Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Pronunciation incorporated: Incorporating pronunciation practice into speaking courses

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This paper describes some simple techniques to help smoothly incorporate pronunciation practice into speaking courses in a way that allows teachers to easily and quickly draw students' attention to pronunciation when necessary, and without needlessly disrupting the flow of a lesson or drawing attention away from other areas being worked on. The techniques are described in the context of a class the author taught and videotaped for a presentation and this paper. Notes are included to provide some theoretical and pedagogical background to the techniques described.

　本論文は、発音練習をスピーキングの授業にうまく組み入れるのに役立つ幾つかの簡便なテクニックについて詳述するものである。これにより、必要に応じて、教師は容易にそして即座に学習者の注意を発音に向けることができる。また無駄に授業の流れを妨げたり、学習している分野から注意を引き離したりすることもない。これらのテクニックは著者が実際に教えた授業の展開に沿って説明され、プレゼンテーションと本論文のためにビデオ撮影もされている。また論じられているテクニックの理論的、教育的背景を提供するため注釈も含まれている。

This paper offers activities and techniques that are easy to understand and do not rely on specialized materials. The reader may view these activities with an eye not only to which ones may be used in their classrooms but also what may be done with the interesting ones that cannot, how those activities that seem intriguing but poorly suited to their particular classroom may be adapted or redesigned. It is hoped that theoretical and pedagogical notes accompanying the activities described in this paper prove helpful in this regard.

This paper also discusses how these pronunciation activities may be woven into the course itself, and this choice of the word "woven" is an indication of how the author sees this being done, as a thread always present, sometimes the focus of the students' work sometimes not, easily accessible without disrupting the students' work.

A class

Because this paper is not simply on pronunciation practice, but on how this practice may be woven into a speaking course, it is felt that the best way to present the techniques and activities is with a description of a speaking lesson. As stated above, theoretical and pedagogical notes on, as well as variations and extensions of, the activities are also provided.

For the purpose of the author's presentation and this paper, seven third-year students from a private university were recruited, four from the author's seminar class and three from a colleague's seminar class. The students English level could be described as lower-intermediate, or at a level roughly equivalent to a TOEIC score of 300 to 450. The students were seated at a long, rectangular table. The teacher was seated across this table from them. On the table were red rods and white cubes taken from a box of Cuisenaire rods and arranged to represent a variety of lexical stress patterns as in Figure 1. Behind the teacher was a whiteboard, and scattered on the whiteboard in no discernible pattern were the words "couch," "ouch," "chair," "cupboard," "television," "microwave," "oven," "table," "with," "coach," and "refrigerator." The 55-minute class was recorded using four video cameras placed at different angles around the room. An abridged video of the class may be viewed at <donaldcherry.com/HIUclass.html.>
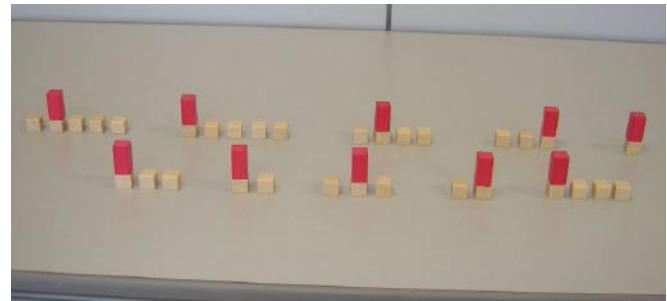

Figure 1. Rod models of lexical stress

Lexical stress

There has clearly been an emphasis on suprasegmentals in the teaching of pronunciation for some time now (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Morley, 1991), with research supporting lexical stress in particular (Field, J., 2005). Furthermore, Dalton and Seidlhofer point to lexical stress as a suprasegmental easier to teach than intonation and with greater communicative value than phonemes (1994, p. 73). In short, a focus on lexical stress seems to offer a favorable "bang for buck" value.

In practice

The teacher claps his hands twice, the first time loudly and the second time softly. He indicates for the students to do the same. He goes from student to student to see that they have the correct rhythm. After a few moments, the teacher draws students' attention to the cubes and rods on the table. He asks, "Which one is it?" Most students point correctly to the

configuration in the front row, second from the left in Figure 1. The teacher invites a student to clap another configuration. The student does, and the other students point to the configuration of rods and cubes representing that pattern.

Later in the lesson, the teacher uses a pointer to point at "oven." He asks the students to choose a model on the table that represents the word stress in "oven." The students all choose a three-syllable model with the stress on the first syllable. The teacher accepts this. He points at each cube, and the students say each syllable in turn. Shortly after saying the final syllable, which for them is the sound /n/, they realize their mistake. The teacher asks them to choose a better model. They correctly choose a two-syllable model with the stress on the first syllable.

Next, the teacher points at "microwave," and asks the students to choose the model on the table that represents this word. A student chooses the three-syllable model with the stress on the second syllable. The students seem uncertain, but the teacher accepts this and, pointing at each syllable in turn, guides the students into saying "microwave" with the second syllable stressed. He then moves the red rod to the final syllable, and guides the students into saying the word like this. Finally, he puts the rod on the first syllable, and has the students say this. He asks the students which is correct, and they all agree on this last one.

This type of work continues for a minute or so. One word that these students find particularly difficult is "refrigerator," more for the number of syllables than for the word stress. The teacher asks pairs of students to decide how many syllables there are in "refrigerator." There are a variety of answers, from three to five. The teacher places three

cubes in front of him, and by pointing at each cube in turn, leads the class to read slowly through the word, syllable by syllable. It becomes apparent that three is not enough, nor is four. Five seems right to most students. The teacher then places a red rod on the final syllable, and the students say "refrigerator" with this stress pattern. The teacher moves the red rod to each of the cubes in turn, leading the class to say "refrigerator" five different ways. He asks the students where the red rod belongs, and most students correctly choose the second syllable.

The classroom work on lexical stress described here may be modified so that no cubes or rods are needed. The teacher may simply clap a pattern, and then ask the students to find a word on the whiteboard that matches this pattern. The teacher may then continue by pointing to each word in turn, and having the students work to discover their lexical stress patterns. There will no doubt be many mistakes by Japanese students in determining the number of syllables in English words. These mistakes should first be accepted, with the teacher then having the students slowly pronounce the words according to each theory, syllable by syllable. This will usually be enough to bring students to an awareness of the correct number of syllables.

Sounds

While there has been a clear emphasis on suprasegmentals among pronunciation teachers, the sounds of the language certainly cannot be ignored. In fact, it has been argued by Jenkins (2000, 2002) that it is segmentals that should be emphasized over suprasegmentals, especially in communication among non-native English speakers. Among

native speakers of English, it is interesting to note a study that found native speakers relied more on segmental than suprasegmental features to determine the degree of accent in non-native English speakers' speech (Riney, R. J., Takagi, N., & Inutsuka, K., 2005).

The most salient point to note in the classroom work described below is the absence of teacher modeling. It is the author's opinion that such modeling is not without value, but its effectiveness does not justify the degree to which it may be relied on in many language classrooms. The author suggests that teachers not "just model," meaning by this that teachers should (1) not model without listening carefully to, and giving feedback on, the students' responses, (2) not restrict themselves to reaching the students solely through their ears, but also give students feedback on their pronunciation visually, and (3) coach the students on their pronunciation with simple explanations or advice in their mother tongue or the target language.

In practice

The teacher uses a pointer to point at the words on the whiteboard, inviting the students to say them as he does so. He stops after each word, and checks pronunciation by going quickly from individual to individual. When there is a problem, the teacher responds in one or more of the following ways: (1) he points to the part of the word with the pronunciation problem, (2) he indicates through gesture or words what the student needs to do to improve their pronunciation, (3) he directs the student to listen to or practice with another student with better pronunciation.

For example, when the teacher points to "oven," many students pronounce the first vowel sound as the Japanese phoneme お, which is a vowel of about the same height but much more "back" than /ʌ/. The teacher points to the "o" in "oven," communicating to the students there is a problem with that sound. They read it a few more times. The teacher silently juts his jaw out a bit, directing the students to do the same. This moves the sound more towards the front for some students, improving their pronunciation. After going quickly from student to student, the teacher pairs students with a good pronunciation of this word with those who need help, directing them to practice together for a minute. While not seen in this particular class, another way of helping the students with this particular vowel sound would be to write the Japanese phoneme あ on the board, which is a sound of approximately the same position horizontally as /ʌ/, but much more open. The students would then be directed to say this sound with their mouths not quite so open.

The words on the whiteboard in the class described above were chosen for the work that follows. Obviously, different words would be chosen for a different language focus. Once on the whiteboard, these words can be referred to at any time during the class to follow. This can be done only when needed, and with a minimum of interference in the flow of the class.

Sentence-level suprasegmentals

With the notable exception of Jenkins and those subscribing to her idea of using as a model the segmental pronunciation targets described in her *Lingua Franca Core*, the majority of teachers seem to favor an emphasis on suprasegmentals in

the teaching of pronunciation. It should also be noted that, despite claims of a lack of research justifying this tendency among teachers to emphasize suprasegmentals (Hahn, 2004) over segmentals, there have been recent studies supporting such an emphasis (e.g., Derwing & Rossiter, 2003).

It has been this author's experience working with Japanese students of English that the greatest pronunciation obstacles for these students are sentence-level stress and word linking. Most of the work described below focuses on these areas.

In practice

The teacher points to "microwave," then to "oven." Having worked a little on these earlier, the students produce each word reasonably well, but there is an unnatural break between them. The teacher drags the pointer across only "mi," and waits for the students to say only this part. The teacher then does the same with "cro" then "wa." Next, he drags the pointer quickly from "ve" to the "o" in "oven," leading students to more naturally join the words with this /vʌ/.

Later, after working on the other words some more, the teacher introduces abstract Cuisenaire rod models representing the nouns written on the whiteboard. These models are introduced playfully, and the students seem amused sometimes at the ingenuity, or perhaps absurdity, of the teacher's creations. In just a few minutes, the students learn what each model represents, and in the process the pronunciation of each word is reviewed. The teacher then lines up the models and works on longer utterances, such as "a table, a television, a cupboard, a chair, a refrigerator,
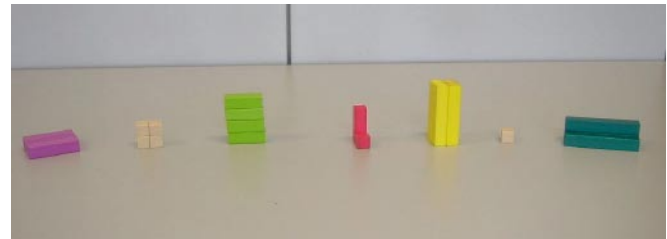

Figure 2. Rod models

a microwave oven, and a couch" (see Figure 2). The class works on the speed of the utterance and on lexical stress.

The teacher now removes all the models except the couch and the table. He places the table in front of the couch. The students work together, eventually coming up with the clause, "a table in front of a couch." The teacher accepts this, and has the other students practice this utterance. As they practice, the teacher begins to beat on an imaginary drum, coming down on the syllables marked by capital letters in the following: "a TAble in FRONT of a COUCH." The teacher reaches across the table and takes a student's hand. Holding the student's hand, the teacher moves their arms in wide circles between them, as if rotating a jump rope, coming down forcefully on the stressed syllables as the student practices the sentence. The teacher directs the other students to join hands and practice like this for a minute.

Work on sentence stress and rhythm continues with the teacher holding the pointer before him, and tilting it back and forth like a metronome as the students say a sentence. For "a TAble in FRONT of a COUCH" the pointer begins pointing straight up, then slowly tilts to one side ("a"), stops

abruptly ("TA"), moves back in the other direction ("ble in"), stops abruptly tilted in the other direction ("FRONT"), moves back in the other direction ("of a"), and stops abruptly ("COUCH"). The teacher uses this metronome to lead students to an alternative pattern "a TAble in front of a COUCH." The students practice this pattern, with the teacher observing and eliciting individual attempts.

The teacher now adds the other Cuisenaire rods models, and introduces the phrase "next to," and the prepositions "behind," "in," and "on." At one point, while working on the sentence, "A cupboard next to a refrigerator," the teacher holds his hands up before him, palms facing inward, all the fingers on his right hand and the pinky finger on his left hand extended. As a student repeats the sentence, the teacher follows along word for word, pointing at each finger. Having established the convention of each finger representing a word, the teacher addresses suprasegmental features. He points at his right thumb, and the students say "a." He points at his right forefinger, and the students say "cupboard." He makes a show of putting these two fingers closely together, and the students say, "a cupboard," joining these two words together smoothly with stress appropriately placed on /kʌ/. The teacher then goes down the length of his right middle finger, stopping just before the base of the finger. After some trial and error, the students say, "next" without the final /t/ (/neks/). The teacher then jumps over his right ring finger, runs down the length of that finger and quickly over to his right pinky, joining "to" and "a," and the students work on joining these words together smoothly. The teacher then finishes on the pinky of his left hand for the final word, "refrigerator."

The class continues, with the students eventually working on such sentences as, "A table with a television on it" and "A couch with a table in front of it." These sentences prove challenging for the students, as they find it difficult to avoid placing stress on the prepositions or prepositional phrases at the end of the sentence. So, rather than "a TAble with a TElevision on it" or "a COUCH with a TAble in front of it," the students want to say "a TAble with a TElevision ON it" and "a COUCH with a TAble in FRONT of it." The class uses the metronome and hand-holding techniques used previously to work on these sentences.

The class ends here. If it were to continue, students could proceed to work on such descriptions as "There is a table in front of a couch, and on the table is a TV." Rods could be added to represent people, allowing work to continue with such sentences as "There are two people sitting on the couch, one man and one woman. The man is watching TV. The woman has fallen asleep."

Student feedback

Students participated in a feedback session following this class. The session was led by the teacher of the other seminar class, the one from which three students were recruited. Notes from the session were written by the teacher in Japanese on a whiteboard (see Figure 3). Some highlights from the feedback session are as follows:

- Compared to the students' junior high school and high school English classes, the amount of time that the students spoke in this class was much greater than the amount of time the teacher spoke.

- Students were helped to discover aspects of the language for themselves rather than having these aspects explained to them.

- The teacher did not use the whiteboard very much. (Because the teacher did in fact use the whiteboard in this class, what students probably meant here is that lengthy explanations of language points were not written on the board.)

- The utterances of the students were respected and accepted.

- The teacher used a lot of facial expressions.

- Students were more attentive, and sat more upright, in this class than in their junior high school and high school English classes.

- Difficult vocabulary was not used.

- Quality of language produced was emphasized over quantity.

- There was a positive atmosphere during the class.

- The content of the class was dense (内容が濃い).

Conclusion

Although the pendulum does seem to swing towards and away from an emphasis on pronunciation in ESL/EFL teaching, and different teaching approaches certainly deal with pronunciation in different ways, it would be difficult to deny at least some place for pronunciation in speaking courses. It is the author's view that one of the obstacles in
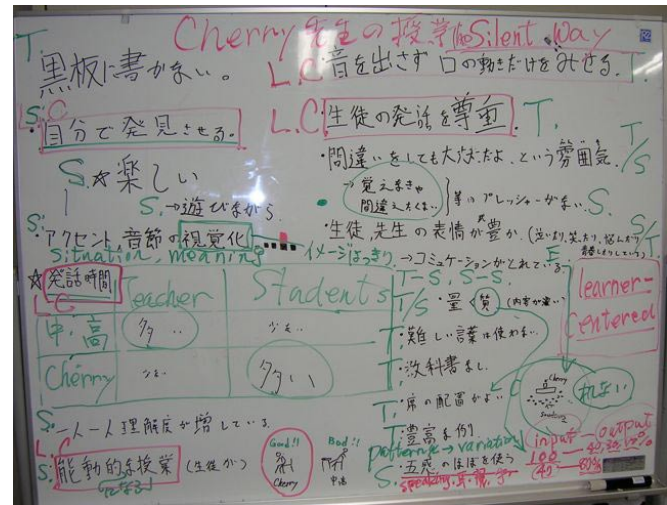

Figure 3. Feedback

incorporating pronunciation practice into a speaking course is that it is difficult to do smoothly and only as the need arises. Pronunciation is often addressed in self-contained, independent activities, usually done to focus on problems anticipated in subsequent speaking activities.

The problem inherent in writing on the incorporation of pronunciation practice into speaking courses is that author cannot know the particulars of the courses into which the practice is to be incorporated. He cannot know the students, the constraints of the classrooms, the expectations of the school administrations, and perhaps most importantly the educational philosophy of the teachers reading this paper. It is hoped that the techniques described in this paper can help

teachers work with their students on both the "micro" and "macro" of pronunciation, from phonemes to sentence-level stress and word linking, in a way that is simple enough to be turned to easily, whenever necessary, and without distracting students from their other work.

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