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Towards a Better English Pronunciation

One of the notorious problems that a teacher of English has to face, and hopefully overcome, is the negative influence of the learner's mother tongue in the sphere of pronunciation. This is true not only of adult learners but also of schoolchildren, who also have pronunciation problems, in spite of the advantages and the natural predisposition for learning a new language that go with the age.

In most cases, regardless of the age group, it is inaccurate recognition of English sounds which is the source of pronunciation errors. This is not surprising if we agree that most learners are already fully competent speakers of one language and have a 'phonological' rather than a 'phonetic' ear. In other words, learners perceive the new phonetic material through the filter of the sound system of their own language. To illustrate this, we can quote the anecdotal confusion of 'r' 'l' by native speakers of Japanese which certainly cannot be attributed to some articulatory deficiency on their part but which results from the simple fact that this sound distinction plays no significant role in their language. In a similar fashion, Polish affricates in 'ci', 'czy' and 'czy' will all sound the same, somewhere half way between 'č' and 'cz' when pronounced by a phonetically untrained native speaker of English. What this suggests is that underlying both recognition and pronunciation errors is the difference between the phonological systems of the two languages, and the following factors in particular:

- Factor 1: There are phonemes in English which do not appear in the learner's native sound inventory.
- Factor 2: 'Equivalent' phonemes are represented by different sets of allophones.
- Factor 3: The phonetic environments in which 'equivalent' phonemes appear are different in the two languages.

Factor 4: In those cases in which the phonetic environments are identical, different phonological rules apply.

All errors deriving from these four factors can be subsumed under one general label of phonological interference.

Before we analyse the role that interference plays in pronunciation learning and suggest some ways to eliminate or reduce its effects, let us take a look at some of the most typical pronunciation errors made by Polish learners of English.

Errors due to Factor 1:

a. ə → e

The English front, open vowel is replaced by a front half-open vowel.

Examples: hat [hæt], cat [kæt] pronounced as [hɛt], [kɛt].

b. ɔ → z, v, d or dz.

c. θ → s, f, t or ts.

The English voiced and voiceless interdental fricatives are replaced by a whole range of consonants from dental and labio-dental fricatives to dental and alveolar affricates.

Examples: Thank you [θæŋk ju] pronounced as [sɛŋk ju], [tɛŋk ju], [kɛŋk ju], or [tɛŋk ju].  
this [ðɪs] pronounced as [zɪs], [vɪs], [dɪs], or [dzɪs].

Errors due to Factor 2:

a. d → rr

All occurrences of the English frictionless continuant replaced by a roll.

Examples: river [rɪvə] pronounced as [rrɪvɛr] or [rrɪvɔ].  
bright [braɪt] pronounced as [brrait].

b. ɪ → l or w

The so called 'dark' or velarised 'l' is replaced by a clear lateral or by the labial glide 'w'.

Examples: feel [fi:l], bill [bɪl] pronounced as [fi:l], [bɪl] or as [fi:w], [bɪw].

c. i: → ɛ

d. ɛ → y

Inconsistent use of the two high front vowels 'i:' and 'ɛ' with a frequent replacement of the latter by a lower and more central vowel 'y'. This leads to a confusion of words such as beach [bi:tʃ],

and bitch [bɪtʃ], seat [si:t] and sit [sɪt], often pronounced as [bɪt], [sɪt].

d. u → u:

The so called short 'u', which is more advanced and lower than [u:] is incorrectly replaced by a higher vowel [u:], slightly reduced in length.

Examples: book [bʊk], look [lʊk] pronounced as [bū:k], [lū:k].

Errors due to Factor 3:

a. ŋ → ɲk, ɲg, n

The English velar nasal is replaced by a sequence of ŋ and one of the velar plosives or by the dental nasal n.

Examples: sing [sɪŋ], singing [sɪŋɪŋ] pronounced as [sɪŋk] or [sɪŋk], [sɪŋg], [sɪŋgɪk] or [sɪŋn].

Errors due to Factor 4:

a. p, t, h, k → p, t, k

Voiceless plosives unaspirated in all positions.

Examples: pen, ten, Ken pronounced as [pɛn], [tɛn], [kɛn].

b. d, g, z etc. → t, k, ʒ etc.

Word final voiced obstruents completely unvoiced.

Examples: good [gʊd], big [bɪg], bees [bi:z] pronounced as [gʊt], [bɪk], [bi:ʒ]

c. Voicel assimilation

Examples: not good [nɒt gʊd], dogs [dɒgz] pronounced as [nɒd gʊt], [dɒks].

d. Vn(C)s, Vn(C)z → Ṽw(C)s, Ṽw(C)z

The sequence : vowel, alveolar nasal, possible consonant and a 's' or 'z' is pronounced as a nasal diphthong.

Examples: sentence [sentens] pronounced as [sɛŋ tɛŋs], dance dɔns pronounced as [dɔŋs], depends [dɛ'pendz] pronounced as [dɛpɛŋtɛs].

e. ni, nɟ → n

Complete palatalisation of 'ni' and 'nɟ' sequences to 'n'.

Examples: Nixon, new, near [nɛksən], [nju:], [niə] pronounced as [ni:kson], [nu:], [niə]

The above classification of errors certainly does not exhaust all of the possibilities. It is also arbitrary in the sense that

It does not show the close relation between the above mentioned sources of pronunciation errors. For example, both Factors 3 and 4 are responsible for the differences in the application of phonological rules in English and in Polish, while Factor 2 is connected with Factors 3 and 4 in the sense that all allophones are products of the application or non-application of phonological rules. Elaborating further this classification would improve its accuracy, but would probably not add much to the basic assumption that pronunciation errors follow immediately from incorrect recognition of sounds, which in turn is caused by the differences in the working of the sound systems in English and in Polish. This assumption, which we believe is quite uncontroversial, is not very widely recognized, nor given enough attention. Most handbooks of English pronunciation and collections of phonetic drills concentrate solely on those sound distinctions which are important in English. However excellent they may be, they are of limited use to the anxious beginner, unless he first learns to hear the difference between what he thinks is right and what he is actually supposed to produce. It probably does not even occur to a Polish student of English that the 'h' sound that he produces is quite different from the English [h], and that it is one of those sounds which a native speaker of English will place very near the top of the list of features of 'Polish' English recognized as strikingly foreign. Similarly, English word final voiced obstruents are either completely devoiced by Polish learners, or fully and cautiously voiced, producing equally incorrect results in both cases, as the fortis / lenis distinction is much more important in English than the voiced / voiceless contrast.

Returning to our classification of errors we can say that those mistakes which arise due to Factor 1 are perhaps easier to eliminate than it is generally believed. They are certainly less persistent than those for which the remaining factors are responsible, simply because not so much phonological interference is involved. For example if the learner's speculations as to whether the English voiced interdental fricative 'th' sounds more like a 'd' or a 'v' are handled properly, it is a matter of correct instruction and a limited amount of exercise to get the pupil to pronounce words like 'this' and 'that' correctly. And once the correct pronunciation of a sound which has no near-equivalent segments in the native tongue is mastered, the error has a good chance of being eliminated.

Most persistent errors, however, are caused by Factors 2, 3 and 4.

They are difficult to eliminate because of the strong interference of the pupil's native phonological system manifested in the first place, by the inability to even hear a particular sound distinction. The conclusion to contrast important for any particular foreign language, be it English, French or German, an adequate set of phonetic drills must also include the phonological peculiarities of the pupil's native tongue. Voice assimilation, nasal diphthongisation, palatalisation etc., are examples of extremely productive phonological rules which are unconsciously transferred by a Polish learner into English. The result is a foreign accent, almost impossible to eliminate without professional help of a trained phonetician who would be able to explain the connection between the various vowel heights and the position of the tongue, or the influence of the phonetic context on the articulation of consonants.

Fortunately, there seems to be an easier, and a less time consuming way to achieve the same effects without having to go into the technical details of articulatory phonetics. What is of essential importance for achieving this aim is, as we said earlier, making the learner fully aware of the differences in pronunciation. We can do this by relying entirely on the learner's intuition of a native speaker of Polish which enables him to recognize instantly all foreign accents in his own language. This principle can be used in a game of pretending to be a native speaker of English who is trying to say something in Polish. By placing an English allophone in a similar context inside a Polish word, we can illustrate and practice not only the difference in the pronunciation of particular sounds but also, and this is of crucial importance, the resistance of English sounds to the phonological rules of Polish. Here are some examples:

1. To illustrate the difference between the English short 'i' and the Polish 'y' pronounce the words in the drill below with the English 'i' in place of the Polish 'y':

byty, syty, gdyby [bɨwɨk], [sɨtɨk], [gdɨbɨk]  
 ryby Krysztywy [rɨbɨk] [krɨstɨwɨk]

syn Tymka był czysto umyty i syty [sɨn tɨmka bɨł ʧɨsto umɨtɨ i sɨtɨ]

2. To illustrate the difference between the English front mid vowel 'e' and the Polish 'e' replace the vowels in the drill below:

sweterek, berek. Sweterek [sɨfɨrɨk], berek [bɨrɨk], [ɨfɨrɨk].

Para, mewa spada z drzewa [eva mewa spada z dzeva]

Chleb i serke jest w tym sklepie w niedziele niedzięły, niestety.  
[klep i serke jest f tam sklepie v dedzele niedzięły nedzetyk]

3. To illustrate aspiration, put the aspirated English plosives in place of the unaspirated Polish 'p', 't' and 'k' in the drill below:

ten, para, kipi [t<sup>h</sup>en], [p<sup>h</sup>ara], [k<sup>h</sup>ipi]  
Ten pan to tata Tomka [t<sup>h</sup>en pan t<sup>h</sup>o t<sup>h</sup>ata t<sup>h</sup>omka]

4. To illustrate the immunity of the English 'n' to palatalisation in the context of 'i:' and 'j' pronounce Polish words with 'n' very carefully, as containing sequences of 'n' plus 'i' or 'j':

oni, pani, Ania [on+i], [onj], [pani], [anja]  
Miania nigdy nie wie [njanja nigdy nje wie]

In this drill attention must be paid that no break is made between the 'n' and the following 'i' or 'j':

5. To illustrate the immunity of the English "vowel-nasal-s" sequences to nasal diphthongisation, pronounce very slowly the following words:

szansa as [sansa] and not as [sawasa]  
dancing as [dansip] and not as [dawsipj]  
penja as [pensje] and not as [pewsje]  
męski as [męnski] and not as [męwski]  
kęs as [kens] and not as [kews]

Similar drills can be designed for illustrating to the pupil the alveolar articulation of 't', 's', 'z' and 'n' in English, for all vowels and for many other secrets of correct articulation of English sounds.

We can see now that instead of being only a negative, destructive factor, the learner's native pronunciation habits can be employed as a background against which even the most minute allophonic peculiarities of English will immediately be picked up by his 'phonological' ear, with full and acute awareness of the strangeness of the alien segment in the native environment. And this seems to be an essential step towards the desired improvement of the learner's pronunciation, which can be not only intelligible but also more correct and more natural.

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Some Issues in the Testing of Reading Comprehension

The present article will be concerned with some of the problems connected with testing reading comprehension. Firstly, it will appear essential to decide what the reading comprehension test is supposed to measure: the overall performance which is the product of the process of reading or the strategies and skills which have been used in achieving it. Secondly, the most common techniques used so far to test reading skills will be briefly presented, with special attention paid to their limitations. And lastly, it will be illustrated on the basis of a sample of the test how these techniques can be used in the most efficient ways.

The history of testing indicates clearly that reading tests are becoming more and more important. It is probably due to the common opinion that the reading skills of second language learners have the potential of more rapid development than other language skills. If so, attention should be paid to discovering what reading comprehension actually involves and what it is that we want to measure by the reading test. It has been assumed that in order to complete any global task several of the so-called enabling skills have to be activated. For example, if the task is:

"Search text for specific information",

the enabling skills involved are at least the following:

- Distinguish main point from supporting details
- Understand text relations through grammatical cohesion devices
- Understand relations within sentences
- Understand conceptual meaning
- Deduce meaning of unfamiliar lexis

/Morrow, 1979:19/

The question arises as to whether a test is to find out which of the communicative skills a candidate has mastered or rather if