

MARK HANCOCK ON ELF AND PRONUNCIATION FOR LISTENING

(Interview with Andi White for IATEFL Online 2013)

Andi: I'm here with Mark Hancock

Mark: Hello.

A: Mark, you're a pronunciation man, and you've been very very busy.

M: I have, yeah.

A: You have. What have you been doing?

M: I did a pre-conference event yesterday for the Pron sig, and this morning I had my normal talk.

A: And now you're here.

M: Now I'm finished.

A: Uh huh. Can we talk about .. yeah, not finished quite yet. Can we talk about the pre-conference event?

M: Yeah. The pre-conference event was on the topic of English as a Lingua Franca, eh, with Robin Walker and Grzegorz Spiewak

A: Oh, he's great, yeah

M: You know him?

A: Yeah. yeah

M: So eh, Robin started out with a general theoretical background, and Grzegorz talked about how you can use your L1, your native language to help your pronunciation.

A: Ok

M: This was very interesting, 'cause, instead of thinking of it as a hindrance or a blockage, your L1 interference, you can actually use it to boost your pronunciation learning.

A: Ok, great, can you give us some concrete examples as to how?

M: Well, for example, eh, all all L1s will have something in common with English, so instead of saying, in your language you haven't got that sound, you haven't got that sound, you haven't got... negative, negative, negative, look at positive, you say, 'Oh look, you've got that, that, that and that'.

A: Yeah.

M: So, eh, you've got something in the bag already.

A: Yeah, psychologically, that's really helpful.

M: Positive, yeah.

A: Yeah. Ok.





- M: And then my part was eh, how to operationalize this in the classroom, materials design and that kind of angle, so to make it, eh, practical classroom stuff, rather than abstract theory.
- A: Ok. Can you give us any pointers on how to do that?
- M: Ehm, well, you can think of it in terms of eh, negotiation. Your student and whoever they might meet in the future is going to have to kind of negotiate meaning with the person they're speaking to, and in all likelihood, neither of them will be a native speaker, so you have a kind of, eh, negotiation between two people who are not native-like, they find their own way, so first of all, you can tell them the typical things that they will probably both need in order to understand each other, and that's called 'The Core'.
- A: Uh huh
- M: The things that most people will need to make understanding. And the other part is building up their receptivity, because they're not always going to hear what they expect to hear, they're going to hear other accents, other ways of speaking, so you have to give them exposure and experience at understanding more widely, so that they have to understand MORE than they have to produce, if you see what I mean.
- A: Yes, of course, it's getting away from this sort of native speaker model, yeah, because it's so incredibly diverse. Yeah, alright. I have a question. Ehm, how important do you think pronunciation is? I mean, I find that often it's like the red-headed step-child - it's gets ignored, or maybe people avoid it a little bit?
- M: I think there are people avoid it because of questions of accent.
- A: Uh huh
- M: The teacher thinks, 'Well, I've eh, a French accent or a Scottish accent: How can I teach the way it's produced, the way it's advised in the coursebook or whatever,
- A: Right.
- M: Eh, well that's wrong. Actually, any, anybody who's a competent communicator through English can be a good model.
- A: Yeah.
- M: And this is especially true with, say, let's talk about a French teacher of English. If they have eh, something of a French accent, then, so will their students if their students are also from the same background
- A: Right.

- M: They - if they do well, they will probably end up being like this teacher, in other words, this teacher is a good model for those students.
- A: Yes.
- M: You don't need to have 'the Queen's English' in that context.
- A: Yeah, that's really a target for a lot of students, they want to be perfect. What would you say about that? Is that perfect? Is that target of native speaker realistic?
- M: It's a good question, it's true that students, eh... they still have the idea of English as a foreign language, EFL, they think that well, the idea is to end up sounding like somebody, an actor they know or something, a native speaker. Well, first of all, you've got to ask them is that really what they want? 'Cause it's unlikely they're going to get there unless they really are a good actor themselves.
- A: Right.
- M: And secondly, it's not necessary. If they really want to communicate globally, then it doesn't actually help to copy or mimic some kind of native speaker, native speakers are not necessarily more eh... understandable, intelligible, than eh a competent international English speaker. Eh, and a related point if I can just get this one in, is a speaker who comes from the same language background as their students has a big advantage because they know all of the ehm, pitfalls and benefits, so they can ehm, work with what the student is coming from, so there's no way that that teacher is inferior as a pronunciation teacher than the native speaker. This is important.
- A: Right.
- M: They shouldn't be afraid of that.
- A: No, it's actually a strength.
- M: An asset.
- A: Yeah, especially when you're talking about comprehensibility, all of that, yeah, they are the experts, they're better at it.
- M: They've done it themselves. They've trodden the path.
- A: Right. It's changed quite a bit, in the past few years, yeah, quite a few years, but this idea of eh, what people should be aiming for.
- M: There's a false sense of ehm... precision, probably encouraged by things like the phonetic alphabet. People go, 'Oh, well, this sound is exactly this, this is what we have to get, exactly this, "cat"', and if you say "ket" or something else, wrong, wrong, wrong. That's rubbish, you know, loads of native speakers say something like "ket" for "cat", so, nobody stops them and says, 'Hey, you've got to change the way you pronounce that'. That would be ridiculous.
- A: Right. Yeah. Ok, so that was just the PCE, and then you gave a talk as well.
- M: Yes, it was kind of related, but it was about listening, the listening skill, how pronunciation interacts with the listening skill.
- A: Ok.
- M: Because normally you think of pronunciation as eh, a kind of mouth thing, but it's an ear thing as well.
- A: Yep. Most definitely.

- M: So here I was looking at eh... features of connected speech and how...
- A: Can you explain that a little bit, what connected speech is. What is that?
- M: Well, words separately is one thing. Dictionary pronunciation of a word is one thing, and then when they actually occur in sequence, they blend together in unexpected kind of ways, ehm, one example I gave was, for examples, was this: 'What's your address?', the question, 'What's your address?' - sounds exactly the same as 'Watch or a dress'. You wouldn't expect that. If you looked at the words separately, in a dictionary, you would never expect that, but actually they form a perfect homophone in many accents: 'What's your address?', 'Watch or a dress'. That kind of thing, it's, you know, it's awareness-raising. Don't expect all of the words to appear as if they were separate.
- A: Right. So it's much different if you have a word in isolation or the train-wreck that naturally happens.
- M: Yes. You need to have a bit of experience of these train-wrecks so that it doesn't, you don't come across it and go, 'Oh, I don't understand that, it's too fast', or whatever. Usually people say, 'Oh, it's too fast', it's not necessarily fast at all, it just gives them that impression.
- A: Yeah. Ok. Do you have just one or two tips for teachers for pronunciation? If there were just two things that you could give them, to start incorporating it more?
- M: This particular thing that I was talking about?
- A: Any, anything on pronunciation.
- M: Eh, ok, a simple one would be, when you're using your coursebook, say, and there's a listening text, what we tend to do is, you play the listening and do some comprehension questions, if it's wrong, maybe play it again... You can do a bit of closer analysis, say eh, choose some small, small troublesome segments, you know, identify what they had trouble with, or get them to say, get your students to say, 'Stop, what did they just say there?', and then you can write it up on the board, just that tiny fragment as it sounds, as opposed to how it's spelt.
- A: Okay
- M: And look at the difference between them, and how did that happen. Or ask your students if they know any songs in English - are there any lines which they understood differently, and then when they saw it printed they go, 'Oh!', and then analyse how they had understood it wrongly, you know what I mean?
- A: Right, so definitely in conjunction with listening, that would be the ...
- M: Well, that was my focus today, about pronunciation for listening, that was the focus, yep.
- A: Yep, okay....

