Notes on instruction of English pronunciation in the Language Laboratory*

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Since October in 1999, I have been engaged in teaching English Phonetics at Tokyo Jogakkan Junior College. This course is designed as part of English education for those who wish to improve their English pronunciation. Therefore the main focus is on the practical side of English phonetics, not phonetics in a scientific sense.

This is a one-year course which comprises two semesters, the last half of which I am responsible for. An 85 minute-lesson is conducted once a week in the language laboratory equipped with some audiovisual devices including video players and tape decks for class- and self-study.

As mentioned above, the course is for those wanting to learn English. The teacher's tasks are those typical of language teachers. They are:
to make an appropriate course design,
to prepare teaching materials which are suited for his students,
to develop and give effective instructions,
to meet the learners' requirements,
etc.

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To get all these tasks done sufficiently, it will be necessary for the teacher to keep a journal about every lesson so that he can explore the problems and figure out their solutions.

1.2 Purpose

Considering the above mentioned background, I have written this paper with three purposes in mind.

The first is to present a detailed description of my lessons to form a basis for the subsequent discussion (§2, §3). The second is to examine the effects and the problems of my instruction for a clue to better teaching methods (§4). The third is to consider how the teacher improves his ability for studying his subject and teaching it (§5, §6).

It should be noted here that this paper is only notes on my instruction of English pronunciation. It is not intended as a research report, nor is it to report a full discussion of the effects of my instruction methods.

2 Overview of the lessons

2.1 Goal

The goal of the lessons is to enable the participants to produce the pronunciation of English to the extent that the native speakers can understand it without difficulty. In other words, my task is helping them remove "Japaneseness" from their English as much as possible.

2.2 Materials

The teaching materials are the following:

1) words and short dialogues in cassette tapes for oral practices and listening comprehension.

2) English songs on CD's

3) Disney's movie video titled "Mulan" (in English without Japanese subtitles). This movie was chosen at the request of the participants.

The main materials (1) are word sets recorded by American speakers of English. Each set comprises two or three words which are minimally different from each other. These words include such sounds that must be distinguished

phonologically in English, but which need not in Japanese. They also include such English sounds that do not occur in Japanese. The actual words used for the oral practices in the lesson are listed in the Appendix.

To complement the main materials, song texts (2) and several lines extracted from the above movie (3) were used for practices of the prosodic features such as stress and intonation.

2.3 Participants

In teaching a foreign language, the teacher must have necessary information of his students, so that he can take that into account for the decision of his instruction methods and of the course design.

The necessary information is as follows:

1) All those who participate in the course are female Japanese students between 18 and 20 years old.

2) All of them speak Tokyo Standard Japanese as a native language.

3) All of them have learned English since they entered junior high school. This means that they have received at least 6 years of English education before taking my course. As is often the case with English education in Japan, their English proficiency level is not very high. Their English pronunciation is poor. They cannot distinguish between the English and the Japanese sound systems.

4) None of them are bilingual nor multilingual.

The questionnaires collected on the first day of the lesson show that the participants are aware of incorrectness of their English pronunciation and their motivation for improving it is strong.

2.4 Teacher

The quality of education will depend on the teacher's abilities and qualifications. Therefore, it may be useful here to present information about the teacher (the author). The major points to be touched upon are the following:

1) He is trained as a phonetician at a postgraduate level both in Japan (Institute of Literature and Linguistics, University of Tsukuba) and Denmark

(Institute of General and Applied Linguistics, University of Copenhagen). He is also trained to produce the sounds of several languages in a relatively phonetically correct way.
2) He has neither majored in English nor lived in English-speaking countries. He has learned English almost on his own after graduation from high school.
3) His English proficiency level is not very high, but enough to teach at an intermediate level or below for undergraduate students.
4) As for teaching, he is not experienced. In fact, this is his first teaching experience.

2.5 Instruction method

Now I describe my procedure in instruction.

First, I have the participants listen to word sets that are on the tape. Second, I inform them that each word set they have just listened to is made up of words which are minimally different from each other (e.g. *mud / mad*). Third, I have them listen to one set at a time and ask if they have been able to perceive the difference. If they can, I tell them to find out what the difference is. If they cannot, I have them listen to the same set once again and ask the same question once again. What is important here is to have them find the difference for themselves.

After the participants have caught the image of the sounds in question, I have each participant repeat the word set. First at this stage, I correct them and give advice. If necessary, I explain how to produce the particular sounds or the whole words in question on the basis of articulatory phonetics.

My instructions are based on articulatory phonetics, because it can directly guide the participants to the correct production of sounds. This is also because my intention is not only to make them understand, but also make them actually pronounce correctly and learn how that feels.

Turning to explaining the way and process of articulation, I pay attention to informing the participants what causes the sound differences. With vowels, I emphasize the importance and the function of the shape of the lip and tongue. I also talk about the relationship between the width of the mouth

opening and the vowel quality. If necessary, I have the participants check their lip and mouth opening by looking in the mirror.

With consonants, I mention places and manners of articulation without using technical terms. I draw the participants' attention to the use of the tongue.

Finally it is worth stating the following. In instruction, I need to pronounce the word in question several times as a model demonstration. At this time, I try to do so in such a way that I sound almost exactly like the tape. This is partly to show that I, who am Japanese like the participants, can also pronounce it and also partly to encourage them in this way. Moreover, if the teacher's pronunciation deviated from the model, it would have a psychologically bad influence on the participants. It must be avoided by all means.

3 Problems

An individual language learner may have his own particular problems. However, most of the problems which learners are faced with are predictable on the basis of the sound system difference between their target language and their native one. In fact, many problems observed in my lesson are ones that Japanese learners of English have in common.

As is expected, the participants have difficulty with producing sounds which do not occur in Japanese.

Take vowels for example. They cannot pronounce correctly such vowels as /æ/, /ɔ/, /ʌ/ and /ʊ/ in *cap*, *talk*, *dove* and *good* respectively. /æ/ is especially difficult to produce. It is certainly problematic for them that English has more vowels to be distinguished than Japanese.

In the case of consonants l/r, f/h, b/v, θ/s and ð/z contrasts are difficult for them to produce. When it comes to perception, they are not at all able to hear the difference between /l/ and /r/ in an example like *light*and *right*.

Another problem is consonantal clusters such as /pr/ in *pray* and /str/ in *straight*. As is expected, unnecessary vowel insertion tends to occur.

Aspiration and weak articulation also cause problems. Japanese has only weak aspiration in /p, t, k/, and Japanese articulation of consonants are not so tense in comparison with English.

I expected that young teenagers can easily pronounce [si] these days. One participant, however, tends to substitute [ʃi] for [si] as she does in Japanese. Nonetheless, she is the only exception.

In addition to the problems mentioned above, the participants show many problems. But what I finally would like to mention is that they cannot pronounce words correctly without being conscious of the articulation. This may not be a serious problem. It only has to do with experience. It still takes some time to learn to pronounce correctly and unconsciously at the same time.

4 Discussion

In the following discussion, I take up three issues.

The first issue is the role of the teacher. At first stages of instruction, the teacher plays an important role. At first, a learner is not completely rid of the sound system of his native language. He is not aware which sounds must be distinguished in the target language. Therefore he tends to perceive a foreign sound in the target language as one of the sounds which can occur in his own language. This means that exposure to the sounds of the target language, say, in a tape does not help him to learn to pronounce the language correctly. Logically, a learner cannot reproduce a sound which he has not been able to perceive. For this reason, appropriate instructions must be given by the teacher. Through my lessons, I explain the difference of the sound system of the two languages, i.e. the target language and the native language, every time and draw the participants' attention to the crucial differences.

The second issue is how to make an articulatory description with the purpose of practical phonetics. Traditional description is made in such a way that the focus is on individual sounds. This gives a static picture of the sound in question at a particular moment, but it will not give a picture of the dynamic movement of the movable articulatory organs which occur during speech. What is important is that a speech event is not made up of discrete units from a viewpoint of articulatory phonetics. Coarticulation must be considered. In addition, I think, a description of the whole word is preferable. This is the way that I have adopted. It guides the participants to relatively correct pronunciation. At all events, language teachers who teach pronuncia-

tion must have a good knowledge of articulatory phonetics.

The final one is how to manage to meet the participants' acquirements within a limited period. This is difficult especially when the teacher is compelled to begin with the basic skills. It takes too much time, if the teacher has adopted so-called the "natural method," by which children acquire the sound system of their mother tongue. He must take a short-cut. The contrastive approach may be useful for adult learners, because they can use their mother tongue as a reference. The learning process needs not to be natural. The point is whether the adopted way is effective or not. In any event, practices only during the lesson are not enough. Guidance for effective ways of self-study must be introduced.

5 Concluding remarks

As a language teacher, I have discussed the problems in the previous section. Nevertheless, there remain some questions open to further examination.

The first question is concerned with the validity of the selection of words as a minimal unit for pronunciation instruction. At first, I intended that from the beginning I would use materials which deal with stress- and rhythm-related problems. I changed my plans, because I found that the participants had not learned such basic skills as they should have learned at junior high school. For example, they did not know how to pronounce [f] or [θ/ð]. My assumption was that those unable to produce individual words correctly are not able to produce a sequence of words correctly. However, if the purpose of speech is to communicate, more than word-level pronunciation has to be learned to convey a message smoothly. The alternative way may be that sentence-level pronunciation is introduced from the beginning in addition to word-level pronunciation. The adoption should be done in a trial-and-error way.

The second question is how to develop effective ways of instruction which are suited for learners' aim. Teaching pronunciation is concerned with motor and auditory skills. For this reason, it is not sufficient to give knowledge about phonetics. I shall have to examine the many ways available including the usage of computer software programs based on psychoacoustic theories

and audiovisual materials for language learning.

The final question is how to balance instruction of production and that of reception. This is an important and formidable task. The relation between production and reception is also a phonetically vital problem. I cannot give any comment about this for the time being.

6 Perspective

As mentioned above, many elements must be considered in teaching pronunciation of a foreign language. Besides, what must be kept in a teacher's mind is that there is not only one way, but various ways to teach effectively from situation to situation. One of the teacher's tasks is to keep finding a new better way.

To widen my view and to explore the problems observed in the lesson, I shall have to work on examining a rich amount of literature in the field of applied linguistics and general phonetics, and gain more experience as a language teacher. This will help me prepare suitable teaching materials, develop effective teaching methods and make an appropriate course design.

Finally, I hope that the English education at a high school level will devote more time to pronunciation. Then, colleges and universities will not have to spare valuable time for the instruction of basic skills.

reference

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LL 教室での英語発音指導に関する覚え書き

三松国宏

本稿は、筆者が東京女学館短期大学で行った英語音声学の授業をもとにまとめた、実用英語教育のための音声指導に関する覚え書きである。

はじめに、授業の性格と指導方針を述べ、適正な教育法を模索するため、実際に使用した教材、筆者自身が採用した指導方法の批判的検討を行った。

アメリカ英語の母語話者によってテープに吹き込まれた最小対立をなす単語群を教材として、調音結合や単語アクセントを考慮にいれた、調音音声学的知識にもとづく発音指導を行った。効果的ではあったが、正しい発音を学習者に定着させるには、授業時の練習の他に、自習の仕方の考案など、さらなる手だてを案出する必要がある。

また、学習者の科目履修時の能力を考慮して、主に単語レベルの発音を指導したが、実用目的の発音を習得させる目的にそれが適合していたかは、疑問の残るところである。韻律特徴の指導も併行して行うべきだったかもしれない。ただし、時間の制約があるので、適切なカリキュラムを立てる必要に迫られる。

さらに、学習者が直面する問題点をいくつか取りあげ、それに対する対処法も検討した。周知のように、学習者の母語を利用した対照音声学的アプローチが、問題点の克服に効果的であるようだ。

最後に、教師として身に付けていなければならない技量、新しい指導法、マルチメディア教材の使用の可能性などにも簡単に触れた。