A Search for the Right Approach to Pronunciation

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Introduction

The ideas discussed in this article are expanded upon in my master's thesis which is a result of qualitative classroom research on the use of teaching-centered and learning-centered pronunciation teaching methodologies in a college setting. The thesis outlines the socio-linguistic and educational issues as they affect English pronunciation teaching and learning, the shift in theory on how pronunciation should be treated in the English classroom, and my experience in finding an appropriate methodology to teach pronunciation in light of the issues posed by the students and the English teaching field. Presented in this article are Part 1: the background and rationale for my choice of teaching methodology, Part 2: a description of this method and its suitability, and Part 3: student response.

Part 1: At the beginning of my teaching college level students in Japan, it was immediately clear that their speaking skills were weak and that their inaccurate pronunciation, particularly concerning stress and other temporal elements beyond the individual sound level, was interfering with communication. In light of this situation, I felt I could best affect the students' English communication ability by putting emphasis on aspects of pronunciation, so I gave it high priority in my teaching.

My response was to approach the problems in the same manner as foreign language teachers have commonly dealt with them however. That was to look at the learners en masse, as a group identity

to be dealt with, and approach any treatment in a generalized manner. I took the traditional teacher's role of knower of the language, the source of correctness/criteria, the model to be mimicked, the judgement giver, and the assessor of when, what, how, and to what extent pronunciation practices would take place. The role of the learner was to follow instructions, imitate, keep repeating, and strive for natural pronunciation for approximately twenty minutes per class.

Pronunciation practices were based on the standard audio-lingual form of model/repetition, minimal pair listening and speaking drills, tapping out sentence rhythms, and other forms which were paired with intensive teacher correction and long explanations. Despite sincere efforts by teacher and students, little progress was being made. Outside of the pronunciation drill situation, the learners were not producing native-like pronunciation. Not only that, the learners' poor self-image as English speakers seemed to be reinforced rather than improved.

It became obvious to me that my approach to teaching pronunciation was not effective in dealing with certain issues which seemed to directly influence the students' learning. These specific issues were low levels of self-awareness and self confidence as language learners and a debilitatingly high level of self-consciousness. With this realization, I concluded that a new approach was needed.

Just as I was beginning the search for another way to teach pronunciation, the new conventional wisdom sweeping the field was that there was no effective way to teach pronunciation. Based on the theories of Stephen Krashen, a noted language acquisition

researcher/theorist from USC, in which he pits language *acquisition* against *learning*, the belief was that pronunciation was not teachable or learnable; to put in into Krashen's terms it was something that the learner would acquire naturally through direct contact with native speakers of the language (Krashen 1982).

Exposed to this line of thought, I felt since it was not effective or necessary, I was absolved of any responsibility to teach pronunciation. I accepted the popular notion that "..teachers and classrooms seem to have [had] remarkably little to do with how well our students pronounce[d] English", so why should I waste the learners' time? (Purcell and Suter 1980) Class time could be spent on more useful kinds of practice. Essentially I stopped overtly teaching pronunciation and attended to it only when it interfered with the learners' general meaning.

When rethinking the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context in Japan and the learners' expectations of me as a native English speaking teacher, and on hearing about some of the drastic outcomes of the Japanese speakers' of English inability to make themselves understood outside the Japanese context, again my attention turned to how to best serve the learners through the teaching of pronunciation. For the students, there is little opportunity for contact with native English speakers, so when if ever would they have the opportunity to *acquire* accurate pronunciation? The conflict between popular theory and reality became increasingly apparent.

Statements by the respected leaders in the field seemed to be more a reflection of the failure of methodology rather than on the teachability/learnability of pronunciation. In fact Krashen himself, in

his presentation of his theories at Tokai University in Tokyo in 1984, ridiculed at length the popular approaches and techniques for pronunciation teaching. In my own examination of the effectiveness of my audio-lingual based approach, I observed over time that there was little significant effect on the learner's pronunciation and concluded that my teaching was not making a difference; the approach was not working well. Rather than abandon the teaching of pronunciation as I had done before, I decided to look at the learner and learning for the answers. It was clear to me, however, that the pundits had bypassed the learner in their discussions.

In reaction to the ineffectiveness on pronunciation of the teaching practices based on Krashen' s acquisition theories of the early '80s, the pendulum has started to swing back and the necessity to teach pronunciation has become a popular topic. This time, however, the importance of teaching beyond the segmental level to include the aspects of intonation, stress, rhythm, and voice quality is receiving much more attention. But, once again, there have been few discussions of the direction of new methodologies which shift the focus to learning and the learner. One of the notable exceptions has been Earl Stevick, an influential theorist and author of several books on humanistic approaches to language acquisition. He writes on the underlying problem:

> ...this issue is most urgent in the teaching of pronunciation. It is:"What is happening inside and between the people who are in the classroom?"Specifically, to what extent and in what ways do the students feel compelled to defend themselves from the teacher, from each other, from the course, and from the language itself? And to what extent, on the other hand, are they free to learn receptively and nondefensively?(Curran 1968, 1972; Stevick 1973, reported in

Stevick 1975)

Joan Morley, a language researcher and pronunciation authority from the University of Michigan, writing in answer to the question "What should an ESOL teacher 'do' about pronunciation? ", touches on the conflict between theory and practice and what she sees as the root problem in teaching pronunciation, the learner's role:

> Only a few existing materials and methodologies encourage students to be active, not passive participants in their own learning. Often students are not to be involved in a cognitive way and their performative involvement is monitored by someone <u>outside</u> themselves...(Morley 1975)

My concerns in teaching pronunciation are summarized very nicely by Stevick and Morley. Their issues deal with learners in general, but they address very accurately the most crucial socio-lingual matters that face the learner in the Japanese cultural context: extreme self-consciousness, lack of self-awareness, and over-dependency on the teacher. The question that confronted me became "How can I best approach the subject of pronunciation in such a way that acknowledges the learner's socio-cultural and linguistic background, that nurtures the learner's developing awareness of her individual learning style and of her responsibility for learning, and that develops the tools necessary for the learner to control her learning environment (both internal and external)?"

In my search for an appropriate way to deal with pronunciation in my classroom, I was introduced to an approach called the Silent Way. It is based on the learning theories of Caleb Gattegno which focus on the education of awareness and the independence of the learner. This teaching approach uses visuals which are color coded according to the sounds of the language. These visual aids have been

developed for several languages including Japanese, Chinese, Hindi, Arabic, English and other major European languages. To continue with any further discussion of the effectiveness of this approach on the students at Musashi, it is necessary to explain what the Silent Way is and how the materials function.

Part 2: The Silent Way is a learning-centered approach to language teaching in which the focus for both teacher and learner is on learning itself and the developing autonomy of the learner. The approach relies on the use of the color-coded charts: the Sound Color Chart (SCC) contains fifty-eight uniquely colored rectangles, each representing a sound of the English language, for a total of twenty-one vowel sounds, plus diphthongs, and thirty consonant sounds, plus blends. Eight grapheme charts (called Fidels) list all the possible spellings of these sounds in order of their frequency of occurrence, e.g. the spellings for /ng/ which is colored olive green are *ng, n, ngue,* and *nd.* Twelve Word Charts contain the functional vocabulary of the language and are printed in the same color code as the SCC and Fidels. Each chart is designed for classroom use and is visible several meters away.

A pointer is used to guide learners through the charts. The learners' use of the pointer provides a physical dimension to the learning activity as they test out new hypotheses by tapping out sequences of sounds or words while the rest of the class speaks, thus providing valuable feedback for the teacher and other members of the class. The pointer gives the teacher a physical distance from the charts, allowing the learners to interact directly with the materials without having to go through the teacher. Their eyes and attention

focus on the pointer and on the challenge at hand. The pointer is also used to illustrate the stress and temporal aspects of pronunciation, the suprasegmentals, by moving it at varying speeds and tapping out the colors or words with a certain power in accordance with established English rhythm and stress patterns, as the learners speak. The most appropriate image which describes the pointer's use is that of the orchestra conductor's baton. The color code/musical notation shows the sense of time and energy required to make the utterances, while the teacher/ or learner/conductor, through the skillful use of the pointer/baton, helps to interpret and fine tune the learner's developing criteria and sense of the language.

The sound and color associations made by the learner initially function as a device for retaining the sounds until they can be internalized. Additionally, the colors act as cues to access the information in the brain. The multi-sensory aspects of the approach (visual, tactile, auditory, and kinesthetic) serve to enrich the information received and add dimension to the learning experience. The learner thus has more access routes for input on which to base hypotheses about how English pronunciation works. Another essential point of the sound/color associations is that they free the learner of the innate confusion and burden of the alphabet, which is "inherently a lie" and which serves to frustrate rather than support the learning of English pronunciation (Gattegno 1976).

As to why these materials are appropriate for Japanese learners in particular, the charts can be used in ways which do not evoke the psychological states and interaction modes which detract from the learning (namely shyness, reticence, jealousy, and competitiveness

among others), once the learner is familiar with them. Their effect on the dichotomy of self-consciousness and self-awareness in the Japanese learner is positive. As the learner works with the charts in a typical lesson, she is forced to concentrate on herself in relation to them and her growing awareness of how the English sound system works. The learner's standing among the other members of the group by necessity becomes secondary and tends to drop further in importance as the learner allows herself to become more deeply involved in the immediate task of learning. If teaching in the spirit of the Silent Way, the role of the teacher is to attend to the learner and what is required of her to learn rather than on the content of the lesson, which is the responsibility of the learner (Gattegno 1976). The teacher thus is free to intervene when the issues which block learning arise; those being as stated previously--self-consciousness, lack of confidence, and dependence on the teacher. However, in working with the Silent Way, it is up to the individual learner to keep these hindrances to learning under control. The teacher can only make the learner aware that her mental state is interfering and work toward developing this self-awareness in the learner.

Part 3: Based on the students' feedback, their reactions have been positive. I have observed changes in students' classroom behavior, specifically increased levels of effort and engagement in the pronunciation lessons. In both written and oral feedback, they have indicated, although this way of learning is very demanding on them and requires much concentration, that it has helped them become more aware of the sounds of English in contrast to Japanese sounds and that they felt confident that they could learn to produce native-

like pronunciation with time. From the teacher's point of view, this feedback indicates a very positive and important shift in awareness and attitude toward the study of English and themselves as students and speakers of English. In addition, through this study I also have been changed by 'listening' to the students' messages, both spoken and unspoken, about themselves as learners and about the nature of learning and teaching. Through these outcomes, although outside of linguistic knowledge, I can presume that further study and use of this method of teaching pronunciation could have a great effect on the learners' speaking capability in English and contribute to more effective communication.

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