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the belta bulletin

Including

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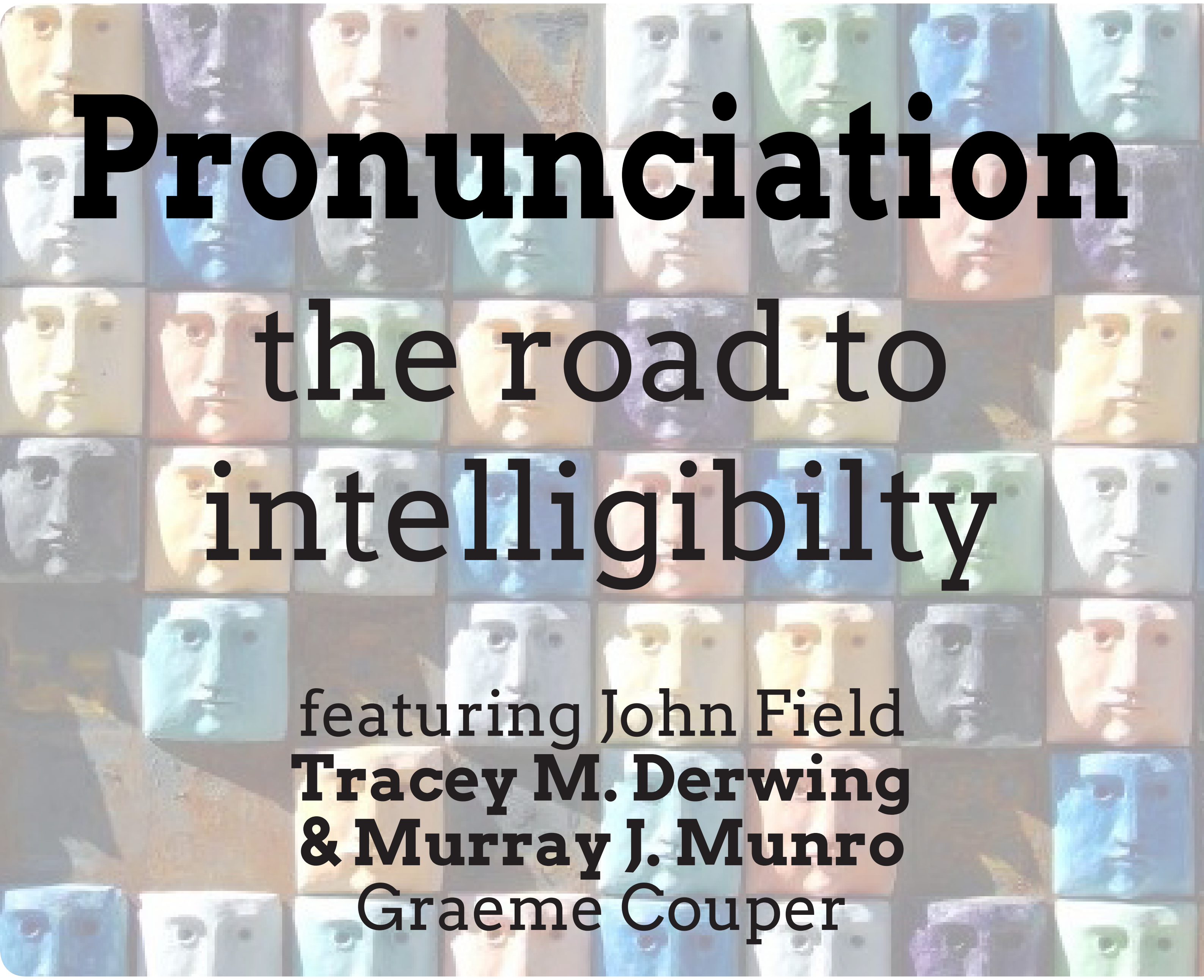

Pronunciation

the road to intelligibilty

featuring John Field

Tracey M. Derwing & Murray J. Munro

Graeme Couper

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the belta bulletin

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A Word From The President

Hello and welcome to this very special issue of the BELTA Bulletin.

Ever since we started this publication back in Spring last year, it has been our intention to print the Bulletin as soon as it was financially viable and as you can see now, that time has arrived! Until now it has always been available online and I think that you, our members, will get a lot more satisfaction from holding the Bulletin in your hands. I'd love to know what you think of this new printed version, so please get in touch with your feedback.

In other news, we have also announced details of next year's BELTA Day which will take place on April 26th. We are delighted to be joined by Gavin Dudeney who joins the ranks of Philip Kerr, Jeremy Harmer, Luke Meddings, Hugh Dellar and John Hughes as our plenary speaker. We can't wait to see him, all the other great speakers, and you, of course. The call for speakers is now available on our website and we'd love to have as many of you as possible joining the lineup. You can find the link on the advert on the back of this issue.

Finally, I'd like to remind you about our Sunday with BELTA webinars. Once a month we are joined by a great speaker who you can watch from the comfort of your home. You can see the lineup we have for winter on the previous page. At BELTA, we make sure that our speakers are of the highest quality, so we are sure you will get a lot from their presentations. And don't forget, the most recent recordings are exclusively available to you in the members area of our website, so if you can't be there on the day, make sure you catch up later.

Many thanks to the contributors to this latest issue of the BELTA Bulletin and if you would like to contribute in the future, please contact us, we'd love to hear from you. Thanks for your support of BELTA and, as always, I'm very keen to receive your feedback, so if you'd like to get in touch with me, email me at president@beltabelgium.com.

Best wishes,

James Taylor (BELTA President)

A Message From The Editor

School has started in many parts of the world; in some it is ending, as holiday season is approaching.

For BELTA Belgium and for you, our readers, it is time for Issue Seven, which we hope you will enjoy!

In this issue, we have a special feature on pronunciation, with many thanks to the IATEFL PronSIG, Laura Patsko, who is the editor of Speak Out!, the PronSIG journal, and the writers, who were generous enough to give us three amazing articles: many thanks to Tracey M. Derwing and Murray F. Munro, John Field, Graeme Couper.

Rob Szabó and Pete Rutherford hold conversations on Communicative Competence in the new instalment of their regular column, On the Radar. Dimitris Primalis restarts his regular column under a new name, A fresh look at teaching.

Christina Rebuffet-Broadus introduces us to her new YouTube channel, Speak Better, Feel Great TV and gives us great tips on how to use her business videos with students.

We hope you enjoy this issue and we look forward to your comments!

Thank you all so much,

Vicky Loras (BELTA Editorial Officer)

Accent and intelligibility: cracking the conundrum

Tracey M. Derwing and Murray J. Munro

Second language (L2) 'accent' comprises the noticeable differences between L2 users' speech and a local language variety. No accent is inherently better than any other. However, L2 accent has been blamed for miscommunication, used as a cover-up for racism and other forms of discrimination, and even viewed as a disorder needing remediation. Our goal in this paper is to discuss research findings that help us sort through the misconceptions about L2 accent and clarify its relevance to pronunciation teaching. Because we work in Canada, an immigrant-receiving country, most of our research is conducted in an ESL context; some of our findings are not bound by context, but others may be.

Numerous studies have documented people's remarkable ability to detect speakers from different L1 backgrounds. For example, Flege (1984) found that listeners distinguished native English from French accented speakers when he played them 30 ms speech samples. Our own work (Munro, Derwing & Burgess, 2010) shows that listeners can even detect an L2 accent in backwards speech. Success rates are above chance even for a single word played backwards, despite the absence of segmental or suprasegmental information (see Figure 1). In such cases, listeners may rely on differences in voice quality.

Another surprising research outcome is that listeners can distinguish foreign-accented speech from native-produced samples in languages they do not even speak (Major, 2007). Taken together, these studies show that accent is exceptionally salient and that people are skilful at detecting linguistic 'outsiders' by their speech. However, the fact that accents are easily detectible does not mean that communication problems are inevitable. Having an accent doesn't necessarily impinge on communication, though sometimes it does.

See Table 1

Figure 1. Foreign accent detection in backwards speech on an A' scale in which '1' is a perfect detection rate. The dotted line indicates chance performance (Munro, Derwing & Burgess, 2010)

Definitions

Like many other researchers, we have operationalized constructs pertaining to L2 speech in terms of listeners' perceptions. Accentedness is the result of differences in speech patterns compared to a local variety and can be assessed through listeners' ratings on a Likert scale. We define comprehensibility as listeners' perceptions of how easy or difficult it is to understand speech. This dimension is a rating of difficulty and not a measure of how much is understood.

Listeners, native or non-native, generally agree with each other strongly on who has a heavy accent and who doesn't, and who is easy to understand and who isn't (Derwing & Munro, 2013). Reliability is typically high, with intraclass correlations of above .9. Moreover, when listeners evaluate multiple speakers from a single L1 background at any one time, ratings are not influenced by differential bias against particular accents. From our perspective, listeners' judgments are the only meaningful window into accentedness and comprehensibility and thus comprise the gold standard measure; what listeners perceive is ultimately what matters most. In numerous studies using a wide range of speech samples, different L1s, and different listeners, we have obtained robust, replicable findings. Despite certain limitations, rating scales are a reliable approach to assessing accentedness and comprehensibility.

Intelligibility, our third, and in some ways, most important construct, is distinct from the other two. Broadly defined, it is the degree of a listener's actual comprehension of an utterance. To evaluate it, we have presented listeners with recorded L2 speech and counted the percentage of words they transcribed correctly; in other studies, we've asked them to indicate whether L2 sentences are true or false. We have also had listeners answer comprehension questions and write summaries to determine how well they actually understood what was said, regardless of difficulty and regardless of how accented they thought the speech samples were. Our colleague Beth Zielinski (2008) has interviewed listeners as they try to comprehend accented speech. None of these methods tells the whole story, but they all show that intelligibility differs from accentedness and comprehensibility.

See Table 2

Figure 2. Accentedness ratings of utterances that were 100% intelligible (1 = no accent, 9 = extremely strong accent)

Figure 2 shows accentedness ratings of L2 utterances that listeners transcribed perfectly, and are thus by definition 100% intelligible. Note that the accentedness ratings fell across the full range, so that even perfectly intelligible utterances were judged as heavily accented, obtaining ratings of 7, 8 or 9 on the scale. This is a robust finding replicated in every study we have conducted on intelligibility: intelligibility and accentedness are partially independent. In other words, it is possible to be perceived as having a heavy accent, and yet be completely intelligible.

Comprehensibility and intelligibility are not the same either, though, generally, comprehensibility is more closely related to intelligibility than is accentedness. As one would expect, comprehensibility and accentedness are also distinct.

See Table 3

Figure 3. Accentedness and comprehensibility ratings of 48 ESL speakers (based on Derwing & Munro 1997)

Figure 3 shows distributional patterns for accentedness and comprehensibility ratings for a single set of speech samples (Derwing & Munro, 1997). The accentedness ratings tend to cluster around the heavily-accented end of the scale, while the comprehensibility ratings cluster at the easy-to-understand end. To summarize, accent is about difference; comprehensibility concerns the listener's effort; and intelligibility is the end result: how much the listener actually understands (Munro, 2008).

Naturalistic changes in adult L2 speakers' pronunciation

Nearly all adult L2 speakers have a perceptible foreign accent. However, some aspects of intelligible pronunciation can be acquired. With L2 exposure, some target patterns develop naturalistically (Flege, 1988; Trofimovich & Baker, 2006). Figure 4 shows one-year longitudinal data on vowel acquisition by speakers of Mandarin and Slavic languages, who started as limited oral proficiency ESL learners (Munro & Derwing, 2008). Even without pronunciation instruction, both groups improved significantly on the vowel /ɪ/. The Mandarin speakers went from 8% intelligibility to 37%, the Slavic language speakers from 5% to 27%. Although both groups improved, neither had reached even 50% by the end of a year. Other vowels also improved despite an apparent limit on development without focused instruction.

See Table 4

Figure 4. Intelligibility of the vowel in 'pit' over one year for Mandarin (MA) and Slavic language (SL) ESL speakers

Pedagogy

Well past the 1980s, views on pronunciation teaching were pessimistic. Communicative language teaching de-emphasized pronunciation under the assumption that sufficient input would help learners improve oral production. However, it was mistakenly believed that pronunciation teaching is ineffective. As Pica (1994) noted, the generally-accepted goal of instruction was native-like speech, a clearly unrealistic aim. Few studies showed that pronunciation instruction could improve intelligibility, because that was not a research focus.

That is not to say that no one was teaching pronunciation in the 1980s and 1990s. A small cadre of researcher / practitioners, such as Adam Brown, Wayne Dickerson, Judy Gilbert, Joan Morley, Mary Anne Celce-Murcia, Donna Brinton and Janet Goodwin were advocates of the benefits of pronunciation instruction. Nonetheless, as Brown (1991) indicated, little research on issues of L2 pronunciation was conducted during this period.

More recent studies indicate a direct and positive effect of pronunciation instruction on intelligibility and comprehensibility (Derwing, Munro & Wiebe, 1998). Other work (Couper, 2006; Saito & Lyster, 2012) shows improvement as a result of instruction, but without measures of intelligibility or comprehensibility. Though these findings are important, merely knowing that pronunciation training can be effective is insufficient. We have to know where to put the focus. If not, we risk teaching things that are merely salient, rather than beneficial for communication. In other words, we might modify accent without improving intelligibility or comprehensibility. Here research can help us identify contributions of specific aspects of prosody and segmentals. For example, Hahn's (2004) study showed that primary stress errors have a negative impact on intelligibility in ESL contexts. Zielinski (2008) demonstrated the relevance of both syllable stress and segments in strong syllables.

A useful theoretical notion to guide future research is functional load, which takes into consideration contrastive frequency. Catford (1987) suggested that certain segmental errors such as substituting /s/ for /ɪ/ (e.g., saying 'sew' for 'show') were likely to be more important to intelligibility than others, such as substituting /d/ for /ð/ - ('day' for 'they'). In a study of comprehensibility judgments (see Figure 5), we indeed found that high functional load errors caused a greater reduction in comprehensibility than did low functional load errors (Munro & Derwing, 2006). This preliminary work should be extended to establish what matters most to intelligibility and comprehensibility.

See Table 5

Figure 5. Comprehensibility ratings of utterances with zero, one or two errors (from Munro & Derwing, 2006)

A classroom study (Derwing, Munro & Wiebe, 1998) indicates why research on the focus of pronunciation instruction is necessary. One group of ESL learners had general global/prosodic instruction, while a second focused on individual consonants and vowels. Both groups learned what they were taught, but the global group received better comprehensibility ratings on extemporaneous speech at the end of the study. In contrast, the segmental group's comprehensibility ratings did not change. Instructors can devote only limited time to pronunciation in a general second language class. If time is spent on something that doesn't affect intelligibility or comprehensibility, more important matters may be neglected. Evidence is accumulating that general speaking habits, volume, lexical and nuclear stress, rhythm, syllable structure and segmentals with a high functional load all matter (Derwing & Munro, 2005).

Social aspects of accent

The social ramifications of accent constitute a huge area of study. Here we will touch on some of the important sub-areas.

Benefits and costs of speaking with an accent

Several researchers have noted that accents can be beneficial to L2 speakers by signalling to their interlocutors that they may need modified input. Nonetheless, accents also entail serious social costs, such as loss of intelligibility. Not being understood, despite good control over L2 grammar and vocabulary, can be frustrating for both speaker and interlocutor. Consider the case of the famous conductor, Gianandrea Noseda, who, in a recorded address to a concert audience, produced (with emphasis) a problematic vowel in the word 'fact', such that the word rhymed with 'ducked'. The vowel error was extremely salient, and the audience tittered in the background. This vowel substitution error had a particularly negative consequence -- a good candidate for pronunciation instruction.

Accent and identity

Given the importance of intelligibility to successful communication, we find it disconcerting when it is claimed that intelligibility is not important. Some writers, for instance, claim that there is a trade-off between changing the L2 speaker's pronunciation and preserving identity. Golombek and Rehn Jordan (2005), in fact, in reference to EFL teachers in Taiwan, argued that 'a decentering of the primacy of intelligibility as a skill is necessary if preservice teachers are to make informed decisions about how best to establish their credibility as speakers and teachers of English' (p. 529). An especially extreme statement from the identity perspective is found in Porter and Garvin (1989, p. 8): 'To seek to change someone's pronunciation – whether of the L1 or of an L2 – is to tamper with their self-image and is thus unethical – morally wrong.' In this case, put us on the side of the devil. Would it really be morally wrong to help Noseda change his L2 pronunciation of the word 'fact'?

In our experience, many L2 speakers find that some aspects of their pronunciation are a liability, and they have expressly asked for help. In such cases it is not immoral or threatening to their identities to assist them to become more intelligible. We have no expectation that pronunciation students will fully adopt local patterns – there is no need to erase their accents. We simply want them to achieve successful communication at work and in their everyday lives – exactly what they want.

The Golombek and Rehn Jordan (2005) study of two EFL speakers stands in sharp contrast to other findings. Several studies contradict the view that identity preservation and pronunciation learning are incompatible. For instance, in a study of 100 adult ESL immigrants (Derwing, 2003), 97% strongly agreed that it is important to pronounce English well, and 95% said that they wanted to sound like a native speaker. When the learners were asked if they felt their identity would be threatened if they could speak English with a native-like accent, their response was overwhelmingly negative: they saw their L1 as the clearest expression of their identity. Their preference was to be fully competent speakers of both their own L1 and English. In these days of learner-centred curricula, it seems ironic that some authorities advocate the opposite of what many students want. Retaining identity through accent is a valid personal choice, but denying students help with intelligibility to protect their identity seems not only misguided but paternalistic. If one is intelligible and comprehensible, one's expression of identity will be more effective.

The extent to which a speaker uses accent to express identity is constrained by the degree to which accent features are volitional. Some aspects of accent are outside the speaker's control. This depends on many factors: age of learning, aptitude, how similar the L1 and L2 phonological inventories are, and the availability of suitable models and input. The motor component of pronunciation limits the ability to change one's speech patterns. It is wrong to interpret accent as an intentional expression of identity if the speaker has no control over these non-volitional features. Of course, there are volitional features of accent that any speaker can choose to modify – or not. If we enhance intelligibility and comprehensibility by working with volitional aspects, we increase the L2 speaker's choices for self-expression.

Discrimination

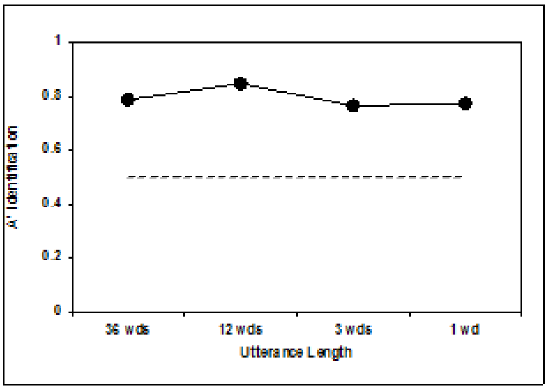
It is important not to minimize another aspect of accent – the fact that many L2 users experience discrimination in reaction to their speech. Lippi-Green (2012) described the strong association of accent, social class, race, and other variables, proposing that the media perpetuate stereotypes through accent. Munro (2003) documented three types of accent discrimination: stereotyping and harassment are two familiar manifestations. The third type occurs when a prospective employee is told that his or her accent is unacceptable for a job, even when the speaker is fully intelligible or the job does not require language skills. But whatever the type, accents do not cause discrimination – the fault is with intolerant interlocutors. Some listeners fail to understand even the clearest L2 speaker, simply because they are convinced that they can't understand accented speech.

Listener responsibility

The responsibility for successful communication is shared across interlocutors. Although we advocate pronunciation training for intelligibility, we are not suggesting that the L2 speaker is at fault whenever communication breakdown occurs. Counterexamples abound. Gass and Varonis (1984) demonstrated that listeners' familiarity with L2 speech improves comprehension. Moreover, listeners' attitudes play a role. Rubin (1992) showed that if listeners merely thought that a person was from a different L1, they understood less of what was said.

Although prejudice affects communication, not everyone who is apprehensive about interacting with people from other L1s is discriminatory. In fact, some people, because of their limited experience, lack confidence in their own abilities to communicate, and therefore avoid interaction with L2 speakers. We addressed this issue in a training study in which social work students were exposed to Vietnamese-accented speech along with phonological explanations for Vietnamese accent (Derwing, Rossiter & Munro, 2002). The participants became more confident and more willing to interact with L2 speakers. Several cited real-life examples of positive experiences following the training.

We now see more interest in lis-



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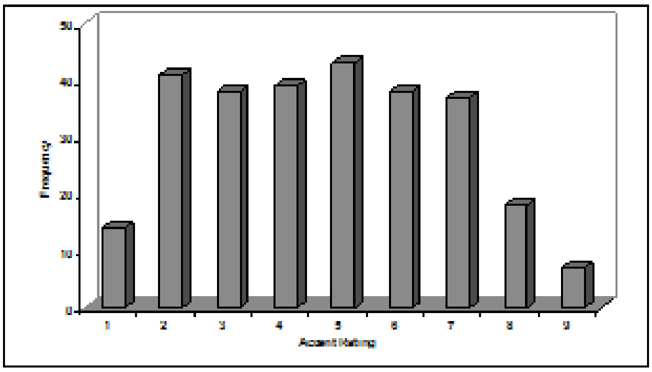

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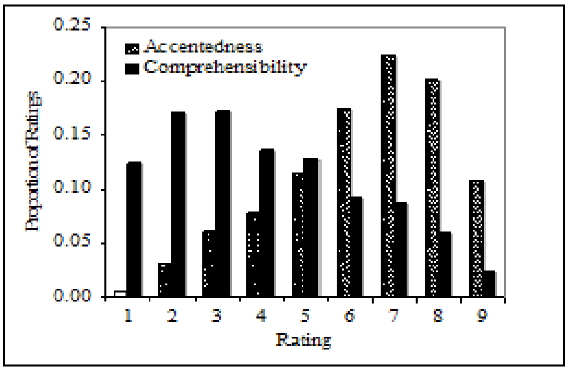

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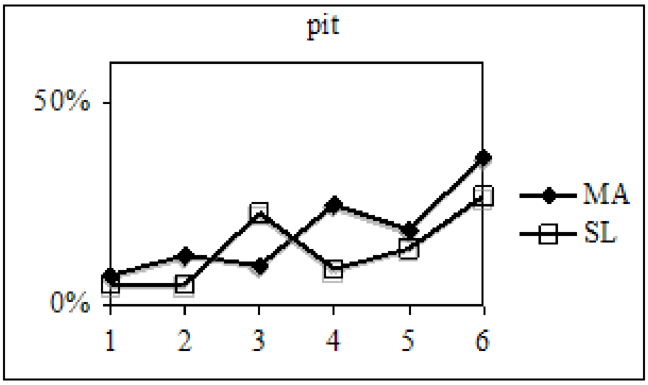

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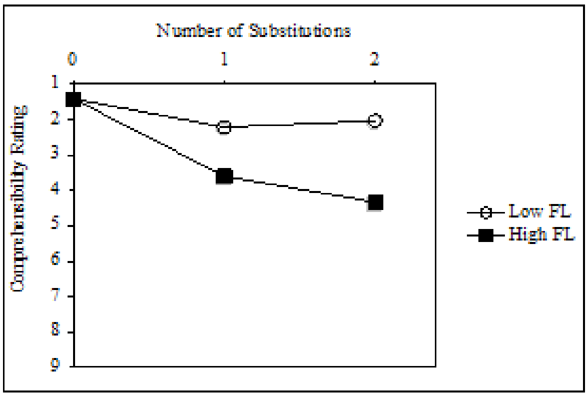

Table 5

tener responsibilities in some workplaces. Improving interactions is important in the private sector where immigrant employees may work in teams with native speakers. Some companies currently implement training programs for their staff that encourage improved communication for all employees.

Future Directions

We see a need for more longitudinal investigations of L2 phonological development, both naturalistic and instructed, across multiple languages. Some aspects of L2 phonology may not need to be taught if they develop naturally, whereas others may require intervention. More classroom studies are also needed. These are difficult to conduct, but closer collaboration among teachers and researchers would improve this situation. We also need more studies investigating the relative importance of various accent features to intelligibility, similar to Hahn's (2004) work showing the effect of primary stress, and more studies of functional load.

Preliminary studies of pronunciation teaching have given us a starting point for pedagogical innovations, but more research is needed to identify effective teaching approaches. Technology offers considerable promise for pronunciation, provided that applications are guided by pedagogical specialists who understand appropriate goals and priorities.

Studies investigating the relationship between identity and accent are needed, as are studies from the perspective of listeners, both native and L2 users, particularly in the workplace. We have focused on ESL settings here, but there is also a growing body of work in English as an international language. Many social issues such as the costs and benefits of an accent, discrimination, and listener responsibility should be examined across a variety of language learning contexts. Finally, we see a need to evaluate the interaction of pragmatic factors and accent. Accent is sometimes a scapegoat for negative reactions to unfamiliar pragmatic behaviour.

Accent is important in that people use it to make social evaluations that affect both listeners and speakers. Furthermore, in those instances where accent really does reduce intelligibility, it is worth addressing. On the other hand, we know that accent, comprehensibility, and intelligibility are partially independent constructs, and that simply altering accent will not necessarily affect the other two. In fact, communication obstacles are often based on things other than accent, but because of its extreme salience, accent is given more weight than it deserves. Recognizing all sides of this complex phenomenon is essential to improving the lot of everyone who lives and interacts in linguistically diverse contexts.

Acknowledgements

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References available on the BELTA website.

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Teaching concepts of pronunciation: syllables, stress and drunk snails

Graeme Couper

At the heart of my research into pronunciation teaching lies the understanding that the way we speak depends on our phonological concepts (phonemes, syllables, stress, etc.). Because these concepts vary from language to language, when we learn to speak a new language we also have to learn the related phonological concepts. These concepts are a pre-requisite to successfully categorising the sounds of the language (Fraser, 2006). Here, I will address the question as to how we as teachers can help learners to form these concepts, taking examples from teaching syllables, supported by the drunk snail game (an information gap activity), and teaching stress.

I will begin with an outline of the theoretical rationale for teaching phonological concepts followed by a very brief summary of findings from my thesis which supported this theoretical position and led to a set of guidelines for teachers. During the course of this research I also developed a particularly successful and popular activity, the drunk snail game, which I would like to share with my fellow teachers. Finally I will present examples from a recently completed research project to show how this approach can be extended to the teaching of stress at both the word and utterance level.

The theory

There is no question that in teaching pronunciation we are interested in the finished product, that is, the degree to which our students achieve their pronunciation goals, whether these are to become more intelligible and comprehensible, or to acquire a certain accent. However, I am also interested in what is behind improving learners' performance. An important source of inspiration for this comes from work done in the area of L2 speech research, most notably Flege's (1995) Speech Learning Model which suggests that adults are able to form new categories, and reset the boundaries of old ones, to cater for the phonemes of other languages. This model suggests that it is possible for adults to learn L2 pronunciation, and it supports usage–based theories of language such as Cognitive Linguistics, and the related sub-fields of Cognitive Grammar and Cognitive Phonology.

Cognitive Grammar is based on the premise that the cognitive abilities required for language are similar to those used on other cognitive tasks. Instead of beginning with a theory of language acquisition, it begins with what is known about cognition and uses that to build theories of language acquisition. Pronunciation depends on the ability to categorise and is therefore a cognitive phenomenon which is 'grounded in the human ability to produce, perceive, and above all, to categorise sounds, and to form mental representations of sounds' (Taylor 2002:79-80). These mental representations of categories, rather than the categories themselves, are referred to as concepts, and it is these concepts which allow us to categorise (Murphy 2002). Because these phonological concepts are language specific, when we learn a new language we have to learn how the speakers of that language conceptualise, or think about its categories. The question this article addresses is how we as teachers can help learners to form these concepts in order to accurately categorise the sounds of the new phonological system.

Both Langacker (2000) and Taylor (2002) suggest a number of psychological constructs and cognitive abilities which might be relevant to language learning. These include things such as categorisation, figure-ground organisation, automatisation, the ability to compare and detect discrepancy, focus on form, social behaviour, and the ability to form mental representations. While Cognitive Grammar provides a useful theory of language, Fraser (2006, 2010) discusses how this theory can be applied to practical classroom situations, i.e. how we can help learners to form concepts of L2 phonology and learn new categories. The idea of concept formation is well established in educational psychology and Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT), leading Lantolf (2011) to propose SCT as the ideal partner for Cognitive Linguistics in the development of language learning theory.

Summary of research findings

The pronunciation focus of the research projects I undertook during my PhD was on the difficulties many learners were observed to have with syllable codas. Specifically they tended to add an extra vowel sound after a consonant, e.g. 'drunk' sounds like 'drunker' (known as epenthesis) and/or inappropriately omit consonants in syllable codas (absence). The learners in all of these studies were adult New Zealand residents with a range of L1s, but predominantly from East Asian countries such as China and Korea. They were taking high-intermediate ESOL classes at a New Zealand university with the intention of pursuing academic study or employment, or feeling more comfortable in New Zealand society.

In the first study of the PhD I analysed data for 50 students who received no explicit instruction in the pronunciation of syllable codas and found there was no change over one semester (Couper, 2006). I also found that the differences in error rates between individuals were large and only partially influenced by L1 and other factors. This points to the fact that although L1 played a role, with East Asian students generally having the greatest difficulty, each individual is different and that the success or otherwise in naturally acquiring this feature of pronunciation is probably dependent on aptitude. So while some learners will naturally notice the salient differences there are others who don't. The second finding was that explicit instruction is of particular value to those who do not naturally pick up on these salient differences. Because this study employed a wide range of teaching techniques it was difficult to say what had helped to make it successful. However, a number of techniques were pinpointed as possibly being beneficial: awareness raising, critical listening, the right kind of metalanguage, helping learners to find rules and patterns, giving feedback and providing opportunities for further practice. It was also found that traditional textbook-type explanations of syllables in terms of consonant-vowel patterns were not effective because learners did not perceive that they were adding an extra vowel or omitting consonants. This suggested that raising awareness of the way native speakers perceived their pronunciation was helpful and that to successfully communicate about this it was important for the teacher to consider learners' perceptions.

The role of learners' perceptions was the focus of a second study in which I explored qualitatively what factors might help to make instruction effective (Couper, 2013). A number of potential variables were identified with two looking particularly promising: Socially Constructed Metalanguage (SCM) and Critical Listening (CL). SCM involves the teacher and students finding ways to communicate effectively about pronunciation, exploring differences in perception leading to the social construction of meaning. I will provide an example of how this is done in the next section. Critical Listening involves the learner in listening for the contrast between two productions: one which is acceptable and one which is not (Fraser, 2000). By making it clear how these differences affect meaning, this approach can help learners understand how the sounds are perceived by the native speaker. It involves a focus on developing speech perception, and learning where the boundaries are between the different phonological categories.

Finally I tested for the role of these variables in improving pronunciation in a quantitative study (Couper, 2011a). I found CL helped with perception, SCM with production and the two used together helped with both.

Overall, these studies led to the following guidelines for teaching (Couper, 2011b, p.13):

- Raise awareness of the nature of the problem; communicate explicitly and meaningfully about it (i.e. through SCM).
- Help form category boundaries by presenting contrasts between what the native speaker does and does not perceive as belonging to the category (i.e. through Critical Listening).
- Actively involve learners in the meaning making process (a broadly communicative approach).
- Practice: focus on forming concepts (i.e. compare and contrast, allow for feedback).
- Provide the right kind of corrective feedback (use SCM).
- Define instruction in terms of what helps learners to form and practice new concepts (e.g. SCM and CL).

Teaching activities

I used a wide range of activities during these studies but here I will focus on the teaching leading up to the use of the drunk snail game, an information gap activity described below.

To start with, in answering questions about a listening text a student says it's a difficult when they want to say it's difficult. I write the two phrases on the board and explain that to my ears, it sounds like it's a difficult pointing to and underlining the difference. I then model the two phrases, asking the student to tell me how they are different. Rather than saying there is an extra syllable, or an extra word, they suggest the 'ts a' in it's a difficult is longer, stronger, or louder. Alternatively, they might suggest the 'ts' in it's difficult is shorter, smaller, or quieter. This tells me that while I perceive an extra syllable, they simply perceive it as a different way of saying the same sound. In other words, we need to help the learners understand the salient differences between the two. To do this, I ask the student to say both phrases and I point to the one I hear. In giving them feedback, I can use the language they have already used to describe the differences between the sounds. So I might tell them to make the 'ts' shorter or quieter to help them produce it's rather than it's a.

What I have done here is to try and begin with the students' perceptions in finding ways to talk about pronunciation, to socially construct metalanguage. Of course, they still need a great deal of practice, especially if the incorrect pronunciation has become an entrenched habit. But once the learner understands how these two sounds are categorised differently by English speakers, they can remind themselves what they have to do to get the message across. Following on from this explicit instruction, I developed an information gap activity, the drunk snail game, in which accurate pronunciation is necessary to successfully communicate.

The Drunk Snail game

The idea of setting up an information gap activity is nothing new for teachers brought up in the era of communicative language teaching. Equally, we understand the value of the social nature of games and how they can help to make learning fun. While this, along with my many years of teaching experience, helped me to develop the game, the real driver was thinking about how we can tap into cognitive processes to drive concept formation, essentially, applying the guidelines arising from my research findings.

This game draws on many of the cognitive capacities and psychological constructs put forward by Langacker (2000) and Taylor (2002) as assisting in concept formation. The game helps learners to focus on the salient features of English syllable codas, in cognitive linguistic terms this involves establishing appropriate figure-ground organisation. The idea of figure-ground organisation is well demonstrated through the sorts of visual perception puzzles in which you can look at a picture and, for example, see a young woman and then by moving certain lines into the foreground and others into the background you can see an old woman. By presenting these differences as meaningful it also becomes easier for learners to understand their salience. Its use of repetition and feedback on the effectiveness of communication helps learners establish categories through multiple experiences and takes advantage of the ability to compare and detect discrepancy. Through repetition and feedback the game also helps learners to entrench, or automatise, the target phonological concept. Finally, it presents learning as social behaviour, and takes advantage of the ability to focus on both form and meaning.

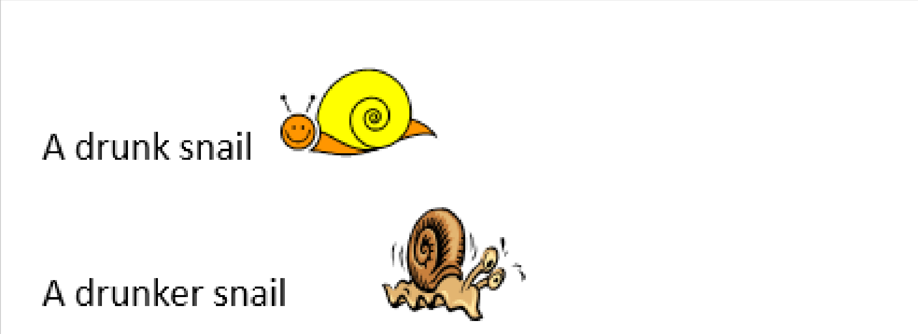

Figure 1: OHT of cards for the drunk snail game

Table 1. Comparatives describing animals. *See next page.*

For this activity I made up pairs of comparatives using consonant combinations which I had observed caused difficulties for the students in the first study. I chose pairs which could be pictorially represented using clip art. This led to descriptions of 32 animals as in Table 1. I presented these pairs accompanied with clip art on an OHT (although now of course I would use datashow). For the first pair I provided a background explanation as a way of reminding learners of the comparative:

This is a drunk snail. It drank too much beer. It was in my garden.

The snails like my lettuces so I give them beer. They drink the beer and drown.

This snail didn't drown. It got drunk. A drunk snail.

[Pointing to the picture above] This snail drank even more beer. This one is a drunker snail.

I then went through the rest of the pictures and phrases on OHT checking the meaning and pronunciation. Some of the adjectives were not known by the learners so these were also taught. The

A drunk snail/A drunker snail
A loud parrot/A louder parrot
A flat fish/A flatter fish
A hot turtle/A hotter turtle
A fierce tiger/A fiercer tiger
A quiet bat/A quieter bat
A wet bird/A wetter bird
A fat cat/A fatter cat
A mild bull/A milder bull
A stout pig/A stouter pig
A fit pigeon/A fitter pigeon
A fast kea/A faster kea
A sick cow/A sicker cow
A wild horse/A wilder horse
A cute kiwi/A cuter kiwi
A kind wasp/A kinder wasp
A cold trout/A colder trout
A tough fly/A tougher fly
A sharp crayfish/A sharper crayfish
A sweet zebra/A sweeter zebra
A weak rabbit/A weaker rabbit
A wide sheep/A wider sheep
A soft toad/A softer toad
A big bee/A bigger bee
A mad dog/A madder dog
A sad spider/A sadder spider
A smug bug/A smugger bug
An odd frog/An odder frog
An old deer/An older deer
A large lizard/A larger lizard
A smart fox/A smarter fox
A meek lion/A meeker lion

Table 1. Comparatives describing animals.

students practiced by listening and repeating and getting feedback. They then went to the computer lab and recorded the pairs of words. Afterwards, in the classroom they listened to the recordings together as a critical listening exercise. Now they were ready for the game (Other students might not need such extended preparation, but for this group epenthesis was deeply entrenched and was clearly going to need a lot of practice to bring about change).

The game requires a set of cards for every group of four or five players. Each pack of cards contains a double set of the 32 pairs of comparatives, i.e. a total of 128 cards in all. To speed the game up one could of course use fewer pairs of comparatives. The idea is that in order to find matching pairs the learners have to be able to pronounce what is on their card correctly, and the others have to understand it correctly (See Appendix A for the rules). For example, one player says I have a drunker snail and another player says I have a drunker snail too. They then show their cards to check that they have pronounced and understood correctly. What often happens is that one of them actually has a drunk snail on his/her card which is where the showing of cards provides feedback. Especially in the initial stages, the teacher also has to monitor them quite closely. Before commencing, hand out the rules, and work through them with your students.

I first used this game with a high-intermediate group and found it provided additional vocabulary development as well as pronunciation work as they were not familiar with all the adjectives. I have also used the game with more advanced groups, including trainee language teachers. So far, all groups have found it useful and enjoyable and they haven't wanted to stop. If you want to use this game you can make your own cards, tailoring them to your particular students, or you can use mine, available on my blog: pronunciationteaching.wordpress.com

Stress: words, utterances and learners' perceptions

Since completing these studies I have been exploring how these ideas can be applied to the teaching of stress, both word stress and tonic stress (sometimes referred to as sentence stress). As with syllables, stress is also language specific, i.e. it is a phonological concept. This has led me to consider questions such as: How do we make learners aware of the nature of the English concept of stress?

To find out, I first ran a short study (Couper, 2012) into teaching word stress. I then ran a follow up study in which I taught word stress in a similar way but extended the teaching to include a focus on tonic stress. My teaching approach was similar to that described above, and I observed how we drew on each others' perceptions to create a dialogue leading to the co-construction of an understanding of word stress in English in comparison with the concepts of word stress in other languages. For example, the participants found there was a difference in their concepts of the syllable as some heard four or even five syllables in my name, Graeme, while others heard one, two or three. When listening for stress, they came to realise that the differences between a stressed and unstressed syllable were much greater in English than in other languages.

They described stressed syllables as longer and stronger and the unstressed syllables as softer or shorter. It was also evident that some participants focussed on the consonant rather than the vowel sounds, which also indicates quite a conceptual difference. For example, when Kay described the difference between commit said with the stress on the first versus the second syllable she described the stress on the second syllable as t sound is very strong. There was also evidence of a strong literacy bias (Linell, 2005), that is, the participants tended to focus on the spelling rather than the sounds. To overcome this we have to train our students to use their ears, not their eyes and knowledge of writing. One further observation worth mentioning here is that the participants became much more aware of the importance of word stress. Upon reflection, they observed that English speakers really struggle to understand them if they get the stress wrong. These insights, which arose from this approach to teaching grew out of dialogue, developing SCM, and using critical listening techniques, and provided me with the means to help participants both understand and produce word stress. The participants believed that as well as becoming more aware of the nature and placement of lexical stress, they had improved in their production. Pre- and post-tests also indicated an improvement in the accurate use of word stress.

In the second study, in which I added a focus on tonic stress, I found the participants' comments on word stress were similar. With regard to tonic stress, they were not very sensitive to the prominence of the tonic syllable. Indeed when they listened to recordings of their own speech they didn't really notice when they had not used a tonic syllable. They also didn't notice when they inadvertently created contrastive stress, for example, Rob said: *The messenger told* ***us*** *about the plans*. However, he was not aware that he had placed the stress there, and neither was he aware of the change in meaning. Demonstrating how moving the position of the tonic syllable changes the focus and consequently the meaning did seem to raise their awareness. In trying to describe the differences between their own productions in comparison with a model, the participants did become aware that the model sounded smooth whereas their one sounded cut. They felt that this was as a result of their first languages, but by focusing on pausing they did become more aware of its importance and they were able to produce more natural sounding tone units. Pre- and post-tests also indicated improvements in their perception of stress.

Implications for teaching

The key feature of the approach I have taken is the focus on teaching concepts. This involves helping learners to explore their current concepts and those they already have from their L1s and compare them with the target language concepts. I have presented some examples of how different learners may talk about these concepts, which in turn leads to suggestions as to how teachers can help them to learn. Both learners and teachers need to distinguish between what we say, the physical sounds we produce, and what we think we say, which is of course affected by the phonology of the language. This theme, the nature of speech and the importance of understanding it is picked up and explored in greater depth by Helen Fraser (This issue). To summarise, we should begin by focusing on learners' perceptions, compare them with the target language concepts and through discussion socially construct metalanguage which can be used for ongoing explanation and feedback. Then we should use critical listening activities to help learners get the practice and understanding needed to form the target language concepts.

References available on the BELTA website

About Graeme:

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What goes in: interfaces between listening and pronunciation

John Field

Over the past 27 years, Speak Out! has contributed enormously to our field by way of informed comment and stimulating ideas on the teaching of English pronunciation. The 50th issue is an appropriate milestone at which to look back at the journey travelled and review how far we have come; but it also offers the opportunity of drawing attention to one or two features of the landscape that we may have missed along the way.

This article briefly reviews how attitudes have changed to the role of pronunciation in the acquisition of L2 listening skills. It then goes on to consider the role of listening in pronunciation practice, and identifies a large elephant that remains obstinately in the pronunciation teacher's room: precisely what is it that we expect learners to retain in their minds and draw upon when we teach them to recognise the sound system of a second language?

Pronunciation in listening instruction

Until quite late in the 1990s, there was a received idea that listening was about 'comprehension' (i.e. extracting meaning from a passage), and that consequently the nuts and bolts of the skill in terms of recognising the sounds, words and recurrent phrases of the language were not a major concern. Why bother about problems of receptive pronunciation in listening practice when any misunder-standing at word level could be resolved by drawing upon 'context'? This assumption paralleled a similar argument that viewed reading as a 'psycholinguistic guessing game' (Goodman, 1967) where accurate word recognition did not play a major role. It is demonstrably false because:

a) Many errors of understanding in listening originate in misperceptions at the level of the word. So 'comprehension' cannot exist independently of perception.

b) If the listener recognises very little in the speech to which he/she is exposed, where does the 'context' come from that is supposed to save the day?

c) Trying to puzzle out what a speaker is saying by using 'context' is quite demanding in cognitive terms. By contrast, the ability to recognise a spoken word quickly and accurately becomes automatic with time and with exposure to the L2 - and so makes few demands upon expert listeners and allows them to focus on the wider message being put across.

These arguments (for more details, see Field 1998, 2003) seem at last to have prevailed. Materials such as those produced by Richard Cauldwell and Sheila Thorn have demonstrated the value of supplementing longer comprehension sessions with small-scale listening tasks which target perceptual features that cause problems of decoding for the listener. The tasks help learners to identify words that have been reduced in prominence or that are not articulated as precisely as they would be in their citation forms due to assimilation, elision, resyllabification etc.

This new emphasis on perception sits well with a general growth of interest in what goes on in the mind of the language learner when producing and receiving language. Today, teachers and testers have come to see listening as a much more complex operation than they once tended to assume. Cognitive models of the skill (Field, 2008) recognise three distinct perceptual components: input decoding, where acoustic cues are interpreted in terms of the sound system of the language, lexical search, where groups of sounds are linked to entries in the learner's vocabulary and the meanings of those words are retrieved; and parsing where a group of words has to be held in the learner's mind for long enough to recognise a grammatical pattern in them. Even 'comprehension' is not a unitary process. On the one hand, it requires the listener to use inference, world knowledge and context to make full sense of a new piece of information. On the other, it requires the listener to add that piece of information to a developing picture of the whole conversation or talk.

Those who stressed the importance of the perceptual phases of listening were once misleadingly (and sometimes disparagingly) described as taking a 'bottom-up view'. This view was said to include the assumption that a listener operates on a Lego principle, building phonemes into words, words into clauses and clauses into meanings; it was said to contrast sharply with a 'top-down view', where context overrules the evidence of our ears. However, the briefest pause for thought will show that it makes no sense to think of these as independent 'views' or to suggest that they are somehow in opposition to each other. We simply cannot have one without the other. Suppose you hear somebody say the word [mægɪɪi:nz]. If listeners operated on a phoneme by phoneme principle, you would be brought to a halt immediately the unorthodox /ɪ/ sound reached your ears. In fact, what happens is that your knowledge of the word magazines compensates for the incorrect phoneme - to the point where you may not even notice that a slip of the tongue has occurred. And if that doesn't work, then the context (they sell newspapers and ---) or even just an earlier mention of the associated word newspaper will do the rest.

So current perceptual theories of how listeners decode speech (Field, 2008: Chap 8) fully embrace the contributions made by vocabulary and context. They propose that, at any given moment, we are drawing on information at many different levels simultaneously – phoneme, consonant cluster, syllable, word, recurrent phrase, lexical field, conversation-so-far – in order to make sense of the signal reaching our ears.

Listening in pronunciation instruction

So much for the role of pronunciation in developing listening skills; let us now consider the role of listening in developing pronunciation skills.

The perceived importance of the phoneme

There is a consensus going back many years that we need to teach learners to discriminate between the sounds of a new language as a first step towards producing them. Hence the importance accorded to ear training tasks. In recent years, these tasks have placed increasing emphasis on suprasegmental features. In a mirror image of what has taken place in listening practice, pronunciation teachers ensure that learners hear and produce some of the characteristics of connected speech. They focus not simply on intonation patterns and the placement of focal stress, but also on rhythm, lexical stress, pause placement, assimilation elision, juncture, recurrent formulaic phrases etc. Cauldwell (2013) provides authentic examples of such features for both recognition and emulation.

But in spite of this encouraging development, ear training still tends to focus quite heavily on phoneme-level information in the early stages of L2 teaching. Learners are introduced in a systematic way to the various sounds of the language, usually by hearing them in contrastive minimal pairs; and then go on to produce them. Questions that have been relatively little considered by pronunciation teachers are: what specifically does this ear training aim to achieve? What does the teacher aim to implant in the mind of the learner by means of ear-training – and how might this record of a particular sound of English later enable the learner to produce the sound correctly or at least intelligibly?

The reasons for asking such questions are easily explained. Firstly, most pronunciation teachers are well aware that any phoneme is highly variable when it occurs in natural speech. The /k/ in car is markedly different from the /k/ in key because speakers adjust it according to the vowel that follows. It is the listener who perceives both of these forms as representing the same sound in the English system and not two contrasted sounds. Of course, that is precisely why we embed phonemes in minimal pairs when we teach them: a pair such as came / game represents /k/ and /g/ used in the same -ame environment. But precisely because phonemes vary as widely as they do, the logical extension is that we need to present the /k/-/g/ contrast not in one environment but in several; and we need to give examples of the contrast in word-final position (back/bag) as well as word-initial (card/guard).

Phoneme representations

So what is it that a learner comes away with after this kind of practice? Teachers manuals tend to imply that it is some kind of template - an ideal version of the phoneme against which all its various forms can be matched. It might be thought of as a prototype – a version which distils what is essential to recognising a particular phoneme and eliminates the features that vary across words. Unfortunately, speech scientists discovered as long ago as the late 1950s that it was impossible to identify features that were peculiar to one phoneme and not present in any other (Liberman, 1957). What is more, phonemes vary not just according to adjoining phonemes but also according to the voice of the speaker. To give an example, a segment of speech that is heard as /b/ in the speech of a fast speaker is likely to be interpreted as /w/ if it is spliced into the speech of somebody speaking slower (Miller, 1981). So speech rate is a factor. Worse: the features that serve to distinguish one vowel from another are not consistent in their frequencies, but vary according to the pitch of a speaker's voice and the shape of the speaker's vocal tract (Fry 1979: 112).

What is the solution? Well, one way of dealing with the issue is to ensure that learners achieve maximum exposure to the L2 in the form of a range of voices and a range of speech rates. The listening instructor has an important role to play in supporting and expanding on basic ear-training; and here the recent interest in incorporating perception into listening instruction is a positive development. It gives scope, for example, for simple tasks in which learners attempt to transcribe short clips spoken by a variety of speakers.

An alternative is to look at larger units than the phoneme. Recall the current view of listening mentioned above, in which syllables, words and chunks of language all play a part in decoding the speech signal. Perhaps the phoneme is not as important a unit of analysis as ELT specialists have come to believe. Suggestions have been made that, across languages, listeners primarily analyse speech into demi-syllables or syllables, which are more standard in form than phonemes. There have even been suggestions that the ability to recognise phonemes is something we acquire through learning to read and not a fundamental part of speech perception. Morais et al (1979) found that Portuguese illiterates could not perform a simple operation that entailed removing the first phoneme from a spoken word. Then there is brain imaging evidence from Démonet, Thierry, and Nespoulos (2002) which indicates that breaking a spoken nonsense word into its consonants and vowels is a slower operation than connecting speech to a word in one's vocabulary. This suggests that a listener identifies a word before identifying its phonemes, rather than the other way around.

My own database of learners' verbal reports on the decisions they make during listening tests provides evidence that L2 listeners at lower levels are heavily reliant on information at word level – even to the point where an approximate word match might overrule the evidence of their ears (for an early study on this, see Field 2004). This makes sense for a learner who has acquired an oral vocabulary repertoire that is more reliable than their impression of what might or might not correspond to a particular phoneme. What is more, words give direct access to meaning in a way that phonemes do not. A focus on word-level information also makes sense for an L1 listener, who might have to compensate for slips of the tongue or for noise in the environment – see the magazines example above. Consider too how the example would be more problematic for the listener if the stimulus was [mægɪ dɪ iːnz] – because of the presence of a potential word in 'jeans'.

The word as a unit of instruction

What does this tell us about our priorities in pronunciation teaching? Well, it suggests we need a degree of scepticism when commentators claim that particular phonemes run a high risk of impairing intelligibility if wrongly articulated (see for example, the lingua franca proposals of Jenkins, 2000). More importantly, it demonstrates a strong interface between the pronunciation lesson and the vocabulary lesson. Through oral vocabulary instruction, learners supplement the sometimes incomplete examples provided by minimal pairs, and gain more extensive evidence of how phonemes operate at the level of the word. Vocabulary teachers should certainly be made aware of their support role in expanding learners' familiarity with the L2 phonological system.

The reader will probably have spotted the hole in this argument. Words are quite treacherous too. It is one thing to acquire a citation form from a teacher; quite another to recognise a word and/or to produce it fluently within a piece of connected speech. In terms of recognition in particular, words are subject to influences such as assimilation, elision and resyllabification that change their shape. They differ when spoken in voices at different pitch levels; and they differ across varieties of English.

What this underlines is the importance of learners acquiring exposure to words when they occur in larger contexts. Confronted by sequences such as tem pounds or farce train, they need to be able to map them on to previously encountered examples. Alternatively or additionally, they have to learn to draw upon co-text (I paid ---) or the cues provided by related vocabulary (e.g. the word slow elsewhere in the conversation). Above all, during both ear training and general listening practice, more attention needs to be given to recurrent chunks of speech. These chunks do not simply include formulaic phrases like How do you do? but also reduced sequences (what do you? rendered as watcha) and common syntactic groups (should've done).

All of these can and should be the concern of the listening instructor. Part of the new attention given to perception should include raising learners' awareness of recurrent chunks – for example, when they crop up in comprehension passages. But there is also every reason for pronunciation materials to include chunks as a fundamental unit of ear-training and production practice. Here one can see another interface between the listening class and the pronunciation class.

An alternative to the 'template' view

So where does this leave us with the troubling question of what a learner stores in his/her mind in order to decode and reproduce L2 speech? If we cannot fall back on the notion of a 'perfect' phoneme template, then where does the answer lie? The template assumption – applied not only in this but many other contexts – grew out of a view of the human brain as extremely fast in computational operations (such as deconstructing an unusual example of /k/) but poor in storage capacity. Hence the notion of a single phoneme form stored in the mind and a complex process of matching variations against it. Hence, too, the use of citation forms in vocabulary teaching, against which learners have to match the many versions of a word occurring in connected speech.

Current thinking in neuroscience is tending in the opposite direction (Dąbrowska, 2004: 17-22). It seems that we are not as good at decision-making as we once believed, but that our brains can and do store enormous amounts of information. All of this lends support to a different view of how language (including the spoken forms of words) is stored in the brain. Take the word actually. It has at least seven distinct forms, depending on how casually the speaker is speaking (Laver 1994). Suppose that, instead of trying to match those seven variants against a 'good' citation form when we hear them, we instead retain all seven of them in our minds. We might retain them in different voices even, different accents, different speech rates. If that is what happens, all we need to do when we hear a rather odd version of actually is to match it to a trace of some previous experience of a similar variant. This does not, of course, entirely deal with the issue of the phoneme, but it would be fair to suppose that, at word level, we have multiple traces of items beginning with (say) /k/ stored in memory, and that our ability to recognise word-initial /k/ is constructed by analogy.

This version of events is part of an emergentist view of how languages are acquired, which places emphasis upon accumulating samples of language rather than extrapolating rules that can be expressed in words. (See Bybee, 2001: Chap.1 for an application of this view to phonology). Intuitively, it seems implausible and wasteful as a theory. On the other hand, nobody to date has provided a more convincing account of how we manage to compensate for the huge variety of voices that we encounter every day – their distinctive pitch ranges and the way in which an individual might vary their speech rate from one moment to another.

It is especially persuasive as an account of how we learn to recognise new varieties of a language. It suggests that we need to lay down a certain number of traces of voices speaking a particular variety in order to map on to them whenever we hear that accent. This will be a familiar experience for many readers. ELT practitioners often experience problems of intelligibility when taking on a class whose L1-influenced accent they have not encountered before; but find that, over a period of time, they build up familiarity with the variety in question. Similarly, many of us have difficulties in following local varieties of our first language (the Edinburgh English of the film Trainspotting required subtitles on release in the USA); but these difficulties diminish following extended exposure to speakers with those accents.

Some conclusions for practice

Whether or not the reader is convinced by the multiple-trace account of how phonemes are stored in the mind, it is hoped that this article has directed a spotlight on what we expect learners to take away from ear training. There are some useful implications for practice.

Firstly, we must not lose sight of the close interdependence of the various units of spoken language. Pronunciation programmes should treat the phoneme as largely shaped by the syllable and the syllable by the word. Nor must we overlook the fact that words, too, are subject to variation in connected speech; instructors need to demonstrate how citation forms are modified when they feature in a natural utterance. When we hear didn't rendered as [dɪnt] or half past as [hɪpɪ:st], it does not just provide an interesting illustration of how native speakers simplify difficult transitions between consonants. It also suggests articulatory short cuts that learners do well to follow. Similarly useful as targets for pronunciation practice are frequently occurring sequences that are commonly produced as chunks: if I were you, what do you mean? are you all right? do you mind if I…?. Mastering these chunks as single units not only contributes to fluency; it also ensures grammatical accuracy because they do not have to be assembled word by word.

Examples such as these further demonstrate the extent to which listening work, with its new interest in perceptual processing, interacts with pronunciation practice. It might be useful to aim for a greater degree of integration – with listeners required to imitate rather than simply decode recurrent chunks of language, and with pronunciation classes making time for the transcription and emulation of short authentic clips.

On the other hand, we should not lose sight of the fact that the pronunciation lesson and the listening lesson require quite distinct behaviour of the learner. Pronunciation teaching promotes precision in the form of accurate identification of clusters of phonemes and an acceptable level of intelligibility in producing them. By contrast, the role of the listening teacher as profiled here is to demonstrate that the skill is a very relative operation – involving weighing evidence of closeness of match to a word and drawing on information at the levels of word, phoneme, syllable, chunk and context.

The other important message is the need for exposure to natural speech. Focused ear training on its own is not enough. At the level of phoneme production and recognition, it needs to be reinforced by colleagues teaching oral vocabulary that expands the range of lexical contexts in which particular phonemes are encountered. Their support might take the form of greater sensitivity during vocabulary lessons to the phonological composition of new words, whether in reception or production, and greater insistence on practising them.

But clearly, the best opportunities for exposure occur during listening practice. Initial pronunciation training may well be restricted to a limited set of voices (those of the teacher or of recorded actors); but recordings designed for listening instruction expand this range enormously. They enable the learner to hear known language delivered in ways that vary greatly from one speaker to another in pitch, precision and speed; and they facilitate the transition from scripted to authentic material. In so doing, they lay down precisely the multiple traces that an emergentist view of language learning would argue are necessary in order to develop oral proficiency.

A final brief comment on accents in listening materials, on which there has been a fair amount of discussion in recent years. Enough has been said here to indicate the tough uphill task that learners face when trying to make sense of stretches of natural L2 speech – given speaker variables such as voice quality, speech rate, precision of articulation or pitch range, not to mention the many variables that transform word forms. This suggests the need for a degree of caution in adding to the load by introducing a range of varieties at an early stage. Note that the issue is not the choice of a particular variety but the number of varieties. The argument is reinforced by the only coherent account that we have of how we learn to understand new varieties - namely the multiple-trace one. It strongly suggests that the process takes time and may be serendipitous because it depends upon the learner gaining a certain level of exposure.

Author's note: If any reader is interested in pursuing the issues raised here, there is a wide-ranging discussion of them from a different angle in Field (in press)

References available on the BELTA website

Editor's Note: The article, in this form, was originally published in Speak Out! The newsletter of the IATEFL Pronunciation SIG, issue 50, pgs. 46-50.

John would also like to share his long professional association with language teaching in Belgium.

He taught at the University of Liege for four years; and he has given a number of workshops and presentations at the University of Leuven, the most recent in January 2013.

About John:

John Field is Senior Lecturer at the CRELLA research unit, University of Bedfordshire, where he specialises in cognitive approaches to second language learning and assessment. He has written and researched widely on L2 listening including the award-winning book Listening in the Language Classroom. A former ELT teacher trainer and materials writer, he has also written textbooks on psycholinguistics.

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On The Radar with Pete Rutherford and Rob Szabó

Conversations about Communicative Competence

In our previous columns for the BELTA Bulletin, Rob and I introduced the idea of using radar charts to represent the various and complex aspects of communicative competence, responded to constructive criticism, reported back on a small action research project, and gave feedback on our presentation on the topic at the IATEFL Annual Conference in Manchester earlier this year.

For this installment of On the Radar, we thought we would share some simple and practical classroom activities with you. These materials have been tested with in-company business English clients, international management students at the University of Applied Sciences in Düsseldorf, and teachers at a recent Hamburg English Language Teachers Association (HELTA) event in northern Germany. The reaction so far has been overwhelming positive, and we hope that readers of this column will have a similar experience using the handouts with their learners.

Definitions and matching exercise (presentation and controlled practice)

This handout has simple, learner-friendly explanations of the five component competences that we've been using in our model (e.g. linguistic competence – knowledge of English grammar, words, sounds, etc). This table of terms uses accessible language to familiarize learners with the concept of communicative competence and the factors that contribute to it.

The matching exercise provides some controlled practice for the learners. Teachers will find that more than one competence can be attributed to some of the quotations. This often engenders a lively discussion on the complexities of the subject.

The answers to the matching exercise are: 1C, 2A, 3E, 4B, 5D.

Anecdotes (freer practice)

Learners discuss their experiences of communicating in English. The teacher then asks them for concrete examples of the communication that was particularly good or that broke down, and why they thought this happened. This task can be done individually, in small groups or as a class.

Once the learners have made some notes on what happened, they can use the five component competences to analyze their anecdotes in a structured manner. For example, did the conversation break down due to poor pronunciation, a confusing foreign idiom, the lack of repair strategies, or a social faux pas? In the case of ineffective communication, learners can use the competences to suggest potential remedies.

My radar chart (self, peer and teacher assessment)

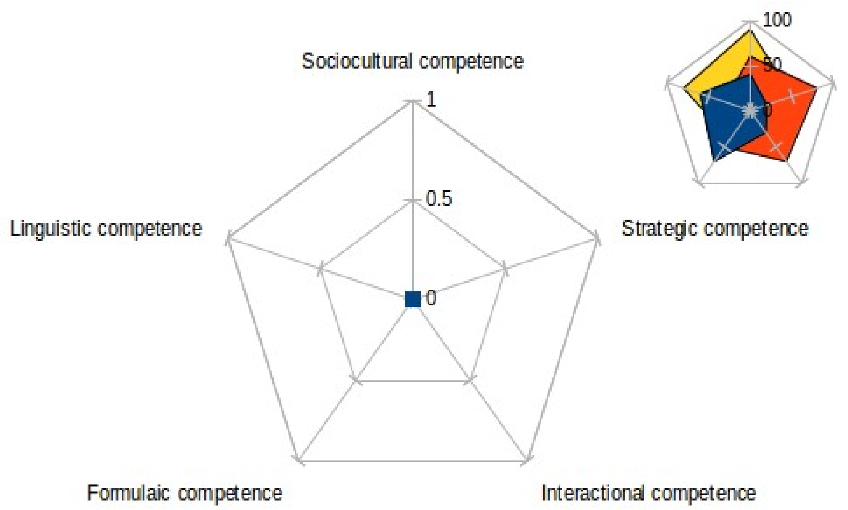
Learners use the blank radar chart to reflect on and plot their current communicative competence. This is a subjective evaluation of their ability to communicate effectively in English.

Once the learners have recorded their current situation, they can mark their goals on the chart. This rough appraisal, which contrasts current and desired competence, is useful for focusing attention on areas that should be developed to improve a learner's overall effectiveness in English. For example, a learner who determines that her strategic competence is poor might decide to focus on learning and then employing phrases for checking and clarifying information. This activity also demonstrates where learners' aims and needs converge or differ.

The radar charts are equally useful for highlighting a learner's communicative strengths. This can be motivating, and the identified strengths often compensate for less advanced competences.

Using the chart, learners can evaluate each other and teachers can assess learners. This proves to be an especially effective exercise when learners are confronted with self-, peer- and teacher-assessed radar chart results that vary.

My communicative competence radar chart



The blank chart has shown itself to be a flexible tool, and we are certain that teachers will find other creative classroom applications for it.

Case study

The Remberg case study allows learners to apply their knowledge of communicative competence to a scenario where they need to decide on an important appointment at a mid-sized German company intent on expanding into new English-speaking markets.

Editor's Note: To find the handouts mentioned in this article, go to

About Pete and Rob

Pete Rutherford is a Düsseldorf-based business English teacher and teacher trainer employed by Marcus Evans Linguarama. He started in education and training in 2003, as a high school business economics teacher, and has worked in Germany, Spain and South Africa. He is a member of the IATEFL BESIG online team.

Rob Szabó specialises in facilitating clear and effective communication between individuals, departments and companies. He is currently completing his Master's degree in Education with a specialisation in Applied Linguistics, his research interests lying in the areas of sociolinguistics, intercultural communication and job mobility.

A fresh look at teaching... with Dimitris Primalis

About Dimitris

Dimitris has been teaching English as a Foreign Language for more than 20 years to a wide range of levels and age groups. He has written five test books for Macmillan and is the winner with Chryssanthe Sotiriou of the 2013 IATEFL Learning Technologies SIG scholarship. He is interested in integrating technology into the syllabus and likes to share his experiences in education writing articles and blog posts and giving workshops at conferences such as the IATEFL, TESOL France, TESOL Macedonia-Thrace, Northern Greece and ISTEK. He works at Doukas primary school in Athens, Greece.

Some of you may be surprised by the new column, expecting Mea Culpa, which mirrors a period of self-refection and learning from our own mistakes. Even though this is an important part of our teaching lives, we live in an era of rapid changes and drastic overhauls in the field of education, which should not be ignored. In my opinion, the educational community is making remarkable efforts to bridge the gap between digital and traditional literacy and approach younger generations of learners with tools and methods they feel familiar with. In contrast with Mea Culpa, this is meant to be a forward-thinking column with features of 21st century teaching. It goes without saying that you are more than welcome to ask questions, challenge notions and practices, discuss problems and suggest topics. This is primarily a column written by an active teacher for frontline teachers who wish to find practical and some theoretical elements to help them with their daily practice.

Collaborative writing with the aid of technology

Gone are the days when working in pairs or groups in class was treated like a crime. These days more and more companies appreciate collaboration and communication as very important skills that applicants should have. These two 21st century skills can be successfully applied in class, with the aid of technology, to boost writing skills. Until recently, asking students to work together in pairs and groups, record the product of their brainstorming and then share it in class had been a laborious process requiring photocopies or slides or writing long texts on the board. However, now technology can facilitate sharing.

You can use two popular tools that allow you to create a virtual space where your students can share ideas, notes, texts, photos, recordings and videos. These can be accessed from anywhere, anytime, provided there is internet access.

If you use Microsoft Windows compatible devices, OneNote © is part of the Office 365 package. It allows you to create collaboration space – a notebook for everyone in your class or groups to share, organize and collaborate.

Students can share pictures, videos and texts or notes with their peers and - depending on the settings - they can access similar data from peers. In other words, you can have the whole class' writing output recorded there and easily accessible as a point of reference or for revision purposes. Once shared, the material is stored and can be accessed offline (even if there is no internet access).

The second suggestion is a web 2.0 tool called lino.it and it is free to use. It resembles a virtual noticeboard on which you can pin posts, photos and videos. Students can write paragraphs or essays and post them on virtual "stickies" so that everyone can read them.

Below you can find two activities that can be done with the aid of the tools above.

Activity 1 "What if …" B1-B2 CEFR levels

Divide students into groups. Create a notebook and separate pages for each group on OneNote, and share a video on the problems our planet is facing. Ask students to watch it at home, and in class invite them to work in groups and decide what they would do if they were the European Union commissioner (roughly the equivalent of minister) for the environment. Students will have to contribute with ideas and solutions in the form of notes, mind maps or even recorded voice files, giving their opinion and explaining what needs to be done and what the consequences may be. As follow up, ask students to choose a problem and present the roots, consequences and course of action that needs to be taken in order to deal with it effectively.

Activity 2 "How did you feel?" A1-B1 CEFR Levels

I have used this to combine literature with vocabulary recycling. Ask your students to read the first two or three chapters of a graded reader – I asked my students to read The Canterville Ghost – and then divide the class into characters. Write the canvas URL on the board and invite them to share their feelings on virtual post it notes (see photo). In my class, it was Mr Otis, Mrs Otis, the ghost, the children and the maid. Students had to write how their character felt after an encounter described in the book. The students wrote comments like: "I am Mister Otis and I am not afraid of ghosts, because they are not real."

(Both activities were originally published in the February 2015 ELT News issue.)

Anticipated problems

Posting shocking jokes or writing silly messages is a temptation that some of your students may find hard to resist. Clarify that this is a tool for learning and not for hoaxing. Set clear rules from day 1 that they should not write anything that they would not write in their notebooks when they hand them in to their teacher. If you feel it is necessary, you can bluff and explain that their digital footprint can be easily detected. With lino.it this is not the case, but this is a rule they should follow whatever they do when working on the internet.

With lino.it there will be ads appearing at the bottom of the canvas. Also students may often make mistakes when copying the URL of the canvas.

Dos and Don'ts before using OneNote and lino.it

Spend a few minutes before the activity to help your learners become familiar with OneNote and lino.it. With OneNote you will need the learners' emails to invite them to join the notebook (virtual space) you have created.

When creating your lino.it canvas change the settings to allow everybody to post "stickies". Otherwise, learners will not be able to write and share.

If students complain they cannot find the canvas, don't panic. In all likelihood, they have made a mistake when copying the URL of the canvas or they are trying to open it through their own lino.it account (if they already have one). All they need to do is copy the link into their browser correctly.

What are the benefits of collaborative writing with the aid of technology?

Students are motivated because they love technology.

It gives them the opportunity to share their views with the rest of the class.

Students can benefit from collective note-taking and weaker students are exposed to richer vocabulary and more complex sentences.

They create digital content which can be accessed anytime, anywhere, and can be used as a source for reference or revision in the future.

Students learn to collaborate – a real life skill that they will need later on in their professional lives.

Students have an audience when they write (the rest of the class), while in the past it was only the teacher who read it.

It is easier for the teacher to edit the material and post it on the school blog rather than spend hours typing it.

You won't hear poor excuses any more, like "My dog has eaten my composition" or "I've forgotten my notebook at home".

Get a real kick out of it with your class!

Talking to Christina Rebuffet-Broadus

Christina Rebuffet-Broadus started her own YouTube channel earlier this year. It's been a big success and we wanted to learn more about how the videos help students, what goes into creating a video, and how it all got started.

What sort of videos do you make?

The videos are short, generally four to seven minutes. They're aimed at French business people, who are very busy and might enjoy watching the video on their lunch break, for example. I mostly cover business subjects like how to answer questions in job interviews, understand better in conference calls, or save time writing email in English. There are also videos on the social aspects of business English, like welcoming visitors and starting conversations. Finally, pronunciation is a popular topic, so I make sure to include pronunciation videos from time to time.

Are they only for French-speaking people?

Not at all! The videos are in English, and they all have English subtitles. This means that anyone learning English can benefit from them. I occasionally make references to aspects of language learning specific to French people, like comparing how you would present information on an American resumé compared to a French CV, but anyone can learn from them!

Your videos are in a nice studio. Is this in your home?

Actually, I share a little studio with Géraldine who makes videos for Comme Une Française TV, and with two guys whose company is called Spontanez-Vous. The studio is at Co-Work in Grenoble, which is the coworking space I work at a few days a week. My first two videos were in my home, but I quickly realized they were, ahem, less than great. Géraldine is a good friend of mine, so she invited me to use the studio at Co-Work.

Your channel is called "Speak Better, Feel Great TV." What does it mean exactly?

Basically, I got the idea from two things clients ask for when they come to English training: to learn to speak better and feel more confident doing it. So that's what the videos help them do! I want to help them improve their English, but also build their confidence and feel good about themselves in English. I'm on a mission to make France a place known for their good English skills!

Why did you decide to make videos?

I actually started a blog to help French-speaking professionals back in summer 2014. The articles were in French, because I thought it would help people read the tips for learning English more quickly. After about 6 months, I polled subscribers to see what they wanted to see in the future. They said: "Videos in English"! I was doing texts in French, so I had it all wrong! It just goes to show how important it is to ask your students, rather than assuming you always know what's best for them.

Who inspires you?

Definitely, and I couldn't have done this without all the help and kind support of others. Géraldine, who I mentioned earlier, has been a huge help, as well as several other people at Co-Work in Grenoble. Vicki Hollett, who created the wildly successful YouTube channel Simple English Videos has also been a huge help. She's taught me so much about the technical aspects and just the process of planning and doing videos. I'm also amazed at what Jason Levine, AKA FluencyMC has achieved with his videos. They are unlike any other ELT videos out there and he's so creative.

What does it take to produce a single video? It's a lot of work, isn't it?

Well, it is, but it's worth it. I have to find the idea for the video. I usually get ideas from my own trainees, or from blog subscribers who request topics. Then I have to do a bit of research and write the script. After that, I'll go into the studio to film, usually 3 or 4 videos at a time. Then I send the files to a video editor that I found on eLance.com which is a site where you can find freelancers to do all sorts of work! He sends the edited video back to me and I add the on-screen words using the software Camtasia. That generally takes about an hour. Then the video is uploaded to YouTube, a guy adds subtitles, and it's ready to go! It is work, but it's a big part of my branding and marketing, so I see it as an investment.

Do you make the videos alone?

I do! Anyone can do it. You don't need a team of technicians. Today, I do have a video editor and a subtitler, but when I started, I did everything from start to finish. Other than those tasks, I do everything. I set up the camera which is just on a tripod in front of the studio backdrop and start filming. I follow a script, which I write myself and then upload to EasyPrompter.com and use my computer as a prompter.

Of course, sometimes I mess up and have to start over, but it makes for comical outtakes at the end! The funniest ones include my French husband Romain. He occasionally guest stars in the videos and he makes people laugh. I think they can identify with him, since he's French. I'm thrilled that he's willing to do some videos with me, and it's a lot of fun.

What advice would you give to a teacher who wants to make videos but doesn't know where to get started?

Don't aim for perfection from the start. Heck, don't even worry about the quality of the first ones. My first videos are awful! You just have to start somewhere and learn little by little how to improve.

Perhaps also, don't feel like you need a lot of fancy equipment to start. Invest your money when you know what you really need. I started with my webcam and by putting every lamp in my house around me for lighting! Start simple, don't aim for perfection. Just get started and learn as you go. Also, reach out and ask for help from others. They can be a goldmine of tips!

Do you think it's worth the time and energy? Would you recommend it?

If you see real value in what you do, definitely. I don't think everyone has to make videos though. It has to bring value to you and your career, as well as to the people you're making videos for. And you have to enjoy it!

Has your YouTube channel helped advance your teaching career?

Definitely. I share my videos on different social networks, and I've had several clients contact me to do distance lessons after seeing my videos on LinkedIn. I've also been contacted by other teaching companies, who have commissioned and bought videos from me. It's great when the clients come to you and ask to work with you. I think when clients get to know you, whether it's through video, podcasts, blogs, whatever, they come to trust you more than if you just randomly contacted them to offer lessons. I think the videos have helped create some exciting opportunities, definitely.

Do you make money from your videos?

Indirectly, yes, from the clients and projects that come my way thanks to the videos. I don't have advertising on my YouTube channel though, as I haven't had the time to properly look at it and decide if it's for me. I don't know if I'm comfortable with ads running before my videos. I personally find them annoying, and I don't really want to feel like I'm selling my audience to big industries. For the moment, I prefer to make money from the videos in the form of new clients and projects rather than advertising.

Do you use the videos in lessons or for flipping your classroom?

Sometimes, yes, when the opportunity presents itself. Either we'll watch the video together in the classroom and then do activities based on it, or I'll invite them to watch a video for homework and we'll use the content and language learned in the next lesson to discuss their questions and practice the language. It's also a great opportunity to get trainees' feedback, which is useful for making better videos in the future.

How often do you publish videos?

There's a new video each week. So far I've managed to keep up that rhythm since the beginning of the year. It takes planning and organization, but once you get a system that works into place, it's not so hard actually. It all just becomes part of the routine.

Thanks for talking to us, Christina. We look forward to seeing more of your videos!

You can find Christina's YouTube channel at http://bit.ly/SBFG-TV. Encourage your students to subscribe and they'll get a new video every week!

About Christina:

Christina lives in Grenoble, France and has been teaching since 2004. She created Speak Better, Feel Great TV in January 2015 and has become fascinated by digital materials creation, marketing for freelance teachers, and client coaching. With Jennie Wright, she co-authored Experimental Practice in ELT: Walk on the wild side, published with the round in 2014.

All references are available on the BELTA website in our members area:
www.beltabelgium.com/forums/topic/the-belta-bulletin-issue-6-winter-2015/

Our cover photo

This issue's cover photo was taken by @foster_timothy.

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