

<p style="text-align: center;">ESL Pronunciation Teaching: Could it be more effective?</p>

Presented at the ALAA Conference, Perth, 1999

DRAFT AUGUST 99: NOT FOR CITATION,
but comments very welcome

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1. Do we need to teach pronunciation?

The pendulum has swung back again, and most ESL teachers now agree that explicit pronunciation teaching is an essential part of language courses. On the one hand, confidence with pronunciation allows learners the interaction with native speakers that is so essential for all aspects of their linguistic development. On the other hand, poor pronunciation can mask otherwise good language skills, condemning learners to less than their deserved social, academic and work advancement.

While there is little doubt about teachers' appreciation of the importance of pronunciation instruction, there is even less doubt about learners' own demand for effective pronunciation teaching: almost all learners rate this as a priority and an area in which they need more guidance. For any remaining sceptics, it may be worth briefly rehearsing the following responses to reasons sometimes given for not teaching pronunciation explicitly in an ESL program.

a) it is true that learners are very unlikely to attain a native-like accent - but their intelligibility can be greatly improved by effective pronunciation teaching;

b) it is true that pronunciation improves most through the gradual intuitive changes brought about by real interaction with native speakers - but for a large proportion of ESL learners the skills that enable this type of interaction do not come naturally; most need a 'leg-up' from explicit pronunciation teaching.

c) it is true that it is offensive to prescribe an 'accent norm' to which learners must assimilate, and it

is true that people should be free to express themselves in whatever accent they choose - but it is not true that this freedom is given by withholding pronunciation teaching. On the contrary, it is effective pronunciation teaching that offers learners a genuine choice in how they express themselves.

2. The problem: not whether to teach, but how to teach, pronunciation

Despite widespread agreement about the importance of pronunciation teaching, in ESL courses around the country pronunciation is the aspect of language that receives least attention. The reason is not unwillingness to teach pronunciation, but uncertainty as to how best to help learners. This is of course not to discount the contribution of significant numbers of gifted pronunciation teachers. The problem is that the effectiveness of these teachers is based largely on individual experience and insights. Very little training in pronunciation teaching is given in TESOL programs. For those already teaching who seek to improve their skills, the literature on phonological theory and English phonetics is often (with notable exceptions) found to be opaque, and of little applicability in the classroom.

The question, then, is not whether to teach pronunciation, but how to teach pronunciation. I have been developing a theoretical approach to phonology that I like to think is useful in this regard. It sees phonology not as computational processing, as is common in generative models, but in a **communicative and meaning-based framework**. Without going into technical detail here, I would like to consider some implications for pronunciation teaching.

3. How not to teach pronunciation

The demonstrated ineffectiveness of drilling phonemes, minimal pairs and stilted dialogues was a large part of the reason that pronunciation was all but dropped from language classes with the introduction of the communicative methods. Basing lessons around detailed descriptions of the articulation of sounds, intensive IPA transcription, or lectures on English phonology are also minimal in their effectiveness, while at the same time placing high knowledge demands not just on learners but also on teachers. Many teachers consider their own expertise in these areas to be inadequate, preferring to delegate pronunciation classes to those with more knowledge. The point I wish to make very strongly in

this paper is that while knowledge of English phonetics and phonology is certainly useful (recall that I write as a professional phonetician!), it is not in itself what is needed for ESL pronunciation classes. Much more important *is for teachers to have insight into the kinds of problems learners face in pronouncing English, and tools to provide for their needs at different stages.*

Let us change the focus for a moment, then, from teachers to learners.

4. Why is pronunciation so difficult to learn?

Pronunciation is one of the most difficult areas for learners, as well as for teachers. In quest of effective teaching, it is worth diagnosing carefully the nature of the difficulties that they face.

a) There is a significant skill component for learners. Pronunciation is not just a cognitive 'knowing-that', it is also a physical 'knowing-how', similar to playing a sport or musical instrument. Learners need *motivation* and *time* to really practise pronunciation. It is very much worth spending class time discussing with learners their own ideas about what is involved in learning pronunciation. They are often surprised by the suggestion that they should practise speaking. Learners need help in overcoming both their wishful idea that pronunciation is a subject like, say, history, which can be learned merely by listening to a teacher, and the psychological and social barriers that make it difficult for them to practise effectively.

b) This skill component however is only that: a component. There is also a significant cognitive component in pronunciation learning, which is much less often acknowledged. Indeed I believe it is useful to think of learning to pronounce a new language as involving a kind of concept formation, about which there is a large literature in psychology and education, rather than as a purely physical skill. Both teachers and learners themselves generally assume it is the latter, and can benefit greatly from a better understanding of the conceptual aspects of pronouncing a new language. For example, very often a sound that causes great difficulty to a learner is one that they can produce quite acceptably in a different context. As just one example: a student who mispronounces 'j' in 'jam, fridge' etc, might

use this very 'j' sound as a mispronunciation of the 'z' in 'zoo' or 'freeze'. Helping them to realise this, and to reallocate the sounds to more appropriate phonemes might well be more use than instruction in the articulation of the palato-alveolar affricate.

The nature of phonological systems means that there is very often a radical difference between

- (i) what people (eg. learners) think they are saying (their description of their own speech),
- (ii) a phonetic description of the sounds they are actually producing, and
- (iii) how someone from a different language background (eg. a teacher) describes their speech.

This creates scope for significant miscommunication between teachers and learners regarding the nature of any errors they are producing. I think many teachers are only partially aware of how unlike their students' perception of speech is from their own. An over-emphasis on the notion of 'transfer' in the literature on second language acquisition can increase teachers' sense that what learners are doing is 'mixing up (say) r and l'. What is actually needed in my view is for teachers to change this interpretation of what is going on. It suggests that learners are using the same descriptions of sounds as teachers are, whereas in fact the problem is that the learners are unaware that there is any distinction between the sounds. To them, they are the same sound. Learners who come from backgrounds with non-alphabetic writing systems have even greater difficulty in even referring to individual sounds within words, in the way that is so natural to literate English speakers.

Another area in which miscommunication between teachers and learners is evident is in discussion of syllables and word stress. The number of syllables people think they are producing can be quite different from the phonetic reality. For example, the same sequence of sounds, say 'sport', which to English speakers has one syllable, when borrowed into Japanese is interpreted as having three syllables. (Note that the pronunciation in connected speech is phonetically very similar in both languages - it is the phonological interpretation that differs.) This can seem quite bizarre to English speakers until we realise that our own belief that we are producing two syllables in 'support' is often equally incorrect from a phonetic point of view (English words like 'support', 'police', etc, are often pronounced with the first vowel phonetically non-existent). The gulf between what people think they are saying and what they are actually saying means that the level of insight people have into the

phonetics of their pronunciation is generally very poor. Giving learners a phonetic description of the target sound is often not helpful, even if it is done accurately. To do this is akin to coaching a tennis player with instruction on which muscles of the shoulder to use. In my opinion, discussion of the articulation of sounds should be restricted to those which can actually be seen and felt by the learner: lip rounding and spreading, tongue between teeth, etc. In other cases, especially for vowels, it is much more useful to concentrate on training the learner's perception, and helping them develop better ways of thinking about the sounds of the new language - just as the tennis coach helps the learner find ways to think about the game ('think of hitting the ball beyond the baseline', etc) rather than in giving anatomy lessons. The interesting thing is that people act, in pronunciation as in many things, not on the basis of the phonetic reality of sounds they hear, but on the basis of their description or concept of the sounds. A nice example of this comes from the case of word boundaries. Many learners speak in a jerky disconnected way, because they separate the words, rather than running them together. This is hardly surprising - most speakers of whatever language believe that their words are separated by short pauses. In fact of course, all languages run words together in connected speech (though the exact way in which the words are run together varies greatly from language to language). When people learn a new language, they will naturally try to keep the words separate. Overcoming their misconception that separating the words makes their speech clearer, and encouraging them to really listen to how words are run together in the new language, can be more effective than instruction in the rules of English coarticulation - which may make little sense to them if they still subconsciously believe that clear speech has separate words. A large part of a teacher's skill, then, is in giving the learner new ways of thinking about or conceptualising words and sentences in the new language. This skill can include knowledge of articulation and abstract rules of phonology, but is not dependant upon it. It is a skill which many teachers have or develop, but which needs greater acknowledgement and explicit attention.

5. How to teach pronunciation

Given these considerations about the nature of pronunciation, let me now make some recommendations about pronunciation teaching - though in the short space

available here I can only outline in point form ideas that require a good deal of expansion and demonstration.

5.1 Set pronunciation in a communicative context

Learners benefit greatly from explicit explanation of how pronunciation fits into the overall process of communication. A very simple model of communication, showing a listener trying to interpret a message on the basis of cues in the speakers' speech, is sufficient. This gives learners a framework within which to understand what goes wrong when they are not understood or are misunderstood, and to gain a clear, practical idea of the nature of linguistic contrast - not just a classroom drill with 'thigh' and 'thy', but the living basis of our ability to communicate in real life contexts.

The advantages of working with this type of framework are:

a) It takes learners' focus away from their own 'performance' and places it more clearly on the listener's experience of their speech. This can be very helpful in reducing nervousness and the expectation of failure. Discussion of learners' experience of listening to foreign speakers of their own language can help them see how tolerant listeners are (in terms of understanding accented speech), and give them a sense that accents are nice - it is incomprehensibility that is bad, not the accent as such. These considerations can help give learners enough confidence in their segmental production to allow them the fluency and rhythm so important to intonation.

b) It changes the goal of pronunciation from one of mimicking a native accent (extremely difficult to achieve), to one of creating intelligible messages (perfectly possible). Errors can be defined in terms of intelligibility rather than in terms of non-attainment of a perfect model - which allows much more scope for teachers to encourage successful communication rather than constantly focussing on deviations from native-like production. The rules of English can be defined in terms of what listeners need in order to understand a message correctly and easily, which makes them more meaningful and easier to relate to real speech.

c) It allows a blurring of boundaries between segmental and suprasegmental aspects of speech, and an easy way in to teaching learners about the information structure of speech, which is highly useful in teaching English prosody. Following from the emphasis on the listener's experience of their speech, they can learn that in English we use stress to highlight the information the speaker considers will be unpredictable to the listener. Many other languages of course do not use stress for this function - the fact that English does needs to be explicitly taught and demonstrated. But spending time on this can give learners a 'handle' on understanding stress and intonation in terms of the meaning of the message, rather than as a set of classroom rules.

5.2 Take a learner-centred approach

This type of teaching naturally encourages the use of naturalistic exercises and practice of real communicative situations. Classes must be learner-centred in the sense that learners should be able to practise speech that will be directly useful to them in their real lives. I think it is essential that the basis of all classroom exercises should be phrases and sentences. Not that individual sounds and words should never be discussed; indeed they should, but always in the context of the larger structures of communicative language use. Learners should be encouraged to bring examples of communication failure to class for workshopping - much can be gained from discussion of why a learner got a cup of tea instead of the cappacino they ordered after lunch. They should also be encouraged to anticipate situations they will encounter after the class, and practise speech that will be useful in those situations. In these ways, the material learned in class will have maximum transferability to the learner's real world. But there are more profound respects in which pronunciation teaching must be learner-centred. We have seen already that teachers need to be aware - to an even greater degree than most already are - that learners actually hear speech very differently from the teachers themselves do. This seems to me to be a natural and essential extension of efforts in all other areas of language teaching to be culturally sensitive in communication with students. Teachers can be learner-centred by developing skills in communicating with learners about speech and pronunciation in ways that make sense to the learners - as opposed to giving them phonetically accurate descriptions. This ability to start from where learners are in order to lead them to new understanding is the basis of all effective teaching. Even more important is

for learners to be 'learner-centred': to develop their own skills in what I call Critical Listening - the ability to notice, diagnose and repair their own errors, and those of their fellows, rather than always relying on the teacher's feedback. It is through critical listening that perceptual discrimination, and appropriate conceptual analysis of English words and sentences into sounds and letters, can best develop. Many indications suggest that it is these that are the foundation of improvements in second language pronunciation.

6. Conclusion

I am working to develop materials for both teachers and students, as well as theoretical ideas along the lines suggested above. I have had help and input from many people in Canberra, Armidale and Townsville, for which I am very grateful. I would be glad to hear from anyone with questions or contributions.

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