

Teaching pronunciation across languages



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Learning pronunciation

The recent widespread adoption of a communicative approach in language teaching, a perspective that highlights the development of communicative competence, foregrounds the need for reexamination of explicit pronunciation instruction. Understanding others and making one's self understood is a key factor in communication. However, what constitutes 'good' pronunciation is a variable that is closely tied to the context and purpose of the communication event taking place. If the speaker is trying to buy sunburn cream on a holiday trip to Aruba with only a few words of Papiamentu (one of two official languages of Aruba, the other being Dutch) and manages to leave the shop with the cream, then one might deem their pronunciation as sufficiently good. If, on the other hand, a teacher is assessing a language learner regarding specific curriculum descriptors, the same learner may be evaluated more negatively.

The phonological systems of languages can be viewed as comprising features of several types of phenomena: segments, syllabic structures, and suprasegmentals (Major, 2001). Learning the features of the phonetic system of a language requires one not only being able to articulate and perceive the target language acoustically, but also to work out which properties of the sound segments that constitute words are predictable in that language. Additionally, learners must master other speech features such as pitch, tone, rhythm, length and timing. In short, not an easy task.

There have been many studies, coming from many different fields, regarding potential barriers to acquisition of 'native-like' speech, stemming from biological constraints to social and cultural factors, although it must be noted that the majority of these studies refer to adult language learners. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly accepted that most (adult) learners are principally motivated to be understood by other target language users and less worried about achieving a native speaker level (a term which is itself controversial as there are significant differences in pronunciation amongst L1 speakers –consider the pronunciation of an English speaker from Liverpool, England and an English speaker from Dallas, Texas, for instance). These differences are even more apparent when we consider native speakers of colonial languages, such as English speakers in India, whose accent is often deemed problematic or non-native despite their background. This highlights how the 'native-speaker' is a questionable social label.

Teaching pronunciation

Still, although the aim may not be to reach native-like pronunciation, teachers in primary and secondary school must still strive to provide their L2 learners quality pronunciation teaching as part of their responsibility as models and facilitators of access to the language of instruction of the school. Intelligible pronunciation is crucial for L2 learners in order to communicate and interact with others, both inside and outside the classroom. Poor pronunciation can be a barrier to communication, and it can also be demotivating to the learner if she feels incapable of making others understand her, provoking a cycle of non-production (e.g. out of fear or embarrassment) which inevitably means less language gains. In the end, it is the teachers' responsibility to provide support for as smooth and rapid social integration as possible for L2 learners.

Studies have found that pronunciation instruction is frequently ignored for different reasons: 1) pronunciation is not considered important in language teaching; 2) it is assumed the learners will pick it up eventually; 3) teachers feel pronunciation is too difficult to teach; 4) a general lack of teacher knowledge on how to teach pronunciation (Morley, 1996). However, a recent review of studies indicates "pronunciation instruction is effective in improving the target form(s)" (Thomson & Derwing, 2014, p.7).

Targeted pronunciation practice can aim at different aspects: raising phonetic sensitivity or awareness (see the document: *First and other language acquisition: Activities for promotion of language learning across all levels* for some teaching ideas), repetition and practice of known problematic areas, and highlighting 'physical' aspects of speech (aspiration, vibration). As almost all teachers know, having fun while carrying out activities is the best guarantee that actual learning will take place. Games and fun activities can be the best way to deal with the feature of language learning that is often seen as the most boring and cumbersome – pronunciation. Some playful ideas for approaching pronunciation instruction are provided in the next section. First, however, it is recommended that the teacher become familiar with potential difficulties related to the L1 of their students (e.g. Chinese speakers often have problems pronouncing "r" and/or "l" because these sounds are not found in their phonetic system). There are many resources available on Internet that explain phonetic differences across language families. Consult also, the local education authority for specific resources for the principal languages spoken in the school community.

Ideas for teaching pronunciation

Act it out

The target language (language of instruction of the school) may have some speech sounds (phonemes) that do not exist in other languages. The teacher can help learners perceive and produce these sounds by first drawing explicit attention to these phonemes by pronouncing and discussing the potentially problematic phoneme and also 'acting it out'. For instance, to focus on vowel length, the teacher might give a

visual demonstration with his arms (eeeeeeee in “seat” would be pantomimed with wide arms, /i/ in “sit” would be represented with shorter arm movements). Key minimal pairs (words that sound the same except for one sound) can be written on the board and teams of learners take turns quickly pantomiming the correct word (drawn from a pile of cards). The idea of this game is to keep it short and fast. Used over a period of time, learners will become more adept at perceiving and pronouncing the problem sounds.

Tag it

This is a quick game that can be used as a break from other class activities and allow students to expend energy if they are becoming restless. Specific problem sounds can be posted on different areas of the wall. First the students practice the sounds as a whole group. Then students line up on the opposite wall and the teacher calls out a word. The learners run (or walk) to the wall marked with this sound. This game can also be played outside on the playground.

Pairing Up

Each student is given a flashcard with a minimal pair word. Then they have to walk around the classroom, greeting their classmates with their word in order to find other students with the same word or sound. Once they have a pair, the two students work together to find more ‘phoneme partners’.

What should I do?

The teacher makes up different scenarios that use phonemes that are difficult to distinguish and asks the learners for advice (one option is sensible, the other silly). For instance, for students learning English as a second language, the teacher might say: Oh dear, my soup is cold. What should I do? Heat it or hit it? A Spanish teacher might propose: Tengo hambre. ¿Qué debo hacer? ¿Comer ternura o ternera?

Tongue Twisters

Teachers should not forget old-time favorites. For instance, tongue twisters are a fun and efficient way to practice pronunciation. Teachers can easily find examples of tongue twisters in the target language on the Internet or in local libraries. A good way to introduce a tongue twister is by first writing it on the board. The class reads it aloud together. Next, the teacher wipes out a few of the words, the class reads the tongue twister again, filling in the words that have been erased. The teacher continues wiping out more words until the students can say the tongue twister by heart. This exercise can be used as a daily or weekly warm up routine. Students can also be encouraged to provide (or even make up) their own tongue twister and even create a tongue twister contest using difficult to pronounce words provided by the teacher.

Swat it!

This is a teachers’ favorite –although it is important to make sure the students only swat the target words- not each other! The teacher should prepare flash cards with words (and visuals if needed) that use the target sounds. The teacher puts flashcards in a circle on the floor or sticks them on the walls of the classroom. Then the teacher calls out a word (or sentence that uses a word with a target sound for more advanced

students) and the learners have to run to the word or card and swat it with their flyswatters, while repeating the word (or sentence).

Say it with your favorite star

This activity aims to support learners' acquisition of pronunciation as well as pacing and intonation. The teacher should find a short, simple clip from a television show that is popular with the students (it might be from a cartoon, for instance). First the teacher plays the short selection to the students once or twice through (a written dialogue can be provided if the students are old enough to read). Next, the students should try to speak along with the dialogue. This is repeated, with the teacher lowering the volume each time until, if possible, the learners repeat the dialogue without any volume at all. This activity can also be done in teams with the 'audience' (other class members) voting to see which team does the 'best' imitation. A similar activity can be done using excerpts from well-known chants or pop songs, as in a karaoke contest.

Final words

Pronunciation instruction has been questioned as language teaching moves away from more normative approaches and towards communicative perspectives. While the concept of the native speaker as the reference for language use is deservedly interrogated, teachers still need to keep in mind the importance of achieving intelligible pronunciation to communicate and interact with others. Bringing in different varieties of pronunciations (e.g. Latin American and peninsular varieties of Spanish) as part of the teaching activities can enrich students' learning of the language and contribute to the development of their students' intercultural awareness.

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