

Foreign-language accent imitation in L1 / Teaching Techniques

How do we do it?

Foreign-language accent imitation in L1 is simply speaking one's native language with an imitated accent of a foreign language. In this mode, we attempt to transplant the sound structure of a learned language upon our native language. By doing so, we are able to heighten learners' phonetic and phonological awareness (García-Lecumberri (2001). This is the ability to spot and manipulate the sound components of spoken words. As such, it is a key element in learning the pronunciation of a foreign language, because we need to manipulate acoustic properties of sounds occurring in our native language to approximate the target pronunciation of a foreign language. With FL accent imitation in the L1 we reverse the pattern. In this case, we manipulate sounds while speaking our native language. Our research with Polish students of English involved learners imitating properties of the English sound system in Polish in a task in which they were asked to show how British people speak Polish (Rojczyk 2015; Sypiańska and Olender 2013). The results showed that Polish voiceless /p, t, k/ were consistently produced with stronger aspiration, which is typical for English (Polish voiceless stops are unaspirated). There were also traces of vowel modification, as in the case of raising /e/ (Polish /e/ is lower than English). The technique may also be used for dialectal accent imitation within a single language (Adank et al., 2013). Moreover, it is used in forensic phonetics to study how effective is imitating foreign accent or dialect in criminal voice disguise (Rose, 2002).

Why do we do it?

When asked to imitate a FL accent in their L1, learners reveal to researchers which features of FL pronunciation they have detected as robust and which of them they have already acquired. Logically, we could ask why not require the learners to speak the FL to train or analyse the features of their accent. It is because speaking a FL carries multiple additional challenges arising from forming utterances on a syntactic, grammatical, or lexical level. This may create a processing load that will distract the learners from paying attention to the properties of sounds. Accent imitation in the L1 avoids these complications. What is more, speaking a FL may be stressful or inhibiting for some learners. In accent imitation we overcome these inhibitions by introducing an element of fun. Now, the learners are not themselves, they only imitate how foreigners speak their language. However, without knowing it, they give away a great deal about what pronunciation features of FL they find salient and they have already learned to imitate. In other words, the element of entertainment implicit in accent imitation may lead to more open and less restricted productions and thus will be equally, or frequently even more, informative than classic elicitation in FL. This technique has been replicated in other studies, and has been shown to be more effective than standard pronunciation practice in the L2 (Everitt, 2015).

Advantages

1. Learners are able to concentrate only on the properties of sounds, even in spontaneous speaking.
2. The element of entertainment is introduced – usually the funnier it sounds the more successful it is.
3. We know which features are already acquired as salient.

4. We may introduce new features to impress on learners how these features change the way they sound.
5. We bypass inhibitions and the linguistic ego which are really impeding for some learners – now, it is not them speaking, they only pretend to be someone else.

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