

Introducing Elements of Pronunciation Practice into Comprehension-based Language Class

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1.

To make a language class for Japanese ESL learners as communicative as possible as required by the recent demand for English in university education, the introduction of pronunciation practice (hereafter PP) is effective in classrooms because it is a method which moves “from teacher centered to learner centered classrooms” (Otlowski 2002). Learner-centered activities are based on such output aspects as speaking and writing, and in a classroom the emphasis is put on speaking, expressing thoughts or ideas vocally. These activities can sometimes be done in a group to make them more enjoyable and effective. PP provides a first step, a warm-up part for more extensive communicative activities and will, hopefully, let students utter English sounds deliberately, even though the practice may, at first, be merely mimicry. The students may feel they are actually producing English sounds and may want to do it more by themselves. In this sense, an introductory or supplementary PP is a motivational activity within the total design of the class. Also, understanding “[t]he “musical patterns” of English, melody, pitch patterns, rhythm, and timing patterns” (Gilbert, 1987:33-39) is surely the key for improving comprehension competence both in listening and reading, which Japanese learners need to acquire according to the needs and recent changes in society under globalization. This paper is an attempt to introduce PP (in its extensive sense) into comprehension-based learning in which movie scripts and videos are used.

Premises: first, this exercise is to take place in an English language class guided by a non-native, Japanese teacher of English; second, with careful attention to the learner’s current communicative competence, the class is organized for the communicative skill building of learners. For this purpose, this paper starts with a brief survey of theoretical matters—methods already proposed and well practiced, and important concepts for PP—and then the paper will examine one textbook based on a movie script and an evaluation of it will be also given. Finally an idea of adding PP components to the class activity will be proposed.

1.1. Audio-lingual Method

For Japanese ESL learners, as they have very little experience of actual English communication, the audio-lingual method (which was the predominant ESL method in the U.S.A. from the 1940's to the 1960's) is the most appropriate one to adapt initially for the development of Communicative Competence from the following viewpoints: in this method, more emphasis is placed on units of sounds than meanings of words and the grammatical construction of sentences. Therefore, students can focus more on imitating the rhythm of the English sentence without undue attention to the semantic aspects of the language. It will also give students the feeling that they are expressing something in English by themselves, sending a message in a foreign language. This encourages the students to study more and to express their own ideas in English. "[T]he main focus in the audio-lingual method ... is on the traditional notions of pronunciation, minimal pairs, drills and short conversations" (Castillo, 1990:3). All of them are easier for students to exercise and their increased attentiveness in class is greatly desired for developing Communicative Competence in an ESL class.

1.2. Intelligibility/Native-like Mastery

When teachers help students to utter English sounds and phrases more and more in a classroom, a measure for judging the appropriateness of students' pronunciation in class activities should be also created for the purpose of developing Communicative Competence. Morley says that "intelligible pronunciation is seen as an essential component of communicative competence" (Morley, 1991:513). Intelligibility is important, given the rapid growth of English speaking populations, including speakers of English as a second language (ESL), in which a curious inversion has occurred: "more people are learning English today in the People's Republic of China—than speak it as a first language in the United States" (Cited from a handout delivered at Joan Morley's lecture held at Temple University in Osaka, March, 2002). Reciprocal intelligibility is one of the essential requirements in the recent climate of global communication. We must accept various pronunciations as different kinds of English; therefore, indispensable sets of distinctions in sounds and intonation patterns, without which utterances cannot be intelligible on the side of listeners, need to be clarified and given their proper place and position in our classes.

1.3. Pronunciation Practice as a Motivational Activity for Communication

After the textbook to be used in the class is examined, in terms of its basic structure, several ideas for introducing PP into a comprehension-based activity will be examined. Furthermore, regular use of the textbook, recommended by the editor, will be examined to ascertain its good and bad points. PP will be introduced into a role-play activity based on the movie script as a part of the activity and is expected to be a factor in helping students to

understand the movie deeply. A PP incorporated into the role-play activity can be anything which strengthens the students' motivation to assimilate the material and the content provided in the class. The PP focused activities dealt with in different situations are offered only as examples; everyone is free to choose their own. The main focus of this argument is on how to build a general framework for introducing PP as a motivation-giver in an English class based on a movie script textbook.

2.

Textbooks based on movie scripts became popular recently in English language classes in Japan because of the world-wide dominance of American popular culture; in particular, Hollywood movies. Studying movie scripts is, also, a good compromise between the traditional Japanese translation method, which was widespread in Japan for many years, and the increasing need for English classes at schools to develop sufficient communicative competence in students. Teachers and students can refer to a written movie script whenever they feel anxious about their comprehension. Textbooks of this kind usually contain many colloquial phrases and expressions. Students are, therefore, exposed to ordinary English in real contexts. Materials dealt with here are chosen from normal, everyday situations which can be of immediate and practical use. Moreover, by using a movie, phonetic input is given greater stress than in normal text-centered classrooms. Students listen to a sequence of English conversation at natural speed, without pauses like in CDs and audio tapes (so common in normal classroom conditions). Through the method described above, students can develop their own listening comprehension strategies and with it better communication.

One good example for general analysis about the use of this kind of textbook is *Good Will Hunting* published by Shohakushya. The movie of the same name won an Academy Award and was a commercial success a few years ago.

2.1. The Outline of the Book

The organization and editor's recommended usage of the textbook are as follows.

Previewing/Pre-reading Exercises

[A] Vocabulary Warm-up

Plan A) Read the definitions of the missing words written under the blanks in the sentences and fill them in with what you think are the most appropriate words. Plan B) Also, an audio tape for these example sentences is available. As a listening practice, have the students fill in the blanks with the words they hear.

[B] Multiple Choice Questions on Idiomatic Phrases

Choose the right meanings of idiomatic phrases from multiple alternatives.

* Students may be given a short writing practice using the words and phrases they learnt from [A] and [B].

[C] Script

This part can be used for both rapid reading, and close reading (here the editor's note implies that it can be used possibly based on the traditional translation method). What students learnt at [A] and [B] forms an essential part of the discourse presented in [C]. The teacher can allow the students to summarize the scene or allot each of them a character who appears in the movie and have them perform role-playing activity. The memorization of phrases which each student prefers, or guessing what happens next in the story, is also recommended at this juncture.

Post Viewing/Post-reading Exercises

[D] True/False Statements

Listen to statements which describe something about the sequence just watched and have the students judge it as true or false. When they think it is F, ask them why they think it is and then ask them what they think is right.

[E] Comprehension Questions

Plan A) As a writing practice, students answer the questions in English.

Plan B) Students listen to the questions and answer them orally. The teacher then helps them to make their speech more effective.

*Students may do [D] and [E] both before and after they watch the video, depending upon each teacher's design of the class.

[F] Discussion

Work in pairs or groups. Think about and discuss the issues provided by the teacher. After the discussion, the leader of each group makes a presentation of their conclusions to the other groups, or every student submits a short written report about what they talked about with other members of the group.

2.2. Evaluation

As expected, the book's emphasis on colloquial idiomatic phrases is reflected in its organization. In [A] and [B] many slang words often used in everyday situations are found. The total design of the book is also configured for developing the students' Communicative Competence, by letting them acquire colloquial expressions, giving them more input of English sounds, and prompting them to express their ideas and thoughts in English orally. Furthermore, the exercises are made to adjust to a wide range of possible uses in a

classroom, from the traditional method to the more communicative one. There is so much flexibility of use that the teacher can choose their own style of using the textbook.

2.3. Some Problems

However, the strong point mentioned above—flexibility of use—can on the other hand lead to infirmity of purpose: in short, the teacher is spoilt for choice. The text can be used without providing the students with any occasion to develop Communicative Competence. This possibility of making a class less communicative is a problem inherent in the very nature of movie watching—the promotion of passivity. Movie producers presume viewers are completely passive, and, in general, good movies are absorbing, so much so that the viewers may forget their positions as viewers. Similarly, students may be more interested in the unfolding of the plot than in the words used by the characters. In this case, classes will be passive partly because of the passive nature of watching movies. If we do not try to bridge the gap between the passive aspect of watching a movie and introducing a practice for developing Communicative Competence in a relation to the movie, classes will be passive and the students will learn profit little.

3. Introducing Role-playing

3.1. The Aim of Introducing Role-playing

To cover the shortcomings of the classroom activity proposed by the textbook, role-playing is good because it allows a smooth shift from an input-based work to a re-activation of the input. It is also easy for students as an initial step for communicative skill building since it is based on mimicry of what they heard with the guidance of a script. The feature of the audio-lingual method is carefully controlled activities and materials; dialogue mimicry and memorization. Using a movie script for a role-play activity in a class, teachers can manage the class in a way somewhat like this audio-lingual method. In doing a role-play, we replace the emphasis on contextual elements and arouse the students' empathy for the characters. According to Morley, there are three important dimensions the teacher should cater to in any pronunciation program; the learner's intellectual involvement, affective involvement, and physical involvement (Morley, 1991:506). Role playing practice of a movie script is suitable for these purposes. Also, we should note that "peer correction and group interaction" (Castillo, 1991:4) are necessary elements for strengthening students' consciousness of Communicative Competence development. According to these standpoints, PP is introduced into a comprehension-based textbook activity.

3.2. Procedures of PP Introduction

Divide students into groups according to the number of characters appearing in a chosen scene. Assign one character to each student and let them role-play the dialogue. Before they start the activity, give instructions about some targeted sounds, some of them are to be discussed in following sections as examples. These instructions are intended to direct them to realize the important points of English pronunciation and the rhythm of English sentences.

3.2.1. Sounds

As Dalton points out, the difficulty of English sounds for EFL/ESL learners is that “if the English sound is not clearly received, the brain of the learner converts it into the closest sound in their own language”. In this sense, for introducing distinctive sounds into PP, several points should be noted. First, sounds which our PP will particularly focus on are those which are especially difficult for Japanese learners to pronounce; second, teachers must put the chosen sets of sounds within a larger context; that is, sounds should be recognized within a speech which extends into a meaningful context.

For example, Thompson enumerates some pronunciation difficulties for Japanese learners. Most of the difficulties spring from the natural inclination of Japanese ESL learners to bring features of the Japanese sound system into that of the English sound system. Teachers must, therefore, be careful to prevent this slipping from one sound system to another in their students while introducing a PP exercise with a particular purpose.

Choosing consonants for an initial step of PP is good because consonants have such distinctive features as the narrowing or closing of the mouth and, as such, are somewhat easier to pronounce than vowel sounds. Thompson shows 9 problems with consonant pronunciation and 3 are quoted here because they are the most common problem points for Japanese learners (214).

1. /l/ and /r/ are both pronounced as a Japanese /r/ (a flap almost like a short *d*), causing confusion in pairs like *glamour* and *grammar*, *election* and *erection*.
2. /θ/ and /ð/ do not occur in Japanese. They may be pronounced as /s/ and /z/ or /ʃ/ and /dʒ/: *shin* for *thin*; *zen* for *then*.
3. /v/ may be pronounced as /b/: *berry* for *very*.

Slow motion practice of these sounds, such as those for example proposed by Morley (1992), seems to be quite effective. To integrate PP including such practice into the comprehension-based class in which a movie video is used, it is best to choose keywords

with difficult sounds from an interesting scene to practice. Words spoken in context have substance and meaning and are therefore interesting. Words spoken in rote lack context and soon bore the learner.

The teacher chooses example sentences which include the difficult sounds and lets the students pronounce them and examine each other. As Morley shows, some vocalic consonants have paired relationships with high vowel sounds. Morley's examples of linking and blending practices, which are designed to clarify the familiarity between high vowels and vocalic consonants, are quite interesting (86-89). They are supposedly fun in a classroom partly because the practice helps students to get used to certain sounds within word groups, and with increased awareness of internal phonetic relations between those sounds.

3.2.2. Rhythm/Intonation Pattern

Understanding the rhythm patterns in English utterances is also important for improving listening ability. To make students aware of these rhythm patterns, let them check the places where they could not understand the others' speeches. The teacher may not be able to find general rules about difficult points in order for students to understand other's speech, but the teacher may, for example, explain the general English stress pattern like strong-weak-strong-weak, which is very different from the Japanese pattern. The teacher may further point out that speech sounds are difficult to hear in words with weakly stressed syllables. However, as Catford states, in the initial stages a teacher should restrict oneself to the most frequent intonation pattern—that is, “a simple falling tone starting on the initial syllable of the last foot in a sentence for statements and WH-questions, and a rising tone for YES-NO questions” (88). Through this kind of instructions and activities, the teacher encourages the students to become aware of the particular rhythms of English.

The teacher shows that assertive speech has in general a falling intonation pattern, whereas interrogatives and declarations of intention for questioning have rising intonations. Additional comment on exceptional falling intonation of wh-questions may be done together. After explaining the normal relationship between an intonation pattern and a performative function of a sentence structure, the teacher assign the role-playing with instructions for the students to check the intonation pattern that the teacher just explained. At the end of this practice, the teacher asks the students to talk among themselves about what they have done within the activity.

3.3. The Evaluation Policy and a Brief Summary

The last issue to be argued is how to evaluate the activities so far discussed. As a motivational exercise with pronunciation practice, a role-playing exercise, based on a movie

script and video, was enacted in class by students. Both as an introduction to PP and as a role-play assignment, this method should help students more actively participate in class. Furthermore, a good evaluation policy should be one that precisely assesses how a student becomes a more autonomous learner through this activity. The degree of empathy with the character who they role-played will provide an appropriate measure for this purpose. To let students ask each other about what the character will do after the scene may be a good way to evaluate their achievements. The important point is that the teacher chooses a good way to test, and a good way to improve, the student's ability. If the teacher is successful in doing so, the students will show a strong desire to improve their English and express themselves well.

In general, Japanese ESL learners are forced to be passive in class for various reasons: the number of students in a normal size language class; the communicative ability of Japanese teachers of English itself or the editorial policies of textbooks by which publishers find out how to respond to a wide range of user requests. In a wider sense, PP, as we understand it in this article as a method of motivation-giving, is an excellent and enjoyable method for teachers to help their students to become more active and more autonomous learners.

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