Games and Activities for Teaching Pronunciation

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Abstract

Games and tongue twisters are often used for teaching children, but they are generally overlooked when teaching more advanced or mature learners. In this paper, we sought to introduce successful examples of games and activities for teaching pronunciation in an intermediate to advanced-level university setting. While it is a common belief that games and tongue twisters are too childish or unimportant for adults, our students, who were in their first year at a Japanese university studying English for academic purposes, seemed to find these activities useful because they provided a supportive, low-stakes environment for practicing and reflecting on their own speech. Based on our experience, pronunciation games and activities can be highly effective if used selectively, even in an academic context.

Key Words: Teaching pronunciation, games, teaching speaking, English for Academic Purposes

1. INTRODUCTION

Often, games and tongue twisters are overlooked when teaching advanced-level or mature learners, presumably because they are considered childish or unimportant by teachers and students alike. However, through experience teaching and coordinating pronunciation courses for university students, we found that some activities are still highly effective even in an academic context if used selectively. In this paper, we describe some sample activities which we found to be particularly useful for our students and how they were used within the lessons and courses we taught. We also discuss possible interpretations of why these activities were successful based on our teaching experiences and students' comments. Our high-intermediate level students seemed to find games and activities helpful for focusing on their own pronunciation habits in a non-threatening, supportive environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Some researchers support teaching pronunciation explicitly, particularly for adult learners. Gilbert (1994) explains that pronunciation features such as intonation, emphasis and pausing are "discourse signals" which are helpful for listeners to understand the flow of conversations (p. 43). Scollon, Scollon, and Jones (2012) also assert that prosodic patterning such as intonation and timing in discourse is a crucial part for successful communication. As Brazil, Coulthard, and Johns state, Communicative Language Teaching has helped language teaching professionals take teaching intonation more seriously (cited in Gilbert, 1994). Daiton and Seidlhofer (1995) also assert that "prominence, tones, and key" are particularly crucial in discourse, for they express the speaker's meaning and point of view (p. 73). Similarly, from listeners' perspectives, Derwing and Munro (1995) point out the importance of having a comprehensible accent. Wong (1987) also concludes that because native speakers rely on the rhythm and intonation of English in order to process speech, it is important to teach such features of pronunciation and guide learners' attention to them.

Other researchers support teaching pronunciation explicitly because pronunciation plays an important role in expressing who they are as speakers of English, which has further encouraged teaching pronunciation for adult learners of English. For example, there is an increasing awareness in our field about the importance of emotion, affect, collaborative dialogue, use of drama, and collaborative learning (Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2011). Teaching various aspects of pronunciation helps students to express emotion and other social aspects of language, which are essential parts of communication. Crystal (2003) also explains the role of sounds in communication, writing that language indicates one's social identity. More specifically, Morley (1994) claims that learners may experience "negative judgments about personal qualities" or "pejorative stereotyping" because of their foreign-accented speech (p.69). Furthermore, Balaubramanian, Bunta, Fitzmaurice, and Major (2002) indicate that such stereotyping can be connected with the perception that the social status of native speakers is higher than that of non-native speakers.

Students who have this negative impression of their pronunciation often feel the need to "fix" or improve their pronunciation so that they are closer to that of native speakers. Various anecdotes shared among Japanese teachers of English in our program also illustrate how learners may lose their confidence in speaking the language and become afraid of being judged. One of the worst reactions that a language learner can have after experiencing such a social judgment is to

stop speaking or stop communicating with people altogether. Even if learners do not stop interacting entirely, their communication style may naturally be affected by such a feeling. Authors of this paper share the same view based on their experience and observations. Pronunciation does express one's attitude about what is being said but also "what we communicate about ourselves as people" (Beebe cited in Morley, 1994, p. 67) and also "solidarity" among speakers of a community (Dalton and Seidlhofer, 1995, p. 7). All of these factors are key elements for building human relationships and maintaining "social harmony" in the speech community (Wong, 1987, p.21). Thus, it can be concluded that pronunciation is an essential part for successful communication and, therefore, discrete areas of pronunciation should be addressed in class where it is possible.

In order to create an environment where students can speak more confidently and enjoy communication, we believe using games and activities are effective. In particular, they can be helpful for students who have a negative impression of their own pronunciation because games and activities usually do not require them to speak in full sentences. Students who may lack confidence in speaking can still be encouraged to speak and engage in communication, because the goal of communication is to solve a puzzle as quickly as possible and to win the game. The games and activities such as those we introduce in this paper are useful especially for students who lack confidence because they create a space for students to practice speaking without being judged.

3. BACKGROUND

Our specific context was an elective class within a university EAP program which met once a week. The students were at a high-intermediate level, and their first language was Japanese. This course was devoted entirely to pronunciation. Each class had an average of twenty students, and the classes ran for eight weeks at a time. In the 2011 academic year, students in these classes took two consecutive pronunciation courses (one in fall and the other in winter term) as a set. Most students in these classes had a general interest in having their pronunciation corrected, fixed, and guided toward improvement. This allowed us as teachers to teach pronunciation explicitly to a receptive audience.

Historically, the Pronunciation course in the English Language Program at International Christian University has been developed by teachers in the program as a communication skills

component. The aim of the course was to improve students' ability to recognize and produce the sounds and sound system of English: consonants, vowels, stress, and intonation. No specific dialect of English is favored over another. Teachers teach the dialect that they speak, and thus it is hoped that students develop a positive attitude toward different dialects. At the same time, teachers try to encourage students to gain skills for self-correction.

In the academic year of 2010-2011, there was a shift in our course objectives, following some reflections and revisions based on the previous year. That is, the primary objective in the year 2009-2010 was to help students "to achieve an acceptable level of pronunciation proficiency, that is, a level that does not draw the listener's attention away from what is said to how it is said" (Staff Handbook 2009-2010). In the year 2010-2011, we also included the elements of teaching students knowledge of how sounds are produced and what sounds require attention in speaking English. However, the focus became helping students "to become confident and comfortable when speaking English because they have achieved an understanding of how languages are learned" (Staff Handbook 2010-2011). We wanted the focus to be more on the students and on their own awareness of pronunciation. In effect, teachers of this course were encouraged to share their anecdotal stories to address socio-cultural affective issues along with learning English as a foreign/second language. Furthermore, in the beginning of the course, we included an open discussion on "What is pronunciation?" to help students examine pronunciation objectively and set goals for themselves. Our intention was to help students become more confident and effective learners of English pronunciation.

The materials of the course are all in-house materials that teachers of the course contributed over the years. Last year, we used a set of materials that typically included a puzzle or game for each lesson. These proved to be helpful for students to improve their self-awareness of speech as well to become more self-confident as English speakers.

4. DESCRIPTIONS OF GAMES AND ACTIVITIES

The games and activities we used were part of pronunciation courses for first year university students in our English Language Program. The first term (Fall) is designed to help students recognize and produce the sounds and sound system of English: consonants and vowels. Students first listen to and practice the sounds that the teacher demonstrates and further practice

listening to other students in the context of a game. Producing the sounds clearly becomes crucial in successfully communicating with each other and participating in the game. Peer correction and self-monitoring happen naturally during the games and activities.

The second term (Winter) focuses on suprasegmentals such as stress, rhythm, and intonation. In order to improve on these aspects of pronunciation, students practice finding stress and pauses in texts and read aloud long texts to each other with consideration of these aspects of language. In each lesson, there is a different focus such as pausing or intonation, and various texts such as poems, dialogues, and academic passages are used. Usually, simpler tasks build up to more complex ones so that students can ultimately apply the concepts introduced to a longer passage to be read aloud.

The followings are descriptions of a typical lesson in each term.

4.1 Sample Lesson 1 (Segmentals)

A typical lesson to teach consonants starts by presenting the sounds of the day. The teacher presents the target sounds, such as /w/ and /f/, in a discrete manner with a minimal pair exercise. Students focus on feeling the differences of the sounds as they pronounce them and check if they can catch the difference among sounds. Theoretically, they may not "hear" the difference, but by discrete and explicit instruction students can experience the differences in producing the sounds. Teachers model the sounds and sometimes ask students to repeat after teachers. Students are guided to sit in pairs and practice by producing the sounds of minimal pairs until they can feel the difference. That is, partners listen and identify which sound is being produced, and their responses let the speaker know whether s/he is enunciating the sounds clearly. Such drills and modeled language are useful for developing the ability to notice features of English. In addition to drills, teachers give a lecture on the place of articulation by showing a pronunciation diagram to explicitly explain the place of the tongue, shape of jaw and lips to produce the target sounds. At this stage, teachers may choose to compare similar sounds in Japanese.

After students listen to and practice the target sounds with minimal pair drills and the teacher's lecture, they are guided to practice the sounds at a word or phrase level. For a lesson with a game containing people's names that use the target sounds of the day, we practice the names in advance. Vocabulary can also be introduced at this stage to practice words that include the target sounds in the previous weeks. Then, students are divided into groups of three for games and activities.

In a lesson focusing on different consonants such as /w/, /f/, /h/, /s/, /ʃ/ and/θ/, groups receive a set of clues which collectively contain information necessary to solve a puzzle. In this game, there are ten people who arrive at an international conference. They each have different job titles and different arrival dates, and students have to figure out who arrived when with whom based on the clues. It usually takes students approximately fifteen to twenty minutes to complete the task. The first group to solve it and inform the teacher wins the game. Throughout the game, students are still focused on discrete sounds where they practice controlling the places of articulation, especially since the names in the game itself are usually minimal pairs, such as Homan, Foeman, Woeman, and Voeman, and these need to be distinguished. Students keep producing the target sounds and give feedback on each other's sounds until they solve the puzzle.

4.2 Sample Lesson 2 (Suprasegmentals)

For a class focusing on intonation, in the first part of class, students confirm that the intention or meaning of words changes with the intonation they use. Students practiced saying single words or phrases such as "Hello," "yeah," or "come here" in different ways. The idea for this activity was taken from Ur & Wright (1992). For example, "Hello" could be said in an overly happy tone, a shy tone, or an indifferent tone. It was pointed out how these emotions can be expressed with intonation and volume.

Next, the class can move on to longer chunks of language, such as a dialogue. This time, we read aloud the conversation and visually represent the intonation used by drawing a handwritten line over the text indicating how high or low the intonation is in each sentence. This helps students to understand how intonation is used at the sentence level (adapted from Gilbert, 2005).

Also, since stress and emphasis is easily confused with pitch and intonation, an extra task can be introduced to differentiate stress from intonation. One way to emphasize this is by listening to an English song and drawing a line for the melody, similar to the way students drew lines for the previous task with the dialogue. The lyrics for a familiar pop or folk song can be printed for students, and we draw lines above the lines of text as we listen to the song. Through this task, students can more easily associate the concept of intonation with pitch, rather than stress placement. This also creates a relaxed lead in to the final task.

At the end of the lesson, we apply the same ideas about intonation to an excerpt of a academic text. A paragraph taken from an academic article would take less than one minute to read

and would be a suitable length for a final 15-20 minute activity. The teacher can choose a set of common texts for students, or students can bring in texts that they like. Focusing on the intonation of how the text should be read, students work in groups (or alone) to draw intonation lines over the sentences in the text. At this stage, the teacher can also walk around and help students with any obvious misinterpretations. Then students can read the texts to each other with an awareness of the intonation. If one common text is given to each group in the class, each group can agree on one answer, rehearse the text, and take turns standing up and reading their text together in unison for the rest of the class. This gives students a non-threatening way to practice reading out loud to an audience, and by listening to other groups of students, they can also recognize how intonation affects the intelligibility of a spoken text.

5. DISCUSSION

Based on class observations and end-of-term questionnaires, students generally seemed to perceive the pronunciation games and activities described above quite positively. Often, students volunteered to speak to each other to solve a puzzle or were laughing as they tried to communicate information with target sounds (e.g. "Seen" vs. "Sheen").   They willingly repeated tongue twisters again and again, and they took activities with children's poetry as seriously as they did with academic texts.

In an open-ended survey given at the end of the first Pronunciation course (two sections during Fall 2011, 14 to 16 students in each section, 26 responses in total), half of all the students who completed the survey used the word "enjoyed" or "fun" regarding the Pronunciation course or the games and activities in particular. Three of the students mentioned that the games were "difficult" or "frustrating," while at the same time also commenting that the challenge helped them to realize the importance of understanding pronunciation in order to communicate effectively. These responses suggest that either way the majority of students in these two classes were invested in the games and activities and that they were useful in some way.

Considering the proficiency level and maturity of the students, it is remarkable how much students seemed to enjoy games and tasks which could also be interpreted as childish by adult learners. What made these activities so interesting or successful for students whose main purpose in studying English is to achieve academic competency? One possible answer is that these learners

found the tasks useful to practice difficult sounds in a meaningful, even if artificial, context. Since students can give each other immediate feedback about whether their pronunciation of particular sounds were understood (e.g. "Seen" or "Sheen"?), they can become self-aware of which sounds are difficult for them to produce intelligibly and focus on improving on those sounds in a supportive, protected environment.

Students may have found these activities meaningful because having a class specifically for practicing pronunciation provides them with a safe space for trying out difficult sounds or aspects of speech. In a real life environment, mistakes in pronunciation can be embarrassing or result in negative consequences (cf. Morley, 1994; Balaubramanian et al., 2002). If students can improve their communicability in class, it can save them from possible difficult situations in the future.

It may also be worth noting that the students in this study were all taking pronunciation as an elective course, meaning they chose to take this class to improve their pronunciation or learn more about English pronunciation over other English skills courses. Some students had indicated during class discussions at the beginning of the first term that they wanted to have better pronunciation because they were not confident about speaking clearly in English. A few shared that they felt they have "bad" pronunciation and that this feeling of being stigmatized had motivated them to take this course. We can say that at least for these students who have an awareness of their pronunciation or those who feel the need to make a conscious effort to change their pronunciation generally students seemed to appreciate having a chance to participate in non-threatening, fun games and activities with their peers.

For students who lack confidence in their own English abilities or feel they are not "real" English speakers, studying pronunciation in a protected environment is one way to overcome the stigma associated with their self-perceived image when using English. By realizing that they can improve their own communicability by adjusting their speech, students can gradually improve their attitude about their own linguistic competence as English speakers.

6. CONCLUSION

By engaging in pronunciation games and activities, students can become more self-aware of how much they are able to communicate. Although perhaps not all students will necessarily

appreciate pronunciation games, many students find them enjoyable and helpful, particularly those who feel the need to improve the intelligibility and comprehensibility of their English sounds. This applies to students of all ages and levels, even if they are adult learners or academically oriented. While learning how to read children's poetry or solve puzzles may not be the ultimate goal for advanced learners, creating a safe, supportive space for practicing pronunciation is important for helping students become more confident about their own speech.

Finally, we believe that the use of games and activities in teaching pronunciation is potentially helpful for language education in any language. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore possibilities in other languages, finding similar ways to incorporate games into other foreign language classes would help learners of those languages become more confident speakers.

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