STRESSING PRONUNCIATION AND PHONETICS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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INTRODUCTION

You might well have heard Spanish learners of English, particularly in Andalucía, offering something with words vaguely approaching: wool jew lie.... For those of us who have lived here for a while it might or might not be recognizable and even intelligible. If one adds a context, and a minimal rising intonation, Wool jew lie a Coca Cola? may become universally comprehensible, but is it acceptable?

English teachers who have lived in one place for a long period of time and are familiar with the language, dialect or accent of that place, often fall into the trap of being unconsciously tolerant of arguably unacceptable pronunciation errors. They become so used to the typical mistakes of the locals that they let them go unchecked. This in the long run does students no favours, for what is the use of only understanding or being understood by English teachers?

Clearly the aims of pronunciation are complex and debatable, and I shall not endeavour to define a full criteria here. Let us limit our goal to one simple word that covers a multitude of sins: intelligibility. Intelligible, not by an English teacher, linguist or someone with a working knowledge of the Spanish language, but by the average native speaker in the street. Nor should an ability to communicate through gesture, body or hand language, although these are valid and important forms of expression, be confused with oral skills. My personal criteria is a simple one and is contained in a question which I keep at the back of my mind when assessing phonetic competence: Could the student get his/her message across to my father by telephone to England effectively and relatively cheaply?
INGRAINED ERRORS

It never ceases to surprise me how many advanced students, although capable of producing third conditionals and causative haves (sometimes even at the same time!), still come out with earsores such as /kɒt/ for coat, or cupboards pronounced confidently as something phonetically resembling /kʌbərds/. More often than not they are amazed to discover the actual simplicity of its phonetic transcription /kʌbəd/.

It is not unusual to find students who can produce so-called advanced vocabulary accurately, yet repeatedly mispronounce basic words and sounds. Many English Philology students are able to produce complicated words like Psycho-Linguistics or Pragmatics, (and even talk about them!), yet may be unable to produce everyday words accurately. One third year English Philology student asked whether he should transcribe the given exam text phonemically or phonetically with coarticulatory effects. Having impressed me with his theoretical and practical command of phonetics, he then ruined the effect somewhat by asking whether I minded if he transcribed in pethul! A simple E.F.L. anecdote of dubious authenticity? A mere case of Andalucian eezeo brought on by exam nerves? A Violet Elizabeth lisp? No, I feel it is more telling than that.

I suggest the fault might lie with the first English teacher’s failure to enforce pronunciation at source. Words like cupboards, blackboard, pencil and coat are likely to be among the very first words learnt, seen in chalk first on blackboards, automatically transferred to notebooks and then committed to memory with the conscientious zeal of a new student in his/her first week of class. The problem is that learners retain the visual image of this word, probably seeing it written well before they were afforded an opportunity to practice it. Students will probably have little cause to use words such as pencil, chalk and blackboard in the future since they are usually limited to a classroom environment, and will therefore rarely find themselves in a real situation where their pronunciation can be checked. They probably know the letter "c" is not pronounced “th” as in Spanish, yet the word is visually engrained in the memory, and the error comes out instinctively. If it is another 20 years before (s)he talks about pencils again, (probably with his/her children), there is a strong possibility that the pronunciation error will be produced again instinctively. Ingrained mistakes can only be eradicated through repetition, and even then bad habits die hard. How many times, for example, have you reminded students that people are plural? All intermediate and advanced students know this, yet despite our fervent attempts to change their ways, it does not stop them falling into singular temptation! Clearly, drilling at source is far more effective than subsequent curative methods. Most correction in English is not based on teaching or re-teaching but merely reminding students of what they already know but repeatedly forget.

THE PROBLEM OF VISUAL STIMULII

There is a natural tendency in Spanish students, blessed with a comparatively phonetic mother tongue, to try and produce all the letters they see (Andalucian accent apart). Therefore chalk is often produced with a and l, comb with o and b and caught in a variety of ways but rarely /kɔt/. The Spanish language has five basically constant vowel sounds, while the English language has twelve in RP. Many learners and teachers seem to try and fit all these English vowels into the five Spanish ones, simply making some longer or adapting others slightly. This, however, is a recipe for disaster as many English vowels such as /æ/ or /e/ not to mention the schwa bear little or no resemblance to any in the Spanish system.

The school system is still strongly based on note taking and copying from the blackboard. There is therefore an almost magnetic or reflex reaction on the part of many students to write down anything that is put on the board, with the consequence that they often fails to actively hear and assimilate what is being said. New words, for instance, are introduced, perhaps pronounced once and then written on the blackboard. By the time the student comes to learn these words, probably alone in the comfort of the home, (s)he has more than likely forgotten the correct pronunciation (if it was ever remembered it in the first place). The words are then learnt as they are written, and there begins our problem.
My belief is that most student errors arise from the fact that they see words and language before they have learnt to say them. One need only listen to students regaling off their lists of irregular verbs learnt by heart using their visual memory, rather than their auditory one. The consequence is often incomprehensible with, for example, the English equivalent of the Spanish verb beber often being pronounced something like /drin/ /drun/ /drun/, and cortar being understandably pronounced as written, with the “u” being produced rather than /u/, therefore making cut and put minimal pairs. As I suggested before, these mistakes may often repeat themselves despite correction, because the visual spelling of the words have been engrained in the memory. The answer seems to be to delay the visual stimulus as long as possible, affording the student as much opportunity as possible to practice the language orally before (s)he actually sees it. This involves the teacher controlling the urge to write on the board or refer to the text book, until the material has been practised orally, something that E.F.L. methodologists having advocated for some time.

**THE PHONETIC CRUTCH**

However, there is a common feeling among many students, (myself included), who feel incapable of pronouncing new vocabulary or structures until they have seen them written down. Clearly this sentiment should not be ignored. Methods based on drilling and concentrated oral production without writing on the board, although perhaps effective in terms of pronunciation, are often frustrating for the student, who is forced to swim, so to speak, in the deep end without anything to hold onto. My experience tells me that for some learners, particularly the older ones and those who are not blessed with a particularly good ear for language, it can be uncomfortable and frustrating to be deprived of a visual crutch to lean on. An answer may lie in a halfway house, where the use of phonetics can provide a compromise between the written and the spoken.

Despite the rapidly increasing evidence of phonemic transcriptions in text books and syllabi, there is still a certain resistance on the part of many teachers who argue that phonetics adds a further complication to the already difficult problem of learning a language. I personally disagree with this point of view as I do not believe that it has to be complicated if approached in the right way. My personal experience is that students actually enjoy the activity of deciphering phonetics. Of the 44 phonemic symbols about 50% of them are instantaneously recognizable, 30% are very easy to assimilate and only another 20%, which corresponds to about 10 symbols, require a minimal effort to learn. With a relatively small initial outlay of time and effort, students can easily learn the phonemic alphabet, a key which I believe in the long term, can pay back their investment many times over. I hasten to add, that it is not necessary for students to actively write in phonetics, but merely recognize the phonemic alphabet passively or at most copy transcriptions from the blackboard.

The phonemic transcription of the given language should, I feel, be the first visual reference after its oral practice. More often than not it serves as a far more effective crutch for students who feel they need to see something written before they can pronounce it and for those who need to take notes. The final stage of actually writing the language in English, should be completed only once the target language has been adequately practised. There should ideally be a time gap between the second and third stages, thereby hopefully ensuring that the pronunciation reinforced visually by the phonemic transcription will predominate over the orthographical image. Thus:

1. Oral Practice
2. Phonetic reinforcement
3. Written confirmation

**POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENT**

Clearly phonetic reinforcement is particularly useful when teaching vocabulary and at the end of this paper I have included an activity to show how this idea could be effectively put into practice. However, I do not feel the process need only be limited to lexical items. It can be extended to most language areas and structures. For a working model, let us return to the example I used to introduce this paper of a typical Spanish pronunciation error, which, to the untrained ear can sound
something like Wool Jew lie. I may be accused of exaggeration, but in my experience that is not the case, and I would repeat that often we do not notice the mistakes of our students. Although a student might not be guilty of mispronouncing all three words, (s)he might very well have problems with one or more of the elements of the utterance. Let us quickly analyse the phonetic difficulties which Would you like presents for a Spanish speaker, particularly from Andalucía.

Firstly there are the semi-vowels. The /w/ of would does not exist in Spanish and there is a common tendency to produce it as a velar consonant which sounds like /g/. The /j/ of you is also problematic and is very commonly mispronounced as /j/. Secondly there is a problem of final consonants which are often overlooked by Spaniards, especially Andalusians, especially when they are velar or in final clusters. Therefore in the word like, the final /k/ is often barely audible if at all. In the word would, the comprehensible assumption is that the “/l/” is pronounced and the effect is that the “/d/” is barely audible if at all. Thirdly there may be the temptation to produce the “/ow/” combination as a diphthong, thereby pronouncing something approaching /o/ rather than /o/ in the word would.

When native speakers first learn to speak their own language, they clearly do not think in grammatical structures but simply imitate sound patterns heard from the mouths of others. As adults, we do not think in individual words but in phrases and utterances, whereas second language learners are taught in words, so Would you like is treated as three separate elements. I suggest that certain groups of words, which are commonly used or are inseparable, can be drilled and learnt as set phrases without analysing the elements. Therefore once practised orally, the visual crutch, instead of being viewed as three words, could be written together as if it were one word with three syllables:

wodju'laik

Once introduced, exercises to practice the structure can be produced easily by writing some pre-taught prompts on the board in phonetics (sdr'tk, sem'bred etc). Once the correct pronunciation has been absorbed and the visual reminder engrained, then the spelling and grammar can be introduced and analysed if necessary.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, I feel that pronunciation is an often neglected area of English language teaching, though not, I believe, because it is not thought important. It is often ignored or overlooked because it is considered difficult to approach and hard to gauge. Through habit, teachers often fail to recognize pronunciation errors since they understand the student’s meaning. Despite our efforts to bridge the gap between the classroom and real life situation, it is important to remember that there is often a difference between being understood by an English teacher, and understanding and being understood by a real English-speaking person! Whereas encouraging communication and getting the message across is a fundamental aim in language teaching, it is also true to say that inaccurate pronunciation can often stand in the way of this ultimate goal.

To finish, I will present a simple practical activity, adaptable to all levels, which is designed to introduce new vocabulary while at the same time checking pronunciation at source.

ACTIVITY

Aim: To introduce and practise new vocabulary while emphasising correct pronunciation.

Level: Elementary (adaptable to all levels)

Materials: Blackboard and Flashcards:
Vocabulary is always difficult to introduce, and one way of introducing new words is by oral bombardment. You take a pile of about 12 cards and stand in front of the class, showing the cards and introducing or eliciting the new vocabulary.

T: What’s this? (showing card) They are scissors /stizəz/  
(To S1) What’s this?  
S1: They are theazar  
T: No, they are stizəz.  
(To S2) What’s this?  
S2: They are stizəz

The card is then placed on the bottom of the pile and the same procedure is undertaken for the following cards, only stopping once a correct pronunciation is reached. Finally once all 12 cards have been presented the process begins again.

T: What are these?  
S1 Stheazar  
T: No  
(showing card to S2)  
S: Seasors  
T: No  
(showing card to S3)  
S: Sisors  
T: No, they are stizəz  
(The card is then placed at the bottom of the pack again)

At this point there will be much discontentment from the students who will swear blindly that that was what they said. Hold your ground and do not accept less than your target pronunciation. An approximation is not good enough, since good pronunciation stands a better chance of success if checked at source. When a student manages to achieve the target pronunciation he is awarded with the card, which represents 1 point. The game continues with students being shown all the other cards in order and in turn with the following student having a chance for a bonus. Initially they try simply to remember the word, but then they realise that an approximation is not enough and they concentrate on not just remembering the word but pronouncing it correctly as well. The first stage of the activity finishes once all the words have been accurately pronounced, with the winner being the student with the most cards.

The next stage is for each student to say which cards (s)he has got, and the teacher writes the words on the board in phonetics for the students to copy. Should a student mispronounce any of the words at this stage, he loses a point and the card is up for grabs once more to the student who pronounces it correctly, thereby ensuring concentration and checking that the correct pronunciation is not merely momentary effort to ensure victory. Having left the phonemic transcriptions up on the board for the duration of the class, the final stage is to tell the students to learn the vocab for homework (threats of old fashioned spelling tests work wonders!). Students are therefore obliged to find out the spelling of the given words by themselves in the dictionary, or more simply and effectively, they have to ask the teacher:

S1: How do you spell /stizəz/  
S2: How do you spell /statarzəs/  
S3: How do you spell /blækɒksəl/  
etc.

The justification is that students have practised the words at least three or four times before they have seen it written, and thus the written word will merely serve to stimulate the pronunciation which has hopefully been assimilated, therefore avoiding the penthil
syndrome. The visual stimulus, in this case the flashcard, will be associated with an orally received word. The competitive element serves as a means of encouraging the students to listen carefully and focus attention on accuracy in pronunciation, with ample opportunity offered for repetition and practice. A visual crutch is offered with the teacher writing the words on the board in phonetics and thus the student pronunciation is reinforced or refined through phonetic written confirmation of what has been produced orally. Only at the end is the oral productive process infected by potentially confusing spelling, which has now been rendered relatively innocuous and its power to influence pronunciation reduced since the exposure is secondary rather than primary.

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LA EVALUACIÓN DEL PROFESORADO DE INGLÉS

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1. INTRODUCCIÓN

Pasamos gran parte de nuestra vida profesional evaluando a los alumnos, emitiendo juicios de valor sobre sus capacidades, comportamientos, estilos cognitivos y otras diferencias individuales, pero raramente dejamos que ellos las emitan sobre nosotros. Hasta ahora el sistema educativo se ha preocupado fundamentalmente de la evaluación del alumnado pero ha dejado a un lado la del profesorado. Aunque la Ley General de Educación (1970) se propuso aplicar la evaluación del rendimiento educativo en el alumnado y en los Centros, apenas se practicó sobre el profesorado. Las disposiciones legales pretendían dirigir la evaluación del profesorado hacia los siguientes aspectos (MEC 1970: 21):

"La valoración del rendimiento de los Centros se bará en función de ... la disponibilidad y utilización de medios y métodos modernos de enseñanza, las instalaciones y actividades docentes, ... " (Art. 11.1 y 11.5)

La LOGSE (MEC 1990) dedica más atención a la evaluación del profesorado y la diversifica de manera que afecte a todo el sistema educativo:

"La evaluación del sistema educativo se ... aplicará sobre los alumnos, el profesorado, los centros, los procesos educativos y sobre la propia Administración” (ART.62.1).

En este mismo artículo se crea el Instituto de Calidad y Evaluación de la Enseñanza que deberá elaborar los sistemas de evaluación que se apliquen, aplicarlos y proponer a las Administraciones educativas iniciativas y sugerencias que favorezcan la calidad y mejora de la enseñanza.