PRIORITIES IN PRONUNCIATION TEACHING

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Some areas of pronunciation may be much more important than others in the classroom if one considers errors that directly affect learners' intelligibility. In this article I use data gathered about errors affecting Brazilian learners' intelligibility to help determine priority areas for pronunciation teaching in Brazil. I also suggest practical ways to deal with these areas in the classroom.

Introduction

The teaching of English pronunciation is often a challenge for teachers. This may be due to the fact that there is so much to accomplish that we often feel overwhelmed, and perhaps even insecure of our own abilities to give learners what they need. Most of us will have the aid of course books, which highlight certain phonemes and other segmental and suprasegmental features, and provide practice exercises and phonemic charts. Many of us will use these when they come up, as suggested in the books. There are also a number of interesting and useful pronunciation handbooks.

Whenever we teach new language items, we try and make sure students are exposed to and get enough practice of the correct pronunciation of words and phrases. Also, in our everyday classroom practice, we know that correcting students' mistakes is very important to help them achieve acceptable pronunciation. This is what many of us do at any sign of error. However, we can become so used to hearing recurrent errors that we do not notice them any more, especially if we teach monolingual groups.

But the most important aspect of pronunciation teaching may not be how we teach it, how much we teach it, or even what we teach. Perhaps the crucial question to consider is *why* we teach pronunciation. Only by asking ourselves this question, and finding a satisfactory answer to it, can we really have a clear picture of the importance of pronunciation in our students' lives, and begin to think of answers to *how*, *how much* and *what*.

Reflecting on learners' production

In order to focus on the question of why it is important to teach pronunciation, I will use examples drawn from my experience teaching Brazilian learners in Rio de Janeiro, but I believe it will not be difficult for teachers elsewhere to find relevant parallels in their own teaching.

Let us then begin by looking at the following example sentences, uttered by learners of English of different levels in a variety of classrooms:

*Do you wanty sung coff? Wivvy or widoutchy mewk?
*Dat sing yooman works in an offs. I don't sink she's he-tir-ed.
*Dis is my car. I likey ITCHY a lotchy.
*My sung watch-ed Hobbin Hood yesterday. He was heally happ!
*Bew is at the cown-trie cloob.

You will probably find these written sentences hard to understand at first glance. But if you are Brazilian, or have lived in Brazil long enough, I am sure that as soon as you read them aloud, you will recognize them immediately! (If not, look at the footnote for their standard English versions[1]).

If you are teaching in Brazil you will have heard utterances sounding like these in your classrooms. But wherever you are and whatever nationalities you teach, it probably bothers you to hear your students speaking like that. What can we do when we hear such utterances? Can we just ignore these errors because this is the way speakers of this or that language pronounce English? Should we try to correct all possible errors, and make the student repeat the correct pronunciation until we are satisfied (or we give up!)? Perhaps the best course of action is to use these utterances as an opportunity to analyse our learners' errors, and to interpret our own reactions to them. Why do these utterances bother us? Is it because they 'sound bad' and 'hurt our ears'? Is it because they are incorrect? Probably the real reason why we feel students should not speak like that is the fact that we know – even if only on a subconscious level – that this sort of pronunciation is likely to affect the speaker's intelligibility and respectability when communicating in English.

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[1] Do you want some coffee? With or without milk?
That thin woman works in an office. I don't think she's retired.
This is my car. I like it a lot.
My son watched Robin Hood yesterday. He was really happy!
Bill is at the country club.

Intelligibility – a reliable guide

Being intelligible – i.e., able to make one's meanings and intentions clear to a listener, according to a simple definition by Brazil (1994: 2) – is obviously essential, but it is not be guaranteed by correct grammar and appropriate choice of words only. If the speech flow is not produced in such a way that it can be recognized by a listener, then the message will not be conveyed. Also, if our expectations of what words and phrases should sound like are inaccurate, we are not likely to understand what is said to us. This is what makes the teaching of pronunciation so important.

But who should students be intelligible to? When they utter sentences such as the examples above, can they understand each other? Most probably yes, because many of them share the same pronunciation problems. Can the teacher understand them? If the teacher is a speaker of the same language as the students, I am sure they can, as they must be more than familiar with common pronunciation difficulties. But will they be understood by native speakers of English, or by speakers of other languages? And will they be able to understand correct pronunciation when they hear it?

The aim of our teaching is basically to enable our learners to use English as a tool to communicate with people in a world where English has become a lingua franca. So it is crucial that their pronunciation is intelligible to a wide variety of interlocutors. However, that does not mean to say that we should aim for a perfect, native-like pronunciation. As Walker (2002: 9) points out, 'whilst it is perfectly legitimate for a student to aspire to a native speaker accent, it is surely wrong for a teacher, explicitly or otherwise, to push students to feel that anything other than this is an imperfection.' Another important aspect to consider is the fact that learners will probably need English to communicate with speakers of other languages a lot more often than with native speakers (consider, for example, the recent expansion of trade between Brazil and African and Asian countries). Gnutzmann (2000: 357) reminds us that 'it has been estimated that about 80 per cent of verbal exchanges in which English is used as a second or foreign language do not involve native speakers of English (Beneke 1991)'.

If this is the case, we should concentrate our efforts on teaching our learners what is really essential to make themselves understood. In order to do that, as suggested by Jenkins (2000: 104), we must become aware of which pronunciation problems really do affect their intelligibility and which do not, rather than 'shoot in all directions'. In most cases this perfection proves impossible to achieve, and the quest for it tends to bring a lot of frustration to both teachers and learners, and does not provide any focus or aim. If international intelligibility is what we should aim for, instead of aiming for native-like pronunciation in all areas, we should learn to prioritize our pronunciation teaching. By doing this, we will be able to establish which areas to tackle more intensely, and which to pay less attention to, and this will ultimately maximize our time and effort.

Finding out what learners need most

The example sentences we looked at above can be very useful in the search for this prioritization for Brazilian learners if they are analysed in the light of following questions:

1. Which typical Brazilian pronunciation errors are students making in them?

2. Which of these errors are more or less problematic as far as international intelligibility is concerned?

3. How should we deal with each of them?

The answer to the first question is so overwhelming that it would probably take us hundreds of words to list and analyse them all. Among the ones Brazilian teachers traditionally pick up on immediately are:

• the mispronunciation of the two TH sounds (*I sink, *dat)

• the addition of an /i/ sound after final consonants (*likey, *wanty)

• the Brazilianized pronunciation of loan words like *country club*

• the mispronunciation of the Past Tense suffix *~ed*.

But other errors involving different segmental and suprasegmental features – which are sometimes not even noticed, and frequently not perceived as very serious by teachers – can also be important[2]. These can only be evaluated after we answer the second question.

[2] Many researchers, such as Shepherd (1987), have put forward comprehensive lists of common Brazilian pronunciation problems which are really helpful tools, though they do not consider any particular order of importance vis à vis intelligibility.

Finding a definite answer to the second question is a lot more difficult. How can we have an accurate idea of which errors may hinder comprehension in an international context? Here we can count on the help of the Lingua Franca Core (Jenkins, 2000: 158). Using Jenkins's findings and recommendations as a starting point, I developed a small-scale investigation into Brazilian students' intelligibility (Silva, 1999), followed by an on-going process of data collection. The results of this investigation – somewhat surprising in many cases – can give us some idea of certain features of the way Brazilians pronounce English that are potential problems for intelligibility. The main ones which cause serious misunderstandings seem to be:

1. Confusion between the /r/ and /h/ in initial position:
E.g.: *hõõ instead of *room*, *he-tir-ed instead of *retired*, *Hobbin instead of *Robin*

2. Strong reduction of the vowel sound in final unstressed syllables (rendering it inaudible to non-Brazilian ears)
E.g.: *coff instead of coffee, *offs instead of office, *happ instead of happy[3]

3. Stress placed on the wrong word in a phrase:
E.g.: *I like IT instead of *I like it*.

4. Brazilianized pronunciation of loan words:[4]
E.g.: *cown-trie instead of *country*

Other pronunciation problems, such as the difficulty in pronouncing 'm' and 'n' in final positions – as in *sung (some or son) – have caused misunderstandings in only a few cases, and therefore seem to be less serious, thus taking a secondary position as priorities.

The wrong pronunciation of TH sounds – many teachers' pet pronunciation problem – does not seem to cause any misunderstandings at all. *I sink (*I think*) and *dis (*this*) are apparently not an issue as far as intelligibility is concerned, and neither is the adding of the extra /i/ sound after final consonants (epenthesis): *likey (*like*) and *wanty (*want*), which agrees with the Lingua Franca Core.

More research will be necessary until we can come up with a reliable list of what to focus on more intensely when teaching pronunciation so that Brazilian learners are really internationally intelligible. Meanwhile, we must take what we already know into consideration, and try to answer the third question above.

[3] This particular problem is not listed by Jenkins in her Lingua Franca Core, but it has stood out in the data gathered in my investigation.

[4] This is also not listed by Jenkins.

Priorities in the classroom

I will list here a few ideas about how teachers teaching Brazilians can deal with prioritization. These ideas may be useful when teaching pronunciation, but they are here more as food for thought and points to reflect upon than as 'magical tricks' to be followed. Teachers who teach speakers of other languages may find ways of adapting them to their own teaching realities and their learners' needs.

R versus H

• Whenever you teach new words beginning with the letter R, make sure you remind students that they cannot pronounce them as if they were Portuguese words. Make them aware of the importance of not pronouncing an 'r' as an'h' by showing them minimal pairs, such as *rat/hat*, or *red/head*.

• Constantly correct this error whenever it occurs. Make it into a 'big deal' in your classes.

• Have students produce posters to illustrate one or two minimal pairs: for example, a rat wearing a hat.

Reduction of the vowel sound in final unstressed syllables

• Start by making students aware that in Portuguese we usually reduce the final syllables of words when they are not stressed. Explain to students they cannot do the same with English words, as people from other parts of the world won't be able to hear the ending of the words if they do.

• Show students minimal pairs like *cough/coffee*, or *tax/taxi*, and have them pronounce each word so that they sound *really different* from one another. Make it into a game.

• Be alert to this type of word when you teach new vocabulary. Many English words follow a **Oo** or **oOo** stress pattern, which means a large number of final unstressed syllables running the risk of being 'swallowed up' by Brazilian learners.

• Again, don't let your students get away with doing that! Pretend you don't hear the endings of words whenever

they reduce them as they would in Portuguese, and repeat the 'mutilated' word with a confused, quizzical look on your face and a question intonation. Then pretend you 'finally' got what was meant, and repeat the word, making the final syllable sound as it should. Then get them to repeat it correctly.

Wrong stress in phrases

• Sensitize students to sentence (nuclear) stress. For example, don't allow strong forms of object pronouns (e.g. I like IT. / She went to the party with ME.) unless it is done for emphasis.

• Show students 'minimal trios' such as:
SHE loves me. / She LOVES me. / She loves ME.
Have them tell you what the difference between them is.

'Brazilianized' pronunciation of loan words

• Start a class list of English words that are also used in Portuguese to be hung. As you add new words to the list, raise students' awareness to the fact that the way they are pronounced in Portuguese is not necessarily the way they should be pronounced in English.

• Create two different symbols to write next to the words as you add them to the list: one meaning 'similar pronunciation in English and Portuguese' and another one meaning 'different in English and Portuguese'.

Final considerations

What about the TH sounds and the rest of the pronunciation problems? Should we just ignore them? That will of course depend on each teacher's beliefs, and/or those of the institutions they work for.

If you believe in teaching English for international communication – EIL or ELF – pronunciation areas which do not at all affect intelligibility in this context can be left alone. Different learners will find different solutions to their 'non-standard' realizations of English sounds – in the case of the voiceless TH sound, for example, it will not matter if the speaker uses /f/, /s/ or /t/, as words like *think* and *bath* will be understood.

If, on the other hand, you believe it is your duty to cover all pronunciation areas, and to make your learners achieve native-like pronunciation, remember that not all learners will necessarily be willing or even capable of doing this, and in failing to do so, they may feel frustrated and demotivated. Since the standard linguodental pronunciation of TH is not so important for intelligibility, for example, there is no need to overdo its teaching and spend precious classroom time trying to make *everyone* master it. Instead, tell those who are unable or unwilling to 'put the tip of their tongues between their teeth', to produce an acceptable alternative. In the case of Brazilians, for example, /t/ is extremely easy to do.

No matter what our beliefs are, however, at the end of the day it is our learners who will determine what their English will sound like, and they will be using it as a lingua franca whenever they communicate in English internationally. Because of this, I believe it is our duty as teachers to look after their production of this lingua franca by making them aware of which areas they have to focus on. By focusing on those areas that are crucial for international intelligibility we can help learners see the importance of overcoming their difficulties in these areas.

To sum up, what most matters is what we can do to help our learners become as intelligible as possible. In this respect, teachers and learners need to understand that not all pronunciation features are of equal importance, and that the ones that get prioritized are the features that most affect international communication in English.

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