Strategies to Improve the Reading Performance in English

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1 Introduction

Although reading aloud is relatively rarely performed in every day life, it is one of the inevitable elements at all levels of EFL learning and teaching. Nobody doubts this, but the question is whether the teachers know <u>why</u> and <u>how</u> to teach it. Is the purpose of reading aloud just to check the pronunciation of individual words or to evaluate the understanding of a text via its interpretation? I believe that it should be the latter. Reading skills of a large number of the first-year students of English at the English Department at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana lacks all interpretation and sounds monotonous. There are two reasons for this state of affairs: first, they have never been taught to develop reading interpretation skills in their mother tongue and second, there are certain prosodic differences between English and Slovene, such as the rhythm, tonicity and the pitch range which all contribute to this state of affairs. Since one half of these students study English to become future teachers of English, it is essential that they understand the prosodic differences between English and Slovene, improve their own reading skills in English and learn how to help their future learners to become intelligible readers and speakers of English.

The present paper first briefly analyses the main prosodic differences between English and Slovene, then presents the results of a reading test carried out with the first-year students of English at our department and finally proposes strategies for building good reading skills.

2 Prosodic differences between English and Slovene

There are several prosodic differences between English and Slovene, but the ones which are most responsible for the overall image of Slovene English are the rhythm, tonicity, the pitch range and the pitch movements.

2.1 The rhythm

The utterance or sentence rhythm is achieved by the exchange of stressed and unstressed syllables as well as the syllable length. In this respect, English and Slovene vary considerably: English has a stress-timed whereas Slovene has a syllable-timed rhythm. As a result of their stress-timed rhythm, which presupposes approximately equal time intervals between syllables which carry sentence stresses, English syllables also have different lengths: sentence stressed syllables are longer than the unstressed syllables between them. Since sentence stresses usually fall on lexical items, the non-lexical or function items tend to be pronounced with a weak vowel. Another consequence is a large number of vowel and consonant reductions and assimilations on the phonological as well as the phonetic level.

In Slovene the rhythm is syllable-timed which means that most syllables receive approximately equal stress and their length does not vary as much as in stressed-timed languages. As a consequence Slovene does not distinguish between weak and strong forms of its function words, while the vowel and consonant reductions and assimilations are fewer than in English. In other words, the sentence rhythm of Slovene is more regular than that of English.

Since the foreign learners subconsciously tend to apply the rhythmic pattern of their mother tongue to L2, the expected problems of Slovene speakers in that respect are the following:
- all the syllables will be equally long;

- the function items will be pronounced equally stressed as the lexical ones and without weak vowels;

2.2 Tonicity

Tonicity or nucleus-placement is important because it is a system by means of which speakers highlight which part of an utterance presents new information. Neutral tonicity means that the nucleus usually falls on the last lexical item in an intonation unit and that the whole unit represents new information. Marked tonicity, on the other hand, means that the nucleus appears on an earlier lexical item or on a function item. Generally speaking, it can be claimed that English and Slovene share this principle to a large extent. Šuštaršič (2005: 35-44) distinguishes the following cases where the two languages differ:

- wh-questions (*Who's that?/ Kdo je to?*);
- negation (*I'm not so sure about that / Nisem tako prepričan)*;
- indefinite pronouns and adverbs (*It's always the same./Vedno je tako.)*;
- comparative and superlative (*… that's most attractive/ … ki je nadvse privlačna*);

Due to the fact that the Slovene word order is flexible, which means that the object of a sentence can precede the predicate and the subject can follow it, the nucleus still remains on the same lexical item:

John had chicken for lunch.   *Janez je imel piščanca za kosilo.*
   (S)   (V)   (O)

Piščanca je imel Janez za kosilo.
   (O)   (V)   (S)

As with the rhythm, the Slovene learners of English are expected to place nuclei in accordance with the Slovene tonicity principles. Thus they regularly put nuclei on wh-words, negative adverbs, comparative and superlative adverbs, as well as some modal verbs (e.g. *must* when expressing obligation).

2.3 Pitch movements and pitch range

In my analysis of the prosodic behaviour of Slovene learners of English (see Komar: 2005), I have established three important differences between English and Slovene:

- Slovenes produce the falling tones in a much narrower pitch range than the English:
- the step up in pitch from the end of the falling pre-tonic segment and the beginning of the falling tone is significantly smaller compared to the step-up in pitch made by the English speakers;
- Slovene learners of English do not use the second most frequent English tone, i.e. the fall-rise.
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These three differences are all equally responsible for the overall impression which Slovene learners of English make on the native speakers of English: they sound monotonous, dull and uninterested in conversation.

3. Reading tests

In order to find out the reading and imitation abilities of the first-year students, I regularly carry out three tests which consist of:

- reading individual sentences;
- repeating the same sentences after a native speaker;
- reading a short text.

3.1 Reading individual sentences

The students are given a set of 25 sentences which consist of up to three intonation units and whose length when pronounced by a native speaker is between 3 and 5 seconds. As expected, the following prosodic features typically occur in the reading of Slovene students:

- generally flat or gradually descending intonation;

- rising tones on all types of questions, but falls on question tags;
- simple rising tones at the end of non-final intonation units and lack of fall-rises;
- the majority of words are equally stressed;
- weak forms do not occur unless they are part of the contracted forms;
- many students stumble in longer sentences.

3.2 Imitation of native speakers' pronunciation

In the second task the students are given the same 25 sentences read by a male and a female native speaker of English which they have to repeat after them. In this task a majority of students improve both the rhythm and the pitch movements with the fall-rise tone remaining to be the problem and being replaced by a simple rise.

3.3 Reading a text

The third test is reading a short text. Before they are recorded, the students read the text silently three times to get familiar with the story. In spite of the instruction to read the text in an interpretative way, most of them fail to do so. They read as if they were reading silently for themselves. The pitch range of their voices is relatively flat, rising intonation occurs regularly in non-final intonation units, the syllables are equally long, the rhythm regular. Occasionally there are a few students who take the instruction seriously and exaggerate their interpretation by making prominent almost every word and by changing the pitch of their voices in an unnatural way.

4 Suggestion for teaching reading

In spite of the fact that reading aloud either in the mother tongue or in the foreign language is only rarely performed, I believe that it is a skill which learners of a foreign language should master because it is also a way to improve their speaking skills and to enable them to perform with necessary confidence in oral presentations of their work.

In my teaching experience I have found out that teaching reading and consequently speaking should be done in several stages. These include:
- listening exercises whose purpose is to sensitize students to the English rhythm and the use of pitch;
- explanation of the basic principles of the English rhythm, tonality and tonicity principles, the choice of tones and pitch movements as well as the pitch range;
- explanation of the main differences between the English and L2 prosody;
- imitation of sentences and application of the same pitch patterns to other similar sentences;
- text analysis and preparation in terms of tonality and tonicity rules as well as the choice of tones;
- reading aloud of the prepared and analysed text.

I also believe that an initial testing of learners' reading skills is necessary and can be very beneficial if it is followed by an evaluation of the learners' performance. I often play the students the recordings of their peers and ask them to evaluate their reading skills on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent. They are asked to justify their evaluations. It is interesting how critical they can be of other people's reading performance – and often with good reason – and how unaware they are about their own reading skills. The gap is often quite huge. Of course, the final evaluation should be given by the teacher.

The sensitization stage can be very useful if the learners are asked to note the comprehension problems which they might have due to the differences in the rhythm. My students often complain that the native speakers speak too fast and swallow words. But when I ask them if they understand the message, their answer is usually affirmative. Eventually they learn how to listen to understand the message.

Students are often unaware of the differences in pitch movements and the pitch ranges. They notice them only when they are against their usual expectations. The awareness of the pitch movements and pitch ranges can be easily achieved by playing to the students a dramatised text which builds its dramatic or comic effects on the language. The teacher should observe the students' reactions and ask them to justify them.

Once the basic principles of the English rhythm and intonation have been explained, it is important to point out to the learners the differences between English and their mother tongue. The best effects are achieved when the students try to compare the two languages and find the differences themselves. Although this seems rather demanding, it can be done at all levels of EFL learning.

Imitation of sentences and the application of the same pitch patterns to other similar sentences is a useful exercise which goes beyond the simple imitation, as it demands from the learners to apply an intonation pattern to different structures.

Text analysis and preparation in terms of tonality and tonicity rules as well as the choice of tones is a more demanding task in which the learners have to justify their choices and discuss other possibilities and how they may change the meaning or the interpretation of a text. As such, it is most suitable for the teaching of intonation at more advanced levels of EFL learning.

Once all the stages have been successfully completed and the learners have a good theoretical and practical understanding of the basic principles of English prosody, it is reasonable to believe that they will become successful readers and presenters of their ideas, as well as attentive listeners to other people's speech.

6. References

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