Methods for Teaching Pronunciation without using 'Imitation'

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ABSTRACT

We teach pronunciation using 'listen and repeat' exercises because that's how it's always been done, and because common sense seems to say that it should work even if it doesn't. The generally poor results we get in the classroom are usually ascribed to listening problems. Instead, they are more likely to be the result of two basic misconceptions: the widespread notions (1) that speech sounds (and timing phenomena) can be learnt by imitation, and (2) that children do this when learning L1. From a theoretical perspective these notions are both dubious. With respect to the second, not only is there no evidence that children learn to pronounce this way, but evidence is accumulating that they do not. It is more likely that their bootstrap into the sound system is the imitative exchanges in infancy where their caregivers reflect their utterances back to them, reformulated into L1syllables. This basic paradigm can be reworked for the classroom, and has been successfully applied for many years by teachers using Gattegno's Silent Way. His approach has been significantly enhanced over that period and can be applied in conjunction with non-Silent Way approaches to grammar etc, and with intermediate and advanced students.

Keywords: Approach, Classroom, Imitation, Pronunciation, Results, Speech, Students

INTRODUCTION

The word 'imitation' covers many different copying processes: mimicry (recreating a sensory experience), matching (producing an effect judged to be similar), emulation (achieving the observed end result by different means), and others. In the teaching of pronunciation, much of our practice is based on attempted auditory matching by the learner, where we ask him to match his output to a model he has heard spoken by the teacher or on a recording. A more colloquial name for what we do is 'listen and repeat' (L&R). It's simple to do, and since we all believe that children learn to pronounce by first listening to adults and then basing their production on what they have heard, it seems sensible to teach older learners on the same basis.

Pronunciation is a crucial ingredient of the learning of oral skills in a second language. However, the role it plays in English language programs for adults varies, and the amount of time and effort devoted to it seems to rely, to a large degree, on the language teacher. This means that it may or may not form part of regular classroom activities or student self-study. However, students often view pronunciation as being very important and a priority for them (Willing, 1988). Studies done by Brown (1992), Claire (1993), Fraser (2000), and Yates (2001) stress that teachers in adult ESL programs encounter some difficulties meeting the pronunciation learning needs of their students, and have displayed that many language teachers are inclined to avoid dealing with pronunciation in that they lack confidence, skills, and knowledge. Besides this, these studies revealed that curricula, methodology and the lack of appropriate materials, all gave rise to inadequacies of the teaching and learning in this field. The reason why we have focused on techniques of teaching pronunciation in this paper is that modern techniques of teaching pronunciation are not employed by language teachers in foreign language classes.

History and trends of pronunciation teaching in the world There are three main approaches to pronunciation instruction, which are the intuitive-imitative approach, the analytic-linguistic approach, and the integrative approach (Celce-Murcia, 1996; Chen, 2007). These approaches integrate traditional methods with modern techniques. In the following section, these three approaches will be expounded one by one. In the intuitive-imitative approach, it is assumed that a student's ability to listen to and imitate the rhythms and sounds of the target language will give rise to the development of an acceptable threshold of pronunciation without the intervention of any explicit information. The invention of the

language laboratory and the audio-lingual method contributed to the support of this approach in the 1960's, 1970's and right up into the 1980's. Indeed, many contemporary second language practitioners still hold to this view; however, research is needed to clarify if their beliefs have any foundation (Carey, 2002:9). In the analytic-linguistic approach, the prominence of an explicit intervention of pronunciation pedagogy in language acquisition is stressed. Developments in the fields of phonetics and phonology from the latter half of the century are drawn upon and often "watered down" for use in the language classroom.

Pedagogical aids, such as the phonemic chart, articulatory descriptions, explanations of the form and function of prosody and practical exercises, such as minimal pair drills and rhythmic chants form the basis of an explicit program of accent modification (Carey, 2002:1). Explicitly does analytic-linguistic approach inform the learner of and pay attention to the sounds and rhythms of the target language. It was developed to complement the intuitive-imitative approach instead of replacing it (Celce-Murcia, Goodwin and Brinton, 1996:2). In the current integrative approach, pronunciation is regarded as an integral component of communication, rather than an isolated drill and practice sub-skill. Pronunciation is practiced within meaningful task-based activities.

Learners use pronunciation–focused listening activities to facilitate the learning of pronunciation. There is more focus on the suprasegmentals of stress, rhythm and intonation as practised in extended discourse beyond the phoneme and word level. Pronunciation is taught to meet the learners' particular needs. There is a dual-focus oral communication program (Morley, 1994) where the micro level instruction is focused on linguistic (i.e., phonetic phonological) competence through practice of segmentals and the suprasegmentals, and the macro level attends to more global elements of communicability, with the goal of developing discourse, sociolinguistics, and strategic competence by using language for communicative purposes. Although there are three main contemporary approaches to learning pronunciation, the learning of English pronunciation has been the subject of research for a long time.

Teaching pronunciation without relying on direct imitation can be achieved through various methods, including focusing on articulation, using visual aids, and employing phonetic alphabet analysis. These methods encourage students to actively experiment with sounds and develop a deeper understanding of the phonetics of the target language.

Articulatory Approach: This method focuses on the physical actions of the mouth, tongue, and vocal cords needed to produce sounds.

- Instead of simply repeating, students explore how the sounds are made, with the teacher guiding and providing feedback.
- This approach can involve using mirrors to visualize mouth movements, and engaging in activities like tongue twisters that target specific sounds.

Visual Reinforcement: This technique utilizes visual aids like charts, diagrams, or even props to represent sounds and their production.

- Sound charts can be used to visually represent vowels and consonants, and vowel diagrams can illustrate tongue placement.
- Stress patterns can be visually highlighted, making them easier for students to understand and replicate.

Phonetic Alphabet Analysis: Using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) can help students understand the symbols that represent sounds.

- Students can analyze how words are spelled phonetically, which can help them decode and produce sounds.
- Phonetic transcription can be used to highlight specific sounds that students struggle with.

Minimal Pairs and Word Isolation: This approach focuses on distinguishing between similar sounds by using words that differ only in one sound.

- Examples include "ship" and "sheep," where the difference lies in the vowel sound.
- Students can practice identifying and producing these sounds in isolation, which can be further reinforced by drilling and repeated practice.

Interactive Activities: Incorporating interactive activities like games, role-plays, or even singing can make learning pronunciation more engaging and effective.

- Singing along to songs can help students learn rhythm and intonation, while role-plays can provide real-world contexts for pronunciation practice.
- Games like "Phoneme Bingo" can be used to reinforce specific sounds in a fun and engaging way.

Techniques of Pronunciation Teaching

Traditionally, language teachers have made use of the phonetic alphabet, and activities, such as transcription practice, diagnostic passages, detailed description of the articulatory systems, recognition/discrimination tasks, developmental approximation drills, focused production tasks (e.g., minimal pair drills, contextualized sentence practice, reading of short passages or dialogues, reading aloud/recitation), tongue twisters, and games (e.g., Pronunciation Bingo). Other trendy methods are listening and imitating, visual aids, practice of vowel shifts and stress shifts related by affixation, and recordings of learner's production (Celce-Murcia, 1996). All these techniques are based on teachers having their students learn each sound and then apply them in real speech. Some students benefit from these techniques; however, others do not learn the pronunciation of the other language easily from them. For this reason, new techniques are being developed to supplement the learning of English pronunciation. New directions in teaching and learning English pronunciation have come from other fields, such as drama, psychology, and speech pathology (Celce-Murcia, 1996).

The techniques Celce-Murcia (1996) stressed are the use of fluency-building activities as well as accuracy-oriented exercises, appeals to multi-sensory modes of learning, adaptation of authentic materials, and the use of instructional technology in the teaching of pronunciation.

Today, there is a variety of current technology equipment and applications used in education. They include computers, digital cameras, scanners, LCD panels and/or projectors, distance education/video conferencing systems, 986 Murat Hismanoglu and Sibel Hismanoglu / Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 2 (2010) 983–989 word processing, databases, spreadsheets, drawing/graphics programs, website development, electronic references, discussion groups/list servers, instructional software (tutorials, drills and practice), presentation software, hypermedia, e-mail, internet, assistive technologies and instructional methods for integrating technology (MuirHerzig, 2004). Among these technology equipment applications, instructional software (tutorial drills and practice) is used commonly to assist people learning languages.

METHODOLOGY

This study was based on a survey of preparatory school language teachers believed to have relevant experience with techniques of pronunciation teaching in EFL classes.

Subjects

The subjects in this study were 103 language teachers working in English Preparatory Schools of five different universities in India. Language teachers' ages ranged from 23- to 53-years-old with an average age of 32. Thirty of the language teachers were native teachers of English, while seventy three of them were non-native teachers of English. All teachers (twenty six male and seventy seven female) had previous teaching experience ranging from 1-3 years to over 24 years at university levels. In terms of the graduated department, 7 language teachers were graduates of linguistics department, 39 English language and literature department, 3 Indian culture and literature department, and 54 English language teaching department.

Research Questions

The research questions were:

1. What three techniques do language teachers prefer using most to teach pronunciation to their students?

2. Is there a correlation between taking a pronunciation course in B.A education and three most frequently preferred pronunciation teaching techniques?

3. Instrument The researcher prepared a questionnaire as an instrument for this survey study. The questionnaire consisted of two multiple choice type of questions in relation to what three techniques language teachers prefer using most to teach pronunciation to their students and whether language teachers took a pronunciation course in their B.A education and a section related to participants' ages and teaching experiences.

4. Procedures After the selection of the data collection instrument, the researcher got the necessary permission from the English preparatory school directors of five different universities in India to conduct the research.

Following this procedure, the researcher administered the questionnaire to randomly selected 103 language teachers working in English preparatory colleges of these universities at the end of 2023-24 Academic Year.

The researcher told the participants to complete the survey sincerely in that their responses would be used for research purposes only and would remain confidential.

The participants responded to the survey anonymously, and the data collected were analyzed by using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests.

The Articulatory approach to teaching pronunciation considers learning how to pronounce a second language to be a motor skill which most students are not in a position to develop based on self-evaluation of their production. The role of the teacher is therefore to provide feedback on students' performance as part of coaching them in the movements of the vocal tract articulators (tongue, jaw, lips, etc.) which create speech sounds.

The Articulatory approach is an alternative to the imitative-intuitive and analytic-linguistic approaches, both of which involve the teacher providing a model for her students to imitate. The model might be her own voice or a recording. In the articulatory approach, the students are not asked to match a model but instead to experiment with making sounds, with the teacher acting as a source of ideas, encouragement and feedback on how close the students are getting to the target.

The Problem of Categorical Perception
When learning a new language, students are not in a position to compare L1 and L2 sounds competently because the L2 sounds are evaluated using the categorical perception developed for L1. Trubetzkoy described the process as follows:[2] "The phonological system of a language is like a sieve through which everything that is said passes ... Each person acquires the system of his mother tongue. But when he hears another language spoken, he intuitively uses the familiar 'phonological sieve' of his mother tongue to analyze what has been said. However, since this sieve is not suited for the foreign language, numerous mistakes and misinterpretations are the result. The sounds of the foreign language receive an incorrect phonological interpretation since they are strained through the 'phonological sieve' of one's own mother tongue."

Users of the imitative-intuitive approach, who simply give their students a model to imitate ('Listen and Repeat') believe that this problem will resolve itself with exposure to L2 over the course of time. Users of the analytic-linguistic approach address the problem explicitly through listening exercises, recently including high variability phonetic training. In both approaches, it is believed that as students improve their perception of L2 sounds, they will be better able to match their production of L2 sounds to the models provided.

Proponents of the articulatory approach argue that it is more efficient to begin by working on the production of L2 sounds directly (as a motor skill rather than an imitative task) and that this leads to improved L2 perception.

An alternative paradigm for teaching pronunciation Gattegno (1962, pp. 5-9) understood what was happening between mothers and their children, and also the importance of directing older learners' attention to where it needs to be if they are to learn the motor skill of pronouncing new sounds. In his Silent Way approach, the teacher does not provide a model, but instead asks the student to start making a target sound by trial and error. (Some way of referring to the target sound is needed, of course. IPA symbols are one possibility; I prefer coloured rectangles for reasons explained below.) The teacher's role is to give feedback on how well the student does, encouragement to keep experimenting, and suggestions of things he might try. The suggestions will often be visible – things for the student to notice – rather than oral instructions.

For example, the teacher might silently hyperarticulate the sound if this would give a clue to the student, or use her hands to indicate a new tongue movement. As soon as the student realises that the teacher does not think that his first attempt is good enough, the student is faced with the need to do something different. And that means becoming present to his own articulators and deliberately using them in a new way. Then, listening to what the result is; listening this time in a state that is ready to hear something different because he knows he did something different. It's difficult to create a new sound, so success won't be immediate. But this process continues over the days of the class as the sound is embedded in longer sequences of sounds and practised at different rates, loudness, and so on. At all times, the student will be encouraged to be present to the two things he needs to be present to in order to learn a new motor skill: the articulators which are creating the sound, and the resulting sound they create. In this process, the model a teacher might provide would be an unhelpful distraction.

In the classroom Gattegno's Silent Way has been developed since his death in 1988, particularly with respect to the pronunciation materials. However, they are still adapted for the whole Silent Way approach and best suited for beginners. If a teacher would prefer not to use the Silent Way, or is teaching intermediate or advanced students, then the paradigm that Gattegno pioneered for pronunciation can still be used, and is supported by the PronSci charts (see the gallery at www.pronsci.com for examples). Here, colour rather than IPA symbols is used to refer to sounds without

the teacher having to say them herself. A chart showing the sounds of English as coloured rectangles provides a synthetic vision of the sound system of the language and of the internal logic of its elements. The sound to colour coding then extends to charts where coloured letters mean that words and spelling combinations are displayed using standard orthography but with their pronunciation immediately apparent to the student. This is one of a number of reasons why colour is better than IPA symbols for most pedagogical purposes.

CONCLUSION

'Listen and repeat' is easy for teachers to do but gives disappointing results. When we examine why, we see that it makes no sense as an approach for teaching the motor skills that are required for pronunciation. Nor is it likely to reflect the way that children learn the pronunciation of their first language. The alternative is for us not to model sounds and sequences of sounds for our students but to work on their motor skills, which means that the teacher needs to act in the way that any sports coach normally acts: by encouraging her charges to work on the problem for themselves and giving them feedback on how they are doing in areas where they have not yet developed criteria for themselves.

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