

## Cinderella at the crossroads: *quo vadis*, English pronunciation teaching?

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Wie mehrere Autoren in diesem Heft drückt Marks seine Verwunderung darüber aus, dass man gerade im kommunikativ orientierten Fremdsprachenunterricht – in dem der Verständigung ein besonders wichtiger Platz eingeräumt werden sollte – der Aussprache lange Zeit so wenig Aufmerksamkeit schenkte. Auch für Englisch als Fremdsprache lässt sich dieser Mangel u.a. mit dem starken Einfluss der jeweiligen Muttersprachen erklären, der es schwierig macht, in internationalen Kursen auf die spezifischen Ausspracheprobleme der einzelnen Sprachgruppen gezielt einzugehen. Diese Erklärung hindert Marks jedoch nicht daran, Sprachlehrern zu empfehlen, systematisch Ausspracheschulung zu betreiben und diese wo immer möglich mit anderen Unterrichtsstoffen zu verbinden. Gerade für das Englische erscheint es nützlich, das Interesse der Lernenden auf regionale Akzente zu lenken und dabei ihr Gehör für die Wahrnehmung charakteristischer Unterschiede innerhalb des Redeflusses zu schärfen. Schliesslich widmet sich der Autor der Frage, welches Ziel man beim Aussprachetraining erreichen wolle: Ist es wichtig, eine Aussprache anzustreben, die sich der Aussprache der Muttersprachler bzw. der Aussprache einer bestimmten Teilmenge davon annähert und die jahrelanges intensives Üben erfordert, oder kann man sich am Kriterium der Verständlichkeit im Kreis von Personen verschiedener Herkunft ausrichten? Die Entscheidung hängt nicht zuletzt davon ab, in wie weit sich die Lerner mit der fremden Sprache und ihrem Lebensraum identifizieren wollen oder ob sie diese eher als gemeinsames Kommunikationsmittel in einem internationalen Kontext sehen.

If you're reading this it's likely that you are (still) a practising teacher of English and, therefore, that your methodology and your personal theories about language teaching and learning have been shaped to a greater or lesser extent by the 'communicative' approach that has been propagated by applied linguistics, teacher training courses and ELT (English Language Teaching) publishing throughout your career. Many of the tenets of the communicative ideology are now so familiar that it's hard to believe they were once regarded as innovative. Consider these two, for example:

1 What is taught should have high 'surrender value'. This term was actually introduced by Michael West, who defined it in 1926 as "the proportionate amount of benefit which will be derived by any pupil from an incompleting course of instruction" (Howatt, 1984: 245). It

was revived by proponents of the communicative approach to express the principle that no matter how short their course is, learners should learn language that they can immediately use in the so-called 'real world' beyond the classroom. Hence the emphasis on teaching 'language functions' such as how to make requests; how to make, accept and reject invitations; how to apologise and so on, instead of providing learners with a gradual accumulation of grammatical knowledge that they might someday, eventually, be able to put to communicative use. And hence, too, the following tenet:

2 Fluency is as important as, or possibly more important than, accuracy. Observation of learners shows that accuracy develops gradually and is typically attained only partially, even after many years of study and practice. So in line with the principle of high surrender value, even at elementary level, learners should be encouraged to use what little language they have acquired so far, to employ 'communication strategies', to 'negotiate meaning' and generally to attempt to achieve communicative success from an early stage, without needing to wait until they reach a high level of accuracy. This clearly makes sense for learners who need to start using English as soon as possible, rather than in the distant future. This new interest in the concept of 'fluency' led to the widespread adoption of a double-track approach to course design, with an alternation of accuracy-oriented and fluency-oriented activities. It also opened the door to an overly rigid distinction between accuracy and fluency, and a lack of recognition that an element of accuracy is needed for fluent language production, if this is to have any chance of achieving any but the most basic communicative goals.

The concept of ‘accuracy’ is associated most closely with grammar, but language knowledge and proficient language use clearly also depend on other types of accuracy, such as lexical accuracy and the factor which is generally labelled ‘appropriacy’ but which could also be called pragmatic accuracy. And what else? Ah, yes, pronunciation, of course! Both formal research (see, for example Ellis, 2008: 22) and casual observation tell us that pronunciation is the area of language learning in which accuracy, certainly if this is understood as *native-like* accuracy (and it generally has been, until quite recently), is least likely to be achieved. It’s common to find people who have lived in an L2-speaking country for several decades and who are extremely fluent and accurate in the L2, but whose pronunciation retains clear traces of their L1. We’ll return later to the question of whether this matters, but for the time being let’s try to explain the phenomenon.

Pronunciation is different from other aspects of language in that it relies on physiological mechanisms which, after a very early age, are less adaptable than the mental faculties required for language learning in general. As we learn to speak our L1 we adopt a characteristic articulatory setting (Honikman, 1964): a default position for the vocal organs and a particular distribution of energy in the muscles controlling them. Within this setting, we develop the ability to produce certain sounds and sequences of sounds – the ones used by our L1 – automatically and consistently. If we subsequently want to pronounce a different language, we face the struggle of overcoming our habitual use of our speech organs. Some learners achieve this more successfully than others but in general, for learners beyond the age of childhood, it is a difficult task. For instance:

1. English has a much larger number of vowel phonemes than many languages, such as Italian, Spanish or Polish. In learning English, speakers of these languages have to learn to make many new fine distinctions of vowel quality in order to differentiate words such as *hat*, *heart*, *hut*, *hurt*. German and French, on the other hand, have large vowel inventories, but many of the actual vowel sounds are quite different from the English ones, so that speakers of these languages also face a major task in redefining the distinctions they make between vowel articulations.
2. In German, voiced stops and fricatives are automatically devoiced in word-final position. German-speaking learners of English have to learn to suppress this automatic mechanism in order to make distinctions between pairs of words such as *dock* / *dog* or *price* / *prize*.
3. In Italian, a word generally ends in a vowel, and Italian speakers have to overcome the tendency to append vowel sounds to English words ending in consonants.
4. In French, stress-accent is a feature of the final syllable of an intonation unit; it may be preceded by quite a lengthy sequence of unaccented, but unreduced, syllables of roughly equal length. French-speaking learners of English have to learn to switch to a very different rhythmic principle, in which intonation units have a more flexible structure, stressed syllables occur more frequently, and the intervening unstressed syllables are subject to shortening and phonetic reduction.

Such examples could be extended into a daunting list for speakers of any language. And as well as causing problems of articulation, L2 features which are absent from L1, or different from L1, also present challenges for perception. We tend not to perceive L2 distinctions of sounds, stress and intonation which our L1 doesn’t make use of, and this clearly adds to the difficulty of listening to the L2 with understanding. The problem of listening is compounded in English by the extreme degree of deformation which words can be subject to in all but the most careful styles of speech. Consider this example (Cauldwell, 2003: 62): [əvʌd?æwɔznɔnədu:] The words run together, sounds are elided and vowels are reduced, making it hard for a learner to recognise this as “of what I wasn’t going to do”. The words are common ones, and the grammar is simple, but the sequence is quite likely to be uninterpretable. This is also something that has been largely overlooked in the wake of the communicative approach; conventional wisdom about how to foster listening skills, especially at lower levels, tends to emphasise the importance of understanding the ‘gist’, and of using contextual and background knowledge to supplement what can be gleaned from the acoustic signal itself. But it’s clearly difficult to understand even the gist if you can’t recognise the words that are spoken.

Pronunciation tends to take a back seat in the literature of English language teaching, the topics covered in teacher-training courses and the content of coursebooks. The communicative approach was in origin primarily a British development (for a summary, see Howatt, 1984: 273–289) and arose, therefore, in a context where classes are typically multilingual. So apart from the general equivocal attitude to accuracy, there was probably a pragmatic reason for the neglect of pronunciation: pronunciation is the area of language where interference from the first language is strongest and most resistant to teaching, and it would be particularly hard to specify, let alone to address, the pronunciation needs of a group of, say, fifteen learners who might have ten different first languages. It might also have been assumed – rather optimistically, perhaps – that negotiation of meaning in pair and group work would be sufficient to resolve communication problems resulting from pronunciation, just as much as from any other cause.

In any event, pronunciation was relegated to a subservient role in communicative syllabuses,

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methodology and materials. Key writings by early proponents of the communicative approach – see for example the papers in Brumfit and Johnson (1979) – contain little or no mention of pronunciation. The teacher's book for Abbs & Freebairn (1982) has only this to say about pronunciation: "Obviously, the recorded models provided on the accompanying cassette are invaluable for developing accuracy in stress and pronunciation." This is the upper-intermediate level of the *Strategies* series, one of the most trail-blazing and influential coursebook series of its era.

Similarly, the teacher's book for Doff & Jones (1983) states: "The course does not contain any formal teaching of pronunciation or intonation. However, students are given plenty of exposure to spoken English in the form of listening comprehension passages, listening models, recorded examples and the drills." It continues: "It is assumed that teachers can deal with any particular pronunciation and intonation problems as they arise." Such faith in teachers' abilities is certainly misplaced.

More recent coursebooks usually include a pronunciation component of sorts. Typically, there is:

- a focus on pronunciation associated with certain grammar points, such as *-ed* and *-s* inflections;
- some work on phonemes, e.g. finding the word that doesn't rhyme, or categorising words spelled with a certain letter according to how that letter is pronounced;
- some work on word stress.

Generally, there is no explicit pronunciation syllabus, and only some of the many available opportunities are taken to highlight pronunciation features of language introduced and practised. Where such features are highlighted, this is generally done on a one-off

basis, with no revision or recycling. And all too often, pronunciation appears at the end of a unit, in the bottom right-hand corner of a page, which only serves to reinforce its lowly status as the thing most likely to be omitted if time is short.

Of course, one factor that militates against thorough treatment of pronunciation in coursebooks designed for an international market is that learners' pronunciation needs, as was remarked above, are so deeply influenced by their L1. One solution is the expensive one of producing L1-specific versions of coursebooks. Another, perhaps commercially more attractive, solution would be to produce add-on web-based L1-specific material, though this would also entail the risk of teachers and learners perceiving pronunciation as optional or subsidiary.

Coursebooks are a powerful influence on teachers' professional awareness and practice. Teachers, faced with the day-to-day demands of their work, understandably tend to rely on a coursebook as a short-cut to making decisions about what to teach and how to teach it. Recent years have seen an upsurge in the publishing of supplementary materials for pronunciation work, but where coursebooks are concerned there is still a long way to go. In the meantime, one important agenda item for teacher-training courses should be to give teachers practice in spotting the hidden potential for pronunciation work in coursebook material whose ostensible purpose is something different: vocabulary, grammar, listening, reading and so on.

The legacy of neglect has left pronunciation as the Cinderella of English

language teaching, as has been noted by various commentators. (There have been other 'Cinderella' candidates, too, such as writing and spelling, but pronunciation has probably been the most popular!)

It's a paradox of the communicative approach that in downplaying the importance of accuracy in general, it somehow overlooked the fact that pronunciation is an immediate barrier to communication unless it has a certain degree of accuracy, in terms of conformity to some recognised, or at least recognisable, system – 'recognised' in the sense of standard, codified, widely-circulated; and 'recognisable' in the sense that listeners can tune in and perceive systematicity even if the details of the system are initially unfamiliar.

A small minority of learners seem to pick up the pronunciation of English of their own accord, but in most cases some pedagogical intervention is required; in fact, because learning the pronunciation of another language entails changing physiological habits, pronunciation teaching has something in common with speech therapy. Teachers, understandably, often feel under-equipped to help learners with their pronunciation; they lack phonetic knowledge and/or effective classroom techniques. Not surprisingly, they may choose to ignore pronunciation work altogether, or else just to include a few, possibly rather ineffective, token pronunciation exercises in their lessons. Learners, on the other hand, often rate pronunciation improvement as important, and something they would like to spend more classroom time on, not least because pronunciation can be an important contributor to confidence – or lack of it! – in speaking a language.

It would be useful if teachers were able to:

- integrate a concern for pronunciation into every lesson, whether the main focus is on vocabulary, grammar or whatever;
- intervene during fluency-oriented activities to give help when a mispronunciation is causing persistent misunderstanding, or seems to be becoming established among the members of a class;
- provide specific guidance and practice in aspects of pronunciation that are causing systematic difficulty for a class;
- provide practice in listening to a wide variety of native and non-native accents of English, with exercises to facilitate noticing of regional differences and of the characteristics of words and phrases when they occur in the stream of speech rather than as citation forms (see Field, 2008).

This is a challenging agenda for teacher-training and for ELT publishing.

But let's now return to an issue mentioned briefly earlier on: how important is it for learners to achieve, or even to aim for, native-like pronunciation, working through the kind of daunting agenda that was hinted at? Setting aside the complicating factor that there are so many different native accents of English to choose from, the fundamental fact is that native-like pronunciation is not important for the large and ever-increasing majority of learners who need to use English as a means of international communication. Not only is it not important; it can even be counter-productive; psychologically, some people feel that their accent is an important part of their identity, which they don't want to surrender when they speak English, and practically, it's often been observed that during international meetings conducted in English, most communication breakdowns occur when *native* speakers are speaking. (Of course this can happen for various reasons – their use of opaque idioms, for example

– but pronunciation is certainly a major contributing factor.)

Jenner (1989) introduced the idea of establishing a set of priorities for pronunciation teaching, as a realistic, achievable goal for learners who don't need or wish to aspire to native-like pronunciation, based on establishing "what *all* native speakers of *all* varieties have in common [.....] This will enable us to set up a *common core* for pronunciation, which would offer the learner a guarantee of intelligibility and acceptability anywhere in the world". He goes to suggest which aspects of pronunciation might be assigned higher and lower priority. For instance, distinctions of vowel length (long vs. short) would be allotted a higher priority than details of vowel quality; the rationale for this is that native accents of English vary enormously in the vowel qualities they use, but all of them make use of contrasts between long and short vowels, and therefore between long and short syllables, and therefore vowel length, but



Una scena dal film "My Fair Lady".

not vowel quality, is important for intelligibility. On the other hand, the consonant systems of native accents show very little variation, and so the integrity of consonant articulations can be assumed to be much more important for intelligibility. Other components of the common core proposed by Jenner include closed syllables (i.e. with consonants before and after a vowel), consonant clusters, the distinction between strong and weak syllables, and an intonation system with a binary set of tones on tonic syllables. Such a priority-based approach to pronunciation would make the teaching and learning load more manageable and give learners greater surrender value for the time and effort they spend on pronunciation.

Whereas Jenner's proposal assumes that learners should be intelligible to native-speaker listeners, the principle of a pronunciation 'common core' has been reconceptualised by Jenkins (2000) as the set of pronunciation features needed to ensure intelligibility among speakers of English as an international language, in interactions in which native speakers don't participate; this is the predominant locus of use of English in the world today, and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. Jenkins' 'Lingua Franca Core' (LFC) is based on research into miscommunications and communication breakdowns in English-language interactions between speakers of widely different L1s, plus a pragmatic consideration of which features seem to be teachable and which not.

The LFC concurs with Jenner's common core in some respects but not in others. For example, the LFC includes most consonant sounds, but not the notorious 'th' sounds, which Jenkins found to be unnecessary for international intelligibility and which are, furthermore, commonly found to be resistant to teaching. Simplification of initial consonant clusters by deletion is not acceptable, but simplification by

vowel insertion is; she found, for example, that a Japanese speaker's [pə'rɒdʌkɒtə] for 'product' was more intelligible than a Taiwanese speaker's [pɒdʌk]. Simplification of medial and final clusters, on the other hand, is much less damaging for intelligibility. Vowel length is more important than native-like vowel quality. Nuclear stress is important, but native-like intonation patterns aren't. And so on: the LFC is worked out in considerable detail, but is still provisional and subject to further empirical validation.

In the face of widespread misunderstanding of her intentions, Jenkins has repeatedly pointed out that the LFC is not appropriate for *all* learners. Those who are keen to aim towards native-like pronunciation should be given the help and support they need in order to achieve this aim as closely as possible. Such learners might include those who wish to identify and integrate with an English-language community, as well as those learning in national education systems where native pronunciation models are enshrined in syllabuses and examinations. This latter group would certainly, at least for the time being, include many European learners.

So, where does all this leave Cinderella? Is she any closer to realising her dream of going to the ball? Perhaps. Her situation has certainly changed in recent years. I now see her standing at a crossroads. In one direction is the old road, well-worn and still open to traffic: the long, winding, bumpy road to native-like pronunciation, full of tricky twists and turns, and with its complex set of junctions where travellers can turn off to reach their chosen native destination. In the other direction is a new road, still under construction but passable with care, which promises to be shorter and smoother, to redefine 'accuracy' of pronunciation in terms of a limited set of achievable goals, and to ensure high surrender value for the efforts of both learners and teachers. *Quo vadis, Cinders?* It's up to you which road you want to take, and who you want to dance with.

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