

## ***A Perceptual Approach to Teaching***

### ***Pronunciation in English***

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#### **Résumé:**

Le but de notre intervention est d'observer qu'il serait plus productif d'enseigner la prononciation de l'anglais à l'élève algérien, dans le cadre de l'approche dite par compétences, en commençant par ses propres acquis phoniques. Nous débuterons alors par son répertoire consonantique puisque d'un point de vue purement articulatoire, nous trouvons des similitudes au niveau des sons consonantiques de l'Arabe par rapport à ceux de l'Anglais (les dentales, les inter-dentales fricatives, et certaines affriquées). Les sons vocaliques, par contre, seront traités à un niveau supérieur. Ceci à l'exception des voyelles de base de l'Anglais sous leur réalisation en voyelles courtes et voyelles longues. Cette priorité dans la présentation du consonantique avant le vocalique est dictée par la simplicité du système vocalique triangulaire de l'Arabe face au système vocalique beaucoup plus complexe de l'Anglais. Le deuxième volet de notre intervention s'intéressera à l'approche en question telle que présentée sous son aspect « Pronunciation and Spelling » dans le Manuel. Le

feedback que nous aurons lors des travaux de ce Séminaire nous permettrons d'enrichir, d'améliorer et de faciliter la tâche dans l'enseignement de la prononciation de l'Anglais en 1<sup>ère</sup> AM.

Most teachers of English in Algeria, and probably elsewhere, see pronunciation as the most difficult teaching aspect. Some would even deliberately set it aside as it gets them involved in the "wildworld" of Phonetics (mostly articulatory in the case of Algeria) and Phonology which they either did not grasp or disliked as BA students of English. Others would see pronunciation as "the Cinderella of language teaching". They say little emphasis is put on pronunciation in comparison to other skills. They feel quite comfortable when teaching skills such as reading, writing, listening and to some extent speaking in this order. However, when it comes to pronunciation they feel they often lack the basics of articulatory phonetics which allow them to teach pronunciation. Some may even find themselves teaching (articulatory) phonetics rather than pronunciation.

In all three cases, we observe that teaching the pronunciation of English in Algeria raises the problem of production over reception and perception. There is a tendency to focus on production as being the most obvious problem affecting our learners. In fact, most research indicates that it is more of a reception difficulty in the first place.

The first difficulty is inter-lingual. The learner approximates the "foreign sound" to his own native sound. This approximation may sometimes lead to a kind

of “phoneme neutralization” (e.g. bill/pill; rope / robe; park / bark; etc.) from the learner when it cannot be achieved simply because the sound discrimination in English does not exist or is not productive in the native tongue, or because no such approximation can be made due to the fact that the English sound is totally foreign to the native sound repertoire. Thus, to a native speaker of French, the dental voiced fricative is converted by the learner into a dental voiced stop which represents the closest sound in his own language. Cases like [ðə buk] “the book” would be pronounced \*[zə buk]. Similarly, a native speaker of Spanish would pronounce it \*[də buk].<sup>1</sup> A speaker of Arabic does not seem to encounter this particular pronunciation problem with the dental voiced fricative as he has a similar sound (but not phoneme) in his native tongue. Nevertheless, he will face other pronunciation difficulties (the most frequently cited ones are in the labial series [p, v] and in final three consonant clusters) that a speaker of French or a speaker of Spanish would not have (e.g. pharynx with /nks/ as a final three consonant cluster). Similarly, a native of Japanese does not seem to perceive the discrimination of the liquids /l, r/ of English while a speaker of Arabic does not have difficulties in either producing or discriminating them.

The second pronunciation difficulty is intra-lingual. It stands as a difficulty that probably all learners

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<sup>1</sup> . We are concentrating on the consonantal difficulty, leaving aside for the moment the vocalic difficulty.

will face, whatever their native tongue may be. This difficulty lays in the big gap that exists between English spelling and sound equivalence. A case in point would be the pronunciation the alveolar sound [ ʃ ] in “she”, “ocean”, “pollution”, mission, etc.

Given these preliminary observations, it seems quite plausible to give pronunciation place of pride right from the start, i.e., at the early stages of the learning process and to put emphasis on listening (reception) as a way leading to adequate pronunciation (production).

Using the sound repertoire of our learners in order to make them aware of their pronunciation problems in English (LLS) and having some prior knowledge (as teachers) of what aspects of English phonetics and phonology are likely to cause problems to our learners, we believe we can end up with learning strategies (LS) that encourage the learner to develop his own inner criteria as far as the sound pattern of English is concerned. For instance, once we predict what the difficulties in pronunciation (including stress and intonation) may be for our learners (cf. p, v, in the labial series, final three consonant clusters, stress patterns and syllable structure, intonation patterns, etc.), and we make the learner aware of the main areas of similarities and differences or contrast between his own language and the target language (English), all what remains to be done by the teacher (coursebook writer or syllabus designer) is to build this information into meaningful pronunciation exercises to practise inside as well as outside class. This was in fact the guiding principle behind the exercises and

pronunciation activities that have been set out under “Pronunciation and Spelling” of the current textbook. The Textbook is produced following a Competency-Based Approach.

The Textbook includes seven files with various themes and topics and a Pre-file. The pronunciation aspect is expounded under “Pronunciation and Spelling” of Sequences One and Two in each file. “Pronunciation and Spelling” is divided into three perception stages, namely, Listen and Repeat, Identify, and finally Compare. In the practice stage, the learner is introduced to very basic (elementary) stress and intonation patterns. In the Practise stress and intonation part, the Textbook designers have introduced some rhythmic of English on the basis of already known vocabulary (re-investment of knowledge) aiming at increasing the learners’ motivation for pronunciation (among other things) through game-like activities.

Each Listen and Repeat includes a two column table: one for Sound and one for Stress. Exceptionally, File One (together with part of File Four) tackles vowel sounds. This is done on purpose in order to make the learner aware of what we called earlier “intra language difficulties”, bearing in mind the fact that he has been introduced to the French script after the Arabic script and now to the English alphabet and spelling which differs in terms of sound representation from French. Thus, the dual phonetic realisation of the vowel /i/ in “I, Hi!, nice, five, write” as opposed to “in, Jill, Taxi, six, listen” (lexical items that he has already been introduced to in Sequence One) is presented together with stress on some

of the words that he has used in Sequence One. Of course, the headings Sounds and Stress for each column are addressed to the teacher. He is not supposed to explain them (in phonetic terms) to the learner. He is free, however, to find or devise his own hints or cues as to what they mean pronunciation wise in English. We suggest that he limits himself to saying that they are particular pronunciation features of English that his learners are going to get acquainted to in their oral interaction and production of this language. Basically, that they are characteristic features of the spoken form of the foreign language there are being introduced to.

During the Identify and Compare phases, the learner is asked to discover (through identification) which is which in terms of the phonic realisations of the vowel /i/ of English. The activity is an open activity in that the learner (or the teacher) may add as many words as he / they wish(es) as long as this activity remains motivating for the learner.

The Practise stress and intonation step is to get the learner acquainted with basic intonation patterns of English (rising/falling tones and neutral tones). The aim is to show him how to greet with rising and falling tones. Here again, the teacher does not indulge in describing the pattern itself. Suffice to say that the learner has to raise the pitch of his voice, lower it or make it neutral.

In Sequence Two of File One, the vowel sounds represented by orthographic ee and e followed by n are presented, e.g. thirteen vs. seven sixteen vs. listen, Sweden, etc.

The same line of conduct is followed under the Identify and Compare phases, bearing in mind that other lexical

items can be added as long as motivation from the learner is kept high.

The game-like nursery rhymes, tongue twisters and other light verses under Pronunciation and Spelling are all original. They serve as consolidation tools of words that the learners have learnt previously. Here, unlike the Listen and Repeat phases, they are not produced in isolation but within utterances, including stress and rhythm. Stressed syllables are represented in bigger fonts and in bold while unstressed syllables are represented in smaller or general fonts. Intonation is shown through arrows. Straight arrows indicate a substantially neutral pitch, upward curvy arrows a rising pitch and downward curvy arrows a falling pitch.

File Two introduces consonantal sounds likely to raise difficulties not in terms of sound approximation with the sound repertoire of his mother tongue but rather in terms of intra-lingual difficulties. The spelling “s” and its realisation [s], [z]<sup>2</sup> are presented to make him aware that to the orthographic “s”, we use two sounds as in yes, eyes, street, legs, etc.

Under Identify and Compare, the learner is in a recognition phase where he normally grasps the difference in sound production as the items included are words that he has already been introduced to in this File or in the previous ones (Pre- file and File One). New words may be added by the teacher in cases of pronunciation checking. Nursery rhymes such as *Liz is tall and Jane is small* or *She's fit and he is fat* are

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<sup>2</sup> . We leave aside the pronunciation [iz] of /z/ for the moment as the learner has not been introduced to the Present Simple Tense as yet.

included in order to prepare the learner to the Produce Phase of the File.

All the remaining files are set out on the same type of pronunciation activities. One must stress that other similar activities may be adopted / adapted by the teacher provided no other sounds are involved in the Identify and Compare phases.

***Suggested Activities:***

On the basis that all pronunciation exercises at level should be simple, fun and enjoyable, and always aiming at combining perception (reception) and production, we suggest some other activities that lead to good pronunciation practices.

**A. Recognition, Retention and Discrimination**

Make the learners aware of correspondences between figures (numbers) and the letters of the English Alphabet. To 1 corresponds A, to 2 corresponds B, to 3 corresponds C, etc. Once they have grasped that, give them figures involving sound discrimination that is phonological. For example, 2 (Two) 1 (one) 4 (Four) should give “bad”, but 2 (Two) 5 (Five) 4 (Four) gives “bed”. The teacher should spell out the number rather than read it (at this stage). That is he should avoid saying “two hundred and fourteen” or “two hundred and fifty four”.

This type of exercise often leads to a discussion of what sounds pose recognition or discrimination or production problems to the learner. It's up to the teacher to devise similar activities where transversal competencies are

involved (counting, sometimes calculating in cases of two-word verbs or nouns).

#### B. Listening and Producing

The teacher utters simple words that “sound alike” , e.g. much / match or put / pot, etc. The learner is asked to recognize which is which and to produce them. In cases of difficulty in recognition, the teacher gives a feedback and he works on modelling the sound discrimination. Nevertheless, this activity should not lead to a mere search for minimal pairs.

#### C. Recognition through Drawings

This type of activity prepares the learner to interact orally. The teacher utters a word, for example pin and the learners draw a pin (the words chosen should be known words in the early stages of the learning). If some of the learners draw a bin, then the p / b distinction still raises problems for the learner. The same procedure can be followed for vowel (either in terms of short / long (e.g. tin / teen) or in terms of neighbouring vowels such as much / match or put / pot, etc. The activity can be extended to figures and numbers if the drawing is difficult for the learners. An example would be the distinction between fourteen (and the learner draws 14) and forty (40).

We conclude that the types of activities presented in the Textbook or in the suggested pronunciation exercises above involve practice in reception then production in order to interact orally. They help the teacher locate the most obvious pronunciation difficulties

of his learners. This often triggers off discussion on learning strategies for pronunciation. The activities are meant to also trigger off communication as they involve agreement or disagreement with what was heard or what was produced. Although most learners might feel negative about their own pronunciation, these activities do involve competitiveness in class as to “who gets it right first” (Listen) and “who says it better” (Produce).

Playing with words in a learning process is often seen as fun and joy. It undoubtedly raises motivation in class, leads to improvement and it stands as a considerable psychological boost for learning.