Pronunciation: Teach or ignore?

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Cinderella

Pronunciation tends to receive relatively little attention in language teaching. It is an often neglected skill and has therefore been looked upon as the 'Cinderella' of language teaching (Dalton 1997, Kelly 1969). This relative lack of attention does not concur with its obvious importance. Pronunciation is a vital aspect of language production, evaluation and perception. A good pronunciation can help people understand each other, and a bad pronunciation may confuse them. Pronunciation may thus send out enlightening as well as confusing messages. Pronunciation has an important social value and is strongly related to prestige (Gelvanovsky 2002) and image. Certain types of pronunciation are associated with socio-economic success, persuasiveness, competence and intelligence, while others are not (Dalton & Seidlhofer 1994, Hudson 1980).

Pronunciation skills are difficult to pass on to learners and some even seem to suggest that it is not easily teachable (Pennington 1989, Purcell & Suter 1980). Aptitudinal and other factors, such as the pronunciation skills of the teacher him/her-self, make teaching this skill in a classroom setting a potentially inefficient task (Thanasoulas 2012). Pronunciation is known to be particularly difficult to master, because it is not only an academic and analytical skill but involves a degree of physiological control. The latter does not necessarily come with intelligence; it involves a manner of shaping and using the vocal tract that deviates from what learners are used to when speaking their own native language (Lowie & Bultena 2007).

What to teach?

When teachers decide to teach pronunciation, they need to know what to teach; what is good and bad pronunciation, and who decides on pronunciation norms? Which pronunciation model should one choose? The place where a language originated is traditionally chosen as the target norm: French from France, Portuguese from Portugal, and English from England. But, increasingly, other pronunciation norms are becoming equally important or even more dominant. Brazilian Portuguese and American English, for example, have a high prestige and are increasingly considered the most suitable pronunciation norms for learners, simply because they represent a large number of native speakers and are internationally very common.

So, while there is usually some agreement on exactly what is the 'right' way to pronounce sounds, the problem is that there may be more than one pronunciation model. In addition, when a model is chosen this model is subject to all types of variation and, as a result, debate and disagreement. Usually, there is agreement on how to pronounce certain sounds but less agreement on others. Also, norms change over time and sticking to certain pronunciation norms may lead to an obsolete norm. It is safe to say that every 20 or 25 years, a pronunciation norm needs to be adjusted. Some teachers may adhere to an older norm, a stricter norm perhaps,

while others will accept a certain degree of variation (Wells 1997). The strict approach is by definition impracticable; the stricter the norm is, the less agreement there will be on whether a certain pronunciation feature is standard. Applying a strict norm boils down to rejecting the pronunciation of certain speakers who are generally acknowledged to speak the standard language. Rules regarding how to pronounce a language are often taken from existing sources, which sometimes tend to be strict, obsolete and not always in accordance with living norms. It is true that these living norms are not easy to determine. Although rules can be given, and following these rules will lead to a convincing accent, breaking certain rules is more serious than breaking others.

Should learners sound like native speakers?

Should the most disturbing features be erased or should a native-speaker accent be the target, if pronunciation is taught? The approach of fighting disturbing features and that of mimicking the native speaker could be seen as consecutive stages; when an intelligible accent has been achieved, native speaker imitation could be the next step. Usually, the native speaker model is the one and only target. However, while sounding like a native speaker can be quite useful, practical, and even enjoyable, imitating native speakers can nevertheless be tricky. The problem is that those who speak with a convincing near-native accent bring about certain expectations regarding the other aspects of their English.

First of all, listeners may expect a speaker's grammar and vocabulary to have the same level as his or her pronunciation. It is a well-known phenomenon that many learners can imitate sounds well but are not blessed with an extensive vocabulary or grammatical range. The same goes for cultural knowledge and for pragmatic competence: understanding irony, jokes as well as sarcasm and understanding the cultural context of utterances. A near-perfect accent may give your interlocutor the idea that your skills and knowledge in these areas are of the same level. Grammatical, lexical and cultural errors become more salient if your pronunciation level is very high. The advantages of having a non-native accent are often overlooked or dismissed.

The joys of 'having an accent'

The widespread assumption that native speakers wish for non-native speakers to sound like native speakers is something that non-native speakers invented, not the native speakers themselves. Imitations of native speakers may even be regarded as awkward to these same native speakers. Native speakers of a language often find comfort in the fact that the pronunciation of the person they are talking to contains clear traces of his or her native culture – in other words, having 'an accent' is natural and sounding like someone from a culture that is not yours is less natural (like cosplay). The absence of 'an accent' in the speech of a learner may be both confusing and uncomfortable. People generally want to know what the native tongue and culture of the person they are talking to are, as this defines the language level that can be used, and it defines the range of possible conversation topics.

Learners run the risk of overshooting the mark and should see to it that they do not sound more stereotypically native than natives themselves. The best compliment is not that one sounds more French than the French or more English than the English. That kind of comment usually implies

that you convincingly imitate a few archetypal sounds in an over-articulate way and not the whole range of pronunciation features. It usually means you have an unnatural and mixed accent. The most complimentary feedback is silent: the way you pronounce the language passes unnoticed, because it sounds comprehensible, consistent and neutral to the listener. Some enthusiastic students end up sounding like a caricature of a famous speaker of the language they are learning. You should try to sound like the same person in your first and second language and avoid adopting a persona that is far removed from yourself; if you do not sound posh, relaxed or, for instance regional, in your native tongue, then it would be unnatural if you had these qualities when speaking a second language.

Talented students

When you have the gift of being able to approximate the native target convincingly and naturally, you could develop your own style. You can stick to the strict norm and perfect this as much as you can or moderate your accent slightly and develop an accent with mild non-standard features, perhaps after studying abroad or after being influenced by a native-speaking friend. Such a 'less strict' accent has the advantage of being less marked and less over-educated-sounding, and it is often less distracting and perhaps closer to the speaker's personality than the strict model is. There is also a group of learners who take it one step further and develop a strong regional accent. This group should bear in mind that error-making in regional accents is possibly worse than error-making in the standard language, as only the latter is typically a model for learners. Finally, there is a group of less talented learners who develop a curious mix of standard and non-standard features in their second-language pronunciation by parroting native speakers with various accents. Such inconsistency is not advisable. It is distracting and can even be confusing. In short, a native accent should only be the target of those who have the talent to channel and naturally tune and shape their accent without instruction after they have completed a pronunciation course, and who have sufficient self-monitoring skills as well as awareness of how their acquired language is perceived and understood.

Drill or analyse?

In pronunciation teaching, two basic schools of thought are prevalent: the behaviourist and the analytical. The behaviourist school leans on the idea that imitation and repetition are the main keys to learning pronunciation. The analytical school believes that understanding what goes on articulatorily whilst pronouncing sounds is most important. Most teachers try and strike a balance between the two. Either approach is problematic if applied strictly. Students are likely to lose interest when drilling words and sentences is the only thing they do, and students who find themselves analysing pronunciation will crave drilling and repetition to bring what they have learned to practice.

The analytical approach is a practical point of departure, and students could be urged to analyse phonemes, phoneme clusters, and stress and intonation patterns. After learning about a specific pronunciation phenomenon, students could be given the opportunity to listen and imitate.

Pay more attention to intonation?

Prosody does not usually come first in pronunciation courses, although many will claim that learning the 'music' of the language will lead to a flying start and will enthuse learners. Instead, the various individual sounds of the language are usually presented one by one. The relative importance of prosody is always a point of consideration, but it is often overlooked. Most courses are almost exclusively based on teaching vowels and consonants and leaving tips on prosody to the margins of the course. A commonly heard complaint by native speakers is that even highly successful learners of English suffer from deviant intonation patterns, which affects the interpretation of utterances. Research has even shown that intonation and related prosodic features are amongst the most important criteria for native speakers to judge the quality of a learner's English pronunciation (Hoorn, Smakman & Foster 2014).

The difficulty of teaching prosody lies in the fact that it is not so easy to capture in simple language. Some linguistic explanation is needed, and the teacher needs to be comfortable teaching this aspect and skilled enough. The combination of these aspects usually prevents teachers from explicitly and elaborately teaching prosody. Extensive intonation and rhythm instruction is likely to end up resembling a theoretical linguistics class and will not help students actually improve their intonation. Teachers should present only that information which may help the prosodic patterns of learners.

Conclusion

Pronunciation is fun, and teaching it can be fun. It is a highly motivating aspect of any language course. It gives those with special talents the opportunity to show off, and it can be an interesting confrontation with reality to those who can write well but not pronounce so well. The importance of pronunciation should not be underestimated – not only does it shape the first impression that listeners have of you, it is also closely related to meaning. A good pronunciation, both of phonemes and prosody, gets the message across the way it is intended. It therefore deserves a more central role in language teaching.

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