Beyond 'Listen and Repeat': Pronunciation Teaching Materials and Theories of Second Language Acquisition

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past half century, the fortunes of pronunciation teaching have waxed and waned. Irrelevant in the grammar translation approach, pronunciation grew in prominence with the rise of the Direct Method and Audiolingualism, only to be pushed again to the sidelines with the ascendency of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the Natural Approach (Krashen, 1982). Today, pronunciation teaching is experiencing a new resurgence, fuelled largely by the increasing awareness of the communicative function of suprasegmental features in spoken discourse (Brazil, Coulthard, & Johns, 1980; Brown & Yule, 1983). In the late 1980s, researchers called for a more 'top-down' approach to pronunciation teaching (Pennington & Richards, 1986; Pennington, 1989), emphasizing the broader, more meaningful aspects of phonology in connected speech rather than practice with isolated sounds, thus ushering pronunciation back into the communicative fold. Materials writers responded with a wealth of courses and recipe books focusing on suprasegmental pronunciation (Bradford, 1988; Gilbert, 1984; Rogerson & Gilbert, 1990). A closer look at such materials, however, reveals that, with notable exceptions (Bowen & Marks, 1992; Bowler & Cunningham, 1991), most commercially produced course books on pronunciation today present activities remarkably similar to the audiolingual texts of the 1950s, relying heavily on mechanical drilling of decontextualized words and sentences. Although they profess to teach the more communicative aspects of pronunciation, many such texts go about it in a decidedly uncommunicative way. The more pronunciation teaching materials have changed, it seems, the more they have stayed the same.

Meanwhile, research into second language phonology has suggested a wide range of factors affecting the acquisition of pronunciation beyond the behaviourist notion of habit formation, including those relating to cognitive development, linguistic universals and psychological and sociological conditions. This paper examines the extent to which the

results of such research have made their way into commercially produced pronunciation materials and suggests ways in which materials can be brought more in line with research findings.

PRONUNCIATION TEACHING AND THEORIES

CAN PRONUNCIATION BE TAUGHT?

Arguments against the explicit teaching of pronunciation rely on two basic assumptions about the acquisition of second language phonology: the first, based on the *critical period hypothesis*, claims that it is virtually impossible for adults to acquire nativelike pronunciation in a foreign language (for review, see Burrill, 1985); the second, arising primarily from the work of Krashen (1982), insists that pronunciation is an acquired skill and that focused instruction is at best useless and at worst detrimental.

A number of studies have supported the popular notion that children enjoy an advantage over adults in learning the pronunciation of a second language (Asher & Garcia, 1969; Scovel, 1969; Siegler, Krashen, & Ladefoged, 1975). Such studies, however, fail to prove that it is impossible for adults to acquire nativelike pronunciation, and several researchers have presented strong evidence to the contrary (Neufeld, 1980; Tarone, 1978). A widely cited study by Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1977) found that adults were actually superior to children in the areas of pronunciation and sound discrimination, at least in the first stages of learning, and, although children excelled in later stages, the only subject in the study identified as acquiring nativelike pronunciation was the teenager. Flege (1987), in a review of the literature, notes that the results of many empirical studies are 'inconsistent with the expectations generated by *the critical period hypothesis*' (p. 174) and points out that the hypothesis itself is difficult to test, as it is hard to isolate speech learning from other factors associated with age. Others have suggested that age-related differences might be the result of wider sociocultural and general maturational variables (Leather & James, 1991), or of differences in learning strategies among different age groups. The social pressures for phonological conformity and the ways these are manifested, for instance, might be different for children than for older learners (Tarone, 1978). It has further been pointed out that adults and adolescents have skills such as 'ability to compare and contrast and recognise patterns in speech' not available to children (Pennington, 1995, p. 102). The implication of such research on the development of pronunciation teaching materials is not that adults should be denied pronunciation training, but that learners of different ages may respond differently, both emotionally and cognitively, to different kinds of teaching approaches and task types: whereas imitation activities might be more successful with younger learners, older learners might benefit from a more descriptive or analytic approach (Brown, 1992).

The second argument against pronunciation teaching claims that the factors affecting second language pronunciation are chiefly acquisition variables, which cannot be affected by focused practice and the teaching of formal rules (Krashen, 1982). The enormous influence of this argument is evidenced by the virtual disappearance of pronunciation work in 'communicative' course books of the 1970s. Proponents of this idea often point to a study by Purcell and Suter (1980), which concludes that the factors which most affect the acquisition of L2 phonology (native language, aptitude for oral mimicry, interaction with native speakers and motivation) 'seem to be those which teachers have the least influence on' (p. 285). 'Teachers and classrooms', Purcell and Suter claim, 'seem to have very little to do with how well our students pronounced English' (p. 285). The problem with Purcell and Suter and other studies that support this claim is that, for the most part, they have focused

on acquisition in a second language environment, and that they tend to underestimate the effect teachers and classrooms can have in the areas of motivation and exposure. Again, the implication for materials is not that pronunciation should be ignored, but that pronunciation teaching methods should more fully address the issues of motivation and exposure by creating an awareness of the importance of pronunciation and providing more exposure to input from native speakers.

LISTEN AND REPEAT: PHONOLOGY AND BEHAVIOURISM

Perhaps the oldest method of teaching pronunciation involves exercises in elocution: imitation drills and reading aloud. The popular image of students chanting 'the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain' is still the reality of many language classrooms. With the development of recording technology and the rise of Audiolingualism, such methods became the stock-in-trade of language teaching, and, although now widely discredited in the areas of grammar and vocabulary teaching, the 'listen and repeat' approach has persisted in the teaching of pronunciation. Even materials which claim to be communicative often offer only a variation on this approach in which simple dialogue reading or practice with minimal pairs is passed off as 'communicative' (see, for example, Gilbert, 1984, 1993). Part of the reason for the focus on habit formation in acquiring L2 phonology is the special characteristics of pronunciation, which, unlike other language skills, involves both cognitive and motor functions: few would deny that repeated practice of motor functions results in increased dexterity. Recent research, however, has revealed the limitations of this approach, finding that, as with grammar, students who exhibit accuracy in controlled practice may fail to transfer such gains to actual communicative language use (Cohen, Larson-Freeman, & Tarone, 1991), and that accuracy of pronunciation varies according to the type of task learners are engaged in (Dickerson, 1975). Others have pointed out that the benefits of imitation drills may depend on learners' aptitude for oral mimicry. For learners without 'good ears', drills may cause production to stabilize before reaching the target (Kenworthy, 1987).

Central to this debate is the question of which half of the 'listen and repeat' equation results in increased accuracy – perception or production. Some teaching materials emphasise the importance of sound discrimination, insisting that students who cannot hear a particular English contrast have no chance of reproducing it (O'Connor & Fletcher, 1989). Several studies, however, suggest that this is not the case. Goto (1971), in his examination of Japanese learners' ability to produce and perceive the *r/l* contrast, found that some subjects with poor discrimination could still pronounce the sounds correctly, suggesting that perception may not precede production and that kinaesthetic sensation may be at least as important as auditory feedback. Similarly, Leather and James (1991) found that 'training in one modality tended to be sufficient to enable a learner to perform in another' (p. 320). Listening and repeating seem to be a two-way street: Focused listening can improve oral production and practice in oral production can improve auditory perception (Pennington, 1996).

It appears that although both imitation and discrimination drills have an important place in the teaching of pronunciation as a means to help articulation become more automatic and routinised, they are best seen as a step toward more meaningful, communicative practice (Pennington, 1996). To be truly effective, drills have to move beyond the simple identification and mimicking of decontextualised sound contrasts to the perception of more meaningful, communicative characteristics of input (Wong, 1987) and the ability to move beyond accurate production of discrete sounds to integrating those sounds into effective communication. Drills can also be made more lively and memorable by concentrating

not just on oral and aural modalities, but also including visual representations and training in the awareness of kinaesthetic sensation (Acton, 1984; Pennington, 1996).

Many materials have sought to integrate perception and production as equal components in pronunciation training. Gilbert (1984, 1993) and Rogerson and Gilbert (1990) promote their books as both pronunciation and listening comprehension courses. Other materials writers have begun to recognise the importance of other modalities (visual and kinaesthetic) in pronunciation training, combining pictures, gestures and physical activities (such as the stretching of rubber bands) with drills, along the lines of Total Physical Response (Acton, 1984; Gilbert, 1993; Pennington, 1996).

INTERLANGUAGE PHONOLOGY

It is a widely held belief that interference from learners' first language affects the acquisition of the second language sound system more than other systems (such as grammar) (Kranke & Christison, 1983). This belief is reflected in the large number of pronunciation teaching materials which include sections on contrastive analysis (Baker, 1977; Bowler & Cunningham, 1991; Kenworthy, 1987; O'Connor & Fletcher, 1989). These sections, however, usually alerting teachers to 'special problems' likely to be encountered by particular L1 speakers, are often simplistic and misleading, treating the production of specific sounds and sound contrasts divorced from the natural stream of speech and usually ignoring suprasegmental features of nonnative accents.

The extent to which interlanguage phonology is affected by L1 transfer, and the relative value of providing L1-specific pronunciation practice, are very much in debate. Tarone (1978) suggests that there is a universal tendency in language acquisition to reduce complex forms, and that 'transfer is only a part – and often a small part – of the influence on interlanguage phonology' (p. 15), with other factors such as overgeneralization, approximation and avoidance being much more significant. It may be that the influence of learners' native language on their pronunciation is not really stronger than on other areas of language use, but simply more noticeable to the casual observer.

Recently, contrastive analysis has given way to the more sophisticated theories of equivalence classification, whereby learners approach a new sound system by mapping it onto their L1 sound system, using existing categories where similarities exist and creating new categories for unfamiliar features (Flege, 1987), and 'markedness' (Eckman, 1977), which posits that certain features are inherently more difficult than others, regardless of the learners' language backgrounds. Several researchers claim that universal constraints of human speech production and perception and nonphonological developmental characteristics might be much more important than L1 interference. Maken and Ferguson (1987) point out, for example, that phonological processes such as substitution, assimilation, deletion and reduplication, evident in L1 acquisition, are also present in L2 acquisition, suggesting that acquisition of a second language sound system may involve continued operation or reactivation of universal phonological processes. Furthermore, episodes of overgeneralization and experimentation in interlanguage phonology indicate that the process of building a phonological system 'is not an automatic one, but rather an active one' (Maken & Ferguson, 1987, p. 17).

In light of these findings, materials writers should approach predicting pronunciation problems based on learners' native language with caution. On the one hand, activities and methods that encourage inappropriate equivalence classification, such as overemphasis on orthography or use of simplified systems of phonetic transcription based on the L1, should be avoided (Pennington, 1996). On the other hand, L1 transfer should not be seen automatically as something negative, but rather as a natural stage and valuable strategy in the process of

the acquisition of the L2 sound system (Kenworthy, 1987; Tarone, 1978). Consciousness-raising activities which sensitise learners to the differences between L1 and L2 systems and the L2 system and their own interlanguage might be more beneficial than error correction.

PHONOLOGY AND THE MONITOR

Since the publication of Morley's classic *Improving Spoken English* (1979), there has been increased attention in pronunciation materials to training students to monitor their production through the teaching of formal rules, feedback and reflective activities (Acton, 1984; Bradford, 1988; Crawford, 1987; Firth, 1987; Pennington, 1996; Wong, 1987). This trend is based on the assumption that 'pronunciation improves through gradual monitoring of the acquired system based on conscious knowledge of the facts learned about the language' (Crawford, 1987, p. 109). Krashen and his colleagues, of course, would argue against training that strengthens the monitor as useless for improving spoken language, which normally does not involve enough time for the monitor to operate. In fact, such training, they might add, could actually encourage 'monitor overuse' resulting in a decrease in fluency. Other theories incorporating the monitor model, however (such as that suggested by Bialystok), posit a more porous boundary between learned and acquired systems through which 'information stored in explicit linguistic knowledge may become automatic and transferred to implicit linguistic knowledge after continued use via the monitor' (Crawford, 1987, p. 113). Dickerson (1987), in a study involving Chinese, Japanese and Korean learners, found that formal rules do result in improvement when used for monitoring speech, and, although they can interfere with production when used for initiating speech, subjects gained in both fluency and accuracy after a period of 'covert rehearsal'. He hypothesised that formal rules may help acquisition by 'generate input for the acquisition device' in the form of learners 'talking to themselves' (p. 134), and calls for a 'better balance in our instructional activities between supplying ideal input and equipping learners to supply their own ideal input' (p. 137). Similarly, Jones, Rusman, and Evans (1994) found that students with prior exposure to phonological rules and principles, although they do not always produce more accurate pronunciation, seem to be better equipped to assess their own speech and more aware of their particular pronunciation problems. Acton (1984) suggests '*post hoc* monitoring', where learners reflect on the accuracy of their productions after the fact, and 'kinaesthetic monitoring', where learners attempt to monitor their output based on correct 'feel' rather than auditory feedback.

Although rule teaching that is too complicated or elaborate, such as all the varied rules governing intonation in discourse, might overwhelm the monitor and thus be detrimental (Kenworthy, 1987), there seems to be no justification for denying learners linguistic information which may empower them to improve on their own. The explicit presentations of rules has been a standard feature of pronunciation textbooks for more than two decades, ranging from detailed explanations of phonological concepts (O'Connor, 1980) to simple, graphic representations of articulatory processes (as in Baker, 1977). Most of these materials, however, fail to take Morley's (1979) lead and go beyond abstract presentation to the application of rules in follow-up activities such as self- or peer monitoring. Furthermore, most rule teaching focuses on single narrow models (such as Received Pronunciation) to the exclusion of local varieties, and is laid out in a deductive, prescriptive fashion. A particularly intriguing direction taken by some materials writers is to present rules more inductively through 'discovery activities' in which students listen and attempt to articulate the rules governing what they have heard with the help of cues, or collaborate with their classmates to find patterns in written or spoken text. This technique has many advantages: It can make rules more

memorable to learners in that they are formulated by themselves; it can increase awareness of the communicative aspects of pronunciation; and it can provide an opportunity for communicative practice as learners interact with their peers (for examples, see Bowler & Cunningham, 1991; Bradford, 1988).

COMMUNICATION AND CONTEXTUALISATION

Perhaps the most criticized aspect of pronunciation teaching materials is their widespread reliance on decontextualized language and lack of grounding in the realities of actual communication. It is one of Krashen's (1982) chief tenets that language is best taught when it is being used to transmit messages, and this sentiment has been echoed in relation to pronunciation teaching by such researchers as Pennington and Richards (1986), who point out that it is 'artificial to divorce pronunciation from communication and other aspects of language use' (p. 208). 'In order to become a competent speaker and listener', writes Pennington (1996), 'a language learner needs to attend to not only the strictly mechanical, articulatory aspects of pronunciation, but also to the meaningful correlates of those articulatory features in the immediate linguistic context, as well as the larger context of human communication'. Pica (1984) goes so far as to attribute the widespread ineffectiveness of pronunciation training for adults to the failure of teachers and materials writers to approach the skill communicatively.

Some, though not many, materials writers have attempted to incorporate a more communicative dimension in their design of tasks and activities. Bradford (1988), for example, organises her course according to discourse functions (highlighting, telling and referring, etc.) rather than the traditional phonological categories. Other writers have included interactive activities where there is a phonological 'information gap' such that only proper pronunciation and perception can lead to the correct outcome in the task (see, for example, Gilbert, 1993). There has also been an attempt to make repetitive practice of rhythm and sound more natural and meaningful through the use of poetry and song (Gilbert, 1993; Maley, 1987). Finally, several materials writers have attempted to integrate pronunciation practice into broader communicative activities by either finding lexical/grammatical contexts with naturally occurring instances of target sounds or features (Celce-Murcia, 1987) or simply altering the language in texts used in such activities (such as the names of dishes on a menu or the names of streets on a map) to include target sounds. A large number of materials, however, offer activities which, though at first glance seeming more communicative, are actually just more elaborate forms of drilling, such as dialogue reading and highly structured pair practice such as questionnaire completion, which learners are able to engage in without attending to meaning or communication at all. In Gilbert's (1993) widely used *Clear Speech*, for example, more than a quarter of the activities are discrimination or repetition drills using decontextualised words, phrases or sentences; another 25% of the activities are reading tasks in which students read aloud printed words, sentences, dialogues, poems or paragraphs; and only about 2% of the activities in the book actually involve meaningful interaction and the transfer of information beyond one or two sentences.

Absent from most materials is the opportunity for freer practice that allows students to participate in discourse situations that exemplify a variety of suprasegmental features, such as the free conversation and 'fluency workshop' activities advocated by Wong (1987).

It is obvious that creating a stronger link between pronunciation and communication can help increase learners' motivation by bringing pronunciation beyond the lowest common denominator of 'intelligibility' and encouraging students' awareness of its potential as a tool for making their language not only easier to understand but more effective.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL FACTORS

Two aspects of pronunciation teaching that have been virtually ignored in teaching materials are the psychological and sociological dimensions. The way one speaks has a great deal to do with the impression he or she wants to create in a particular context. It has been claimed that the more learners identify with native speakers of a second language, the more likely they are to sound like native speakers. Conversely, learners who wish to retain identification with their own culture or social category may consciously or unconsciously retain a foreign accent as a marker of in-group affiliation. Such L2 social marking can occur even in the very early stages of second language acquisition (Dowd, Zuengler, & Berkowitz, 1990). Consequently, a number of researchers have claimed that work on pronunciation 'needs to be tied in with work on the individual's value set, attitudes and socio-cultural schemata' (Pennington, 1995, p. 104), and that targets for pronunciation teaching should be appropriate for the particular sociological context in which the teaching takes place (Brown, 1989).

Similarly, the way an individual pronounces has much to do with his or her personality and psychological or emotional state at any given time. Acton (1984) sees preparing students psychologically as a necessary correlate to improving their pronunciation. Phonology, he says, has both 'inside-out' and 'outside-in' dimensions which function in a kind of loop: 'Not only does personality or emotional state show in pronunciation . . . but the converse is also true: speakers can control their nerves or inner states by speaking properly. This is the basic tenet of successful programs in voice training and public speaking' (p. 75). Others (such as Guiora & Schonberger, 1990) point to the importance of empathy and the development of a 'second language ego'.

Finally, learners' reasons for learning a second language and the uses they plan to put the language to can have an effect on how nativelike they may want or need to sound. Learners who expect to have a large amount of interaction with native speakers in business or professional contexts, for example, will have different needs and expectations from learners who plan to use the language primarily for communication with other nonnative speakers.

Of course, it is difficult for teaching materials prepared for an international market to cater to learners with different needs, personalities, learning styles and cultural backgrounds. Some writers, however, have attempted to include opportunities for personalisation and student-centred learning in their activities (Bowen & Marks, 1992; Kenworthy, 1987; Morley, 1979). Such opportunities can be realized through questionnaires asking learners to reflect on their attitudes toward nonnative-like pronunciation of their own language, their pronunciation needs in their future careers, and their perceptions of their ability to change their pronunciation, as well as activities in which learners are asked to comment on their impressions of recordings of speakers with different varieties and degrees of foreign accent.

CONCLUSION: PRONUNCIATION TEACHING MATERIALS IN THE FUTURE

Contemporary materials for the teaching of pronunciation, though still retaining many of the characteristics of traditional audiolingual texts, have begun to incorporate more meaningful and communicative practice, an increased emphasis on suprasegmentals, and other features such as consciousness-raising and self-monitoring which reflect current research into the acquisition of second language phonology. Much, however, remains to be done to bring materials in line with SLA research findings.

Writers of pronunciation teaching materials in the coming years will likely pay more attention to learners' sociolinguistic situations and the political implications of attitudes

toward nonnative accents. They will also increasingly find ways of dealing with the psychological aspects of pronunciation training, integrating confidence building and reflective activities into their courses. More attention will also be given to the order in which phonological principles are presented, with increased focus on the broader, more communicative aspects of pronunciation such as 'voice quality' (Jones & Evans, 1995). Like other aspects of language teaching, pronunciation materials must adapt to changes within ESL, addressing, for example, the more specialized needs of ESL, and the changing role of the learners in Self-Access Language Learning (Rogerson-Revell & Miller, 1994). Listening will continue to play a large part in pronunciation training, with perhaps more authentic listening tasks with a variety of accents. The explicit teaching of rules will remain, but will be tempered with more and more opportunities for free practice, and training at the monitor will continue to be emphasised with exercises in self-assessment. Finally, pronunciation will, whenever possible, be taught in concert with other skills, not as a separate entity, but as another string in the communicative bow.

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