A phonetic study group run by students

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1 Introduction The range of problems that a student of phonetics can experience in a classroom when dealing with sounds he or she has never heard before is huge. And the difficulties seem to multiply when practicing on one's own. Although individual practice tends to be seen as the ideal way to improve one's pronunciation, the lack of feedback and support can discourage the student to the point of not keeping on with the endeavor. This paper describes the attempt undertaken by some postgraduate students to bridge the gap between classroom work and individual practice through the creation of a study group. What follows is the account of what proved to be a successful approach to overcome self-consciousness, receive trained feedback on performances, and find out where to focus individual study.

2 Development of the group The authors met as students in the MA Phonetics programme at UCL in autumn of 2006. This is a broad phonetics programme, and one of its aims is for students to learn to recognise and produce all the sounds of the languages of the world, including all of the sounds represented in the International Phonetic Alphabet, rather than focusing on a particular language. The main reason for organising a phonetics study group was a common search for feedback: receiving feedback became a need when starting to deal with unfamiliar sounds, and the comments received in class were, although noticeably valuable, not enough. Giving feedback also became a very significant part of the learning process, in that being able to assess other people's performances can help to develop skills which may turn out to be very positive with individual practice.

Coping with new sounds for the first time may also find another serious hindrance: self-consciousness. Practicing in front of a lecturer and a group of classmates can become a nightmare which might get worse as sessions go on. The environment of a phonetics study group formed by students in a similar situation can be a very useful tool to deal with self-consciousness.

At the beginning of the second term, we created a group that would meet once a week. The group was mainly constituted by the MA Phonetics students, a PhD Phonetics student, a visiting linguistics professor from Japan and a BA Linguistics student. Besides the advantage of comprising people from different academic backgrounds, the group also benefited from having native speakers of a large variety of languages, which included two dialects of English, Spanish, Catalan, Japanese, Korean, Cantonese and Polish.

Although the initial purpose was to hold some informal meetings with our classmates, we soon realized that the group would require one of us to coordinate it. The coordinator would get the session started, suggest doing something else when an activity was starting to falter, keep the dictations moving around the circle, and bring the group back to focus when we started wandering off on tangents.

Moreover, it was a great advantage to have a core of people who came regularly even if not to every session. This meant that a shared informal sense of how the group worked carried over from week to week, and people who came only rarely could easily see what was going on and join in. The size of the group was normally

three to five people, which turned out to be the perfect number for its effectiveness. After attempting to work in pairs, we realized that this leads too easily to a situation where the speaker and listener disagrees on what sound has been produced and then have nowhere to go. Even for people who are not especially overconfident, it is much too easy to suspect errors in someone else's ears rather than in one's own dictation. Groups larger than four or five brings greater self-consciousness and means that each person has too few opportunities to practice. Thus, a group of three to five provides the ideal balance between getting strong feedback and getting more opportunities to practice. And, on the situation where a larger group gathers, it can be split into smaller subgroups of this size.

2 Activities The main aim of the activities was to get everyone to perform sounds as many times and in as wide a variety as time allowed. We considered that ear training would improve naturally from commenting on others' sounds.

Dictation was the core activity in all the sessions. However, we experienced a series of problems in our first approach to it. Our first intention was to write nonsense words for others to dictate. The result was that people tended to write words that were reasonable in their native languages and made use of sounds they knew others in the room found nearly impossible to say. This took up a great deal of time, most of which was spent exclaiming about the shocking cruelty and vindictiveness of our classmates, but yielded very little actual dictation. Besides, we started out trying to dictate nonsense words of three syllables, similar to the ones we were used to dealing with in class, such as [ʁɛŋœʐɑ] . It turned out none of us could do it well enough for the exercise to run smoothly since one person would struggle for several minutes, dictating slightly different things each time, until we all threw up our hands.

We then decided to change to two-syllable words like [ʁɛŋœ] or [ʁɛʐɑ] in subsequent dictations, and we soon realized that they are much more suitable. They allow for a more dynamic exercise, letting everyone dictate many times in the session and get instant feedback on what others heard from other's performances. Towards the end of the term, when we were more confident with this procedure, we included some dictations with tones.

Practicing cardinal vowels turned out to be a very good warm-up exercise, as the familiarity with it helped us get over our self-consciousness at the beginning of each session. It also improved our dictations; if we did not drill cardinal vowels, people tended to create nonsense words using only one or two vowels, one of which was invariably [ɑ]. It was harder for people to write dictations with unfamiliar vowels than unfamiliar consonants, so starting with vowels encouraged more varied dictations. We practiced sets of primary [i e ɛ a ɑ ɔ o u], secondary [y ø œ ɶ ɒ ʌ ɤ ɯ], unrounded [i e ɛ a ɑ ʌ ɤ ɯ], and rounded [y ø œ ɶ ɒ ɔ o u] cardinal vowels, spending extra time on the unrounded back vowels [ʌ ɤ ɯ], which most of the participants tended to shy away from.

Another very powerful tool, strongly recommended by Catford (2001) is sound alternations, which we used to practice voiceless and voiced fricatives at all the oral places of articulation, in the style of [x ɣ x ɣ x ɣ…] or [ç ʝ ç ʝ ç ʝ…] and also for fricatives and approximants at the same place of articulation, as in [ʝ j ʝ j ʝ j...] or [β β β β β β …]. One of us, upon learning that she was unintentionally producing a high back unrounded vowel with rhoticity, started holding it while curling and uncurling her tongue tip, for [ɯ ɯ˞ ɯ ɯ˞ ɯ ɯ˞ …]

Exercises based on introspecting while moving the articulators, also found in Catford,

were helpful for improving our performance on palatal, velar and uvular consonants. Listening to one group member read these exercises aloud while we silently performed the described movements provided us with a more solid understanding of these places of articulation, the relationships among the plosives, fricatives, and approximants formed there, and the vowels with similar tongue positions. Thus, if we started with, say, the velar place of articulation, we did the following sequence: [k ɡ x ɣ ɰ ɯ u].

In our last sessions, we also included some intonation practice following O'Connor and Arnold's description on the different nuclear tones. We wrote a few English sentences on the whiteboard, performing them with different intonation patterns. We also reversed this and took turns dictating the sentences with various intonation patterns while others attempted to discern the pattern.

3 Conclusions At the end of the term we all could produce a wider range of sounds than at the beginning of the term, and we could also produce them more consistently. It is, of course, difficult to determine with accuracy how much improvement is attributable to these sessions, how much to individual study and how much to our continuing ear training course. Yet, we can say that the phonetics study group was indeed a great support in our process of learning for a number of reasons.

One of the best features of holding a study group of these characteristics was the possibility of giving and receiving feedback from other students. This is what guided the group during the sessions and allowed us to work more effectively independently. As an example, one of our Japanese members was surprised to find out that the vowels he was so sure were back vowels sounded central to everyone else. He practiced on his own and came in with solid [o] and [u] to the following session. Without hearing three or four people unanimously saying that his back vowels were central, he would not have known where to focus his efforts. It was also from repeated feedback that our American English speaker learned to produce a clear /l/ along with her native dark /l/.

Moreover, another important result of our sessions was that self-consciousness visibly decreased over the course of the term. This effect was stronger in people who came more often; a person who seldom came to the group showed more discomfort and delayed longer before dictating than the regular group-goers.

Having speakers of so many different languages among our group was also a very significant aspect of the study group. The opportunity of having native speakers of so many languages, who gave valuable advice on the production of a sound the rest was not familiar with, was central in our learning. For example, our Polish speaker helped us distinguish between [ʃ], [ʂ] and [ɕ]; the speaker of Korean explained how to produce reasonable [ɯ] and [ɤ] vowels; and our Spanish and Catalan speaker provided us with some tips to utter a successful alveolar trill [r] and proper nasal and lateral palatal consonants [ɲ] and [ʎ]. We also had the pleasure of having a native speaker of Arabic with us on one session, who patiently showed us how to articulate the pharyngeal fricatives [ħ] and [ʕ]. In addition, our production of uvular trills made a significant progress thanks to a recording of Edith Piaf performing her song Milord. We listened to the recording of The Sounds of the IPA (Wells and House XXXX – what year?) when required, but hearing the sounds from native speakers was a priceless experience in our learning.

Finally, a key facilitator of our learning process was our pooling of knowledge and personal experience in the production of sounds. Sometimes someone brought up a

class of relatively unfamiliar sounds (such as ejectives, or clicks) and we had an informal discussion of personal experiences in learning to make those sounds, what we collectively remembered from any discussion previously had in class, and perhaps half-baked personal theories about it. Although the field of practical phonetics has no shortage of helpful books designed to acquire performance skills, sometimes a fellow student can make a comment about the placement of the tongue or the lips when trying to utter sounds that helps more than a detailed description from a book. Surprisingly, students need only a moderate degree of phonetic training to provide useful help to each other.

In conclusion, learning with other students while sharing one's experiences with the acquisition of new speech sounds is a suitable complement to traditional university courses. We believe that student-run study groups can greatly enhance the effectiveness of class work and individual practice when learning to produce and discern speech sounds.

4 References

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