Some Goals and Components in Teaching English Pronunciation

To Japanese EFL Students

Yujin Komoto (Shirayuri College, Tokyo, Japan)

popeye@kikimimi.ne.jp

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how and where to set learner goals in English phonetic education in Japan, especially at the threshold level, and on what components are necessary to achieve them both from practical and theoretical perspectives. It first describes some issues mainly through the speaker's own teaching plan and a literature review of various researchers such as Morley (1991), Kajima (1989), Porcaro (1999), Matsui (1996), Lambacher (1995, 1996), Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994), and Murphy (1991). By comparing and analyzing these and other researchers, the speaker tries to set and elucidate reasonable and achievable goals for students to attain intelligibility for comprehensible communicative output. The paper then suggests detailed components that form an essential part of desirable pronunciation teaching plan in order to realize a well-balanced curriculum between segmental and suprasegmental aspects.

1.   Introduction

This paper deals with how and where to set learner goals in English phonetic education in

Japan, especially at the threshold level, namely, at junior high school level. It also deals with

what components are necessary to achieve such goals from both practical and theoretical

perspectives. In my previous papers, such as those I wrote in 1999 and 2000, I gave priority to

practical aspects, and introduced a syllabus that I designed myself for a junior high school

textbook. So this paper should be good opportunity to review the literature of phonetic

education, focusing on such major studies as done by Morley (1991), Dalton and Seidlhofer

(1994) and others. I will compare and analyze these studies, and based on the findings in these

studies and my previous phonetic syllabus design, I would then like to think about some of the

reasonable and attainable goals and syllabus in order that the students can achieve

intelligibility for more comprehensible communicative competence in their pronunciation.

2. Review of the Literature and Discussion

2.1. Morley (1991)

Joan Morley starts her 1991 monumental article with a general survey of pronunciation

teaching in the field of TESOL, especially from a historical point of view over the past half

century. She points out some of the most significant changes in theoretical paradigms in

TESOL as follows:

1. From a language learning perspective of outside-in, to one of inside-out; that is,

a changed concept of language acquisition that views the learner as the active prime

mover in the learning process, and an emerging paradigm shift in which learners are

seen as active creators, not as passive recipients, in a process which is cognitively

driven.

2. Following from this altered conceptualization of the learning process, a

movement from a focus on the group, to an increasing focus on individual learner

differences and individual learning styles and strategies.

3. From a focus on language as simply a formal system, to a focus on language as

both a formal system and a functional system, one that exists to satisfy the

communicative needs of its users.

4. From linguistic preoccupation with sentence-level grammar to widening

interest in semantics, pragmatics, discourse, and speech act theory.

5. From an instructional focus on linguistic form and correct usage to one on

function and communicatively appropriate use.

6. From an orientation of linguistic competence to one of communicative competence.

7. From a global competence concept to detailed competency specifications and the introduction of an especially useful model that brings together a number of viewpoints in one linguistically oriented and pedagogically useful framework: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence.   (p. 483f)

To sum up the above quotation, the major changes that occurred during the past decades put stress on 1) more student-centered teaching; 2) attending to individual learner differences; 3) focusing on both formal and functional systems to meet better communicative needs; 4) a shift from sentence level grammar to discourse level grammar; 5) focus on function and communicative appropriateness and competence; and 6) a shift from a global competence concept to a varied concept combining such aspects as grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic. These changes are still our continuing concern nearly ten years after the publication of the article. Morley then

reviews the changes in pronunciation teaching that happened during the same period. She

starts her review from the 1940s and 50s, that is, audiolingual methodology that focuses on

correct grammar and accuracy.   She then reviews the period between 1960s and 80s, and

indicates that there was a period of total elimination or reduction of pronunciation teaching,

mainly because of "growing dissatisfaction with many of the principles and practices of the

traditional approach to pronunciation." (p. 485)   By "traditional approach," she refers to

the one based on articulatory phonetics, and the recent trend has been shifting its emphasis

to   more   communicative   interactions,   functional   language   use,   and   task-based

methodologies.

Starting in the 70s, however, there were some drastic changes as a reaction to the

elimination and reduction of pronunciation teaching in the previous period, which were

reflected in the increasing number of articles and publications that appeared. Such authors

as Prator, Allen, Bowen, Dickerson, Kreidler, Brown, Parrish and many others published

articles and books on pronunciation from quite a different point of view, compared with

those of the previous periods. These changes include treatment of intonation with more

practical suggestions, emphasis on the need for more learner involvement and speech self-

monitoring, variability in L2 pronunciation performance, reports on both teachers' and

students' preferences for correction, increasing attention to suprasegmentals and sound

changes such as stress, rhythm, intonation, reductions, and assimilations.

In the 80s and into the 90s, pronunciation teaching in the ESL/EFL areas has further

developed centering around ESP areas, that is, there was a growing needs for pronunciation

for academic, occupational and other social reasons. Stemming from the development in these

areas mainly in the United States, the number of journal articles and teacher resource books

made another increase in the 80s, which was "clearly a reflection of renewed interest in

pronunciation teaching principles and practices." (p. 487)   And the trend was going away

from teaching pronunciation in isolation, and going more in the direction of pronunciation

within discourse. Thus, rather than accuracy, intelligibility[1] came to be considered as the most

important component in learning and teaching pronunciation. In order to gain intelligibility in

a context, Morley also stresses the importance of voice quality and paralinguistic features as

well as suprasegmental features. (p. 493)   In order to improve students' voice quality,

paralinguistic features, and suprasegmental features , an activity that readily comes to our

mind is "English through drama." There are, of course, numerous reference materials in this

field, but the following is one of the recent and an example of a good course design both in

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[1] "Intelligibility" is rather an elusive concept, but Morley succinctly defines it as "reasonably easy to understand and not distracting to listeners." Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994: 9) also refers to this term and

terms of utility and handiness: "English Through Drama: A Visual/Physical Approach" by

Stephen Whitear. Other useful resources include "Role Playing/Simulation" by Patricia K.

Tompkins where such activities encourage students' thinking and creativity and provide them

with relatively nonthreatening setting.   Porcaro (1999) reassures us of significance and

practicability of recitation to develop students' pronunciation, articulation, intonation, rhythm,

voice projection and so forth.

The following are some of other essential items in teaching pronunciation according to

Morley:

1.   A focus on the link between listening and pronouncing/speaking and a need

to expand the nature and the range of pronunciation-oriented listening instruction.

2.   A focus on a range of important sound/spelling relationships, especially in

stress and

rhythm instruction.

3.   A   focus   on   the   uniqueness   of   each   ESL   learner.

(p. 493f)

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writes that "social and psychological factors also bear upon the question of intelligibility."

Most of the Japanese teachers should be aware of the importance of all of these above, but they are yet to be fully realized in classrooms. Concerning the second item, namely, the link between listening and pronunciation, we should say that many of the Japanese junior high school textbooks are still content-oriented rather than pronunciation-oriented.

2.2. Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994)

Next, I would like to take up Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994, henceforth, Dalton). This book gives us quite a different view on pronunciation teaching from Morley's components, which basically centers around learner-oriented philosophy and practices. Among the various issues she treats and discusses, Dalton also highlights those aspects related to teacher education. She begins the book with such basic topics as main concepts and terminology in the field of pronunciation teaching, but in Section 11, she goes on to make the reader think about "ways in which teachers can explore and make use of the theoretical and pedagogic approaches to pronunciation." (p. 153)   In this section, she introduces a number of tasks that are readily available to use in the classroom. These tasks are valuable because they give us teachers useful clues to reflect on what we have been doing in class, and they also help us realize and

remember important factors to improve our teaching. Some of the tasks Dalton introduces are

(pp. 153-171):

Task 114: Self-reflection on how much attention you pay to pronunciation points in

your teaching--- for about a week, keep a diary of how often you cover pronunciation

points (correcting, explicit teaching).

Task 115: To survey teaching materials for pronunciation points covered--- survey

your coursebook considering the following questions: are pronunciation points built in

regularly? What aspects of pronunciation are covered--- sounds, word stress, prominence,

'sentence stress', intonation connected speech? Do listening tasks pay attention to

pronunciation points? Is pronunciation integrated with the other material or is it 'tagged

on'? ...

Task 117: To explore the occurrence of connected speech phenomena in recorded

course materials--- listen to the tapes you are using, evaluate them according to rhythm,

tempo, and clarity, and make a note of the connected speech phenomena that occur.

The above tasks may look like a matter of course at first glance, but we should say that

they are very often overlooked as we are busy occupied with our daily teaching routines. For

example, in Task 114, Dalton suggests us to reflect on how much attention we pay to

pronunciation in our teaching, and at least some of us have to admit that we seldom take a

backward glance at our daily teaching routines. And about Task 115, how many of us actually

make a survey of our textbooks from a phonetic point of view, although we are aware of its

importance? I suspect that even fewer of us check our AV materials in detail, attending to such

phenomena as rhythm, tempo and other aspects that are involved in connected speech. In other

tasks, Dalton advises us to have discussions with our students on various points, including

arousing sensitivity to pronunciation points in students, students' listening, and which

pronunciation points our students are already aware of.

2.3. Murphy (1991)

Along with the necessity of reflection of our teaching and materials and of knowing

students' needs, Murphy (1991) refers to various methodologies that have to be kept as central

consideration in our mind (p. 52):

1.   Grammar Translation

2.   Total Physical Response

3.   Audiolingualism

4.   Direct Method and Situational Language Teaching

5.   Comprehension Approach

6.   Natural Approach

7.   Silent Way

8.   Suggestopedia

9.   Community Language Learning

10.   Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Murphy mentions in the following paragraph that, among these various approaches, we

naturally have to choose appropriate ones according to the level of students we are engaged in.

For example, Total Physical Response, the Silent Way, or Suggestopedia may seem less

appropriate for intermediate or advanced levels. (p. 53)   With these approaches in mind, he

then asserts the necessity to integrate the three phases, namely, speaking, listening, and

pronunciation, in oral communication classes in TESOL, and that ESL teachers should

highlight all three when they are designing course curricula and /or classroom activities.

Murphy also advises us that microlevel phonological information is necessary for both

listening and speaking, along with the necessity to gain macrolevel perspectives. Recent trends

in pronunciation teaching/learning may have been putting excessive emphasis on macrolevel

phonology such as stress, intonation, rhythm, sound changes and so forth. We agree with

Murphy in order to maintain a balance between suprasegmental and segmental phonology.

Among the articles that treat microlevel phonology for Japanese EFL learners are: Lambacher

(1995, 1996) that deals with nasals and interdentals through comparison between Japanese and

native English speakers' pronunciation by using the sound analyzer; Matsui (1996) that

indicates drawbacks to using visual aids in teaching interdentals; Dalton (1997) that combines

segmental practices with communicative activities.

Besides these technical aspects of pronunciation, he reminds us that attaining better

pronunciation habits is intimately linked with learners' affective states, thus we can avoid such

counterproductive factors as embarrassment can be avoided in the classroom. (p. 58)

3. Conclusion

Through the above review of the literature, we have been able to confirm that

pronunciation teaching/learning must be done in the classroom, because it is necessary to

improve communicative competence. However, it should not be done in isolation to pursue too

much accuracy which eventually develops disinterest and the sense of monotony on the side of

the learner, but it should be done in a context and in a communicative way in order that the

teaching/learning of pronunciation bears as much meaning and function as possible to attract

and maintain students' motivation and involvement. There has been a period, especially in the United States, when articulatory phonetics has been either eliminated or reduced, and since then the emphasis was mostly on suprasegmental aspects. I think, however, that there should not be too much emphasis on such aspects, and that we should also pay attention to segmental aspects as Murphy suggests in his article. This is especially true if we consider that we are teaching pronunciation to Japanese EFL students, whose L1 has a number of segmental differences that cause problems to attain intelligibility.

This paper leaves us with two issues that still needs to be solved. One is to pay attention to individual learner differences when we instruct our students, but at present, this is very difficult to realize due to the large size of the class, 30 to 40 students in each class at many of the schools, and also due to insufficient number of hours allotted to English learning. Another issue that must be borne in mind is that many of the textbooks that are used in junior high schools do not have a focus on the link between listening and pronunciation. Almost all of the listening practices in the textbooks are merely content-oriented and not pronunciation-oriented, but this should and can be improved once we clarify the teaching points and develop methodology.

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