The role of articulatory repair 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 one's own) and are prepared to accept a "generalised" model. The underachievers are often rigidly attached to a "personalised" model - even one that they find attractive - will not lead to a permanent empathetic 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 matured native accent which they are (apparently) unable to drop. This category of underachievers does not see to attract either researchers or FL methodologists. FL research is primarily concerned with pronunciation capability has concentrated (either implicitly or explicitly) on the successful learner (e.g. Goula et al./6/, Hunter et al./7/, Purcell /8/). For methodologists the problem marginal, which is not surprising in view of the general acceptance of the idea that there is a "mediocrity band" with a core of very poor and very good learners. Moreover, while foreign accent weakens whatever learners are characterized by the "average" or "good" language within a group, it is possible, I think, to improve the accent of underachievers if one is prepared to put in a number of hours of extra work with uncertain results partly because of the learner's strong resistance to any form of change. Moreover, while pronunciation can be improved, linguistic accuracy cannot be achieved (of the English articulatory profile). The study demonstrated that high degree of empathy, which is defined as "the projection of one's own personality into the personality of another in order to understand him or her better. (Kohut, 1971:329). The notion of empathy appeared in SLA studies in connection with the affective domain which has been defined as "the affective, motivational, and personality factors" (Ochsner /10/). The relative mean achievement of the experimental group conceals individual differences. That was shown in our remedial programme as was limited to the articulatory training which I devised and in which the "nonspecifically 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" body posture, with open mouth and protruding lower lip. This overall 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 learning. The term "empathy" is used as a broad term for various factors (e.g. empathy, sympathy, identification) which influence TL pronunciation accuracy (Suter, op.cit.) and whole-hearted participation in the remedial programme (individual sounds,intonation, stress, rhythm, weak forms, nasalisation, etc.) in the parallel course in general phonetics and English phonology. It is this - admittedly small - group of students who have less than perfect pronunciation by now. The poor learner may contribute to this process of "inevitable" as in experiments we are limited to the artificially induced conditions (alcohol, hypnosis, etc.) made specific mention of this in connection with the idea that one can "psychologically socially cross-culturally" (Krug, op.cit.p.109) and that the teacher can be the one to help people. I am interested in this as it is 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 us just refer to a few of these. The phase-specific empathetic ability of young children manifests itself in acquiring native-like pronunciation, when the FL is learnt in its nativelike environment (actually SL). I doubt whether this ability manifests itself so strongly as a group variable when pronunciation is acquired in a foreign context. Tongue movements (and other learner variables) are related to the development of empathy, but I am not sure whether empathy and pronunciation accuracy are related to the same variables.

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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 AHM/early model to empathise with. Thus, many underachievers among FL 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 accents. These 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 calibrated—of a single, attractive model (personae adoption), or (2) the elaboration of a generalised model, resulting from the combined influence of several models. Empathy in such learners appears to generate attitude for oral mimicry and also to be connected with focal 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 the less-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-chosen 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 Krabiw secondary schools). In some cases the training in pronunciation ad
testation to the Institute I observed a certain regularity: those whose pronunciation was poor not possessed certain vocal characteristics of the teacher (clear, high, precise voice, with a slight articulation). 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 with 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 "voiceless" or "voice-quality" understanding or permanently present background personifying vocal characteristics which is "biologically controlled" (Crystal, 1975) but rather for a person's "habitual mode of phonation" (Laver's description), inarticulacy, speech-rate, and articulatory/permanent lip-rounding as well as pitch-related (crawling, clipping) mannerisms.

In my remedial work I have to use a fairly small inventory of terms, which are, of necessity, often impressionistic. I also use some 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 pure theatre more than anything else. But it is not time-consuming and, moreover, 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 accents in underachievers, should rely on a well-stocked library of video-cassettes and recordings of phonetic teaching materials made not by the teaching team, but representing different voice-types. But the collection would be just as useful to those as to all other learners. In fact, it is not altogether easy 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 to inform my teaching, I would have to believe Purcell (op.cit.), who says that "colloquial English just does not seem to have much to do with pronunciation accuracy" and leaves things as they are. Indeed, being sympathetic to hermeneutic rather than normative 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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