

On Teaching Foreign Language (English) Pronunciation – Some Useful Ideas

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Abstract

There is no question that teaching foreign language pronunciation is an important matter. For some people this may sound as a kind of truism, so the author is not going to platitudinise about how important explicit FL pronunciation is or whether we should teach it explicitly or not. Unfortunately, pronunciation is the aspect of EFL that still receives little attention.

Pronunciation is a skill to be acquired. It cannot be perceived only as a part of declarative knowledge but primarily as a part of procedural knowledge, which is acquired gradually and must be exercised a lot. Whether we believe pronunciation should be taught explicitly or allowed to develop without any explicit instruction, the question of phonetics in language teaching should, inevitably, receive some consideration.

Listening activities constitute a vital part of all practical phonetics lessons conducted at school. However, they are not the only ones. It is doubtful whether activities based entirely on listening to the model, or listening and repeating sessions, may contribute to students' phonetic development, namely better pronunciation. The aim of this paper is to present a sample of exercises in which the learners have to make use of their theoretical knowledge about English descriptive phonetics in order to do the exercises properly. The activities have already been used as a didactic tool by the author and they appeared to be both efficient and useful in the course of students' pronunciation betterment. The presented tasks comprise activities and techniques that the author employs with her first-year students. The samples of exercises cover – mainly – vowels and stress, since they pose serious problems to the learners.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, pronunciation was taught via hearing-based activities; when students were usually to sit in language laboratories (provided the school had the necessary equipment) or around a tape-recorder and listened to native speakers' speech samples and then repeated. The author started her work as a pronunciation instructor also putting emphasis on listening-repeating activities favouring the auditory input. The students were exposed to both intensive and extensive listening practice (BBC English Magazine cassettes accompanied by different pronunciation coursebooks). Both segmental and suprasegmental phonetics were practised through listening discrimination practice (drilling minimal pairs and sentences); controlled practice (producing the target sounds and identifying them in stories heard); guided practice (information gap tasks, questions about pictures or stories etc.); and communicative practice (performing skits, story telling, games). However, the author noticed that although the learners were able to produce (repeat only?) quite appropriate sounds and tones they somehow lost the proper pronunciation during communicative activities or interactions with both students and teachers alike, which was easily observable during the practical English oral exam.

2. The Exercises

Instead of repeating after a recording words containing vowel minimal pairs, the author proposes an exercise which she called vowel search or minimal pairs search. Students are only given a table (either on the board or on sheets of paper) divided into as many columns as there are vowels in English, excluding schwa. There are two extra columns at both sides for consonants starting/ending the words. Students' task is to fill in the table with as many words as they can. On the basis of what they have created they practice the pronunciation of the words from the box in different forms (e.g. games). One possibility is to divide students into groups reading a word aloud for the opponent group to guess the pronounced sound. Everything takes place under the supervision of the teacher who scores both the 'saying group' (for accurate pronunciation) and the 'guessing' one for indicating the correct sound. This semi-student-generated activity gives the learners a lot of enjoyment and satisfaction.

English vowels pose many problems to Polish learners. Not only due to the number and lack of equivalents in Polish are they difficult for the students, but their spelling may be frequently a misleading factor in establishing pronunciation patterns. In order to raise students' awareness about the lack of relationship between the way the words are written and pronounced the author proposes two activities in order to draw the students' attention to the fact. The students are presented with two columns of words where each word in the left-hand column rhymes with only one word in the right-hand column so the students have to identify the vowels and find the pairs. Another variant of this kind of activity is to give the students the list of pairs of words which end with the same consonant letters and which have the same orthographic symbol of a vowel, but which do not rhyme. The task is to identify two different vowels in each pair of words. The words from the activities mentioned above do not have to be only the list of trap words, they can be cut out from pronunciation poems for example. Such a trap poem may be an excellent exercise on its own. The students can be asked to memorize the poem, checking first all the difficult words in the pronunciation dictionary, or they may be simply asked to read the poem with certain words wiped out from the lines. Knowing that the word at the end of each line rhymes with the one from the line above, and it differs with only one sound (and usually one letter) from the other trap words in the same line, students have to come up with the appropriate word. Not only is it useful but also an enjoyable and stimulating activity.

Another exercise which is rather a funny phonetic game proves that drilling phonetics is neither arduous nor tedious. It is called Alexander goes mountaineering (taken from Alderton – see [3]). It may be preceded by exercises on word- and phrase-stress patterns or used on its own. The students are given a table with six columns in which they have six different stress patterns and twelve English names of people (both male and female) stressed according to the given pattern. They have to choose appropriate e.g. hobbies, food, etc.(provided or not, depending on the students' level) for the people, according to the stress patterns.

3. Pedagogical Implications

If a teacher understands what processes take place in the students' minds he/she may choose the best teaching tools adjusted to the learners' needs. Factors connected with the system: teacher – material organization – learner affect one another significantly and have great impact on the acquisition process [4].

A number of factors determine the teaching-learning process. Not only do the features connected with the students themselves influence language acquisition but factors directly or indirectly connected with the teacher may also influence the process. The teacher's personality, qualifications, knowledge and

pedagogical skills together with the properly set teaching goals (the aim of the course, the duration, the materials chosen, teaching techniques etc.) may greatly contribute to the learners' success [5].

However, not all of the above mentioned factors will affect the learning and acquisition process, to an equal degree. Since it is the learners who are our subjects in a didactic process it seems quite justified that teachers mostly concentrate on the features directly connected with the students. Identifying students' needs and styles allows the teacher to choose and select the best teaching methods and techniques. Marton [2] pinpointed that in Poland, learners mostly represent the rational-logical type of learning which, unlike the intuitive-affective type require from them to verbalize the linguistic phenomena and their visual perception helps them understand and absorb the language in a more effective way.

Inevitably, the teachers should diagnose the learners' styles in order to help them succeed in the language acquisition process. It can be achieved by varying the teaching techniques, making them more personalized (or individualized), namely more attractive and student-friendly. Taking into account students' possibilities and predispositions the teacher optimizes the didactic process making it more effective and fruitful. Knowing the learners' preferred styles allows to adjust the teaching process to their needs and to direct particular students to self-monitored work so that instead of being actually taught the students are being instructed and advised how to work on their own. Thus the teacher's role is to counsel and stimulate the learner rather than 'give' ready-made recipes [6].

In their small-scale experiment Stasiak and Szpyra-Kozłowska [7] analyse the effectiveness of two techniques; one based on an increased aural exposure to spoken English, accompanied with imitation and repetition drills; the other technique based on more 'scientific' and explanatory way of teaching phonetics with the use of descriptive (phonetic) information, phonemic transcription and contrastive analysis. The findings allowed them to draw the conclusion that "the employment of the two techniques has brought about strikingly similar results. The improvement in the phonetic performance of the learners has been observed in the same areas of pronunciation. Thus, both approaches have proved to be equally effective" (ibid.). One of the Stasiak and Szpyra-Kozłowska's conclusion was that no matter what instruction or technique the teacher will employ, provided he/she introduced pronunciation lessons regularly, the students will improve their performance "slowly but steadily" (ibid). Their experiment comprised the data gathered by means of recordings of a text read twice, before and after the experimental teaching and although their goal is to establish which phonetics features taught will be sustained then in spontaneous speaking and/or reading, no actual data on that matter is presented. Despite the success in preserving (during the second reading) some of the pronunciation features considered difficult (voicing of word-final obstruents, proper pronunciation of the velar nasal and dental fricatives and lost trilling of [r]), Stasiak and Szpyra-Kozłowska do not record any progress in the distinction between long and short vowels, correct pronunciation of the vowel 'ash', voiceless plosive aspiration or the use of weak forms. However, their experiment lasted only six months and the actual teaching of phonetics had to be limited to about eight minutes per lesson during the three 45-minute-lesson a week.

In teaching pronunciation, as in any aspect of FL, the same question arises – which teaching methods and techniques will be most efficient and at the same time attractive and satisfactory for our students. As Bukowski [1] notes "one of the reason for a relatively low success rate in the teaching/learning of the pronunciation of a foreign language might lie in different learning styles of the students and the discrepancy between this fact and the teaching techniques employed by the teachers" (ibid.). In his project-study, Bukowski (ibid.) proposed a set of activities concerning various aspects of English pronunciation problematic to Polish learners (final devoicing of obstruents, the third person suffix in the Present Simple Tense, dental fricatives and the velar nasal) introduced and practised according to the students' primary sensory modality modes. His observations, made upon a group of 29 intermediate high-school learners hence cannot be treated as statistically significant or representative of all the

Polish learners of high schools at this age or language proficiency level, seem to confirm the previous studies of Marton [2] and prove that visual students are in majority. Consequently, students should be taught through appropriately chosen methods and techniques different from the commonly believed and widely used auditory input only.

4. Final Word

Some research outcomes [8], [9] reveal that students do obtain better results if their instructors are innovative and imaginative combining both standard coursebook tasks with varied and inventive exercises. Although the more the teacher emphasises communicative activities the better the communicative competence of his/her learners, it was proved [10] that learners need the so called 'silent period' in the foreign language acquisition process. During this period the learners absorb the materials only and they are not ready to speak at this stage.

Effective teaching of L2 phonetics requires from the teacher to recognize different students' styles and adjust the scholastic process to their preferences. Practical phonetics classes cannot be entirely based on arduous re-production of sounds, words, sentences, monologues or dialogues heard before. As the author already mentioned Marton's findings [2], rationally-logical Poles do favour verbalization of the learned material since the visual perception assists them to acquire the language more effectively. The variety of, even mechanical, exercises correlated to the students' individual learning style allows to consolidate the already acquired knowledge and to apply it in a more creative and communicative context.

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