

SPEAK OUT!

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Non-imitative ways of teaching pronunciation

Piers Messum and Roslyn Young

Around the world, the basic paradigm for teaching pronunciation is 'listen and repeat'. In PronSIG's one day pre-conference event at the 2011 Brighton conference, we justified and demonstrated teaching through an alternative paradigm: one in which students do not imitate a teacher or a recording, but instead work with awareness on what they need to do with their lips, jaw, tongue, larynx and the rest of their bodies in order to learn the motor skills required to pronounce English well.

Very many of the exercises teachers use for pronunciation come down, in one form or another, to 'listen and repeat'. It's believed that students will learn to pronounce this way because it is generally thought that this is what young children do when they learn to pronounce their mother tongue.

Surprisingly, there is no evidence at all – not a mite! – that young children learn to pronounce this way. They do, of course, learn how to pronounce *individual words* by copying them, but how they learn *the system*, including the qualities of the speech sounds within words and the timing patterns of speech, remains unknown. Piers showed in his thesis (Messum 2007) why it is unlikely that these aspects of pronunciation are learnt by imitation, and described the other mechanisms through which learning the system more plausibly takes place.

To elaborate this a little, let us first consider the learning of speech sounds and then consider the learning of timing patterns.

It is clear that when we learn the pronunciation of a new word, 'horripilation' for example, we do so by first parsing it: we recognise the 3 or 4 speech sounds that make it up (perhaps 'ho' 'ri' 'pi' 'lation'). Then we reproduce these speech sounds in the right order in our own voices with speech sounds we know to be equivalent to the ones we heard. This is imitation in the sense of a straightforward reproduction of a series of events. But how did we come to know as children what to produce that would be taken by our listeners to be equivalent to what they said for 'ho', etc? This is the real issue, and while it, too, might be achieved by imitation – in this case by a different form of

imitation, a process of acoustic matching – it most probably is not.

The most likely alternative is that when an infant is making sounds, he notices that on some occasions his caregivers make sounds in response. He realises, from the way they are acting, that they are imitating him. (This kind of imitative game – with the caregivers doing the imitation – will be familiar to all parents and is well documented in the literature.) So the child concludes that his caregivers regard his and their speech events as equivalent, and that he can use his sound whenever his caregivers use the one that corresponds to it. (The mechanism is more fully described in Messum (2007, 2008)).

With respect to 'timing' patterns, like the differing length of English vowels in certain contexts, the 'rhythm' of English, and so on, the longstanding assumption is that children observe these effects in the speech of those around them, and then copy the underlying timing in some way.

However, no one imagines that a child learns the 'rhythmic' nature of an activity like walking in this way. We all know that a child walks as he does for good biomechanical reasons, which he discovers for himself. He is not imitating the timing of his parents' walking when he starts to walk.

That said, once we know how to walk, we can, at that stage, start to consciously copy the way others walk, including peculiarities of timing, etc., but this is not how the skill is initially acquired.

Walking provides a useful example for understanding speech, but with a major difference: the breath control of speech is invisible, so very few people have considered how it is learnt, and then considered the effects this has on the pronunciation of different languages. The 'pulsatile' style of speech breathing that English demands from its young learners (in order to reproduce stressed syllables in the West Germanic way) provides a much better explanation for the appearance of many timing effects than the conventional imitative account (which is really only an assumption) (Messum 2007, 2008).

How we teach

The non-imitative approach to teaching pronunciation that we use was originally developed by Caleb Gattegno (e.g. 1962, 1970). In it, the teacher does not provide a vocal model for the language, either in person or using recordings. Instead, he is a 'silent' (but not mute) coach, who acts like a gymnastics coach, encouraging his gymnasts to do what he sees is necessary in relation to

what they can do today, but not demonstrating it himself. In this way, the students' attention is kept focused on what they are doing with themselves physically and what the results are. Their attention is not taken up by the comparison of two acoustic images, which generally leaves students insufficiently aware of what they actually do with their bodies to produce their output.

In Brighton, we started by asking participants how they would know if it was time for them to change the way they taught pronunciation. And then, if it was, how they would choose another approach. In answer to this second question, there seemed to be four arguments that would be persuasive: that the alternative approach is logical and rationally justified; that children learn in that way; that someone personally has a good experience of learning that way as an older learner; that others get good results and recommend the approach. We tried to address all four arguments during the day.

Piers presented the rationale for work on speech breathing for stress – including the fact that it gives learners a grounded, tangible and authentic mechanism to learn. He then used exercises adapted from the Accent Method to show how this can be taught in classes and how timing effects, in particular 'rhythm', start to appear in speech when one works this way. See Messum (2009) for more on this.

Then we moved on to an experience of learning pronunciation with a 'silent' teacher: Roslyn taught French for an hour, using the sound/colour rectangle chart from the Silent Way materials. During that time she herself produced just one French sound, an /a/. All the rest came from the students, whose French pronunciation blossomed. Roslyn's coaching took the form of encouragement to stay with the task and hints on how to move the participants' production closer and closer to an authentic way of producing French. She directed their attention to what they were doing physically using a constant stream of feedback on all they did. They quickly gained a remarkably French-sounding accent (confirmed by a native speaker in the room), they understood what they did with themselves to achieve this, and probably gained the confidence to use their new skill outside the classroom.

In the afternoon, we explored the new Pronunciation Science materials for teaching English. These take Gattegno's Silent Way materials as a starting point, but include a new sound/colour rectangle chart, new fidel (showing the sound-to-spelling correspondences of English using the colour code) and new word charts. Examples can be seen at www.pronsci.com.

The Pronunciation Science word charts are designed for teaching pronunciation as part of whatever approach a teacher prefers for other aspects of language teaching: grammar, vocabulary etc. They are not just adapted for the Silent Way. Words are logically arranged and easy to find by teacher and students.

Once participants were familiar with the materials, there was a general discussion about how the approach seen in the French class could be transferred to English. See chapter 5 of Young (2011; forthcoming) for more practical details, and Young and Messum (2011) for the insights into human learning that led Gattegno to develop this approach.

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