

What do we mean when we speak of meaning?

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1 Introduction I have been teaching English as a foreign language for over 25 years and, at present, I am teaching English Phonetics and Phonology at a Teacher Education Programme in Santa Fe, Argentina. In this institution I am a member of examination boards for different subjects of the course and, together with my colleagues, we have noticed that many students who have accurate pronunciation when they take Phonetics and Phonology exams, don't have the same level of pronunciation performance when they sit exams for other subjects. It seems that, when they focus their attention on the content of their message, they neglect the pronunciation features they should consider for conveying meaning efficiently.

One possible explanation for this phenomenon could be the deductive approach traditionally used to teach Phonetics and Phonology. When students are concentrated on accurate production of pronunciation, they focus on rules of use and achieve near native-like pronunciation. But when they are nervous, trying to remember details of content of subjects other than Phonetics and Phonology, they don't exhibit a natural use of native-like oral production. This might be evidence of lack of internalization of learned material.

Another possible cause could be the fact that although nobody denies the importance of lexis, grammar and phonology to construct an intelligible utterance, teachers tend either to neglect the teaching of pronunciation or to teach it separately in tedious drills. My proposal is to teach pronunciation in a systematic and integrated way.

2 Pronunciation features to be considered Kelly (2000) agrees with Kenworthy (1987) on the importance they give to pronunciation mistakes which, they claim, inhibit successful communication. But at the same time, both phoneticians claim that teachers tend to neglect the systematic teaching of phonology. Thanasoulas (2005) goes even further when he defines pronunciation as the 'Cinderella' of language teaching. My opinion is that, when students and teachers of English as a foreign language share the same L1, we are tempted to wrongly identify an L1 sound with the nearest phonetic rendering of an L2 sound. In the rush of the lesson, trying to meet the grammatical, lexical or content objectives, we give much less importance to phonology.

Kenworthy (1987) and Wells (2006) emphasize the little tolerance native speakers have towards intonation mistakes on the part of foreign speakers of English. The latter suggests that native speakers of English might not "realize that intonation can be erroneous.(...) and assume that –when it comes to intonation- you mean what you say." (Wells 2006:2)

Katamba (1989), Roach (2005), Brazil (2005) and Wells (2006) highlight the influence of pitch fluctuation in meaning. This gives rise to the description of several functions of intonation detailed by the latter, who insists on the fact that they are a key point to be taught in EFL courses.

3 Pedagogical considerations Teaching pronunciation in a deductive way places the weight of reasoning and association on the teacher. The teacher processes the information and then prepares activities for students to develop their pronunciation

accuracy. Students perform on their teacher's demand and rely on her corrective response. They perform to meet their teacher's expectations.

If our objective is to help our students to become independent proficient users of English, we need to move a step forward. We need to approach our teaching in an inductive way. Our students will thus discover the language features themselves, will make their own associations and will end up internalizing the learned material. This, in turn, will enable them to use the language instinctively without having to resort to an analytic approach to rules to put them into practice. We should try to plan integrated lessons to achieve this aim.

In order to plan integrated lessons it is advisable to follow certain principles stated by Hewings (2004). He suggests that teachers should react to opportunities for teaching pronunciation, since we cannot predict all possible difficulties we might encounter in our lessons. We can work on incidental teaching as issues pop up during the lesson. He also proposes to develop certain techniques for modelling and monitoring pronunciation in the classroom, and to have a set of activities ready to use when we need to work on recurrent problems.

4. An approximation to the teaching of pronunciation through consciousness raising.

a. Introducing pronunciation features. Our students need to be exposed to the L2 sounds and teachers have to help them discover similarities and differences between the two systems. They will have to become aware of the differences they hear and, at the same time, gain control of their muscles to be able to produce the L2 sounds as accurately as possible. They will even be able to see the differences they produce by looking at themselves in a mirror and by observing peers producing the sounds. All these approaches to consciousness raising cater for different learning styles and, consequently, for each individual student's needs.

Since individual sounds don't have meaning in themselves, we need to introduce words and, eventually, utterances. Our students will start feeling the effect of pitch fluctuation in their oral production. They will start identifying stressed from unstressed syllables and how they form meaningful messages when they are produced with the corresponding rhythm and intonation. Students will have the feeling that they can produce authentic English speech. Underhill (1994) suggests the "internal imaging" technique, which consists of the teacher providing a model and allowing some minutes for students to develop their own image of the utterance before producing it themselves. Underhill (1994) asserts that "some people 'see' it, some 'hear' it, some 'feel' it, and so on." (p.113) He is obviously making reference to the students' different learning styles. He suggests that teachers should help students to develop the ability to use this internal imaging intentionally for learning pronunciation.

We can help our students to develop the ability to express attitudes by means of intonation if we start by asking them to try to express the same utterance conveying different feelings. In this way, we will make use of some similarities between L1 and L2 that are supported by the universals of intonation and, little by little, induce learners to discover the features that make both languages different.

b. Providing corrective feedback. In order to enhance our students' oral production, we need to provide them with the immediate feedback they need to go on learning. Continuous assessment will give them the qualitative feedback that helps them to improve their performance. But in order to do so efficiently, we need to differentiate

error from mistake. The former is lack of internalization of learned material and requires remedial teaching. The latter is just a slip of the tongue and can be put right by students themselves.

We teachers need to perceive the difference so as to avoid providing the answer ourselves. We need to activate the students' schemata in order to enable them to work on self-correction, or, if necessary, to provide them with the input they need to be able to correct themselves.

c. Planning lessons When we plan our teaching, we can foresee which sounds are likely to be more difficult for our students to produce and prepare some activities to enhance students' proficient oral production. We can plan how to highlight the attitudes different tones help speakers to convey, and induce learners to identify them with the aim of enabling them to produce native-like intonation. Summarizing, we can plan the teaching of a lesson integrating pronunciation, lexis and grammar.

Following a top-down approach to teaching a dialogue, for example, we start by identifying the speakers and the context in which they interact. During the first listening, students will answer some general questions, e.g. Who is talking? What about? What is the speakers' attitude? In this way we can help students to work out the attitudes conveyed by the speakers while they start identifying the different tones they produce.

By means of a True / False exercise, the teacher will raise consciousness of the importance of focus and corrective prominence.

E.g. T: The singer was a man. Ss: No, it WASN'T a man. It was a WOMan.

T: Mike wants to know the name of the song. Ss: No, he doesn't want to know the NAME of the song. He wants to know the first LINE of the song.

T: The song is about a boy and his pet. Ss: No, it ISN'T about a boy and his pet. It's about a boy and a GIRL.

This activity helps students become aware of two main features of pronunciation: how we highlight what's NEW as being opposed to what is GIVEN, and how to remark what needs correction. At the same time, students will be using different tones meaning contrast and assertion.

If the teacher identifies a sound that might bring about problems for students to produce accurately, she can prepare some activities in advance. She could create a sentence containing such sound and ask students to repeat it. If they use the imaging strategy, they will prepare their muscles for articulating the sound properly. A follow-up activity might be to list words which contain the sound. In this way, students will activate their previous knowledge and will be practising the sound both receptively (while listening to their classmates' lists) and productively (when they say their own lists).

Another funny and useful way of helping students to perfect their sounds, rhythm and intonation is to ask them to produce the longest sentence possible using sounds that they need to internalize. My students created the following sentence: '**Why was Wendy waiting for William while he was working away in the wood with Watson?**' This is a very useful activity because students generate their own sentences. They don't deprive language of meaning because the sentence has to make sense. They activate their schemata and actually produce meaning. They have the opportunity to hear the sound produced by their peers while different groups read the sentences they created, and they also produce their own sounds and become aware of how

accurate they can be. We are thus working meaningfully, integrating the main features of language.

Preparing information gap activities can be helpful to make students practise minimal pairs without noticing it. E.g. Student A's name will be Pete, while Student B's name is Pit. Pete lives on Park Rd, while Pit lives on Bark Rd, etc. In this way, students will be producing and identifying different phonemes while they practice language in a meaningful context. And they will become aware of the effect of mispronunciation because, if mispronounced, the information will belong to the other character their peer is playing the role of.

6 Final considerations If we integrate phonology to our teaching practice, and we do so in an inductive way, we will help learners to become aware of the key elements that form the mechanism for meaning conveyance. Learners will be approaching language as a whole, conscious of the interwoven use of lexis, grammar and phonology. This presentation is an appeal to teachers of all content subjects to adhere to this view of language teaching. If we all work cooperatively based on a whole language approach, students are more likely to achieve spontaneous use of accurate native-like pronunciation since they will be able to put into practice rules of use they will construe out of their own learning experience.

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