing learners' motivation, and can provide immediate feedback that is repeatable and reliable. However, she also states that instructional materials developers have been slow to develop pronunciation software materials. Since Pennington's comments, attempts have been made over recent years to design pronunciation materials for self-access centers. These materials have come in a variety of forms, such as books, audiotapes and CDs, CD-ROMs, the Internet, and other computerized materials. Although many of these resources claim to improve self-directed learning, these materials are basically supplements to textbooks or other classroom materials and provide learners with few or no opportunities for feedback. For instance, CDs give the learner the chance to hear native speaker pronunciation. Students can only imitate native speaker speech without any given feedback. Other materials, such as pronunciation exercises available on the internet or on CD-ROMs, provide practice, instruction, and explanation for learners. Some programs even allow the learners to record their own speech and hear what they have recorded. However, these programs are limited in scope and do not give the learners much opportunity to practise specific suprasegmentals with the capability of receiving immediate feedback (Bott, 2005: 13).

Online resources have also been suggested as a way to meet the variety of teachers' needs (DeWert & Cory, 1998; Moore & Wise, 2004). However, recent studies have mainly concentrated on describing the usefulness of online resources for language teachers (Justice & Espinoza, 1999; Davis & Resta, 2002; De Wert et al., 2003). While such studies present meaningful information on the usefulness of online resources, there is still a substantial lack of data on how language teachers can actually use online pronunciation teaching resources in their professional practices.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF USING ONLINE RESOURCES AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL IN PRONUNCIATION PROGRAMS

Nowadays, there are a variety of pronunciation materials, such as course books, CDs, DVDs, dictionaries, phonemic charts, vocal tract diagrams as well as online resources. Although the right form of pronunciation

material to use depends on the circumstances, it is common to use online pronunciation resources in order to teach pronunciation to students. However, online resources have both advantages and disadvantages.

On the one hand, there are some positive sides of using online pronunciation resources. Firstly, online professional organizations, such as *the International Phonetic Association*, *IATEFL's Pronunciation Special Interest Group*, and *TESOL's Speech/Pronunciation Special Interest Section* inform language teachers of issues and news in the field of pronunciation learning and teaching, and they also offer a wide range of resources that teachers can employ to develop their phonetic knowledge and pronunciation skills.

These online professional organizations specific to pronunciation learning and teaching are described in the following:

The International Phonetic Association

Available Internet Address: <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/IPA/ipa.html>

Description: The IPA aims to promote the scientific study of phonetics and the various practical applications of that science. IPA fonts, journals, and sounds of the IPA are available on both cassette and CD.

IATEFL's Pronunciation Special Interest Group

Available Internet Address: <http://members.aol.com/PronunciationSig/index.htm>.

Description: The aim of the IATEFL Pronunciation SIG is to take the mystery out of pronunciation teaching and make it interesting and accessible for all teachers of English. Speak Out! is their publication devoted to the teaching of English pronunciation.

TESOL's Speech/Pronunciation Special Interest Section

Available Internet Address: <http://www.public.iastate.edu/~jlevis/SPRIS/>

Description: This organization provides information about the interest section, discussions of pronunciation issues, information about pronunciation teaching and resource books, pronunciation activities, articles, previous TESOL Matters columns, and links to interesting Web Sites.

Secondly, online journals, such as *the Journal of Phonetics*, *the Linguist*, and *Language Learning & Technology* provide ready access for language teachers who are interested in promoting their phonetic knowledge, comprehending the most current research trends in the field of pronunciation learning and teaching, and putting theory into practice. These online journals specific to pronunciation learning and teaching can be described as follows:

The Journal of Phonetics

Available Internet Address: <http://hbuk.co.uk/ap/journals/jp/>

Description: The Journal of Phonetics publishes papers of an experimental or theoretical nature that deal with phonetic aspects of language and linguistic communication processes.

The Linguist

Available Internet Address: <http://www.emich.edu/linguist/>

Description: This online journal contains online academic papers, job resources, research support and a myriad of other helpful links for the linguist.

Language Learning & Technology

Available Internet Address: <http://lt.msu.edu/>

Description: This online journal looks at how technology impacts the classroom. Articles relating to technology that facilitate the teaching of pronunciation on the Internet are published in the journal.

Thirdly, listservs and online discussion groups provide language teachers with a vehicle for exchanging pronunciation teaching ideas as well as getting new information and pronunciation resources from each other. Some listservs and online discussion groups related to pronunciation learning and teaching are described in the following section:

The IATEFL Pronunciation Special Interest Group Discussion Group (52 members)

Available Internet Address: http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/iatefl_pronsig/

Description: This discussion group aims to make up a forum for discussion of all aspects of pronunciation in English Language Teaching, whether you are interested in classroom methodology, teacher training, phonetics, phonology, or wish to find answers to tricky questions. What methods work in the classroom? What model of pronunciation should we use? How can technology be used to aid teaching and learning? Language teachers discuss issues, ask and answer questions, and make contact with people of similar interests.

English Phonetic Symbols (29 members)

Available Internet Address: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/English_Phonetic_Symbols/

Description: The aim of this discussion group is to gather people who are interested in learning / practising English Phonetics for better pronunciation. Meeting sessions are arranged once a month for exchange of knowledge and experiences in relation to learning/practising English Phonetics.

Phonetics (17 members)

Available Internet Address: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Phonetics/>

Description: This discussion group aims to help students to learn to speak clearly in both personal and professional situations with focus on the International Phonetic Alphabet, the consonants, the vowels, words in company, stressed and unstressed words, strong and weak forms, intonation, voice projection, breathing techniques, Singapore English pronunciation methodology, lecture, demonstration, listening exercise, exercises in phonemic transcription, reading and dialogue.

Fourthly, free online resources for pronunciation provide language teachers with a variety of online pronunciation lessons, sound and video animations, diagrams of speech organs, tongue twisters, minimal pairs, and songs. Some free online resources relevant to pronunciation learning and teaching are described in the following section:

<http://www.fonetiks.org/>

Description: This site presents online pronunciation guides to 7 varieties of the English in relation to single vowel sounds, two vowel sounds, three vowel sounds, voiced/voiceless sounds, various other sounds, and stress and tone.

<http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Pronunciation/>

Description: This site contains tongue twisters, minimal pair practice and quizzes, sound and video animations, intonation practice, liaisons, listen and repeat machine, contractions and shortcuts used in daily speech, common pronunciation errors by ESL students, pronunciation guide for the names of people and places, videos of some problem causing English consonants, reduced forms, phonetic alphabet, phonetic transcription, reasons for studying English pronunciation, colorful poems with animations, audio and activities, and guide to English pronunciation under the related categories.

<http://www.manythings.org/pp/>

Description: This site covers songs, poems, tongue twisters, and quizzes in relation to problematic English consonants and vowels. There are sound animations for minimal pairs, songs, tongue twisters, and quizzes.

<http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics/english/frameset.html/>

Description: This site includes animated articulatory diagrams for consonant and vowel phonemes of North American English, a step-by-step description and video-audio of the sound in a context.

<http://esl.about.com/od/pronunciationlessonplans>

Description: This site presents free English pronunciation lesson plans for beginning, intermediate, and advanced level of English learning in ESL/EFL classes focusing on phonetics, IPA, and correct sentence pronunciation.

www.cambridge.org/elt/resources/skills/interactive/pron_animations/index.htm

Description: This site presents sounds, stress, intonation, and phonemic chart. Students can watch the mini-movies to practise reading and saying all the diphthongs in English. Furthermore, they can do practice on stress, intonation, and phonemic chart in English.

On the other hand, there are some negative sides of using online pronunciation resources. Firstly, online pronunciation resources may be problem-causing for language teachers and students who are inexperienced in e-learning as well as computer illiterate. Secondly, access to online pronunciation resources can sometimes be quite time-consuming and frustrating, especially when there is no high-speed internet in educational institutions. In some cases, due to the change of web addresses or for some other reasons, access to online pronunciation resources may be unavailable, which is highly demotivating for both the language teacher and the students. Thirdly, language teachers may have difficulty in maintaining control over online pronunciation activities in a computer laboratory. Lastly, students may not have the opportunity of face-to-face interaction when using online pronunciation resources, which may be boring for some students who like classroom teaching where they can talk to a friend, relax, or joke around.

METHODOLOGY

This study was based on the data gathered from preparatory school language teachers believed to have relevant experience with using online resources in EFL classes.

Subjects

The subjects in this study were 109 language teachers working in English Preparatory Schools of five different universities in North Cyprus (*European University of Lefke, Cyprus International University, Near East University, American University, and Eastern Mediterranean University*). Language teachers' ages ranged from 23- to 53-years-old with an average age of 30. Thirty of the language teachers were native teachers of English, while seventy nine of them were non-native teachers of English. All teachers (twenty six male and eighty three female) had previous teaching experience ranging from 1-3 years to over 24 years at university levels.

Research Questions

The research questions were:

- Do language teachers use online resources to teach pronunciation to their students?
- What do language teachers think of using online pronunciation teaching resources?
- Is there a correlation between age and using online pronunciation teaching resources?
- Is there a correlation between teaching experience and using online pronunciation teaching resources?

Instrument

The researcher prepared a questionnaire as an instrument for this study. The questionnaire consisted of one yes-no question in relation to whether language teachers in preparatory schools use online resources to teach pronunciation to their students or not, one open-ended question as to what they think of using online pronunciation teaching resources, and a section related to participants' ages and teaching experiences.

Procedures

After selecting the data collection instrument, the researcher obtained the necessary permission from the English preparatory school directors of five different universities in North Cyprus to conduct the research.

Following this procedure, the researcher administered the questionnaire to randomly selected 109 language teachers working in English preparatory schools of these universities at the end of the Spring Semester of 2007-2008 Academic Year. The participants responded to the questionnaire anonymously, and the data collected were analyzed by using descriptive statistics.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to answer each research question (see below). The frequency and percentage of responses were computed to find answers to the research question 1, 3, and 4.

Question 1: Do language teachers use online resources to teach pronunciation to their students?

Table 1
Using online resources to teach pronunciation

Answers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
YES	36	33
NO	73	67
TOTAL	109	100

Table 1 indicates that 36 (% 33) of language teachers stated that they made use of online resources to teach pronunciation to their students, while 73 (% 67) of the language teachers responded that they did not use online resources to teach pronunciation to their students. This result shows that language teachers disregard using online resources in their classes. The underlying reasons for this situation may be language teachers' having technophobia, being computer illiterate, and lack of phonological competence, etc.

Question 2: What do language teachers think of using online pronunciation teaching resources?

The most striking answers to *Question 2* are exhibited in the following table in quotation marks:

Table 2
Language teachers' views about using online pronunciation resources

<p><i>"Online pronunciation resources are beneficial for my students because they have more access to native speakers through the use of online resources."</i> (Age 23, 1 year of experience)</p>
<p><i>"Language teachers should go beyond traditional pronunciation teaching materials included in the course books. They should begin to use online resources in such a technological age."</i> (Age 28, 5 years of teaching experience)</p>
<p><i>"Online pronunciation resources are useful not only for students' pronunciation development but also for our professional development."</i> (Age 29, 5 years of experience)</p>
<p><i>"I made use of online pronunciation resources in the self-access center and observed my students improving their pronunciation clearly."</i> (Age 31, 9 years of teaching experience)</p>
<p><i>"Language teachers should be trained in how to use online pronunciation resources"</i> (Age 45, 22 years of teaching experience)</p>
<p><i>"I have never tried using online pronunciation teaching materials"</i> (Age 50, 27 years of teaching experience)</p>

As seen in the above table, language teachers who are seniors and more experienced state that they have never used online pronunciation teaching materials, and that they need training as to how to use online pronunciation resources.

However, those who are young and less experienced express that:

- students have more access to native speakers through the use of online resources,
- language teachers should go beyond traditional pronunciation teaching materials included in the course books and begin to use online resources in such a technological age,
- online pronunciation resources are beneficial for both students' pronunciation development and language teachers' professional development, and
- they make use of online pronunciation resources in the self-access center and observe their students improving their pronunciation clearly.

Question 3: Is there a correlation between age and using online pronunciation teaching resources?

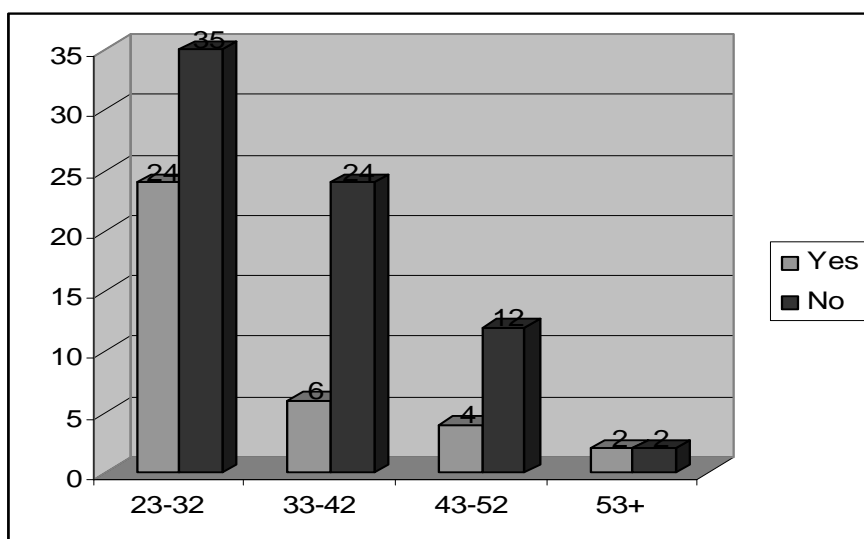
To find out whether there is a relationship between age and using online pronunciation resources, language teachers' answers to question 3 were cross-tabulated. Table 3 shows the cross tabulation of age and question 3.

Table 3
 Cross tabulation of age and question 3

			Question 3		Total
			Yes	No	
AGE	23-32	Count	24	35	59
		Expected Count	19,5	39,5	59,0
	33-42	Count	6	24	30
		Expected Count	9,9	20,1	30,0
	43+	Count	6	14	20
		Expected Count	6,6	13,4	20,0
Total	Count	36	73	109	
	Expected Count	36,0	73,0	109,0	

In the following graphic, it is clearly seen that language teachers who are seniors show a reduced tendency towards using online pronunciation resources, while those who are young are more enthusiastic about using technology, especially online pronunciation resources.

Hence, it can be stated that there is a relationship between age and using online pronunciation resources.



Graphic 1
 Language teacher's age and using online pronunciation resources

Question 4: Is there a correlation between teaching experience and using online pronunciation teaching resources?

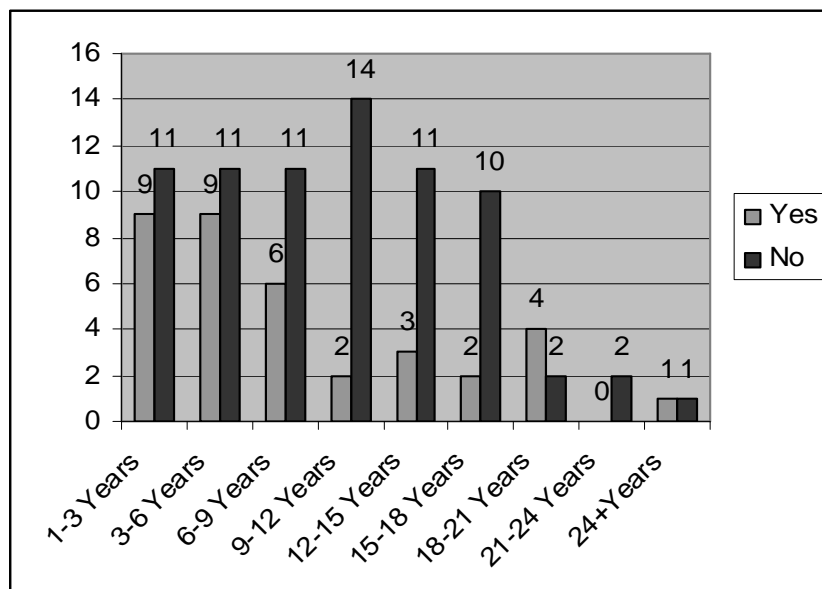
To find out whether there is a relationship between teaching experience and using online pronunciation resources, language teachers' answers to question 4 were cross-tabulated. Table 4 shows the cross tabulation of age and question 4.

Table 4
 Cross tabulation of teaching experience and question 4

		Question # 4		Total	
		YES	NO		
TEACHING EXPERIENCE	1-3 YEARS	Count	9	11	20
		Expected Count	6,6	13,4	20,0
	3-6 YEARS	Count	9	11	20
		Expected Count	6,6	13,4	20,0
	6-9 YEARS	Count	6	11	17
		Expected Count	5,6	11,4	17,0
	9-12 YEARS	Count	2	14	16
		Expected Count	5,3	10,7	16,0
	12-15 YEARS	Count	3	11	14
		Expected Count	4,6	9,4	14,0
	15+	Count	7	15	22
		Expected Count	7,3	14,7	22,0
	Total	Count	36	73	109
		Expected Count	36,0	73,0	109,0

In the following graphic, it is clearly seen that language teachers who have more teaching experience show a reduced tendency towards using online pronunciation resources, while those who have little teaching experience are more enthusiastic about using technology, especially online pronunciation resources.

Thus, it can be stressed that there is a relationship between teaching experience and using online pronunciation resources.



Graphic 2

Language teachers' teaching experience and using online pronunciation resources

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS

The use of online resources has increased rapidly in the field of pronunciation learning and teaching recently. However, language teachers, especially those who are seniors, avoid using such resources in their pronunciation classes because of being computer illiterate, inexperienced in e-learning, and e-teaching. At this point, it should be stressed that language teachers can be stimulated to employ online pronunciation resources by the following ways:

Organizing Teacher Training Programs

Language teachers should be educated to use online resources by:

- operating training facilities, such as seminars, workshops, talks and hands-on-experience for each school or college,
- integrating personnel knowledgeable in computer technology into these educational institutions (Kargbo, 2002).
- team teaching with less experienced teachers,
- stimulating teachers to participate in online discussion groups,
- encouraging teachers to subscribe to blogs or podcasts (Dudeny & Hockly, 2007),
- encouraging them to access to online language teaching sites and read the online journals or magazines in relation to the field of language learning and teaching.

Creating a Need for Online Pronunciation Resources

Online pronunciation resources and materials are effective tools. However, if they are not used appropriately, they will not be beneficial for the students. The first step in maximizing the use of online pronunciation resources is to create a need for language teachers to check or visit them frequently.

For instance, the web addresses of some online pronunciation resources and materials can be incorporated into the curriculum or course book so that the language teachers can access the online resources and materials either before or after the class. Moreover, during the first meeting with the students, the language teacher may

introduce online pronunciation resources to their students as well as the aims of using such sources in their classes. Thus, language teachers may do meaningful pronunciation teaching in their classes. If the language teacher does not have a computer and a screen projector in the classroom, relevant screens from the website can be transferred onto transparencies or printed notes (Cheng, 2003: 21).

Designing Activities Requiring Use of Online Sites

The language teacher can design a number of activities relevant to an online pronunciation site. Creating quizzes on the web, using a dedicated discussion forum as a platform for out of class discussions and reflections, and using a chat room for real-time communication activities are some of web-based activities. It is through these web-based activities that language teachers and the students can have the chance to use online pronunciation resources and materials (Cheng, 2003: *ibid*).

Employing the Interactive Capabilities

There are many activities and projects that can be done through the use of CMC tools, such as collaborative research projects, e-mail projects, online discussions, and peer reviews, (Skinner & Austin, 1999; Warschauer, 1996a; Warschauer, 1996b; Zhao, 1996). The advantage of using CMC tools is that these projects are not bound by geographical limitations. Teachers of colleges and schools in various parts of the world can collaborate on such projects, thus benefiting not only the students but the teachers as well.

Making the Site Aesthetically Appealing

Speed, user-friendliness, display of navigational icons, and the design or layout of an online site is prominent in maintaining students' interest and attention. That is to state that, for an online site to be powerful, the design should complement the content and should be sensitive towards the audience it is targeting (Cheng, 2003: *op.cit.*).

Finally, online pronunciation resources (i.e. online professional organizations, online journals, listservs and online discussion groups), and other online resources (i.e. pronunciation lessons, sound and video animations, diagrams of speech organs, tongue twisters, minimal pairs, and songs) facilitate the teaching of L2 pronunciation by the language teacher. Many language teachers, needless to say, use online resources in the teaching process. Because the factors like age, teaching experience, teaching style, graduated department, computer literacy, etc. affect how language teachers teach L2 pronunciation, it is not logical to support the idea that all language teachers should employ online resources or should be trained in using online resources to become successful teachers.

However, studies to be done on online pronunciation teaching resources should go beyond whether such resources should be used by language teachers or not and attempt to seek for answers to a variety of questions, such as:

- What types of online pronunciation resources seem to work best with what learners in which contexts?
- Do online pronunciation teaching resources or online pronunciation teaching resources training transfer easily between L2 and FL contexts?
- How long does it take to train specific teachers in relation to the use of certain online pronunciation teaching resources?
- How can a language teacher best assess and measure his/her success in using online pronunciation teaching resources?
- Are certain online pronunciation teaching resources used more easily in classroom and non-classroom contexts?
- What online pronunciation teaching resources should be used at different language proficiency levels?
- What is the role of the language teacher and that of students relevant to the use of online pronunciation resources?

It can be expected that answers to the above mentioned and many other questions from research in a variety of settings will pave the way for building the theory that seems necessary for more online pronunciation teaching resources work to be relevant to current L2/FL pronunciation teaching practice.

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