Beyond Fossilization: A Course on Strategies and Techniques in Pronunciation for Advanced Adult Learners

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This paper discusses the development of a course on the improvement of pronunciation for adult learners. It provides an overview of the course which combines phonology with strategies and techniques designed to take learners beyond various levels of fossilized pronunciation, i.e. "pronunciation highly resistant to change" (Selinker, 1972). One of the techniques, oral reading, is described in detail. The article ends with a summary of how the principles of self-directed learning are incorporated into the course.

In the development of a course on phonology and pronunciation for the Advanced Language Training Program (ALTP) of the Canadian federal government, several factors were considered. The first was the clientele: the students at the ALTP are adult francophone civil servants selected for training on the basis of their superior level of motivation and language learning aptitude. They come mainly from the managerial and executive ranks of various departments and agencies within the Canadian federal government. Most have been working in English, at least partially, for several years. The second factor was the ALTP's mandate to build a program based on the principles of self-directed learning. To attain and maintain a high level of bilingualism, active involvement in the language learning process is crucial. It is felt that this can be accomplished by encouraging self-directed learning both in theory and in practice. Thus, activities are organized which permit students to reflect on and take responsibility for their own language learning. At the same time, students are taught practical strategies and techniques in all the language skills which they can continue to use independently after the end of the program. The third factor which influenced the development of the course was the time frame of the ALTP. The program requires a two-year participation from the students. This is divided into an Academic Phase of four months or blocks during which students attend an intensive, full-time program of courses, and is followed by an Assignment Phase of twenty months where students return to a job or take a series of professional assignments in other

departments requiring the use of the second language at least 50% of the time.

A consideration of these factors resulted in the formulation of three questions:

1) How can the phenomenon of fossilized pronunciation in adults be dealt with?
2) What practical classroom activities to improve pronunciation can be developed to provide a meaningful context of learning for adults?
3) How can the principles of self-directed learning be incorporated into the course?

OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE

The phonology/pronunciation course is structured so as to permit work on three levels simultaneously: first, the phonological aspects of the language as applicable to francophone students at the advanced level; second, global strategies designed to develop "the habit of reflection" (Feiman, 1979) on the language learning process; third, specific techniques which represent the "hands-on" aspect of the course. The outline in Appendix 1 provides an overview of these aspects as presented in the four months or blocks of the Academic Phase.

Phonology

The phonological items listed in the first column of the outline (Appendix 1) were chosen according to the readily identifiable needs in pronunciation for francophones at the advanced level. Thus, Block I, or the first month of the program, covers the topics of syllable stress, unstress, rhythm, linking between words and phrasing. Block II, subtitled "Down to Details," deals with specific segmentals which are persistently difficult for francophone speakers of English: word endings such as the final "s" and "ed", the "h", the "th" and selected vowel sounds. The topic of varieties of native and non-native spoken English was added to meet the needs of students who work in offices with English speakers of several nationalities. Block III sensitizes students to the notion of intonation, its importance and subtlety in transmitting the shades of meaning which reflect the attitudes and feelings of a speaker, for example. Intonation and stress in phrasing, asking questions, counting, in the use of noun compounds, two-word verbs, and in expressing various shades of meaning are presented and practised. Block IV is subtitled "The Sounds of Conversational English or Why Can't I Understand my Anglophone Colleagues Over Lunch?" It presents the pronunciation phenomena associated with informal, conversational speech from

the point of view of comprehension rather than production. These phenomena include contractions, reductions, simplifications, speed, etc.

Strategies

The strategies in column two of the course outline (Appendix 1) are introduced at the rate of one per month. Their inclusion in the course is designed to give students a time and place to reflect on the language learning process in terms of pronunciation and also to encourage them to consciously assume responsibility for it. The strategies focus on the students' own role first and then branch out to include the teacher, the materials available and finally other native speakers. Class sessions on strategies are conducted as brainstorming activities where the students reflect aloud on the question at hand, share ideas, and through discussion, stimulate new ideas on how to maximize the language learning potential of various situations. The ideas are then compiled, typed and distributed to the students so they can keep track of their suggestions and those made by colleagues. (See Appendix 2.) This student-generated material is theirs to experiment with or not, as they choose. Frequently, students modify a colleague's suggestion to fit their particular needs.

Techniques

The "hands-on" techniques in column three of the course outline (Appendix 1) represent student-centred exercises which can be done in small groups or pairs in the classroom or individually in the language lab. They are initially introduced by the teacher and gradually taken over by the students. Indeed, student input as to procedure, content and evaluation of the exercises is an essential ingredient in the success of the exercises. The following describes one of these techniques in detail.

ORAL READING

Oral reading, one of the techniques which has been the backbone of the course, was first introduced to the author during a French language course held in France. It is similar to exercises traditionally done in French language diction classes where students rehearse and recite a text using their best pronunciation. A theatrical flavour and an element of fun in the exercise appeal to most students. Moreover, the activity is relevant to ALTP students because it brings context and ideas to pronunciation exercises. It parachutes us into the realm of spoken discourse with all the inevitable implications for rhythm, intonation, phrasing, phrase and word stress, and speed (Cureau & Vuletic, 1974). Of course, one could argue that "speaking a text" which was written to be read has its drawbacks in terms of authenticity. This weakness can be

remedied by using transcripts and tapes of authentic spoken dialogue such as interviews and conversations. In spite of this, the oral reading activity has the advantage of going beyond the isolated word, phrase or sentence level of traditional pronunciation exercises. Most importantly, the content of the text holds student interest and stimulates thought and student involvement—necessary ingredients for adult learners in particular who tend to tire quickly of mechanical and uncontextualized drills.

SELECTION OF THE ORAL READING TEXT

Almost any short text or excerpt of interest to students can be selected for the timeliness of the topic or for its relevance to the students' particular field of endeavour. It may be part of a novel, a magazine or newspaper article, a paragraph from a professional newsletter or journal, an advertisement, a taped dialogue with transcript from an ESL text book, a student composition or presentation, or a taped authentic conversation plus transcript. The length of the text will vary from a few lines to one paragraph to one page maximum, according to the abilities of the students. Initially, the teacher selects the text taking into account not only interest and length but also grammatical complexity, desired type of vocabulary, appropriate register, etc. Soon, students are encouraged to think about choosing their own texts and to accumulate a bank of interesting texts for later use.

TEACHER RECORDING OF TEXT

The teacher now records the text at a natural speed with natural rhythm and intonation. Or, for the sake of variety, other native speakers can be asked to record the text. Several copies of this master tape should be made for the students, using a fast copier machine often available in language labs. This recording will be used by the students for listening, shadowing (to be defined later in the paper) and repetition exercises. There should be a blank space on the cassette for the student to record his/her "personal best" performance. Alternatively, each student can be provided with one blank cassette tape onto which all personal best performances are recorded. The accumulated readings can be kept as a record of all work done in phonology and is evidence of progress made. As different oral readings are assigned, the final version is recorded onto this main tape. Students can then listen back to the work done six months previously to check for improvement—a kind of self-evaluation of progress.

PREPARATION PHASE

When introducing the oral reading technique to students, the teacher may divide it into preparation, performance and feedback phases. In

the preparation phase, as in all phases, there are many ways of approaching the activity. The following is a suggested, standard procedure open to modification.

First, the teacher briefly explains the activity to give the students an overview of the procedure. Then the teacher distributes a copy of the text (usually one short paragraph to begin with) to the students and asks them to read it silently while listening to it on tape. The main task at this point is to understand the ideas and the language of the text. Students are encouraged to ask questions on new vocabulary and expressions. There may be a discussion on the ideas presented in the text. Following this, the teacher asks the students to decide on a focus of work for the text. Or, if the teacher sees that a particular text lends itself well to a specific focus, such as the "th" or word endings, the focus may be the same for the whole class. The focus chosen for the activity should be written at the bottom of the page as a reminder to the student and as an indication to the teacher of the type of correction desired. If the students select their own focus for the text, they may choose to work on one or two of a variety of points such as syllable stress, phrasing, phrase stress, rhythm, speed, intonation, the initial "h", word endings, etc. In this way, students individualize the activity to fit their needs and interests. They also practise defining and setting their own objectives. Still in preparation, students are now encouraged to listen to the text several times and mark it for the points of focus. For example, they may circle word endings, mark syllable or phrase stress, cross out silent letters, indicate linking between words, mark off thought groups, pauses, intonation, etc.

PERFORMANCE PHASE

Now the students are ready for imitation, repetition and performance. The teacher asks the students to "shadow read" the text as they listen to the tape. Shadow reading is the superimposition of voices during which the students read the text aloud, in a relatively soft voice, at exactly the same time as the voice on the tape. This differs slightly from the tracking exercise mentioned by Acton (1984) who defines it as an activity where "learners attempt to repeat immediately *after* the speaker whatever the speaker says on a word-by-word basis". He goes on to say, and this is also true of the shadowing exercise, that "it is an intense experience, one that eventually forces learners to focus on intonation contours, stress and rhythm, independent, to some degree, of the lexical content. With practice, the ability to attend to both form and content develop." The students shadow the text several times, listening carefully and imitating the native speaker's voice. After several repetitions, the goal is to record a "personal best". This is not memorization, but rather a phase which allows for experimentation. Students are encouraged to

exaggerate, to overarticulate, to be actors, to speak loudly and brightly or softly and slowly, to experiment with modifying their voices in English in order to develop a sense of range, flexibility and accuracy. This seems to lower inhibition and build confidence.

Also, during the performance phase, students are asked to listen back to their recordings several times in an effort to compare their pronunciation to that of the native speaker. This sharpens their ability for focussed listening. It also accustoms them to hearing how they sound in the second language—often a disconcerting experience. By now, students are beginning to take responsibility for their learning by listening critically to themselves—a kind of self-monitoring. They can then make notes or question marks on their texts when they have difficulty or are unsure of something. This self-monitoring can be a first step to self-correction.

FEEDBACK PHASE

Students now seek feedback from a teacher, colleague, friend or any native speaker. As with other phases, this can be done in a variety of ways, but the onus is on the student. With their "personal best" performance on tape plus a copy of the text in hand, they may indicate to the native speaker which aspects of the text they wish feedback on. This can be done in a one-to-one session where student and teacher listen to the tape together, both making comments and asking questions. Or it can be done by the teacher alone who listens to the tape, marks comments on the text, returns both tape and text to students who then listen back and read the feedback at their convenience. Finally, if time and energy allow, the student produces a comprehensive final reading using the suggestions gleaned from the feedback sessions. These are only two of many types of feedback options.

All in all, the oral reading technique is a flexible exercise which permits ideas and modifications by both students and teacher to be incorporated gradually as the activity unfolds.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

The last section of this paper deals with how the principles of self-directed learning are incorporated into the phonology/pronunciation course. The goal is to have students gradually take over the responsibility, control and management of their own language learning process by engaging in a series of interrelated steps as outlined by Henri Holec (1981):

1) defining and setting one's objectives
2) defining and selecting the content of one's learning activities
3) defining and selecting methodologies and techniques of learning suitable to one's learning style
4) deciding on the best physical location for and the timing of one's learning activities
5) evaluating one's effort both in terms of linguistic progress and in terms of degree of autonomy.

As the students' participation becomes less passive and more active, the teacher's role also changes from that of traditional authority figure to that of facilitator or guide. At this point, the teacher suggests, asks questions, and helps the students reflect on the language learning process by acting as a sounding board for ideas and problem-solving.

In the phonology/pronunciation course, the technique of oral reading demonstrates how the principles of self-directed learning are put into practice. After setting individual objectives, the students gradually assume responsibility for the other phases of the activity. The choice of text is delegated to the students. This requires the selection of appropriate content with regard to topic, length, complexity, type of vocabulary, etc. Responsibility for evaluation in the form of self-monitoring and self-correction is gradually handed over to students in feedback sessions where the teacher encourages students to take control. The teacher may invite students to stop the tape recorder and ask for explanations or corrections only when they feel the need for it rather than stopping for every error. Also, students are encouraged to take responsibility for self-correction by making notes and deciding how to process the feedback they receive over a period of time. Thus, students tend to develop their own symbols, abbreviations, rhyming key words and thought associations for items they particularly want to correct. Finally, students begin the process of self-evaluation by listening to their earlier recordings to observe and compare their present manner of pronunciation to their previous manner.

CONCLUSION

The phonology/pronunciation course of the ALTP demonstrates that steps can be taken to improve fossilized pronunciation in adult students by engaging them in activities which sustain interest and generate optimism. Given genuine motivation, a little elbow grease, and a combination of meaningful activities, students who have been speaking English for years can go beyond fossilized pronunciation habits.

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APPENDIX 1

COURSE OUTLINE: PHONOLOGY/PRONUNCIATION

		PHONOLOGY	STRATEGIES	TECHNIQUES
BLOCK I		*The Flow and Music of English* ● Syllable Stress ● Rhythm & Unstress ● Linking & Phrasing	*Self:* What can *I* do to improve my pronunciation?	● Oral Reading/Shadowing ● Observation and imitation of native speakers' pronunciation ● Repetition and practice
BLOCK II		*Down to Details* ● Vowels and Consonants ● Word Endings Varieties ● Accents of English	*Tutor:* How can my *tutor* help me work on pronunciation?	● Self-Monitoring and Self-Correction ● Kinesthetic Correction ● Dictionary Pronunciation Keys
BLOCK III		*Tone and Nuance* ● Basic Intonation Patterns ● Intonation and Stress for Special Emphasis ● Attitudinal Use of Stress and Intonation	*Resource Centre:* How can I best use the *materials* at my disposal?	● Dictation ● Errors: A New View ● Error Analysis: Make Errors Work
BLOCK IV		*The Sounds of Conversational English* ● Levels of Language ● Contractions/Reductions ● Rapid Speech Phenomena	*Resource People:* How can I get *anglophones* involved in helping me make progress in pronunciation?	● "How to Tame an Anglophone" ● "How to Break Old Habits—Easier Said Than Done" ● "Tricks and Tips: Memory and Mnemonics"

STRATEGIES TO GET HELP WITH PRONUNCIATION
DURING THE ASSIGNMENT PHASE

or

How to finetune an anglosaxophone . . .

1. Find the right person:
   The choice of resident anglophone is extremely important. Try to choose someone who is linguistically sensitive. Many people who are not can't really help and you shouldn't expect them to.

2. Appropriateness:
   There's a time and a place for language feedback. It's difficult to interrupt the flow of a conversation to ask for correction. Also, during a formal business meeting with people from other departments, it may be inappropriate. However, if there are anglophones sympathetic to the cause present, one could ask them to note down the major linguistic "problems" they notice.

3. Set a date:
   One could set up an appointment for ten to twenty minutes of linguistic feedback on spoken English. Why not confer with your sympathetic anglophone on things you have said during the past week or so. You may have mental or written notes to guide the conversation on a few items you had difficulty expressing lately and on which you would like suggestions for improvement.

4. Positive Feedback:
   It's great to have positive as well as negative feedback from others. We might remember to congratulate others on their progress in the hopes that they will do the same for us when it comes to their attention.

5. Let people know you mean business:
   It's essential to let people know consistently that you really want and appreciate their corrections and feedback. We all recognize that, for a number of reasons, people are reticent to correct others. They need constant but gentle reminders.

6. Negotiating Feedback:
   Many types of arrangements for "an exchange of services" can be made from negotiating a more formal contract to an understanding between two people. What seems to be important is to clarify the understanding with the people involved and not just quietly hope it'll all work out.

7. Recognize Feedback When You Get It:
   Feedback may take many forms: some direct and clear, others indirect and subtle. A correction might be a rephrasing of what you said in more colloquial language. Or it might be a complete change of what you said. In both cases, it is indeed correction and should be accepted as such.

8. Ask the right question:

When discussing an error, the question *WHY* may not be the most productive. It demands a grammatical or academic explanation which often is not possible from a native speaker who speaks the language but has not necessarily studied it.

The *HOW* type of question seems to get us further:

> How do you pronounce this word/phrase/title, etc.?
> How could I improve this?
> Can you suggest an alternative way of saying this?
> How can I say this to sound more "English"?

9. Special Relationship:

The relationship we have with a linguistically sensitive native speaker is special . . . It's not one we can have with all our colleagues. It's good to be aware of this.

10. Mental Shadowing:

When in a meeting, we can mentally shadow the speech of someone who expresses him/herself particularly well.

11. Reuse it or lose it:

Keep track of new language by using the first opportunity which presents itself to reuse the item. If you don't take the opportunity, that means you haven't learned or acquired the item. But don't worry—it'll come back when you're ready.