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Teaching pronunciation: Is your tongue right?

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The teaching of pronunciation has long been considered a troublesome side-issue to the mainstream of English language teaching. Many competent and experienced teachers quail at the prospect of pronunciation work and prefer to 'leave well alone'. In other words, they rely on their students' imitative abilities and trust that the authenticity of their pronunciation will improve as their production of other aspects of English (lexis, grammar, the functional repertoire) becomes more fluent. There is, however, a growing awareness among teachers that pronunciation must and can be handled as a problem in its own right.

The articulation of linguistic sounds is a deeply sub-conscious physical habit. In order to sound 'more English', an L2 learner has to undo the habits of a lifetime and learn to use all his articulatory muscles in a different way. This is often the major stumbling block. The learner needs to know *how* to undo these articulatory habits, and *how* to use the muscles so that he can articulate the sounds of English authentically. To neglect the preliminary re-formation of habits, and yet expect the learner to master English pronunciation, is like assuming that someone who has never learnt the notes of the piano keyboard nor practised the scales would be able to perform a piano concerto, simply because he knows what it sounds like.

For those teachers who choose to work specifically at pronunciation in the classroom, the quantity and range of teaching materials currently available is impressive. Such materials have, however, tended to concentrate exclusively on details, on the individual sounds of the English language. They provide practice in the articulation of /p/, /t/ and /k/, or in the difference between /p/ and /b/, or between the vowels in *bin* and *been*. The learner, whose L1 probably also makes all of these sounds and contrasts, simply equates the sounds of English with those of his L1 , and retains his essential 'foreignness' while speaking English. The problem is that the sounds which have been deemed to be identical in the L1

and L2 have essentially different characteristics which derive from the general articulatory habits (or 'setting') of the two languages.

It is our belief that if, in pronunciation teaching, one could begin by establishing a general *articulatory setting* for English, before working at individual sounds, many problems which seem to be associated with sound-segments would not exist. In a sadly neglected article, published in 1964, Beatrice Honikman wrote:

> Where two languages are disparate in articulatory setting, it is not possible to master completely the pronunciation of one whilst maintaining the articulatory setting of the other.

When we ask a learner to 'sound more English', we require him to abandon the articulatory setting of his L1 and use the muscles of his larynx, tongue, jaw and lips in a new and unfamiliar way. In other words, we require him to adopt the essential articulatory setting of English. This will not happen until the learner is a) aware of the features of the setting and the main focus of articulation, and b) is provided with regular and appropriate physical activities to train his muscles to respond in the unfamiliar way. Only when he has thus established the essential 'Englishness' of English, can the particulars be fitted into the general framework.

The activities we describe here have been tried out with multi-national groups as well as with monolingual groups of French, German and Dutch learners. They are designed to help the learner recognize and establish the articulatory setting for English, irrespective of his L1 . The exercises are not specific to a particular level, but are intended for regular use to 'warm up' the learner's articulatory apparatus.

A. The Look of English: the External Setting

Before the learner can embark upon any useful physical activity it is, in our experience, vital that he is taught to observe and describe those general gestures of English which he seeks to incorporate into his own performance. If we ask 'what do English people look like when they speak?' learners usually tell us, 'they don't open their mouths', or 'they speak lazily', or even 'they look sad'. This all provides a valuable starting-point. Learners may then be asked to watch a TV interview or discussion—with the sound turned down—to observe the following features of the 'look of English'.

i) Lips

a) compared to speakers of most other languages English speakers do not spread, purse or open their lips very much.

b) any movements on the horizontal or vertical plane are rapidly relaxed to a neutral position.

c) all muscular effort is slight and the lips tend to remain loose.

ii) Lower Jaw

a) the lower jaw is almost motionless in speech. Some speakers talk with their teeth almost touching.

b) again little muscular effort is involved. The rest position (when not speaking) is 'loosely closed (not clenched)'. (*Honikman, loc. cit*)

iii) Cheeks

a) the cheeks are slack, even slightly 'drooping'.

b) English speakers do not, in the main, develop the muscular hollowed cheeks of native speakers of French or Italian.

iv) Tongue

a) the tongue is hardly ever visible during speech.

b) even in 'th-' sounds the tongue does not protrude beyond the teeth, contrary to the expectations of many learners.

The sum total of these observations is that the external appearance of English speech is loose or lax. There is great economy of movement and an avoidance of extremes. This may be demonstrated by the teacher talking with a pencil loosely held crosswise between his lips. It is possible to speak English quite clearly and the pencil will not move to any great extent. Students usually find this an amusing exercise. It is useful if they try it both for English and their L1 , and if the pencil falls out while they are speaking English, the lip and jaw movement is too great. (It should be noted that a pen is too heavy for this experiment.)

The fact that L2 learners often have ready comments about these features of English suggests that they are aware of them as a stereotype. In our experience, the description and discussion of them is both an enjoyable and an essential preliminary to any physical training of the articulatory apparatus.

B. Articulatory Focus and Features: the Internal Setting

The laxity we have described in the external facial setting of English speakers is also to be found inside the mouth, although this is not available for observation in the way outlined above. Whatever the learner does, however, must be carried out with constant reminders from the teacher that there should be as little muscular effort as possible, except at the tongue-tip (see below). Any sound, consonant or vowel, will be uttered with less muscular energy than in the student's L1 and the lips, jaw, tongue and larynx will return as soon as possible to a neutral position.

We will now look at sets of exercises which highlight the most important characteristics of the English articulatory setting.

1 . Alveolar consonants

The most important single characteristic of the internal setting for English is the activity of the *tongue-tip* on or near the *upper teeth* and the *alveolar ridge* (the ridge immediately behind the upper front teeth.) The rest of the tongue is relatively inactive in standard British English, but the activity of the tip is responsible for /s/, /z/, /t/, /d/, /n/, /l/, and the 'ch-', 'sh-', 'j-' and 'th-' sounds, for which the symbols are /tʃ/, /ʃ/, /dʒ/ and /θ/ or /ð/ respectively. It will be apparent that these are by far the largest single group of English consonants. They differ from their equivalents in most other languages, however, in that only the tongue-tip, rather than a larger part, is involved.

A regular warm-up drill, therefore, consists of a sequence of sentences concentrating on each of these consonants in turn. The emphasis is on precision and relaxation. To achieve this, it may help if they are initially whispered or spoken very breathily. Almost any pronunciation manual will yield suitable examples for selective use. We have derived many of ours from *Accepted English Pronunciation* (Collins et al, 1973): others are of our own invention. They have much in common with traditional tongue-twisters, but are used for precisely the opposite reason: to *relax* the tongue and *focus* the tongue-tip. They have the added virtue of being reasonably plausible utterances with a touch of humour.

/s/ /ʃ/

She's my sister

Is she Spanish?

No, she's Swiss

She's selling her house in Swansea

Six weeks in Sussex sounds simply splendid

/θ/ /ð/

They're over there by the theatre

These are the things for your brother

Mother and father bathed in the sea

I thought both of them were worth thousands

/t/ /d/

Dutch gin

German sausage

We generally choose Dutch cheese.

George had a large chop for lunch

I had pigeon and cabbage—a strange mixture

Joan fetched a large jug of orange juice from the fridge

/t/

Tell me when it's time for tea

Take it from the top of the tree

Tony had a terrible time in Tonbridge

These are practised *rapidly*, with natural rhythm, both individually and chorally, breaking down the longer sentences into smaller units initially ('back-chaining'), with frequent reminders about facial relaxation and using only the tongue-tip. We encourage students to learn them by heart and to practise them daily for a few minutes at a time until the setting becomes automatic.

2. Bilabial consonants

In this group, we include /p/ and /b/ and the clusters /pr/, /br/, /pl/ and /br/, all in initial positions. The relaxation and breathiness we have already spoken of are important here too, particularly in the voiceless /p/, /pr/ and /pl/. Excessive tension would prevent the escape of air (aspiration) which is one of the distinguishing features of English. It has therefore been found helpful if students warm up by making the noise a child would make when imitating a car engine: /ppppppppp/ or /bbbbbbb/. For this the lips 'flap' or 'trill' rapidly under (gentle) pressure from escaping air. Both the voiced and voiceless examples are practised with the tongue-tip loosely anchored on the teeth-ridge. The /pl-/ cluster then consists of a single flap of the lips with *simultaneous* downward release of the tongue-tip never quite makes contact with the teeth-ridge.

/p/

Penny pushed Pauline off the pier

A packet of peas and two pounds of potatoes please

Perhaps Peter will leave his pet python at home

/pl-/

They're planning to plant some new plum trees

Apply here for platform tickets

/pr-/

Proctor's presenting the prizes this year

I appreciate your present but I'd prefer a pen

/bl-/

Blue is a blasted nuisance

It shows all the black blotches

/br-/

Brenda's always bragging about her brother

Bruce has gone to the Brewers' Jamboree in Brighton

C. Vowels

It is our experience that, if the right degree of laxity and tongue-tip focus can be achieved through these consonantal drills, the vowels largely take care of themselves, in that the internal shape is right. There is, however, one important aspect of English vowels which deserves attention. We refer to the basic 'impurity' of all English vowels, which means simply their tendency to *glide*. This derives from the same general articulatory feature (lack of tension) which characterises English consonants. It is, therefore, helpful to practise those vowels where this is particularly marked, namely the diphthongs. All English diphthongs (double-vowels) end with the mouth more relaxed than at the beginning. Either the jaw and tongue close slightly (as in *know*, *grow*, *high*, *why*, *cow*, *bough*, *boy*, *ploy*), or the whole setting relaxes from a position where the lips are slightly spread or rounded to one where they are neutral (*there*, *here*, *poor*, *tyre*, *power*). Again, pronunciation manuals provide plentiful examples, but here are some which we have found productive:

Brown rice is dearer than white rice

The phone makes a frightful row

My brown ale's gone sour

The train-drivers want a pay-rise

My boy works in the paper trade

Flower Power is here to stay

If he spoils my enjoyment I'll boil him in oil

The Daily Mail is clearly right

Conclusion

We have attempted in this article to draw attention to the need, in pronunciation teaching, to give the main emphasis to those features which distinguish English from all other languages and which all learners, whatever their L1, must seek to cultivate. We feel,

therefore, that teachers do not need to be experts in a large number of contrastive phonologies: if they understand the cardinal features of English articulation—laxity, economy of movement and tongue-tip focus—much will be achieved.

To this end we have endeavoured to provide teachers with a small repertoire of exercises and activities which can be readily extended or adapted to suit particular teaching circumstances. We have also tried to avoid 'phonetician's jargon' and to use the kind of simple language which we have found to be efficient in the classroom. To ask 'is your tongue right?' is then usually a sufficient reminder to a student whose setting has slipped.

References

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