

An Exercise in Phonetics and Phonology

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An Exercise in Phonetics and Phonology

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Abstract

This paper examines some of the phonetic and phonological challenges faced by a group of EFL learners in Japan. The learners participating in this exercise were recorded reading a short passage from which various aspects of their pronunciation such as segmental phonology, word stress, features of connected speech, and intonation were analyzed. From this analysis, I offer some suggestions that may be helpful to EFL teachers in assisting learners similar to the ones in this exercise to begin to overcome some of their phonetic and phonological difficulties.

この論文は日本のEFL 学習者にとっての音声学上・音韻学上の課題を検討する。まず、この実習の参加者による短文の朗読が録音された。そして文節音音声学、語強勢、連続音素性、および抑揚といった発音の様々な面からそれが分析された。この分析から、私は音声学上・音韻学上の課題を有する同様の学習者を指導する上で役立つであろうEFL 教師のための提案を提示する。

Introduction

This paper serves two main functions. First, this paper will examine some of the difficulties that a particular group of learners experience with aspects of English pronunciation such as segmental phonology (individual sounds), word stress, aspects of connected speech (such as rhythm and stress), and intonation. To this end, I have analyzed a recording of some of my learners performing a dialogue (included in the appendices). Second, this paper will offer some theoretical and practical teaching suggestions to aid these learners in overcoming these difficulties.

Before I can commence with a discussion concerning my analysis, it is necessary to provide some relevant information about the particular students I used in this task. For identification purposes, we shall distinguish the students on the tape as **A1**, **A2**, **B1**, and **B2** (**A** = the first conversation and **B** = the second conversation; **1** = the first speaker and **2** = the second speaker), and each line in the conversation will be numbered in sequence one through seven. Further, students **A1** and **B1** are of Chinese nationality, while **A2** and **B2** are Japanese. Save for student **A2** (who is at a high intermediate level), the students performing the dialogue on the tape are all at a low intermediate level in

their study of English.

Segmental Phonology

Vowels

All of the students had problems concerning the vowel /i:/. Generally, they tended to substitute /i:/ for /I/ as students **A1** and **B1** demonstrated in their pronunciation of “did” (line 1), and **A2** and **B2** exhibited in their pronunciation of “in” (line 4). Similarly, students **A1** and **B1** substituted /i:/ for the phonemic vowel schwa ə in the word “civilized” (line 7). In other instances, schwa was substituted by many different vowels.

Consonants

My students displayed great difficulties with the phonemic consonant /l/. Student **A1** substituted /l/ for /n/ in “night” (line 1). Kenworthy (1987, 128) notes that there is a tendency for the Chinese learner to confuse /n/ and /l/. Similarly, Thompson (1987, 214) and Shibatani (1990, 865) make reference to the struggles that many Asian students (particularly Japanese) have in pronouncing and distinguishing between /l/ and /r/. This is evidenced when student **B1** supplanted /r/ for /l/ in the word “like” (line 5), and student **A2** substituted /d/ for /r/ in the word “really”.

Teaching Suggestions

My learners had difficulties distinguishing between minimal pairs such as /i:/ and /I/; and /l/ and /r/. In such cases, a teacher could implement activities that compare the minimal pairs that the students are confusing. Another activity that is helpful in building learners’ awareness of different sounds, and also allows them practice opportunities making the sounds is *phonemic bingo*. For instance, a bingo card which contains words such as “lent” and “rent” could be used as teaching tool to show the difference between /l/’s and /r/’s.

In cases involving /r/, where a learner is having difficulty pronouncing a particular phoneme, the teacher could guide the student step by step through the process necessary to make the sound. Roach (1991, 59) describes the articulation of /r/ as *post-alveolar approximant*. That is, the tip of the tongue approaches the alveolar area in much the same way it would for /t/ or /d/, but never actually makes contact with any part of the roof of the mouth. The tongue is slightly curled back and the tip raised. Roach (1991, 59) suggests that a learner should look in the mirror when performing this and other sounds so they can see the inside of their mouth. It is also relevant to point out that /r/ in the initial position of a word is voiced.

Word Stress

My learners also displayed some difficulties with word stress. Generally, my students tended to give each syllable of a word equal stress. This was evidenced in **A2** and **B2**'s pronunciation of T.V. (line 2). Although the second syllable in "T.V." is usually stressed, both students gave each syllable "T" and "V" equal stress. As well, my students have particular problems pronouncing multi-syllable words, or words which may be new to them. This was shown when **A1** and **B1** misplaced the stress altogether in the word "civilized" (line 7). Rather than give primary stress to the first syllable (and secondary stress to the third); **A1** gave primary stress to the third syllable, and **B1** gave primary stress to second syllable.

Teaching suggestions

There are two contrasting viewpoints as to the best method for teaching word stress. There are, on one hand, those who believe that word stress is predictable and can be taught by rule (eg. Halle and Keyser 1971, Cruttenden 1986; cited in Benrabah, 1997, 159) and, those on the other hand, who believe that learners need to learn the stress placement of each word individually because of the complexities of the rules (eg. Jones 1975, O'Connor 1980, Gimson 1980; cited in Benrabah, 1997, 160). In my opinion, the teaching of word stress by rule is (if at all) probably best suited for high-intermediate to advanced level students because learning this way would likely confuse beginner level students. Rather, "integrated pronunciation teaching" (dealing with each word individually) appears better suited for learners at a beginner level.

More specifically, relating to the students I used in this examination, they are probably best served in learning the word stress of each particular word as they come across it. Some *consciousness-raising* activities may be beneficial for lower level students. In particular, for those whose stress patterns differ in their native language (such as my learners). This could be as simple as a teacher pronouncing a multi-syllable word various ways (correct and incorrect) and have the students decide which is the correct way. Similarly, the teacher could pronounce multi-syllable words and have the students attempt to identify where they heard the stress.

Connected Speech

Rhythm and Sentence Stress

B1's speech sounded jerky at times. He seems to be using glottal stops to ensure clear pronunciation. This is evidenced when **B1** pronounces "you ? do" (line 1) and "more ? civilized" (line 7). This should occur less as the learner gains more experience speaking English and more confidence in his pronunciation.

Weak and Strong Forms

Overall, my students displayed great difficulties in distinguishing between strong and weak forms. With the possible exception of **A2**, my learners tended to give each syllable equal stress. Thus, they did not use the vowel schwa (to show weak form) as evidenced in the recording in such words as “and” (line 2), “at” (line 4), and “civilized” (line 7).

Consonant Clusters

The dialogue did not contain many consonant clusters, so it was difficult for me to detect any concrete patterns amongst my learners. However, I suspect that this would be a problematic area for my learners because consonant clusters are rare in Japanese and Chinese. Generally, teachers should address these problems as they arise.

Teaching Suggestions

It may be necessary to show students that English may have different stress patterns to their native language, especially at lower levels. Japanese is a syllable timed language (each *syllable* receives equal stress), whereas English is a stress timed language (*stressed syllables* occur at regular intervals whether they are separated by unstressed syllables or not). Further, it is important to introduce schwa to learners at an early stage for two reasons. First, there is no letter which represents schwa in the alphabet, and second every vowel can represent schwa as in **a**bout, students, **c**ivilized, contain, and circus.

As a consciousness-raising task, students could analyze a recording of non-native speaker (NNS) discourse, and attempt to identify and correct the errors concerning aspects of connected speech. Further, Adams (1979, cited in Taylor, 1993, 20) points out that reading aloud has been shown to provide valuable practice as far as rhythm is concerned. For lower levels, Kenworthy (1987, 30) suggests activities that can be built around metric material such as rhymes, verse, limericks, and children’s games. The following example shows how strong and weak forms can be shown and practiced in the classroom by using songs and rhymes (N.B. The stressed syllable is underlined):

There was a young lady of Norway,
Who casually sat in the doorway, etc. (Kenworthy 1987, 30)

Intonation

With the exception of student **B1**, my learners exhibited comprehensible intonation. **B1** produced little or no pitch change at all in his utterances. For example, when **B1** read aloud “so do I” (line 7), he maintained a low pitch through out the utterance; thus, giving the impression that he was perhaps disinterested. A native speaker may use a rise tone (/) when uttering the phrase “so do I” to show agreement or encouragement (Roach 1990, 168). Similarly, **B1** did not alter his pitch for the question “Don’t you like going out?” (Line 5). This utterance could include a rise-fall tone (^) to express

surprise, or it could include a rise tone to indicate that a question is being asked.

Further, both men (A2 and B1) used a much lower pitch range than the women (A1 and B1). According to Kenworthy (1987, 152), Japanese men tend to emphasize their masculinity by adopting a deep voice. Based on my experience teaching EFL in Japan, men often seem uncomfortable using a high overall pitch as this is used to express a stereotypically female role. This can be problematic as they encounter situations where a higher pitch range is needed in English to convey politeness.

Teaching Suggestions

Although teaching intonation by looking at the attitudinal functions of intonation remains a popular method, a discourse approach seems to be more “teachable” in the sense that systematic patterns exist. In the most accessible account of the discourse approach, Brazil (1980, cited in Taylor, 1993, 17) distinguishes between *proclaiming tones* (consisting of falling tones and occasionally rising-falling tones) and *referring tones* (consisting of falling-rising tones and occasionally rising tones). In other words, proclaiming tones *proclaim* new information while referring tones *refer* to old or given information. The following example illustrates this point:

Eg. Todd married Ramona.

This example is a possible answer to the question “Who did Todd marry?” where *Todd* has already been mentioned (falling-rising tone) and *Ramona* is proclaimed as new information (falling tone).

For my learners (specifically B1), I propose two activities types to improve their intonation. The first is an activity that raises consciousness about intonation patterns. This could be done by analyzing native speakers speech (audio or video) and breaking down the intonation patterns used. The second type involves some form of practice. This could be done in a variety of ways such as using drama techniques and reading aloud.

Further, in dealing with the men’s overall low pitch range, it is important to keep in mind that this may be an area where the learner does not improve. While it cannot hurt to point out phrases that require a higher pitch, it may be best to suggest to these male speakers to compensate for low pitch with smiles and the use of polite expressions (Kenworthy 1987, 152).

Conclusion

This paper first identified some of the phonetic and phonological problems a particular group of learners had in reading a brief dialogue. By examining and identifying the troublesome areas, I have enabled myself to have a much clearer focus in my teaching of this area, and thus will be much better equipped in my efforts to improve their pronunciation. Second, this paper offers some teaching suggestions for each of the

areas that were discussed such as segmental phonology, word stress, connected speech, and intonation. These suggestions will undoubtedly have to be adapted or extended to suit student's individual needs.

Further, these suggestions are not to imply that pronunciation should be taught as separate segments (i.e. intonation in one class, word stress in the next class, etc.). Rather, these suggestions are for cases where teachers recognize pronunciation problems in their learners' speech and have the time in their syllabus to deal with them. I recognize, as it is most practical, that *integrated pronunciation teaching* will most likely continue to be the most frequently practiced method for teaching pronunciation (Kenworthy 1987, 113).

Lastly, as this task involved the reading of a predetermined text, it seems worthy to mention that English spelling can sometimes cause pronunciation problems. My students have had to adjust to alphabetic conventions, as Chinese and Japanese languages use a system based on symbols. Further, English spelling is not purely phonetic. That is, it is sometimes irregular, and many rules have to be learnt. Teachers should be aware of potential problems in this area in terms of the disparity between language systems and deal with them accordingly.

In conclusion, it is my hope that this paper has served to draw attention to EFL learners' pronunciation difficulties. Too often it seems, the teaching of pronunciation in EFL syllabi is an afterthought or ignored altogether. To truly assist learners in improving their pronunciation, EFL teachers have to, first and foremost, make a conscious and concerted effort towards this goal.

Appendix

Phonetics/Phonology Task: Text for Analysis

(University of Leicester 2000, The Planning unit, 22)

(Line 1) **1:** What did you do last night?

(Line 2) **2:** I watched T.V. and went to bed early.

(Line 3) **1:** You must have been tired.

(Line 4) **2:** Not really, it was just an ordinary evening at home. I often stay in.

(Line 5) **1:** Don't you like going out?

(Line 6) 2: Not much, I prefer to have people come round to the house.

(Line 7) 1: So do I; much more civilized.

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