

# Take It Easy: Amusing activities for pronunciation teaching

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This paper suggests pronunciation teaching games and other amusing activities aimed at making pronunciation training more enjoyable for students and teachers.

In contrast to the old practice when pronunciation was “commonly if perhaps absurdly regarded as having only superficial links with the word ‘communicative’” (Jenkins, 1997: 7), we find that pronunciation training\* is once again establishing its place as an important element of English language teaching (Jenkins, 2000). Pronunciation training is essential for successful communication (Morley, 1996; Pennington, 1996) since it strongly contributes to ‘speaker intelligibility’ (Jenkins, 1997), i.e. the ability of the speaker to produce speech that can be easily processed by the listener at the phonological and prosodic level.

While the ‘obtrusiveness’ of an L1 accent depends partly on not only the characteristics of the produced speech, but on the identity of the receiver (listener) as well (Jenkins, 1997), in general, the pronunciation

of Japanese learners of English is frequently described as ‘impeding communication’, and improving it as ‘extremely hard’ (Ikeguchi, 1997). While the blame for problems with L2 pronunciation is commonly put on the L1 interference (e.g., Kenworthy, 1987), in the case of Japan other factors are known to contribute, such as the practice of katakana transcription of loan words, large numbers of students in a class, lack of trained professionals, and most importantly, the fact that English pronunciation is not normally taught in Japanese schools, colleges and universities (Makarova, 2001a)

The purpose of this paper is to provide some practical suggestions aimed at helping teachers to incorporate elements of pronunciation training into general English courses in such a way that it would be the least strenuous and the most enjoyable for both teachers and students.

### **The Framework: Conciliatory teaching**

The activities suggested in this paper are designed within the framework of conciliatory teaching (e.g. Makarova, 2001b)\*\*. Since the limitations of a small paper do not allow a full description of the approach, I shall only briefly list some points providing what appears to be the minimal methodological background necessary for explaining the origins of the suggested activities. However, the activities have a value of their own; even if totally separate from the approach. In other words,

they can be easily integrated into communicative, collaborative, or most other language classes.

Conciliatory approach is based on seeking a conciliation (balance) of a number of factors affecting language teaching/learning. For example, one of the balances to be achieved is between the ideal goal of learning and the limitations of curriculum. While ideally the teacher may wish all the students to require RP, or Standard American, or any other accent/variety of English, in reality, only some mispronunciations may be addressed. The teacher therefore needs to prioritize pronunciation features he/she selects for class work with regard of their importance for intelligibility as well as of the opportunities and time provided by the particular English course curriculum (e.g., Bradford, 2001).

Another balance relates to the roles of the teacher and students. The teacher in the conciliatory approach is seen rather as a ‘senpai’ (an elder, more knowledgeable colleague willing to provide guidance), than a ‘sensei’ (a ‘mentor/guru’), which relieves the teacher of the ‘omniscience’ burden and the fear of making mistakes. In pronunciation training this is relevant both in case of a native teacher (who may not adequately know the native language of students and therefore be unaware of the ways to tackle L1/L2 interference problems, or may be unable to provide information related to the pronunciation of English Accents other than his/her own), as well as in case of a non-native teacher

(who may fear that his/her English pronunciation is imperfect). Students receive guidance from the teacher, but they take responsibility for their own progress. The conciliatory approach gives value to both teachers' and students' views of learning and its goals, which are known to be sometimes in contradiction (Valdes, 1992). For example, Japanese students often wish a foreign teacher to be entertaining (Makarova & Ryan, 1999), which may agree with some foreign teachers, but not with others. This contradiction of teachers' vs. students' classroom expectations as well as the contradiction caused by the differences across individual students' learning styles may be resolved with the help of some practical elements of conciliatory teaching:

1. making language learning/teaching mutually enjoyable for the students and the teacher by employing their individual special abilities;
2. co-creating teaching materials together with students;
3. combining teaching formats and tasks in class: lectures, drills, individual exercises, pair-work, listening, speech imitation, speaking, presentations, discussions, poster making, story telling, writing assignments, tests, games, etc.

The next section will explore some specific ways of making pronunciation training enjoyable.

## Making Pronunciation Training Enjoyable

Pronunciation teaching operates with notions from physiology and acoustics, which are often hard for students to understand, and requires hours of articulatory and listening drills, which can sometimes be monotonous. To overcome these obstacles, a few measures can be suggested.

### *Providing links beyond acoustics/articulation correspondences.*

Students benefit from additional links which allow them to visualize and 'feel' the desirable articulatory and acoustic targets.

#### *1. Colours*

Perceptual characteristics of English vowels as well as the differences between English vowels and their Japanese counterparts can be re-enforced by introducing colour parallels, e.g. as suggested in Rimbaud's poem which claims that

"A is black, E — white, I — red, U — green, O — blue" (See Appendix 1). Students can be encouraged to offer their own versions of sound colour correspondences for English and Japanese.

#### *2. Physical movements*

Another way of 'fixing' sounds or prosodic features in students' memory is by binding articulation and its

acoustic outcome with physical movements, as suggested in the Physical Approach method. For example, placing a finger on the lips helps students to notice and remember the difference between *i*;, *I*, and *e*. Different corners of the class can be 'assigned' to different vowels, and the teacher's movement in classroom space is accompanied by a change in students' articulation of a vowel (Underhill, 1998).

### 3. *Pictures*

Native speakers of Japanese are known to have a strong graphic dependency in their native and foreign language learning which develops partly due to years of learning Chinese characters and partly due to the written text-oriented native and foreign language teaching (Makarova, 2001b). Japanese students are also often very skillful in drawing. Therefore, I find that any form of graphic support ranging from phonics-type pictures (Higgins, Higgins, & Shima, 1995) to picture games and posters (see some examples in the next subsection) is welcome by my Japanese students.

### *Incorporating games as one of the teaching formats.*

Along with other teaching formats, Conciliatory Approach emphasizes the importance of games. Games are widely employed in language teaching not only because they are one of the instruments of learning, but

also because they are motivating, relaxing and helpful for building up collaborative relationship between students in class and between students and the teacher (Makarova, 1998). Some general language teaching games can be adapted for the needs of pronunciation teaching, e.g. 'bingo' or 'hangman' (Laroy, 1995; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, 1997; Kelly, 2000), or new games can be invented. Some examples of pronunciation teaching games are given below.

#### 1. *'Slap'*

This game is played in the following way. Some pictures are spread around on tables. One participant reads out words (sounds) from a list, and others slap a picture illustrating this word (or any word with this sound). The game is efficient for sound production and perception training.

#### 2. *'Phonetic maze'*

Words are unscrambled from a maze written in phonetic transcription. The game addresses reading of phonetic symbols and sound - letter correspondences.

#### 3. *'Sound ball'*

The sound requiring practice is written on a ball (balloon), and every student catching the ball has to say a word (phrase) containing this sound. The game helps to train sound production in words and phrases.

#### 4. *'Word chains stories'*

Students make a story in which every sentence has to contain a word with a certain sound. The game links pronunciation training with spontaneous speech production.

#### 5. *'Phonetic darts'*

One participant says (reads) words with certain sounds (especially the ones which present difficulties for Japanese students, such as /s/ and /ʃ/, /z/ and /D/\*). The dartboard has respective sounds instead of circles, and other participants throw the darts to hit the sound they think they hear. This game tackles production and perception of 'problem' sounds.

#### 6. *'Rhythmical boom' game*

The game is aimed at fighting the effect of katakana transcription in such cases when the numbers of syllables in the English word and its katakana equivalent differ (e.g., bike and 'baiku', salad and 'sarada'). The teacher prepares a list of words for the game. Every participant chants the words rhythmically clapping hands whereby each clap coincides with the number of syllables — 1, 2, 3, etc.).

#### 7. *'Battlewords'*

First, students make as many words as possible with certain sounds suggested by the grids in a sheet, and

insert these words into respective cells of the sheet. For example 'car' into the intersection of /k/ and /a:/, 'pot' for the intersection of either /p/ or /t/ with /o/, etc. (ref. Appendix 2 for an example of a 'battleword' sheet). The game is played similarly to 'battleships'. The student who has more words left in the chart wins.

For more pronunciation games examples, refer to (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994; Hancock, 1995; Kelly, 2000; Makarova, 1998, 2000).

### *Co-creation of teaching materials*

In order to reach a balance between the interests and special skills of the teacher and students it is important to produce some teaching materials in collaboration. The exact type and kind of materials is, of course, individual and depends on the curriculum, teacher's and students' personalities, etc. The types that I have found suitable for my own classes are:

#### *1. Student-produced stories, word-chains, etc.*

Students are required to produce a story or a word chain with a certain sound, or a group of sounds. In contrast to the oral and spontaneous 'chain story' game, this one is a writing activity, and students spend some more time on the task. Consequently, the requirements to the content quality and numbers of occurrences of the given sound are stricter. The produced stories are checked

by the teacher and re-distributed among students (not necessarily the authors of the text) for reading practice.

## *2. Poetic re-makes of student-produced texts.*

After many futile attempts to teach my students to like poetry and to write it, I developed this activity as a conciliation of my personal interest in poetry and my students' dislike of it. The activity starts with giving students a task to create an interesting story containing some required sound(s). The topic can either be completely free, set, or prompted (in the examples given in Appendix 3, the topic was prompted by showing students the video of the 'Bugs' life' animation, whereas the task was to produce a story from bugs' life with many /ai/ and /ei/ diphthongs). The teacher then re-makes the story into a poem which is used for reading practice, memorizing or even for tests. I find that students appreciate and get amused by these re-makes of their own products much more than by 'real' poetry ((Ref. to Appendix 3 for examples of the original stories and their poetic re-makes).

## *Pronunciation posters*

Students make a poster including into it a particular sound or sound contrast. The poster can advertise some event, be a warning or notice of some kind, etc. The teacher checks the posters and gives them back to

students who then orally present information from their poster. An example of a poster is given in Appendix 4.

## **Conclusion**

Improvement of pronunciation skills is not only necessary for 'cosmetic' reasons, such as 'sounding nicer'. We know many examples when pronunciation errors lead to serious misunderstandings, e.g. the anecdotal case reported in the Japan Times on June 21, 1997, when a Japanese lady found herself in Torquay instead of Turkey because of her poor pronunciation of the sound / 3:/. Pronunciation performance below the 'intelligibility level' can completely disrupt the process of speech comprehension by the listener. Moreover, pronunciation skills development is strongly intertwined with the growth of speaking and listening skills, and the progress in one area leads to better performance in the other ones (Ikeguchi, 1997). It therefore appears necessary for teachers to incorporate elements of pronunciation training into pronunciation class, whereas the exact form or format of pronunciation training can be chosen to answer the interests and special abilities of both the teacher and students.

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## Notes

- \* 'Pronunciation training' in this text is used as a synonym for 'pronunciation teaching'.
- \*\* Conciliatory Approach has so far been only presented orally at conferences.
- \*\*\* The transcription in slanted brackets given in this paper follows SAMPA format to prevent any possible misreadings resulting from the differences across computer fonts (more information about SAMPA is available on <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/ice-gb/index.htm>)

## Appendix 1.

### *VOYELLES (Vowels)*

Arthur Rimbaud

A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu : voyelles,  
Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes :  
A, noir corset velu des mouches éclatantes  
Qui bombinent autour des puanteurs cruelles,

Golfes d'ombre ; E, candeurs des vapeurs et des tentes,  
Lances des glaciers fiers, rois blancs, frissons d'ombelles ;  
I, pourpres, sang craché, rire des lèvres belles  
Dans la colère ou les ivresses pénitentes;

U, cycles, vibrations divins des mers virides,  
Paix des pâtis semés d'animaux, paix des rides  
Que l'alchimie imprime aux grands fronts studieux ;

O, suprême Clairon plein des strideurs étranges,  
Silences traversés des Mondes et des Anges :  
– O l'Oméga, rayon violet de Ses Yeux !

A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels,  
I shall tell, one day, of your mysterious origins:  
A, black velvety jacket of brilliant flies  
which buzz around cruel smells,

Gulfs of shadow; E, whiteness of vapours and of tents,  
lances of proud glaciers, white kings, shivers of cow-  
parsley;  
I, purples, spat blood, smile of beautiful lips  
in anger or in the raptures of penitence;

U, waves, divine shudderings of viridian seas,  
the peace of pastures dotted with animals, the peace of  
the furrows  
which alchemy prints on broad studious foreheads;

O, sublime Trumpet full of strange piercing sounds,  
silences crossed by Worlds and by Angels:  
O the Omega! the violet ray of [His] Eyes!

<http://publish.uwo.ca/~spederse/rimbaud.htm>

## Appendix 2

*BATTLEWORDS stop+vowel+[stop] [+...]*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
	i:	I	e	æ	u	u:	o	o:	ɜ:	^	
a) p											P
b) t											t
c) k											k
d) b											b
e) d											d
f) g											g

## Appendix 3

### Example 1.

*The original student-produced story (original grammar and punctuation preserved)*

A bug wants to be a human.

He's name is Gray. Mr. Gray hate his life because he want to become a human. He is flying the sky and gather hay into a house. One day he is made up his mind. Spirit is came and say "You can be human when at the sunrise. He was made magic. Mr Gray say good-bye his five family and his bugs life.

#### *Re-make*

Mr. Brown has a job, spacious house, gorgeous wife. Yet he finds he needs a change, as he hates his daily life. He made up his mind at last: he approached an old guy, A magician, who was famous, ugly, fearful, but wise. Wicked wizard saw at once where his client's problems lie:

Mr Brown, you are a **cockroach!** I'll make you human by sunrise!

*(With Mieko Koyama and Megumi Yoshida)*

### Example 2.

*The original*

One day lady bug met bee at the lake. They sailed a boat next day. One rainy day snail came there. Snail said "I want to play with you". Ladybug replied: "I hate you!" Snail cried and said "why?" She said "You can't fly!" Snail went back with rain.

#### *Re-make*

One day a snail-romantic invited a honey bee: "Dear, I admire you! Come and play with me!"

"No, sorry, snail, I won't", followed a reply.

"You break my heart, my honey. I pray you, tell me why?"

The bee was too straightforward, and she would hate to lie.

"Because you are so slimy, you crawl and cannot fly!"

*(With Arika Shimizu and Tomomi Yoshiike)*