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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE IATEFL PRONUNCIATION SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

February 2012 Issue 46

Price £5.00
Free for PronSIG members
ISSN 1026:4345
www.iatefl.org

Non-imitative ways of teaching pronunciation: why and how. Report on the 3rd Fielded Discussion

Alex Selman, Piers Messum and Roslyn Young

Following on from the success of our discussions on Practical Pronunciation Techniques and the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca, we held the third IATEFL PronSIG Fielded Discussion from 29th Oct to 6th Nov 2011.

A few years ago, I took a handful of the most popular ELT course texts in a UK university language centre and analysed the pronunciation content. There was notable variety in the quantity of exercises and differing views on choral repetition, and issues such as whether to focus on single sounds or intonation. A basic assumption in all of the books, however, was that learning involved listening to and then repeating a model given either by the teacher or from a CD. It is not surprising, then, that our latest online discussion, in which it was argued that listen and repeat does not work, received a great deal of interest and generated a lot of debate.

Contributors from all over the world helped to make this discussion a real success. It was lead with expertise and diligence by Piers Messum and Roslyn Young, whom you may have seen at the IATEFL Pre-Conference Event in April 2011**.** What follows is their selection from the discussion, which I hope will inspire you to try out and research the ideas, to head to the PronSIG Yahoo! Group to read more, and to take part in future discussions.

Alex.

'Listen & Repeat' is the problem

The introduction to the discussion read as follows:

All around the world, pronunciation teaching mostly comes down to asking our students to imitate a model: 'listen and repeat' (L&R). And pronunciation teaching isn't very effective for the majority of students. Could it be that L&R itself is the source of the problem?

We think the answer is yes, for two main reasons: We don't think that children learn to pronounce sounds this way. More importantly, when we use L&R, we misdirect our students' attention, taking it away from where it needs to be: in their production system.

We seeded the discussion with posts that summarised the case for the prosecution: that L&R is part of the problem not the solution, and that this is true not only for speech sounds but also for timing phenomena such as the so-called 'stress-timed' rhythm of English. We won't repeat our arguments here, but if you're interested then please go to the PronSIG Yahoo! Group (address below) and look at posts 840, 847, 896, 909, 916, 932 and 934.

Instead, we'd like to report on some of the responses that contributed to the debate and moved our own thinking forward. We'll summarise and expand on what people said, but give the post numbers so you can find the original comments, too.

Mahmoud Jeidani made two important points (841). Firstly, that the L&R process can be very dispiriting for everyone involved. We all know that a particular sound can be modelled by a teacher and said incorrectly by her students ten times in a row, with no improvement. The students feel bad, the teacher feels bad. No one has any idea what to do next. It's embarrassing. No wonder pronunciation is something teachers avoid doing despite, as we know, it being something that students want very much to improve.

Secondly, Jeidani pointed out that pronunciation will not be mastered in the classroom. It will be with the practice that students do outside the class that they will secure a good accent. So what we do inside the class should be something that they can carry away with them to work on. L&R doesn't help here. It relies on the presentation of an acoustic model which fades quickly in the minds of the students even if it was heard correctly. It will not be available to them later. Work on pronunciation as a motor skill, on the other hand, is something they can practise afterwards. And our students tell us that working this way in the classroom 'charges' them up to do this work.

We both remember that, as soon as we had some insight into how to produce a problematic sound in languages we were learning, we spent hours practising how to get our mouth around it, either walking in the local park (RY) or sitting in the bus going home (PM). This is what we mean by being 'charged'.

Joanna Smith picked us up on our claim that there shouldn't be a model, saying that students have to have something to aim for (853). She's right that there must be a model, but we are suggesting that it should not be a spoken model to be copied. In fact, the teacher has to have clear ideas of (1) what the sound should sound like in any particular student's voice, and (2) what one does to make it. In other words, the teacher has two models: an acoustic one and an articulatory one, and uses both to guide her students as they home in on the new way they have to use their mouths. The students start working using a mouth movement which for a new sound will certainly be incorrect. But this movement – their motor model – will be modified and elaborated by them based on their own experimentation and the feedback the teacher gives them.

The process of working on their articulatory model is a very efficient way for students to develop a properly constructed auditory model for the new sounds they produce in the language. In other words, production educates perception: by learning to make new sounds the students learn to discriminate them.

Alex Selman asked who can be a guide in this non-imitative approach (863). The answer is that both native and non-native speakers can use it successfully. A non-native speaker certainly has criteria for pronunciation, even if she doesn't always pronounce perfectly herself. She can bring these criteria to life in her students without having to speak. In fact, whether native speaker or not, the teacher is more helpful if she doesn't distract her students with her own pronunciation.

Roslyn told us that she speaks less when she teaches French than when she teaches English. Although her French is good, she wants to give her students the chance of developing a better accent than hers.

There were plenty of entertaining diversions in the discussion, and we were particularly happy that Jonathan Marks explained why we must be vigilant in our use of the word 'acquisition' (891). We'd wondered why we disliked the way the word is used, and we think Jonathan has put his finger on it when he reminds us:

> Normally, when we acquire something, we enter into possession of it; it passes from someone else's possession into our own, ready-made, without undergoing any change of state. When we acquire our L1, though, this doesn't happen; instead, we have to build it for ourselves, without an overall blueprint of the whole edifice, and it takes a lot of time and effort. It's easy to forget this if we just assume that L1 acquisition happens 'naturally'. It's also easy to forget because it happened, for all of us, such a long time ago.

Finally, we were happy to read Charles Jannuzi's thoughts at the end of the discussion (940).

> So listen-repeat-imitate is sort of like [the teacher] standing at the foot of a very long bridge and looking useful, but the student still has to cross that very long bridge alone. [Pronunciation] teaching might be better if it gave them something for the trip across the bridge …

We agree! And the alternative is for us not to model sounds and sequences of sounds for our students but to work on their motor skills. This means that the teacher needs to act in the way that a sports coach normally acts: by encouraging her charges to work on the problem for themselves and giving them feedback on how they are doing.

Speaking from experience, we know that it takes a degree of faith to start working this way. But students do not find it unsatisfactory. Quite the opposite: they very much appreciate the chance to work on the problem themselves and have themselves heard in a space that is not overwhelmed by the teacher's expert production skills. Please try it!

Piers and Ros

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