A Map of Pronunciation Teaching

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INTRODUCTION

There is an Indian parable in which a number of blind men set out to discover what an elephant is like. Each feels a different part of the animal and comes away with an entirely different impression of its form. For example, the one who touches the trunk thinks its like a snake; the one who touches it's tusk think it's all hard and bony. I sometimes feel something similar happens in our field of pronunciation teaching. How can accent and identity, jazz chants and discourse intonation possibly be part of the same animal? It's easy to become blind to the whole.

But is this a problem? After all, to make any important advances in any field, we have to specialize. My answer is that, while it may not be a problem for the specialist, it *is* for the teacher. The teacher must weigh up all the different angles and approaches which compete for attention and make considered, pragmatic choices. The teacher needs to see the whole elephant at once, so to speak, or to change the metaphor: the teacher needs a bird's-eye view of the whole territory – a map. I have attempted to create such a map, and in this article, I will present and explain it. But first, let us look at some potential problems resulting from working without a view of the big picture.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Here are three examples of problematic classroom scenarios which will serve as a starting point.

Problem 1: I had been studying an aspect of phonology and had become very excited by it. I decide to apply it directly in my pronunciation class, with disappointing results. It turns out that while the theory was very elegant, it proved impossible to explain to the students, and moreover, they clearly regarded it as superfluous to their needs.

Problem 2: I found a pronunciation game which looked great fun and I really wanted to try it out in the classroom. Unfortunately, I didn't study the pronunciation point of the game before the lesson, and when the students started asking about apparent exceptions to the rule, I had to start improvising explanations of dubious accuracy. A whole lesson was taken up on what, at the end of the day, was only a minor pronunciation point

Problem 3: Over time, I had become convinced by certain articles and conference presentations that the aims of pronunciation teaching, as had traditionally been described before, were misguided. I wanted to apply the insight to my teaching. Unfortunately, my students were confused because I didn't seem to be giving them any clear guidelines as to what they were supposed to be aiming at. Moreover, my lessons were rather unstructured. without much variety of task type.

In each of the scenarios above, the problem is not what I <u>did</u>, but what I <u>didn't</u> do. There can surely be nothing wrong with studying an aspect of phonology in detail, searching out enjoyable classroom material, or refreshing one's outlook through articles and at conferences. But what I didn't do was *balance* these with other considerations prior to classroom application. This question of balance is the first issue the map will address, and it will do so by dividing the territory into three regions.

A QUESTION OF BALANCE

Let's assume that we aim to create pronunciation classes which are accurate, effective and useful. Those three adjectives, *accurate*, *effective* and *useful*, will be handy in our first marking out of the territory:

- *Accurate* relates to the content of what we are teaching – the phonology; the answer to the question <u>*What*</u> *are we teaching?*
- *Effective* relates to the process of teaching/learning – the pedagogy; the answer to the question <u>*How*</u> *are we teaching it?*
- *Useful* relates to the educational aims – the syllabus; the answer to the question <u>*Why*</u> *are we teaching it?*

The map will be marked out into three principal regions accordingly, and these will be called *What*, *How* and *Why*. All three regions are essential – any pronunciation teacher will have to have a theory for each area; an answer for each of the three questions. These may be something the teacher has formulated explicitly. However, they may equally well be implicit and unexamined – a default position that the teacher is unaware of. For example, a teacher may take it as given that the objective is for learners to acquire native-like pronunciation, without explicitly selecting this as an objective or considering any alternatives. A map may help to fix this neglect of the *Why* Region, if only by reminding us that it exists. Let us review the three problems I introduced above in this light.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

Returning now to the three problems described above, we can now propose three potential solutions, expressed in terms of the regions of the map:

Solution 1: We can see that in my enthusiasm for the What? (the aspect of phonology), I had developed a blind spot for the How? and Why? To make this work, I would need to work out a pedagogic simplification of the theory, and make sure it was presented in such a way that the students could perceive its usefulness.

Solution 2: In my enthusiasm for the How? (the pronunciation game), I neglected the What? and Why? In future, I should make sure that I know what the pronunciation focus of any classroom task is, and that its relevant and useful for my students.

Solution 3: In my enthusiasm for the Why? (my new insight regarding the aim of learning pronunciation), I neglected the What? and the How?. I will need to make sure that students understand – and agree with – the teaching point I have selected, and make sure that I teach it in an effective and motivating way.

Having looked at the question of balance, we will now turn to the second important issue which the map seeks to address – the question of breadth.

A QUESTION OF BREADTH

So far, I have focussed only on a broad division of the territory of pronunciation teaching into three regions – What? How? and Why?, and I have argued for the importance for teachers of maintaining a balance between the three of them. However, balance alone is not enough. For example, imagine a teacher whose only pronunciation work consisted of drilling minimal pairs until the students approximated to native-like production of these. This teacher has a theory – either explicit or implicit - for each of the regions as follows:

- What? Pronunciation is about sounds and sound distinctions.
- How? Students learn to pronounce by listening and imitating.
- Why? The objective is for the student to acquire native-like pronunciation.

This teacher does have a theory for each region. However, the problem is the teacher's limited repertoire of possibilities within each region. This results in a teaching focus which is partial, a methodology which is inflexible, and an aim which is not adaptable to the students' real needs. To improve this situation, the teacher will need to go off exploring the different regions and start to fill out the blank areas of their map. What follows is a description of some of the landmarks they might find.

THE *WHAT* REGION

Our imaginary teacher's theory of What? was that pronunciation is about sounds and sound distinctions – in other words, segmental aspects of phonology. The most obvious way of expanding this repertoire is to add supra-segmental aspects like stress, rhythm, intonation and connected speech. The teacher may also explore how pronunciation integrates with other areas of the syllabus, for example, spelling, grammar, lexis and the skills – speaking, obviously, and no less importantly, listening. Then there is also the question of the language background of the students, leading to questions of contrastive analysis and different articulatory settings.

There is also the issue of model – which variety of English are we teaching. This lies on the border of the *Why* Region, because it depends very much on the students' purpose for learning. Candidate models might include prestige native varieties such as RP or GA, or another regional variety, or the teacher's own accent. Or perhaps the very idea of model may be called into question,

with a focus instead on a minimal core of features for global intelligibility, coupled with a willingness to negotiate meaning.

Meanwhile, on the other border, between the What and the How Region, there is the question of how theory interacts with practice. For many features of phonology, our teacher may find the need to simplify the theory, even at the expense of accuracy or completeness. For instance, a teacher might choose to omit certain phonemes when presenting the sound repertoire of English, or make no reference to the idea of secondary stress. Teachers have long been accustomed to the idea of a simplified, pedagogic grammar, yet there is often a resistance to a similar simplification of pronunciation – a pedagogic phonology.

THE *HOW* REGION

Listen and repeat is arguably the first procedure that would come to mind if you asked someone to teach pronunciation. This may be associated to a behaviouristic view of learning, in which pronunciation is seen as a habit formed by doing something frequently and mindlessly. Perhaps the apparent detachment from anything meaningfully communicative in *Listen and repeat* is what leads to the relative neglect of pronunciation in communicative approaches.

There have been attempts to give traditional pronunciation methods a communicative make-over, such as by embedding minimal pairs in communication games, and this has the benefit of showing to the student how pronunciation can impact on meaning. Nevertheless, it would be impossible to make much of what we need to teach in pronunciation truly communicative during the form-focussed, intensive practice stage of learning new pronunciation habits, and perhaps we should just accept that the means don't always have to resemble the ends. In this respect, a minimal pair game may be useful even if it doesn't resemble a conversation.

Pronunciation has also been dealt with more cognitively, with awareness-raising activities designed to help students notice patterns, or approaches like the Silent Way, in which students discover how they create the sounds for themselves.

Our teacher will also need to fill out the map in the region of tasks, finding different ways of working with minimal pairs and other task types, both receptively and productively, as well as such things as games, group-work, wordplay, and chants. Finally, the map will need more detail in the area of tools. Most coursebooks are seriously thin in the area of pronunciation, but there are supplementary materials available. Many teachers also make use of charts and multi-media. The fastest growing resources in this area, however, are digital tools. The latter have opened up, like never before, the possibility of students working on their pronunciation outside the classroom. But there is also a potential downside: technological possibilities can be so mesmerising that we are tempted to neglect the other regions of the map – the *What* and the *Why*. Some tools are lamentably retrograde in their assumptions about what pronunciation is and why students are learning it.

THE *WHY* REGION

Our imaginary teacher's theory of Why? was that our students are all aiming to sound like native-speakers, and that this is both possible and appropriate. It may indeed be appropriate for some students, who have migrated to a country where English is spoken, and find themselves denied full access to the local society because their accent is stigmatized. These individuals may attempt to integrate more fully through accent reduction.
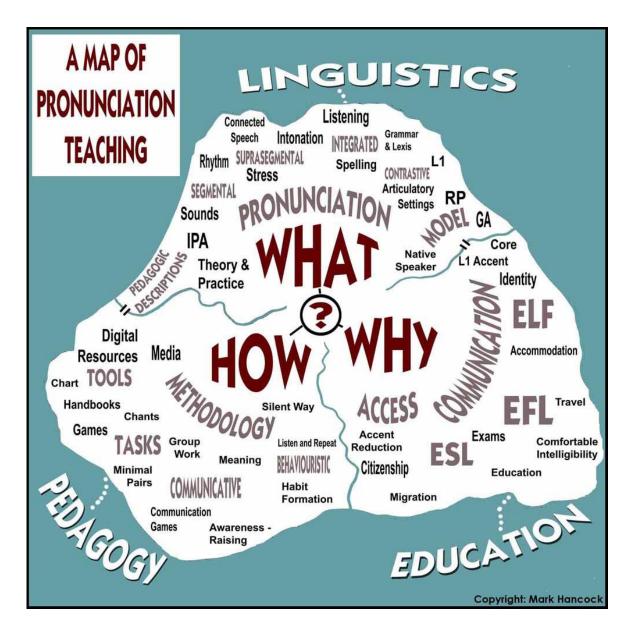
However, for most of the students a pronunciation teacher is likely to encounter in the wider world, the more pressing aim is communication. We might identify three broad contexts for their possible communicative needs: English as a Second Language (ESL) – communicating as a resident in an English speaking location; English as a Foreign Language (EFL) – communicating as a potential visitor to an English speaking place; and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) – communicating in an international context.

Note that EFL learners may never actually visit the English-speaking country, but have it 'brought to them', so to speak, through an exam which is assessed on English native-speaker criteria, or through classes which try to evoke an English speaking culture. In EFL, although learners may aim for a native-like production, it is accepted that they settle for something else, namely comfortable intelligibility – their own accent is fine so long as it doesn't make it hard for a native speaker to follow.

In the ELF region of the map, the native-speaker is dropped, both as a model and as a referee of what's intelligible. An important idea here is that speakers must accommodate to one another to negotiate an understanding. This means adapting their accent to a given interlocutor as far as they are able, and tolerating their interlocutor's accent. In this area of the map, accent is not something to be reduced, but a part of the student's identity, and a resource to help them in their acquisition of an effective international English pronunciation.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

The territory of pronunciation teaching which I have described does not exist in isolation. It exists at the confluence of three broader disciplines. Off the coast of the *What* Region is linguistics, and many concepts within phonology will point outwards to this broader context; for example, to the contrast between generative and functional models of grammar. Off the coast of the *How* Region is pedagogy and learning psychology, and the pronunciation teacher may at times need to make reference to concepts such as multiple intelligences or motivation. And finally, off the coast of the *Why* Region, is the wider field of education. This includes a concern for what skills people need to learn to live in a globalized world in the 21st century, and the teacher will need to consider the implications of this for pronunciation.

A MAP OF PRONUNCIATION TEACHING

LINGUISTICS

Listening
Connected Speech
Intonation
INTEGRATED
Grammar & Lexis
Rhythm
SUPRASEGMENTAL
Stress
Spelling
L1
CONTRASTIVE
SEGMENTAL
Articulatory Settings
RP
Sounds
PRONUNCIATION
MODEL
GA
IPA
PEDAGOGIC DESCRIPTIONS
Theory & Practice
WHAT
Native Speaker
Core
L1 Accent
Identity
Digital Resources
Media
HOW
WHY
COMMUNICATION
ELF
Accommodation
Chart
TOOLS
METHODOLOGY
Silent Way
ACCESS
Handbooks
Chants
Games
TASKS
Group Work
Listen and Repeat
Accent Reduction
Exams
EFL
Travel
Meaning
BEHAVIOURISTIC
ESL
Comfortable Intelligibility
Minimal Pairs
COMMUNICATIVE
Citizenship
Education
Communication Games
Awareness - Raising
Habit Formation
Migration
PEDAGOGY
EDUCATION

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A MAP OF PRONUNCIATION TEACHING

Having described the rationale behind the map, and taken you on a whistle-stop tour, it only remains for me to present the map itself to you. The map is somewhat like a brainstorm. The labels on it are suggestive of what might go there, but in no way are they comprehensive, and you will no doubt be able to add more. The map is also like a mind-map, although less explicit about what connects to what – I didn't want that level of restriction. The actual shape of the coastline is fanciful, of course, yet I think the map would be less reader-friendly without it. In any case, the map is not intended to be scientific or rigorous, but to serve as a picture of 'the whole elephant', a reminder of what to take account of (balance) and what the possibilities are (breadth), when preparing to teach pronunciation.

You may also use the map as a vehicle for reflection. For example, if you circle all the words and concepts which you feel at home with, and then look at the overall pattern of these on the whole map, this is your 'pronunciation footprint'. If there are any conspicuous areas outside your 'footprint', you may want to look

into the ideas in those areas a little more. Similarly, you may use the map after reading an article or attending a talk: is it possible locate the author's main argument on the map? The process of deciding this is a way of reflecting on what you have just read or seen. Perhaps you could try it with this issue of Speak Out!

BIO
Mark Hancock graduated in geography and philosophy in 1984. Since then, he has done an MA in Teaching English, and he has been an English teacher on three continents. Since the early 1990s, he has also been an ELT materials writer. His first book was *Pronunciation Games* (CUP 1995). He also wrote *English Pronunciation in Use Intermediate* (CUP 2003 and 2012), He co-founded, with Annie McDonald, the ELT resource website
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