

## **PronunciationforTeachers.com/Teaching Techniques**

### **Socially Constructed Metalanguage and Critical Listening: How to help learners recognize their errors**

In recent studies, I have been asking teachers about their views on pronunciation error correction and one of the themes is that it is often ineffective in the long term (Couper, 2016, 2017). They suggest that some errors are momentary lapses, and some can be easily resolved with a little information relating to the pronunciation of the word in question, but others are very difficult to resolve. These seem to be entrenched, systematic pronunciation difficulties. This article reviews the key findings of two long term studies (Couper, 2006, 2009, 2013) that attempted to increase our understanding of how such difficulties can be overcome, and suggests practical solutions that will help learners to achieve and maintain gains in the long term.

The focus in both studies was on the pronunciation of ends of words, or syllable codas. Sometimes this involves the addition of an extra vowel, e.g., Korean speakers who say 'fishy' when they mean 'fish', or the omission of final consonants making it difficult to understand the word (or the related grammar when past tense and plural markers are omitted). This focus was chosen because it represented a widespread systematic difficulty faced by my students.

The first study (Couper, 2006) involved an intact class of 21 ESOL learners. There were also 50 learners who acted as a control group. While the control group made no progress, the group that received the instruction decreased their error rate from 19.9% to 5.5% between the pre- and post tests and had retained most of these gains in a delayed post-test three months later (error rate of 7.5%). The study found that although L1 played a role, individual differences were more important, suggesting that some learners naturally notice what is salient to the L1 speaker while others do not. It was also determined that explicit instruction was of particular value to those who find it difficult to notice these salient differences.

I employed a wide range of teaching techniques, exploring what did and did not work, which made it difficult to pinpoint what had helped to make the instruction successful. However, qualitative findings (reported in Couper, 2009) based on both the teacher/researcher's observations and insights from learners suggested the following techniques may have been 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. Traditional explanations of syllables in terms of consonant-vowel patterns often used in textbooks were not helpful because learners did not perceive they were adding an extra vowel or omitting consonants. This made it clear that to successfully communicate about the way expert speakers perceive sounds, teachers also need to consider learners' perceptions.

This led to a second study (Couper, 2009, 2013) involving just four students so that I could focus more clearly on what was happening with individuals' perceptions and more precisely define the factors that make pronunciation instruction effective. This time I tested the students eight months later (although in one case it was 18 months) and found that they had retained and even advanced the gains made. I identified two key variables: Socially Constructed Metalanguage (SCM) and Critical Listening (CL). SCM involves talking about pronunciation by starting with the learners' perceptions, asking learners how they hear it, and

drawing comparisons with how an expert speaker might hear it. The metalanguage used comes from the learners as they engage in meaningful discussion to socially construct common understandings. These can be referred to when giving feedback later. In Critical Listening, the learner listens to two productions, one acceptable and one not, and is asked to focus on how they are different (Fraser, 2009). By making it clear how these differences are salient to meaning, learners can be helped to understand how expert speakers perceive the target sounds. The aim is to develop speech perception and learn where the boundaries are between phonological categories in the target language.

The study reported on several interesting exchanges that shed light on the importance of effective communication and what could be done to ensure it is effective. For example, a downward hand movement by the teacher was misinterpreted as referring to intonation and in another case a student had said *export* when she meant *expert* but she misinterpreted the correction as referring to mispronunciation of /p/ until the teacher used the board for clarification. This underlines the importance of using the board to provide visual representations in addition to acoustic ones. A haptic approach would encourage an agreed upon set of meanings for gestures (See: [actonhaptic.com](http://actonhaptic.com)).

In practice, it would be good to run diagnostic tests and work with learners to increase awareness of their most significant pronunciation difficulties, i.e., ones that may affect comprehensibility and/or intelligibility. In the case of entrenched systematic pronunciation difficulties, learners must first be made aware that there is a problem and then be helped to understand precisely where the problem is before they can begin to understand the salient differences between their production and that of the expert speaker. For example, if a learner says *It's a difficult* when they want to say *It's difficult*, write the two phrases on the board. Underline the extra word and ask "Did you want to say this one or that one?" Say "I heard this one. This is how it sounded to me. *It's a difficult*. Listen to this one *It's difficult*. What's the difference?" They might suggest the 'ts a' in *it's a difficult* is longer, stronger, or louder. This suggests that while an expert speaker perceives an extra syllable, they perceive it as a different way of saying the same sound. This example illustrates that instructors need to help students understand the salient differences. We can start by asking the learner to say both versions and then point to the one perceived by the teacher. I can also use these words (the 'ts' is too long) in giving feedback. Once the learner understands how these sounds (*It's difficult* and *It's a difficult*) are categorized differently by English speakers they can remind themselves what they have to do to get the message across. As a teacher, one can create information gap activities that require accurate pronunciation to successfully communicate (For example, see the *Drunk Snail* game on my blog: [pronunciationteaching.wordpress.com](http://pronunciationteaching.wordpress.com)).

To summarize, our goal is to raise awareness of the nature of pronunciation difficulties by communicating explicitly and meaningfully about them with the help of SCM. We want to help learners form new category boundaries by using Critical Listening to present contrasts between what the expert speaker does and does not perceive as belonging to the category. We need to take a broadly communicative approach to involve learners in the meaning making process and provide practice and the right kind of feedback with a focus on forming concepts using SCM, and define instruction in terms of what helps learners to form and practice new concepts (SCM and CL).

These studies suggest explicit pronunciation teaching can help, but it needs to be learner focused. I would suggest we should not present rules and explanations as acoustic facts

(because they are generally not) or in terms of English phonology (which the students may not understand because the whole point is that they do not understand some aspects of English phonology). We should also be careful not to assume: that learners hear the same things you do, that they understand terms such as syllable and stress in the same way that you do, or that they understand exactly what it is you are correcting.

Finally, the success of the approach suggested here is based on recognition that we are helping learners to form new concepts. For evidence of the centrality of concepts to phonology and the role of cognitive skills in concept formation we turn to Cognitive Linguistics because it provides us with a classroom relevant usage-based approach to understanding pronunciation (Fraser, 2006; Mompean, 2014) and to Socio-Cultural Theory for a related theory of learning (Lantolf, 2011). The implication is that learning pronunciation involves learning a different way of thinking about sounds. As teachers, we have to remember that when we think about English pronunciation we are doing it from the perspective of someone who already understands the underlying concepts. This makes it easy to forget that the actual sounds produced do not correlate one-to-one with the phonemes we see in the dictionary. A two-step process is involved: first we have to understand the difference between what we actually say (the physical sounds) and what we think we say (the way we categorize sounds, or phonology). Then we have to help learners go through the same process with their first language by getting them to use their ears to change the way they are used to thinking about sounds so we can help them understand the way English speakers think about sounds. By engaging in cross-cultural communication both teachers and learners are better able to understand each other and develop a common basis on which to build and maintain pronunciation proficiency in the long term.

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