

THE ROLE OF ARTICULATORY EMPATHY IN THE TEACHING OF PRONUNCIATION

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ABSTRACT

The concept of articulatory empathy is discussed in the context of teaching FL pronunciation to learners with poor phonetic ability. Successful learners are able to empathise with a variety of models (even ones with voice sets radically different from their own) or with a "generalized" model. The underachievers are not so flexible: a randomly chosen model - even one that they find attractive - will not lead to a permanent empathic response which can only be evoked by a suitably matched voice set. Practical implications of this fact (or postulate) are considered.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I am concerned with the pronunciation training of FL learners whose phonetic ability is rated low because of marked foreign accent which they are (apparently) unable to drop. This category of underachievers does not seem to attract either researchers or FL methodologists. SLA research connected with pronunciation capability has concentrated (justly or unjustly) on the successful learner (e.g. Guiora et al./1/, Suter /2/, Purcell /3/). FL methodology considers the problem marginal, which is not surprising in view of the general insistence on cost-effectiveness: programmes devised to improve the accent of underachievers imply long hours of extra work with uncertain results, particularly with learners past the critical age of puberty. Moreover, while foreign accent weakens FL performance, it does not, by itself, preclude successful communication (cf. Brown: "We all know people who have less than perfect pronunciation but who also have a magnificent and fluent control of a second language" /4/).

I hope to demonstrate here that (1) the study of the poor learner may contribute to SLA research, by analysing the concept of articulatory empathy, and (2) the approximation of TL accent is not beyond the learner written off as unteachable. What he needs, however, is not a multiplication of drills and exercises administered to his better-endowed colleagues, but a qualitatively different instruction.

My interest in the problem arose in the context of my teaching a remedial course of phonetics to Polish students of English philology. My students are future teachers: their pronunciation should be decent if they are to serve as models to their

pupils. But the examination boards of my Institute are surely not alone in tolerating imperfect pronunciation in candidates with high proficiency in other areas. Since "pronunciation capability and overall proficiency in a given language are independent capacities" (Guiora /5/), there are many good, ambitious students whose accent remains their weak point despite their strong "concern for pronunciation accuracy" (Suter, op.cit.) and wholehearted participation in the remedial programme (individual sounds, intonation, stress, rhythm, weak forms, assimilations, etc.) and in the parallel course in general phonetics and English phonology. It is this - admittedly small - group of students that commands my immediate interest. I hope, however, that the issues I intend to raise apply to other groups of learners as well.

ARTICULATORY BASIS IN FL PRONUNCIATION TEACHING

Foreign accent results from the interaction of many factors. Knowing that the majority of these was attended to in our remedial course, I concentrated in my earlier work on one factor that was ignored in our teaching: articulatory basis. According to Honikman /6/, "where two languages are disparate in articulatory setting, it is not possible completely to master the pronunciation of one whilst maintaining the articulatory setting of the other". Assuming this to be true, I described and compared the articulatory bases of English and Polish, using Honikman's parameters (plus state of glottis, Ozga /7/). That study was followed by a report (Ozga /8/), in which I checked the adequacy of my descriptions by testing the success of the articulatory training based on them. There were a number of procedural errors and contaminating variables in my "experiment", but one thing was clear: students in the experimental group, who had the additional drills and exercises connected with the acquisition of the English articulatory basis achieved greater phonetic accuracy and naturalness than the control group taught only by standard auditory and postural methods.

In a remedial course the articulatory "programming" is, of necessity, an exercise in re-orientation. Actually, as was demonstrated by Kolosov /9/, the optimal time to introduce it is the very beginning of a FL course (artikulac'ionaya priorientirovka). I have tried, over the years, to convince teachers of the usefulness of such pre-orientation exercises - especially for children, who respond more readily

than adults to this kind of treatment. However, few teachers are prepared to start a course by "making faces" and my programme has elicited practically no response in the teaching profession.

For my part, I have continued to include the articulatory training in the remedial course, though I have been careful not to administer it wholesale to student groups since the time of the experiment. The relative mean achievement of the experimental group concealed individual differences. That was inevitable as "in experiments we are limited to the statistical averages of a group and not individual factors" (Ochsner /10/), but the teacher in me refused to acknowledge this. I was worried by those cases which spoil the neat picture of overall success. Some students obviously did not profit from the articulatory training which I devised and in a - mercifully small - number of cases their pronunciation actually deteriorated. Their attempts to reduce lip, cheek, and jaw mobility (which is less pronounced in English than in Polish) produced a peculiar "frozen" lockjaw effect, with open vowels flattened and distorted. This overkill took a lot of individualised instruction to undo. Since then I have always tried to deal with the "hard cases" on the individual instruction basis, concentrating on the physical and psychological conditioning of particular learners. That called for inquiry into personality characteristics, notably into the affective learner variable referred to by the term empathy.

EMPATHY IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION STUDIES

The notion of empathy appeared in SLA studies in the context of interaction between personality and language behaviour. Empathy is a transactional factor in the affective domain which has been defined as "the projection of one's own personality into the personality of another in order to understand him better" (Brown, op.cit.). Numerous studies have attempted to show that there is a direct relation between this ability "to put oneself into another's head" and language learning success: empathy is said to be a characteristic of the good language learner (see Reves /11/ and works quoted therein) and a valuable predictor of LL success (Guiora and Acton /12/, but see Brown, op.cit. p.109). Of particular relevance to this paper is the early research of Guiora et al./13/, which investigated the relation between empathic capacity and ability to pronounce a SL accurately. The study demonstrated that high degree of empathy, as measured by the Micro-Momentary Expression test (MME), is a predictor of authenticity of SL pronunciation. Empathy is described as related to the flexibility (permeability) of language ego boundaries, which accounts for the ease with which SL pronunciation is assimilated before the age of puberty. Since to speak a SL authentically is "to take on a new identity", around puberty, when the ego boundaries are firmer, this flexibility is said to be drastically reduced and it is more difficult to "move back and forth between languages and the personalities that seem to come with them" (Guiora and Acton, op.cit.). Empathic ability appears to vary not only globally with age but also between individual speakers and under exper-

imentally induced conditions (alcohol, hypnosis, see Guiora and Acton, op.cit.).

IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH ON EMPATHY FOR THE TEACHING OF FL PRONUNCIATION

Research on affective learner variables like empathy (I should also add self-esteem, anxiety, aggression, etc., which surely interact with empathy), which influence FL pronunciation accuracy, helps us to understand how it happens that the ability to acquire native-like pronunciation varies when such factors as cognitive styles, motivation, exposure to training are held constant or are comparable across learners. The problem is that "if indeed a high degree of empathy is predictive of success in language learning, it would be invaluable to discover how one could capitalize on that possibility in language teaching... One would need to determine if empathy is something one can 'learn' in the adult years, especially cross-culturally" (Brown, op.cit.p.109). I am interested in these questions in so far as they are related to the development of empathic capacity in the underachievers, but obviously there are numerous other areas where empathy studies are relevant to FL teaching. Let me refer to just a few of these. The phase-specific empathic ability of young children manifests itself in acquiring native-like pronunciation, when the FL is learnt in its native environment (actually SL). I doubt whether this ability manifests itself so strongly as a group variable when pronunciation is acquired in a foreign country in the context of formal instruction. Individual differences are sharper then and the influence of the teacher as a pronunciation model is of crucial importance (in my experience young children usually get the worst teachers!). There are other interesting questions connected with pre-puberty pronunciation acquisition (e.g. durability of early model-based habits, later modifications, fossilization of infantile habits in children who acquired a SL in native environments and were later taught it as a FL).

Guiora et al. (op.cit.) stress the drastically reduced ability to assimilate native-like FL pronunciation after the age of 12. This bodes ill for Polish learners who generally start to learn English at the age of 15. And yet, if puberty contributes in an important way to the completion of the articulatory profile of a person in first-language acquisition (see Birnbaum /14/), should we exclude the influence of this phase on the formation of the correct FL pronunciation profile, even in a formal teaching programme? According to Birnbaum, "the modification of the articulatory manners and preferences affecting these young people are more radical, since they are deliberate, than the difficulties in imitation and pronunciation adjustment encountered in early childhood" (op.cit.). As teenagers are a model-seeking generation, responsive to fads and fashions, there are excellent possibilities to capitalize on this in teaching pronunciation (but also great dangers, if unattractive, unimaginatively selected models are offered).

Let me now consider the problem from the point of view of individual learners. Paradoxically, it

is the highly empathic learners that are likely to suffer failure in acquiring a native-like pronunciation of a FL, if - as is too often the case - they have an influential but inadequate single early model to empathise with. Thus, many under-achievers among my students are "hidden empathics". Fortunately, they respond satisfactorily to the remedial course and to articulatory basis training; but why should they have to unlearn bad habits and arrive at the native-like approximation so late, when their empathic potential qualifies them for much earlier success? They had the bad luck of having fashioned their pronunciation habits on teachers (very often good teachers) with poor accent. Those teachers were recruited from the ranks of the underachieving students: the vicious circle is closed.

That the situation of the highly empathic learner is generally not so dramatic as in the above account is due to the fact that successful language learners are able to empathise with a variety of models. Their empathic response - demonstrated in terms of articulatory adjustments - is evoked by models with voice sets radically different from their own. Their FL pronunciation profiles are acquired through two strategies: (1) the choice - usually deliberate - of a single, attractive model (persona adoption), or (2) the elaboration of a generalised model, resulting from the combined influence of several models. Empathy in such learners appears to generate aptitude for oral mimicry and also to be connected with tonal memory, musical abilities and certain perceptual qualities which enable them to empathise with disembodied voices on tapes and records, without the reinforcing presence of visual cues.

The underachievers are much less flexible: a randomly selected model - even one that they find attractive - will not lead to a permanent empathic response. Forcing models on such learners ends in a sad caricature. The only way to ensure successful teaching is to find suitable models for the learners to rely upon. I look for such models in a principled way, acting on the assumption that underachievers must have at least a modicum of empathic capacity, i.e. ability to empathise with models whose voice sets are similar to their own. I refer to this type of empathic ability as "articulatory empathy".

ARTICULATORY EMPATHY

Although I know a female Polish student whose English pronunciation training was based solely on the Laurence Olivier films and she indeed sounds like the famous actor when she speaks English, I would insist that imitating very remote models (also age- and sex-wise) is to be avoided even with good students. That is why the middle-aged, precise, dignified voices regularly heard on records and tapes of phonetic material are so exasperating to the students in general, and fad-sensitive teenagers in particular. While this is the question of teaching materials rather than methods, it certainly does have a bearing on the success of the teaching process and cannot be disregarded.

The importance of well-matched models for pronunciation struck me with full force in an anecdotal

context. Over the period of some fifteen years over twenty students have formerly been the pupils of the same teacher (from one of the Kraków secondary schools). In assessing their pronunciation on admission to the Institute I observed a certain regularity: those whose pronunciation was poor did not possess certain vocal characteristics of the teacher (clear, high, precise voice, with a slight glottalization). On the other hand, most of those whose pronunciation was good shared these characteristics and all of them clearly "inherited" certain personal pronunciation mannerisms of the teacher. In a few cases it was, in fact, possible to guess which school they had attended because the pronunciation profile of the teacher came through very clearly.

These observations indicate, however, that in talking about articulatory empathy it is not sufficient to refer to the "voiceness" or "voice-quality" understood as "permanently present background person-identifying vocal characteristic" which is "biologically controlled" (Crystal /15/ but rather to a person's "habitual mode of phonation" (Laver's description), including the pausal profile, speech-rate, and articulatory /permanent lip-rounding/ as well as pitch-related (drawing, clipping) mannerisms.

In my remedial work I have to use a fairly small inventory of terms, which are, if necessary, often impressionistic. I also make use of the set of 24 descriptive parameters proposed by Kelz /16/ for the description of articulatory bases of languages. The teaching relies on improvisation to a large extent and resembles psychotherapy more than anything else. But it is not time-consuming and, more importantly, it works. I hope to report on the details of the training and on the framework that underlies it after I have managed to give it a more stabilised and efficient shape.

CONCLUSION

Ideally, a course intended to eliminate pronunciation inaccuracies and foreign accent in underachievers, should rely on a well-stocked library of video-cassettes and recordings of phonetic teaching materials made not by the usual one-male-one-female team, but representing different voice-types. But the collection would be just as useful to them as to all other learners. In fact, it is not altogether utopian to expect that at some point in the future the teaching of FL pronunciation will be based precisely on such model-oriented materials.

But today's underachievers cannot wait. It is for them that I have undertaken a "small scale intervention" (Brown, op.cit.), without waiting for the corroboration of large experimental designs which I am unable to undertake myself. In any case, if I relied on experimental evidence in my teaching, I would have to believe Purcell (op.cit.), who says that "classroom learning just does not seem to have much to do with pronunciation accuracy" and leave things as they are. Instead, being sympathetic to hermeneutic rather than nomothetic mode of inquiry (see Ochsner, op.cit.) I have tried to use intuition, common sense and experience to develop a teaching framework that works.

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