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Goals in teaching English pronunciation

1. Aims in language teaching

The current debate about the phonology of English as an international language (EIL) should encourage us to think about our aims in language teaching, and specifically in the teaching of English pronunciation in the context of English for speakers of other languages. Some of the questions we need to address are as follows.

- **Are we teaching EFL, ESL or EIL?** that is, do we intend our students to use English as a foreign language, as a second language, or as an international language? Now the mere formulation of this question exposes its absurdity. English in Poland may not currently have any role as a second language in the sense of a role such as it plays in India, Nigeria or Singapore; but Polish learners of English will surely want to be able to apply their learning of English both in an EFL context and in an EIL context. They want to be able to apply their acquired knowledge of English by participating wherever English is used. It is not realistic to ask for a **choice** between EFL and EIL: our students need both.
- **Do you and your students want to be able to interact with native speakers? or only with non-native speakers?** Will they interact with the British, the Americans, the Australians, the Irish, the English-speaking West Indians and the Canadians? Or will they interact with those whose L_1 is not English, for example with the Japanese, the Scandinavians,

and the Arabs? Or indeed with those who will shortly be your partners in the European Union – the Italians, the Spanish, the Austrians – to the extent that they will be speaking English with them rather than French, German or some other EU language? Clearly, Polish learners will want to be able to interact with **both** native speakers (NSs) **and** non-native speakers (NNSs).

- The teaching of English to speakers of other languages may indeed have **different aims** in, for example, Britain, Nigeria, and Japan respectively. In teaching English to immigrants in Britain, the main aim is clearly to enable learners to interact with British people, native speakers. In Nigerian primary schools, it is to enable them to participate in the public life of their country by interacting with other Nigerians. In Japan a main focus might indeed be the use of English to communicate with the Chinese or the Latin Americans.

- What are the student's **personal aims** and aspirations in language learning? Different students in the same class of school or university may well have rather different aims. Some just want enough English to communicate at a basic level, or indeed just enough to pass some examination. Others aim to achieve the best they possibly can. We must cater for both types and for those who fall somewhere between. Speaking personally, I must say that my own aspiration in learning languages is NS-like proficiency. I acknowledge that I may be unlikely to attain it. But that doesn't stop me aiming for it. I try to inspire my students with the same high ideal. If it were suggested that I should not even aim so high, I should feel short-changed.

2. 'English as an international language'

What, then, are the characteristics of English as an International Language? Arguably, it suffers from a number of design faults, characteristics that make it unsuitable for this role newly imposed upon it.

- It has an elaborate and unwieldy **vocabulary**. Even among the most basic and frequent words there are many sets of near-synonyms such as *ill* vs. *sick*, *big* vs. *large*, *small* vs. *little*, tricky to distinguish between. Where we have a single noun *king* we have three related adjectives: *kingly* (of Germanic origin), *royal* (French) and *regal* (Latin). They have subtly different nuances, which may be fine for literature and literary language, but are a superfluous burden for those who only want to use the language for practical purposes. The verb *arrive* has an associated noun *arrival*; but for *depart* the noun is not **departal* but *departure*. When the plan *lands* that is not a **landal* or a **landure* but a *landing*; when it *takes off* again that is not a **take-offal, *take-offure* or **taking-off* but a simple *take-off*. This inconsistency in derivational morphology (typical of English) is an unnecessary complication for NNSs.
- It has a complex **syntax**, although this is partly compensated for by the simplicity of the inflectional morphology.
- Its **orthography** is notoriously inconsistent and irregular. You cannot safely predict the pronunciation from the spelling. Nor, given the pronunciation, can you reliably infer the spelling.
- Its **phonetics** is idiosyncratic, including various characteristics that are unusual from the point of view of universals: an large and elaborate vowel system, including complex processses of length alternation and weakening (*compete-competitive-competition*); a consonant system that includes dental fricatives ([θ, ð]) and voiced sibilants ([z, ʒ,

dʒ]), which are problematic for many learners; words stress placement that is free, i.e. arbitrary and frequently unpredictable; and an intonation system that seems to be more complex and to have a much higher functional load than that of most other languages.

It it because of such considerations that some (including me) have argued that for international purposes we ought to use Esperanto, rather than English. Given, however, that most people seem content for English to play this role, what special provisions do we need to make for EIL?

The Lingua Franca Core (LFC) approach can be represented — with oversimplification and rather unfairly — as saying that we should ignore the parts of English that NNSs tend to get wrong. Jennifer Jenkins has made a number of proposals in *The Phonology of English as an International Language* (Jenkins 2000). We shall consider some of them in a moment. If we applied similar proposals not to phonetics but to grammar, it would arguably mean ignoring such difficult matters as the articles (*coffee—a coffee—the coffee*), the number system (singular vs. plural, *dog* vs. *dogs*), the distinction between countable [C] and uncountable [U] (so that we could happily talk of *informations* and *furnitures*), and the distinction in verbs between progressive and non-progressive (*are you smoking?* vs. *do you smoke*, which even fluent users of English in Scandinavia typically ignore). In vocabulary we could stop worrying about false friends such as *actually* and *eventually*, relatively international words where the NS English meaning is out of line with the meaning in other languages that have the word.

Many of the oddities of NNS pronunciation of English are due to inappropriate inference from the spelling. The NS spoken form of *marvellous* is [ˈmɑː(r)v(ə)ləs]. NNSs who say [ˈmavelus] or the like, with [u] in the final syllable, are doing so purely on the basis of (mis)interpreting the spelling. Native speakers pronounce *climbing* as [ˈklaɪmɪŋ] or [ˈklaɪmɪn]. Nigerians who say [ˈklaimbiŋg], with [-b-], do so because of spelling. For NSs, the past tense of *look* [lʊk] is

looked [lʊkt]. Nigerians typically treat the past tense as [d] and then apply voicing assimilation, giving [lugd]. Arabs speaking English often treat it as [ɪd], giving [ˈlʊkɪd]. Arguably, both of these forms are mispronunciations arising simply from defective teaching: no one has ever taught such NNSs how the English regular past tense is pronounced. There is no more reason to regard them as acceptable than there is for **childs* instead of *children* or **teached* instead of *taught*.

In cases where NSs make differences in pronunciation that are not reflected in spelling, NNSs tend to ignore them. Although the difference between the noun *entrance* [ˈentrəns] and the verb *to entrance* [ɪnˈtrɑːns] can be coped with, the difference between the verb *to separate* [ˈsepəreɪt] and the adjective *separate* [ˈseprət, ˈsep(ə)rɪt] may be lost, as is that between the verb *to document* [-ment] and the noun *a document* [-mənt]. *South* and *southern* have different vowels for NSs ([saʊθ, ˈsʌð(ə)(r)n]), but often not for NNSs. There are many other ways in which English spelling misleads NNSs, who unlike NSs learn visually rather than auditorily. NSs pronounce *front* with the STRUT vowel (RP [frʌnt]); NNSs often use the LOT vowel ([frɒnt]), purely because of the way it is written. There are two possible remedies for this general problem (if it is indeed a problem): either we must reform English spelling (and I might mention that I have just become President of the Simplified Spelling Society) — or teachers of English to speakers of other languages must **teach the pronunciation** of each word as well as its spelling. This implies teaching the **use of phonetic symbols**, at least passively for reference.

3. Phonology of EIL?

Jenkins's proposals still require the mastery of a fair number of difficult pronunciation points that are not in practice mastered by many users of EIL.

The consonant [f], a major problem for Koreans, Filipinos and others. Korean [pʰ] instead of [f] is likely to trigger a breakdown in communication, as Jenkins shows; Korean [hɥ] (their other L₁ possibility) is hardly a better substitute. We have to teach the articulatory difference between bilabial plosive [p] and labiodental fricative [f]; we have to train the learner not only to produce the difference but also to perceive it (the latter task being often overlooked). There is no way to avoid drilling the learner with minimal pairs such as *pork—fork, copy—coffee.*

Other consonantal differences that constitute serious problems for some learners, but which Jenkins rightly insists must be mastered, include [b–v, r–l, s–ʃ, s–z, tʃ–dʒ, j–dʒ]. Failure to discriminate one or two of these pairs can perhaps be condoned, given sufficient redundancy in the context to disambiguate otherwise ambiguous messages. We can readily cope with Swedish English in which every /z/ becomes [s], provided that all the rest of the pronunciation is pretty NS-like. But Japanese English in which [b-v] and [r-l] are confused, together with various vowel confusions and phonotactic problems, ends up unintelligible.

I am in favour of Jenkins's suggestion that l-vocalization should be allowed, indeed encouraged for those learners for whom dark /l/ constitutes a problem. There are millions of Londoners and others who say [mɪok] for *milk*, [bʌob] for *bulb*, [ˈbɒto] or [ˈbɒʔo] for *bottle*, etc., and I see no reason why the French or the Cantonese should not do likewise.

Allophonic reduction in vowel length (pre-fortis clipping, as in *right* as compared with *ride*) helps intelligibility, but is difficult to

teach and learn. However phonemic vowel 'length' differences, perhaps better considered primarily as vowel quality differences, are another matter. Jenkins is right to insist on mastery of the [iː–ɪ] distinction (*leave* vs. *live, sheep* vs. *ship*), which is made by all NSs. Her wording also implies that the distinctions [uː–ʊ] and [ɔː–ɒ] are equally required, and here I disagree. Millions of Scottish speakers of English manage perfectly well without any difference between the vowel of *shoot* and that of *foot*, and there are tens of millions of Americans and Canadians for whom *hawk* and *hock* are homophonous. These distinctions have a low functional load and are not needed in EIL.

Jenkins's wording does not leave it entirely clear whether the vowel oppositions /e-æ, æ-ʌ, ɔː-əʊ/ are required in the LFC, but I assume that they are, despite constituting a considerable problem for some NNSs. The difficulty with English /æ/ is that many languages have only two vowels available for the three English vowels /e, æ, ʌ/ to be mapped onto. The consequence is that learners disregard either the /e – æ/ distinction (Polish, Russian, German and Hungarian learners, who tend to make *bed* and *bad* identical) or the /æ - ʌ/ distinction (Japanese and Spanish-speaking learners, who tend to make *bad* and *bud* identical). In either case misunderstandings can result.

It is to be emphasized that we are concerned here with the vowel **system** rather than with the details of vowel realization. All NSs distinguish *bed – bad – bud*, though the actual vowel qualities used may vary widely. Listeners can tune in to such variability without too much difficulty. There are six short vowels in most kinds of English, representing the standard lexical sets KIT, DRESS, TRAP, STRUT, LOT, FOOT (Wells 1982:ch. 2), as in *bid, bed, bad, bud, cod, good.* There are NS accents that merge STRUT and FOOT (the north of England, where *cut* and *put* rhyme) or TRAP and LOT (popular Jamaican, where *black* and *block* sound identical). But no NS accent merges DRESS and TRAP (/e - æ/, *bed—bad*), a distinction that also bears a high functional load. Nor is there any NS accent that merges

TRAP and STRUT (/æ - ʌ/, *bad—bud*). These oppositions, difficult as they may be for learners, are ones on which we must insist.

In teaching such vowel oppositions it is important not to forget to teach the spelling-to-sound rules associated with them. For /e – æ/ there is a fairly reliable rule: **if the spelling is *e* or *ea*, the sound may be /e/ but never /æ/; if the spelling is *a*, the sound may be /æ/ but never /e/**. Thus we have *let, dress, when, very, never, dead, bread, head, pleasure* with /e/ and *hat, cap, ran, stack, have, gather, tram, dabble* with /æ/. The only exceptions are *any* and *many*, together with *ate* if pronounced /et/ and the suffix *–ary* if pronounced /-eri/. For /æ - ʌ/ the rule is 100% reliable: **if the spelling is *a*, the sound may be /æ/ but never /e/; if the spelling is *u, o* or *ou* the sound may be /ʌ/ but never /æ/**. Thus we have *hat, cap* etc. again with /æ/, and *hut, cup, run, stuck, love, mother, come, touch, trouble* with /ʌ/.

While there are various NS accents of English that manage without the opposition between LOT and THOUGHT (*don—dawn*, RP /ɒ - ɔː/), there are none that dispense with that between THOUGHT and GOAT (*law—low*, RP /ɔː - əʊ/). So here again we must insist that this distinction be learnt. Again what is important is the systemic contrast rather than any particular realization: clearly in an EIL context [oː] is as acceptable for GOAT as [əʊ] or [oʊ].

From a comparative and historical perspective, the accents of England (including RP), Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa are unusual in having lost the distinction between the lexical sets THOUGHT and FORCE, merging them as /ɔː/ in homophones such as *flaw—floor, caught—court, sauce—source* (as in Gimson's joke about good chefs who, like good journalists, refuse to reveal their /ˈsɔːsɪz/). The resultant homophonic clashes do not cause serious problems, even though Jenkins's proposals remedy them by restoring historical *r* as appropriate.

Jenkins also insists on the mastery of the [ɜː] of the NURSE set (or rather of its rhotic equivalent [ɝː]). Whichever variant we select, however, we are dealing with a sound-type that is from the point of view of language universals highly marked, being vary rare indeed among the languages of the world – though fortunately, perhaps, the widely spoken Mandarin Chinese does have a sound similar to American [ɝː]. There are many EIL learners for whom this vowel remains problematic, not least the Japanese, who typically confuse *star* and *stir*.

Let us turn now to the question of phonotactics: cases in which it is not so much individual sounds that constitute a problem as their combinations in particular positions in the syllable. Although Poles have no difficulties with English consonant clusters, there are many learners who do – Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans for example as well as speakers of Spanish. Thus an English word such as *strong* may come out most easily as [esˈtron] (Spaniards) or [sʊtʊˈrɒN] (Japanese), with the difficult initial consonant cluster /str-/ resolved by the addition of epenthetic vowels. Rather than add vowels, speakers of Cantonese tend to omit consonants that are in positions they find difficult, which has an even worse effect on intelligibility. In word-initial position the clusters in such everyday words such as *pray, bread, train, queen, splash* may offer a problem; so in word-final position may the clusters in *milk, lamp, left, fox* and *wasp* (not to mention its plural *wasps*).

Voiced obstruents are not a problem for speakers of Polish, German, or Russian, but producing them in word-final position is. Hence they must learn to produce voiced (or at least lenis) obstruents in such words as *rub, bad, big, love, rose, rage*. Whether *bed* is pronounced as [bet] (German) or [beʔ] (Cantonese), in each case the NS opposition between final /d/ and /t/ is lost.

A particular problem with consonants is that the L_1 may have phonological processes – allophonic or assimilatory – that are inappropriate in English. However learners of English will tend to apply them in English unless taught not to. Thus Korean learners, for

example, need to be warned against the Korean assimilatory processes that turn *pop music* into *po*[m] *music* or *Rugrats* into *Ru*[ŋn]*ats*. Poles should be discouraged from applying Polish-style voicing assimilation such as makes *ice dancing* sound like *eyes dancing* and *pick them up* like *pig them up*.

When we turn to suprasegmental matters, Jenkins rightly insists on the importance of not accenting function words. There must be a difference between *a big one* (e.g. when we are talking about waves, a big wave: *one* is a function word) and *a big one* (which might be a large figure one: *one* is a form word). She rightly insists also on the importance of deaccenting repeated lexical items, or of lexical items with the same semantic referent. Although this principle applies in many other languages more or less as in English, there are differences of detail: as pointed out by Ortiz-Lira, 1995, where the English reply to *We're already late* might be *I don't care if we are late*, with the repeated word *late* deaccented, the Spanish equivalent would be *Pero si ya estamos atrasados – No me importa si estamos atrasados* with no such change in accent pattern.

In summary, my prioritizing recommendations for the teaching of English pronunciation in an EFL/EIL context would be:
- to concentrate on the matters that most impede intelligibility; while encouraging fluency and confidence;
- not to neglect the need to interact with NSs; arguably, we also need to educate the NSs;
- to exploit the findings of contrastive analysis to help pinpoint likely areas of difficulty.

While contrastive analysis does not provide all the answers, it goes a good way towards pointing us in the right direction. This means, for instance, that Polish learners of English must pay particular attention to those consonants that are not found (or not found as phonemes, or found with very different phonetic realization) in their L1: /θ, ð, ŋ, r, h/; to final obstruent vocing, and to aspiration; among English vowels, to /æ, ɜː, ɔ, əʊ, eə/, to pre-fortis clipping, to vowel duration and to weakening.

Thank you [ˈθæŋk ju], or as we might say in the LFC [ˈteŋk ju ˈveri ˈmatʃ].

References

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