

# Innovative Approaches to the Teaching of Practical Phonetics

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## 1. Introduction

New developments in pronunciation pedagogy result from a general tendency in foreign language teaching to embrace communicative and holistic approaches. Moreover, current trends have been affected by clear influences from other disciplines such as psychology, neuro-linguistics, drama and technology. This paper presents an overview of innovative approaches to the teaching of practical phonetics and points to their common characteristics.

## 2. Communicative perspective

Many of today's pronunciation teaching practitioners try to go beyond traditional classroom techniques such as repetition drills, recognition and discrimination tasks, descriptions of the articulatory system or transcription practice. Since the advent of communicative approach, which has dominated the whole spectrum of foreign language teaching, pronunciation methodology has started to advocate more discourse-based approaches. In addition, the focus has shifted dramatically from teaching segmentals to suprasegmentals with a view to improving general comprehensibility. Today's pronunciation curricula tend to reflect a more balanced treatment of suprasegmentals integrated with segmentals with highly functional load (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). For some time, however, pronunciation has ignored the interaction of the sound with function and meaning, traditionally focussing only on accurate production of sounds and intonation patterns. Now the scope of pronunciation instruction is being seriously questioned since accuracy and fluency are regarded to be highly interrelated. Consequently, fluency-based communicative activities are more and more often incorporated into pronunciation instruction, particularly into initial stages of a lesson in the form of warm-ups. For a detailed treatment of fluency-building activities such as discussion wheel, fluency workshop or personal introduction collage see Celce-Murcia et al. (1996).

## 3. Voice setting

Current approaches to the teaching of practical phonetics have become concerned with developing a more authentically native-like 'voice quality' or 'setting', which cannot be achieved through mastering sound segments alone. Voice quality refers to characteristic features of a given language such as pitch level, vowel space, neutral tongue position and the degree of muscular activity that are common to speakers of a target variety and result from using organs of articulation in a particular way.

General features which contribute to the quality of the English voice include the position of the larynx which is neutral or slightly lowered, thus giving usually a warmer and more resonant effect. The larynx is used predominantly with low energy and low tension, therefore, English sounds rather relaxed and 'breathy'. The supralaryngeal tract is also quite neutral and relaxed with the exception of the tongue tip which tends to be very active frequently moving towards the alveolar ridge (Jenner 1995). It is essential for the students who wish to sound more authentically English to become aware of these characteristics and to try to modify their own voice quality. It can be achieved through a number of exercises involving the observation and imitation of articulatory movements employed in speaking English. The following techniques may be useful to develop some general features of the English voice:

- speaking with a light object placed between the lips (e.g. a pen-cap) which indicates a small degree of opening in English,
- using a 'yawning' voice when counting in English to lower the position of the larynx,
- applying breathing exercises to achieve an almost total laxity of the English voice,
- exaggerating the length of long open vowels and diphthongs produced in context e.g. *I'll see to the tea, How now, brown cow?*, as long vowels in English are closely connected with muscular laxity,
- practising rhythmic sentences with frequent /t/, /d/ or /n/ sounds to activate the

tip of the tongue to make contact with the alveolar ridge, e.g. *Tip this tin into the bin.*

Students are also encouraged to create new more confident-sounding voices by changing the pitch, speed and timbre and possibly imitating more L<sub>2</sub>-like body postures in order to develop a more authentically sounding English voice quality.

#### 4. Drama techniques

There is a growing interest in incorporating drama voice techniques into the teaching of practical phonetics as they prove to be very efficient in enabling students to gain a better control over their articulation and overcome fossilised pronunciation. These techniques focus mainly on warming up the organs of speech through tongue exercises and increasing pitch range through intonation exercises. Furthermore, they offer valuable insights into the mechanics of speech, the process of breathing as well as help monitor the shape of the mouth, posture and body language. Drama voice modulation techniques are fun and they also help to reduce the stress which is often a feature of speech production in a foreign language.

The following sample activities were selected as most applicable for pronunciation classes. For a more detailed treatment of drama voice techniques see Wessels & Lawrence (1995)

4.1 Relaxation and posture: these exercises are designed to release tension as stiff bodies impair our breathing and, consequently, decreasing voice control. They include assuming a correct posture, basic stretching exercises and relaxation of face muscles by e.g. smiling broadly or tensing and relaxing facial muscles by making the face as big and then as small as possible. The main aim is to relax and warm up the organs of articulation for further training.

4.2 Breathing and resonance exercises: a basic breathing exercise consists in breathing in for a count of three, holding the air inside for three, and releasing the air for three. Resonance exercises involve inhaling the air and letting it out on a long vowel or a consonant-vowel sequence (e.g. *aaah, oooh, eeeee, mmmmaaa, mmmoooo, mmmuuu*).

4.3 Phoneme sequences: practising phoneme sequences can be compared to playing scales on the piano, so that the production becomes semi-automatised e.g. *lee lay la low lu, pin nip pin nip, thick tin thick tin.*

4.4 Pitch, volume and rate control: producing sound sequences or whole passages progressively louder or softer and at different rates of delivery; practising (i.e. singing, humming, chanting) sentences like *'I can make my voice go really high / fall really low'* with a gradually falling or rising intonation.

4.5 Tone awareness exercises: learning to use resonators to create particular tones (e.g. soft or harsh, bright or dull, etc). This can be accomplished through practising mini-dialogues expressing each time different emotions such as surprise, anger, great pleasure or politeness, e.g. *'Let's go for a walk.' 'OK.'*

4.6 Articulation exercises: called 'vocal warm-ups' since they help to exercise the muscles of the mouth and the tongue, contributing to a greater articulatory agility and clearer speech. They include popular tongue-twisters (e.g. *She sells sea shells on the sea shore*), chants and raps.

4.7 Imitations of a native-speaker model:

- mouthing - miming a dialogue without words
- mirroring – repeating simultaneously with the speaker and imitating his/her gestures and facial expressions
- tracing – repeating simultaneously without mirroring the speaker's gestures
- echoing – repeating slightly after the speaker (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996).

Other drama techniques that are nowadays frequently applied in pronunciation teaching involve performing dialogues or scenes from a play. Emotional involvement and context provided by the dramatic situation foster communicative competence and lead to increased empathy and self-esteem. When performing students tend to go beyond the normal limits of fluency and accuracy and there is a clearly visible improvement, particularly in intonation.

## 5. Multisensory modes

A holistic approach to teaching practical phonetics manifests itself in the use of multisensory modes. Auditory, visual, tactile and kinaesthetic as well as olfactory and gustatory reinforcements have been shown to enhance acquisition through appealing to different learning styles. Multisensory approach is in line with the findings of the so called "brain-friendly revolution" according to which learning should be experienced as a combination of modalities appealing to different senses. It also reflects a strong tendency nowadays to emphasise the physical rather than abstract aspect of pronunciation (Underhill 1996). The following examples of multisensory reinforcements are being applied successfully by many pronunciation practitioners to make their lessons more effective:

5.1 Visual: seeing images and pictorial representations of phonemic symbols; using vowel charts, phonemic charts, diagrams and flash cards; relying on learners' visual perception of muscular movements of articulators when presenting a new sound or word by miming rather than saying it.

5.2 Auditory: listening and repeating; associating a sound with a phrase used as a mnemonic device or memory peg; uttering a model only once and leaving a silent space for conscious internal processing.

5.3 Tactile: using props to demonstrate features of the English sound system e.g. elastic band to illustrate vowel length, matches or a piece of paper to introduce aspiration; placing fingers in two corners of the mouth to trace lip movements between spread to rounded position when producing *iii uuu iii uuu* sequences.

5.4 Kinaesthetic: tracing intonation contours with arms, modelling the mouth with hands, counting the number of syllables on fingers, clapping or stamping the rhythm.

## 6. Affective domain

It has been established that pronunciation is very sensitive to emotional factors (Brown 1995) and that its nature is strongly related to students' ego, identity and the level of self-confidence. Therefore, new trends in teaching practical phonetics put a strong emphasis on the

affective or emotional domain of learning to counterbalance the traditional focus placed exclusively on intellectual learning. An ideal receptive learning state occurs when a person is physically relaxed, emotionally calm and mentally alert. Research findings indicate, that a relaxed frame of mind and a degree of confidence facilitate an accurate production of L<sub>2</sub> sounds. Consequently, creating a non-threatening student-friendly environment is amongst prime concerns of modern pronunciation instruction.

Efficient methods of reducing stress connected with pronunciation practice and dealing more efficiently with learners' emotions rely on the use of drama techniques. Thanks to them learners become more expressive and are more willing to experiment with sounds or intonation patterns. A commonly used strategy involves assuming an English or American identity and putting on a strong native accent, as if becoming a different dramatic persona.

## 7. Neuro-Linguistic Programming

Neuro-Linguistic Programming is yet another perspective which is frequently advocated by innovative pronunciation instructors as it deals efficiently with affective factors related to learning pronunciation and facilitates an accurate production of L<sub>2</sub> sounds. NLP is a collection of patterns and strategies based on a series of underlying understandings of how the mind works and how people act and react. NLP's main concern are neurological processes called states. According to Neuro-Linguistic Programming a desired state of mind, when learning occurs naturally, could be induced through relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises or autogenic training (i.e. guided imagery activities), which render learners emotionally calm and mentally alert and, at the same time, help break down their ego boundaries. Research shows that having students relax at the beginning of each teaching session will increase their learning by 25 percent (Bolstad 1997).

The NLP perspective attaches much importance to the role of interpersonal relationships between the teacher and the learner. This meta-communication, i.e. rapport, linkage and authority (Bolstad 1997), is believed to be particularly conducive to success in pronunciation leaning. The process of learning

pronunciation of a second language has been demonstrated to be especially sensitive to suggestion (Lozanov, 1979). Sometimes referred to as educational hypnosis, suggestion is one of key priorities in NLP. Murphy and Bolstad (1997) define it as a desire to constantly suggest internal representations that lead someone to facilitative states. Therefore, how instructors talk about acquiring good pronunciation and the messages sent consciously or subconsciously to students contain important suggestive communication patterns. NLP helps to use language more efficiently so that through sending positive messages and suggestions of success we can produce intended responses.

Other pronunciation enhancing techniques adopted from the NLP perspective include visualisation (e.g. visualising a sound or a phonological process to remember them better through building new neurological paths); reframing (changing the context of one's experience e.g. modelling a native speaker speaking our native tongue) or anchoring (i.e. committing an aspect of practical phonetics to memory through doing something striking or linking it with a particular location). Anchoring usually occurs in the final stage of a lesson and may consist in presenting some vivid or memorable phrases, examples of rhyming verse which are to serve as mnemonic devices and imprint on the learner's memory.

## 8. Conclusions

Various new developments in the teaching of practical phonetics presented in the article share a number of characteristic features. What prevails nowadays is an interdisciplinary approach that applies findings of the science of the brain, appeals to different senses, takes advantage of drama and voice production techniques and allows for affective factors as well as sociopsychological issues such as identity, ego boundary or interpersonal relationships.

It is hoped that this paper will provide teachers of foreign language pronunciation with practical insights into a variety of innovative techniques and resources, help them expand the repertoire of traditional classroom practices and, consequently, enhance pronunciation instruction.

## 9. References

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