

Pronouncing on the right side of the brain

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The Background

Many English teachers avoid teaching pronunciation because they feel they do not have sufficient knowledge of phonetics and phonology to explain the rules of pronunciation to students (Macdonald, 2002). This is unfortunate, since knowledge of phonological rules is not essential to helping students acquire pronunciation skills. Indeed, too much focus on phonology can mean students end up knowing the rules - but stating them in pronunciation which violates those very rules. Readers of this journal will require little persuasion (Arnold, 2003, Ur, 1990) that what students most need is not information about the pronunciation of English, but practice in the doing of English pronunciation (by which I mean not just segmental articulation but all aspects of speaking clearly). This practice can be provided to a useful extent through classroom activities which simulate real situations in which students need to use English pronunciation (Ellis, 2003).

As many teachers who use such 'implicit' pronunciation teaching methods will attest, however, just 'doing' is not always enough to enable learners to achieve the proficiency they desire. At certain points, a pronunciation teacher, like a coach of any skill (Morley, 1991), needs to provide explicit feedback and guidance on learners' performance. The question is, what kind of feedback and guidance is appropriate in coaching the skill of pronunciation?

In this short article I would like to explore an analogy between teaching pronunciation and teaching drawing that might offer a way for teachers to develop answers to this question suitable to their own classroom situations.

The 'Explanation and Model' method

Many readers will have been subjected to unsuccessful drawing lessons at some time in their education. For example, a drawing teacher who focuses on technicalities such as colour theory and the rules of perspective may help students with a skillbase that allows them to use such information, but others, even if they attain some proficiency in technical exercises, can find it difficult to translate the theory into the skill of drawing a cat that looks like a cat. To help with this, a drawing teacher might encourage students to copy masterful drawings, and observe how the techniques they have been learning are embodied in real art.

Pronunciation teachers take a similar approach when they provide a native speaker model for students to imitate. They are sometimes puzzled, however, to find just how difficult it can be for learners to imitate the model (Fraser, 2006). Considering the analogy with drawing may shed some light on that puzzle.

When students are asked to copy a drawing, it is assumed they are able to keep the model in front of them long enough to study it, and to refer back and forth to it while perfecting their copy. This assumption does not hold for pronunciation. An auditory model is very different from a visual model. The moment the model is heard, it is gone. Expecting a learner to imitate a pronunciation model accurately after one hearing is rather like expecting a student to copy a drawing shown to them for a few seconds then whisked away. The latter expectation is ludicrous. Yet somehow many expect language learners to imitate a model pronunciation after hearing it only once or twice - and despairingly invoke a 'critical age hypothesis' if they can't.

This raises the first practical suggestion for teaching pronunciation by analogy with drawing. Language learners can actually improve their pronunciation considerably just by imitating model sentences. However, they need to hear the model many times, either via a recording, or via a speaker repeating the model in a consistent natural manner (i.e., without exaggeration). This is a particularly useful method in that it requires little specialised knowledge from the teacher – beyond the crucial knowledge to resist the temptation to 'explain' learners' mistakes to them. This is an ideal activity, then, for native speaker assistants working alongside a language teacher.

Ideally, practice should be set up which allows the learner to listen-speak-listen-speak until they get bored - which, since copying pronunciation is no less challenging than copying a drawing, often takes

much longer than a teacher might predict. Indeed, for some learners, Quality Repetition, in chorus, is all they need to acquire excellent pronunciation which translates well to spontaneous speech (Kjellin, 1999). In my experience however, repetition alone is not always enough. Just as with drawing, useful as it is to work from a model, the copy is liable to fall short of the model in ways which the student cannot identify and correct without guidance from the teacher.

In the case of drawing, where the student has previously learned about colour theory, rules of perspective, etc, it can be useful for the teacher to remind the student of these explanations while pointing out differences between the copy and the original. Carrying this analogy across to pronunciation brings us back to the problem with which we started: the sense many teachers have that such explanations should be phrased in terms of the phonological rules of English.

Explaining phonological rules can be useful at this stage of pronunciation teaching. However, it requires a number of conditions to be met, beyond the obvious one that the teacher must know the rules. First, it requires considerable linguistic and educational sophistication on the part of the learner. To see this, consider what it would be like to explain errors of perspective to a drawing student with very limited English, from a very different cultural and educational background. By analogy, complex phonological rules may be best suited to tertiary education situations where teacher and student share a language of instruction.

Second, the teacher must have the ability to diagnose the learner's errors in terms of the phonological rules. I would suggest that this condition is far less likely to be met than the equivalent in drawing. Since the 1950s, phonological theory has developed in a very abstract manner. Explaining second language pronunciation in terms of phonological theory is problematic even for the theorists (Archibald, 2000). Indeed, there is considerable scholarly debate about which theory provides the best rules, or whether 'rules' are even the appropriate way to account for phonological behaviour (Gussenhoven & Jacobs, 2005).

Finally, whatever rules are applied to the learner's pronunciation need to be translated into practical instructions that enable learners improve their performance. Returning to our analogy - a drawing teacher needs not just the ability to diagnose what the student has done wrong, but the talent of communicating the rules to students in a way they can act upon to improve their performance. How to do the equivalent in pronunciation teaching is a topic phonological theory has addressed to a very limited extent (Levis, 2005), focusing as it has on learners' speech output rather than on interaction between teachers and learners, and many phonology theorists would readily admit to having no experience or skill in teaching pronunciation.

Drawing on the right side of the brain

All in all, then, the 'explanation and model' method of teaching drawing does not transfer well to teaching pronunciation. Fortunately there is another approach to teaching drawing which might provide a more appropriate analogy for language teachers. This is the approach known as 'Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain' (Edwards, 1989). The idea is that, rather than directly teaching the student how to draw, the teacher helps students 'learn how to see' in a way that indirectly enables them to draw better. Of course this is a special use of the expression 'learn how to see'. The student can already see perfectly well. What they need to learn is how to see things in a way appropriate to the task of creating a visual representation of those things – as opposed to the normal way of seeing, appropriate to engaging with the things as meaningful objects in the world.

Edwards urges students to switch off their normal or 'left brain' way of seeing things in relation to what they know about them – for example that tables have rectangular tops, or people have two identical eyes. With the left brain out of play, students can engage a new 'right brain' way of seeing things in terms of line, shape, colour and texture. In this 'right brain' mode, they can notice for example that unless you are directly above a table, its top has the appearance of a parallelogram not a rectangle, and unless you are directly in front of a person, the two eyes appear to have different shapes.

Once the student starts to see tables, chairs, and people in terms of line, shape colour and texture, it becomes much easier to represent those lines, shapes, colours and textures with other lines, shapes, colours and textures on a page. Of course, this is only the beginning; it does not instantly turn the student into da Vinci. However, Betty Edwards' website (<http://www.drawright.com/gallery.htm>) holds many examples to show the improvement students can achieve in a short time simply by being given

the idea that drawing is not primarily about doing things with pencils on pieces of paper, but more about seeing the world in a different way. This improvement provides a foundation from which students can work towards whatever level of proficiency they aspire to.

Application to teaching pronunciation: difficulties

My suggestion is that similar levels of improvement can be achieved in pronunciation by helping students understand that pronouncing is not primarily about doing things with tongue and lips but more about learning to hear speech in a different way. To follow the analogy effectively, however, it is necessary to notice some important differences between drawing and pronunciation.

Edwards' 'right brain' terminology is engaging in its context, and has helped many thousands of students learn how to draw. However it is slightly misleading in a way that is important to recognise if we are to use the analogy to best effect in teaching pronunciation. In 'seeing on the right side of the brain' we are not so much 'seeing things as they really are' as 'using a different vocabulary to describe what we see'. For example, rather than describing a table as 'a flat top supported by four legs of equal length, used for resting things on', we describe it in terms of lines, shapes, colours and textures. The latter is just as much a description of what we know as the former. It just uses different vocabulary - specifically, vocabulary suitable to describing the form of the table, rather than its meaning.

Fortunately for drawing teachers, the visual domain has a ready-made vocabulary for describing the form of objects. Certainly this vocabulary differs from language to language (Hardin & Maffi, 1997), but anyone who can speak even basic English can talk about line, shape, colour and texture as easily as they can talk about tables, chairs, and people. By using this vocabulary, a teacher can help a student 'learn how to see' in a way appropriate to the task of representing the form of objects in a drawing ('See you have drawn this corner of the table as a right angle. We know in reality it actually is a right angle, but if you look carefully you will see that visually it is only about 60 degrees.'). Difficulties of comprehension are relatively easily resolved by reference to the drawing and the things being drawn: all concrete, stable objects.

Things are very different in the auditory domain. We have already noted that auditory objects are fleeting, but that is not the end of the problem. To learn pronunciation, as with drawing, students must learn to 'focus on form' (Doughty & Williams, 1998) rather than, as in normal understanding of speech, focus on meaning. However, there is no obvious equivalent to the 'shape, line, colour and texture' vocabulary that comes so naturally for describing the form of visual objects.

To appreciate this, consider how you might describe a sound - say the sound a cat makes, the sound of a car braking on gravel, or the sound of running footsteps. We can use terminology like *high pitched*, *rumbling*, or *rapid-fire*, but these are nowhere near as objectively definable as *square*, *yellow*, *shiny* and the like. In many cases, there is no way to describe the sound except by referring to what makes the sound - i.e., to focus on the meaning of the sound rather than its form. For example, the description 'the sound a cat makes' is probably easier to understand than any attempt to describe 'the actual sound'.

What about pronunciation? How would you describe the sound of a sentence, say *The cat sat on the mat*? More importantly, how would you describe the difference in the sound of this sentence pronounced correctly, compared to its sound when pronounced incorrectly by a learner? This, after all, is what is needed if we are to find an analogy to the 'right angle' example above.

For most people, the description of pronunciation that springs most readily to mind is one based on the spelling of the word. Teachers with some background in linguistics may recognise limitations of spelling-based description (e.g., there is no 'g' sound in 'rough'), and prefer a description in terms of phonemes, or syllables - for example, 'you left the /t/ off the end', 'you used the wrong vowel', or 'you added an extra syllable'. However, though these descriptions may seem absolutely clear to the teacher, they can be extraordinarily difficult for the learner to act upon. The problem is that interpreting descriptions like this requires a level of specifically English phonological awareness that by definition a learner making such mistakes does not yet have.

Phonological awareness (the ability to break words into parts, and describe the parts) is highly language and culture specific. It is acquired in early childhood (Berko Gleason, 2005, Brown, 1958), and varies greatly, not just according to which language is learned, but according to which writing

system is learned (Olson, 1994). Thus, learners from a non-alphabetic literacy tradition may have considerable difficulty even dividing a word into individual phonemes, let alone correctly identifying those phonemes, while learners with alphabetic literacy in a different language may divide the stream of speech into phonemes in ways quite different from those that come so naturally to English speakers (Fraser, 2004).

In short, talking about pronunciation is much more like talking about politeness, family values, religion or other culture-relative topics, than it is like talking in the relatively neutral, objective terms of colour, line, shape and texture. However, while most learners with a degree of intercultural experience recognise that words like *respect* or *democracy* have significantly different interpretations to people from different language backgrounds, those same learners quite often believe their own subjective description of speech is somehow obvious, neutral and objective.

Not an insurmountable problem

This in itself is not an insurmountable problem for language teachers. Being skilled at intercultural communication, they are generally well able to deal with situations where learners interpret information differently from native speakers, and these skills can readily be transferred to the very similar issues of metalinguistic communication that arise when teachers discuss pronunciation with students.

Where a major problem can arise, however, is when teacher education fails to alert teachers to the fact that speakers of different language and literacy backgrounds can 'hear' a simple sentence like *The cat sat on the mat* in vastly different ways to the one that seems so obvious to native speakers.

Without that alert, teachers expect students to understand 'simple' instructions like 'You said 'shuh' and it should be 'suh'', 'you put the stress on the wrong syllable', or 'compounds take stress on the second element when the first element is functioning adjectivally'. Such descriptions may be perfectly accurate, but still very difficult for students to interpret in differentiating between what they just said and what the teacher is telling them they ought to have said.

A teacher who doesn't realise this might conclude 'I can't teach pronunciation', or 'adults can't learn second language pronunciation', rather than simply 'I need to seek a more effective way to communicate with this student about pronunciation'. Finding that effective way does not mean discussion of English letters, phonemes or syllables should be avoided, or other esoteric terms substituted. It simply means that teachers need to build up a small vocabulary of metalinguistic terms appropriate to their teaching situation, provide students with clear, practical definitions of those terms, then use the terms consistently, checking frequently that they are fully understood by students every time they are used. Some practical tips are offered in (Fraser, 2001).

Conclusion

The most effective way to communicate about pronunciation, as with any communication, will vary dramatically depending on the learner and the context. There is no 'one right way'. The criterion is not whether the teacher has followed a manual, but whether the learner has understood the teacher in a way that enables them to modify their pronunciation appropriately.

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