

WHY EXACT PRONUNCIATION IS NOT ALWAYS IMPORTANT: USING DIFFERENCE TO INFORM FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGY

Annotation

This article is about teaching methodology that promote practical students learning. It emphasizes the importance of semiotics in teaching methodology especially using difference in the classroom.

Introduction:

While observing a class, an instructor noticed that many of the students in the classroom were having a difficult time pronouncing the English sound ‘th.’ The instructor seemed to have an exercise ready for just such an occasion, so the instructor told the students to recite a passage that they all had already memorized. The passage had numerous words with the ‘th’ sound and was a silly tale about a thief. It went something like this [insert part of the passage]. After the students had recited the passage, many stumbling through the tortuous passage of ‘th’ words, they came to an abrupt stop. The students had indeed memorized the passage, which was quite impressive. The students unarguably knew a lot of English words, but after the showmanship of the passage had worn off, the emptiness of the words had remained. We had a chance to speak with many of the students after the class, and we praised them for their ability to recite such a turgid passage, but we soon realized that many of the students did not understand a great deal of the words that they blithely enumerated for the teacher. They had memorized a massive passage for the sole purpose of pronouncing the sound ‘th’ correctly (which probably took uncountable hours of study and did not even promise the perfect pronunciation of ‘th’), but had lost out on the meaning and the usefulness of such words. We have noticed that the ‘th’ sound can be quite hard for foreign language learners to pronounce, but we rarely find that a speaker’s inability to pronounce the sound perfectly ever interferes with communication. As foreign language teachers (FLT), we should teach more effective communication skills, and we should use grammar and pronunciation as tools to teach effective communication skills. We should not let them distract us from our main goal.

Using some basic tenets of Semiotics, we wish to propose a different mode of Teaching Methodology, a method based on comprehension and engendering better communication skills. Of course, pronunciation is important to language comprehension, and we do not intend to argue that it is not. We only want to better demarcate the difference between teaching a foreign language and teaching a foreign language with the *intent* of teaching better communication skills. Even in America, native speakers use a variety of pronunciations, but this does not compromise communication. The importance is not knowing every word perfectly, but being able to recognize a word’s place in its linguistic context. Once we recognize that even in colloquial speech that pronunciation varies from speaker to speaker, and then we can begin to construct teaching methodologies that replicate these instances instead of trying to abolish them from our classrooms.

Why do we let teaching language get in the way of teaching better communication skills?

There are many reasons why we as teachers let teaching language impede our goal of improving communication skills. The most practical reason for learning another language is to be able to communicate with someone else that knows that language (the ability to communicate

has *use value*), but there can also be a great deal of *symbolic value* in learning a language. Use value includes mostly skills that come from something, while symbolic value includes more intangible things such as prestige or some other form of cultural currency. Using the example from the introduction as an example, memorizing a passage has little to no use value, but has a lot of symbolic value for the students, as well as for teachers. Students get recognition from the teacher and a good grade for being able to complete the recitation that the teacher assigned them. The teacher gets symbolic value from the student's ability to recite because they can show others (for example, directors or visiting teachers such as myself) that the students "know" English. The student's ability to recite seems quite impressive, but it has a lack of substance. The students are left with little to no use value. They might be able to pronounce 'th' better, but their ability to communicate has barely increased (if at all). Teachers should focus their efforts towards activities that have more use value and concern themselves less with activities that focus on symbolic value. After a brief summarization of the basic tenets of semiotics, we can use semiotics to create a better teaching methodology.

Background Information:

Ferdinand de Saussure, known by many as the father of modern linguistics and one of the greatest contributors to semiotics, developed the concept of the *sign*. A sign constitutes two basic parts: the *signifier* and *signified*. The signifier is something that refers to or signifies an idea (this could be a word, a symbol, or anything that refers to something else). The signified is the actual idea that a signifier refers to. For example, the signifier "dog" will refer to many signifieds in the recipient's mind (an image of a dog, faithful, dirty, and many more depending on the individual). For the most part, FLT's main objective is to create new signifiers for already existing signifieds. For example, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors will tell Russian speaking students that the word "dog" means *собака*. The new signifier ("dog") will be connected to already existing signifieds (*собака* or an image of a dog). So, in full, the sign is a combination of a signifier and all the signifieds that are referred by the signifier.

In addition to the concept of the sign, Saussure emphasized how language is *arbitrary*. The letters that we use to represent sounds do not meaningfully represent how those sounds are pronounced in any way. We merely use letters to distinguish one sound from another. So, if our use of letters is arbitrary, then our use of words and language are also arbitrary. As Saussure argues in *Course in General Linguistics*¹, even onomatopoeias are dependent upon the linguistic structure and are not strictly influenced by the actual sound made.

Authentic onomatopoeic words (e.g. *glug-glug*, *tick-tock*, etc.), not only are limited in number, but also they are chosen somewhat arbitrarily, for they are only approximate and more or less conventional imitations of certain sounds (cf. English *bow-wow* and French *ouauoua*). In addition, once these words have been introduced into the language, they are to a certain extent subjected to the same evolution—phonetic, morphological, etc.—that other words undergo (cf. *pigeon*, ultimately from Vulgar Latin *pīpiō*, derived in turn from an onomatopoeic formulation): obvious proof that they lose something of their original character in order to assume that of the linguistic sign in general, which is unmotivated.

(Saussure 855)

Even with onomatopoeias, words that we consider to be directly influenced by our environment are arbitrary to an extent. They are formed by the existing linguistic structure and the onomatopoeias change from one language to next. In Kyrgyz, the onomatopoeia for a bark is [ov, ov, ov]. Instead of words deriving from natural substance, we only use words to differentiate one word from another. The term *difference* encapsulates this phenomenon.

Difference, the idea that we use words to differentiate from other words to create meaning, can inform new demarcations for teaching methodologies, specifically the pursuit towards better communication skills instruction. Saussure argues that the exact pronunciation of a word does not always matter for comprehension, but being able to differentiate always does:

Phonemes are above all else opposing, relative, and negative entities. Proof of this is the latitude that speakers have between points of convergence in the pronunciation of distinct sounds. In French, for instance, general use of a dorsal *r* does not prevent many speakers from using a tongue-tip trill; language is not in the least disturbed by it; language requires only that the sound be different and not, as one might imagine, that it have an invariable quality. I can even pronounce the French *r* like German *ch* in *Bach*, *doch*, etc., but in German I could not use *r* instead of *ch*, for German gives recognition to both elements and must keep them apart.

(Saussure 861)

Using this concept as one of the foundations of teaching language, FLTs can teach towards difference to teach better communication skills. This concept of differentiation is not interfered with when the language does not recognize that sound (I'm referring to Saussure's example from above where the French can use the German 'ch' in place of 'r'). Additionally, differentiation can still happen when replacing a sound that is recognized by the language and it will not always interfere with comprehension. Although Saussure argues that you cannot replace a sound with another sound that is recognized by that language, we can and do all the time.

Differentiation:

Differentiation is not always disrupted when a sound is replaced by another sound already in the language system. As recipients of language, we use context to distinguish one word from another. For example, in the English language there are a few sounds that are absent in the Kyrgyz and Russian language: notably the sound 'th' and 'w'. Many EFL teachers will notice a *sound change* when EFL students are trying to pronounce the sound. The sound change usually consists of 'f' or 'd' for 'th' and 'v' for 'w'. These sound changes in the context of speech rarely intrude upon comprehension. Many linguists use sound change to note a change of a sound over a period of time. So instead of doing a diachronic analysis of sound change, I will use sound change to identify more synchronic changes in sound, especially with students that are studying a foreign language.

Assimilation is a "general term in phonetics which refers to the influence exercised by one sound segment upon the articulation of another, so that the sounds become more alike, or identical" (Crystal 39-40). In other words, assimilation is the process where one sound based on the articulation of other sounds around it becomes similar or the same. Usually, assimilation results from other sounds that are near the phoneme. For my purposes, I will use the term *trans-language assimilation*. This refers to a speaker replacing a sound that is not within their linguistic system with a sound that is within their linguistic system, for example, a Russian speaker replacing the sound 'w' with the sound 'v'. Many speakers will replace a sound with another sound that is closest to a sound in their respective language. For the most part, trans-language assimilation does not interfere with communication.

When EFL students use a word with a trans-language assimilated sound change, there may be some misunderstanding if the word is only used in isolation. An EFL student may say "viper" instead of "wiper," but when do we ever use words in isolation? Language is contextual. Language has the context of environment and other words to contextualize the word. As a speaker talks and continues to elaborate, the context refines the meaning of every word used.

When a speaker is in a car on a rainy day and says, “you should be careful. The *vipers* aren’t working,” the listener does not misconstrue “vipers” for actually vipers or snakes. The listener does not think that there are reptilian animals in the car that are being lazy and not working. They use context to understand that the speaker is talking about the car’s wipers. In context, the trans-language assimilation of the sound ‘w’ becomes meaningless. Any supposed mispronunciations are rectified by difference. The listener still distinguishes the difference of the word “wiper” from the other words in the sentence. The listener uses difference and context to understand the speaker’s intent. In addition to the meaninglessness of these assimilated sound changes, assimilation is a natural part of language, and it is common even in colloquial speech.

Examples of colloquial speech that assimilates:

In colloquial speech, assimilation happens often in language. Native speakers of English will often assimilate words for the ease of articulation (Burleigh 90). Just as fluent speakers will use assimilation in their speech, so will speakers that are using a foreign language will have sound changes to make articulation easier for them. Assimilation is especially prevalent when people speak quickly. Here are a few common examples of assimilation in English speech:

Bags → bagz

loads → loadz

We can go whenever – can go → cang go

You can buy the book – can buy → cam buy

Although the process of assimilation usually happens at the end of the word, the process is very similar to trans-language assimilation. Both processes are sound changes that happen because it is easier for the speaker to pronounce those sounds instead of the original sounds.

Assimilation is a natural phenomenon in every language. EFL students should not be discouraged from assimilation unless the assimilation prevents proper comprehension. If anything, EFL students should be taught towards differentiating different types of assimilation and towards differentiation instead of listening for perfect pronunciation. Ideally, students should be exposed to many different accents and different pronunciations of words. This will increase their listening skills and help towards better differentiating words. Only allowing perfect pronunciation in the classroom will actually diminish the student’s ability to differentiate words.

How can we teach toward differentiation?

If we want to teach more toward differentiation, there are many things that we can do as language teachers. At lower levels, we can teach phonetics and near sounds that commonly result in assimilation and other sound changes or sound eliminations. We can also teach parts of speech along with common patterns that happen within each part of speech. Teaching word order can go far in helping students identify parts of language and aid them in differentiating between words. Once students are more advanced, we can teach different pronunciations and develop student’s skills in being able to identify separate words while listening and writing. All of these objectives will help students learn better differentiating skills, which is the way we create meaning in language. If we want to improve student’s communication skills, then we need to teach more toward differentiation.

Conclusion:

Passages like the example from the introduction have a place in teaching methodology. Silly stories or songs can be great warm ups or energizers for students, but these activities should not derail us from teaching effective communication skills. They should encourage better communication skills. Instead of simply memorizing the passage, the students could read the passage on the board and then the teacher can use the passage to segue into unknown vocabulary. Memorization does not mean understanding. Using words in context are much better indicators of understanding. FLTs should use context to simulate real life usages of words instead of merely reciting a passage. Communication is a much better indicator of understanding and exact pronunciation is not always needed for that. We must distinguish between understanding and misunderstanding. One of our main goals to increase understanding is connecting already existing signifieds to new signifiers. Once we have done that, we should teach strategies that promote effective differentiating skills and eliminate activities that would hinder differentiation.

This is only one example out of many where teachers let teaching language interfere with teaching better communication skills. As we have said, grammar and pronunciation are extremely important to language learning. We should continue to instruct on grammar and pronunciation, but we should use grammar and pronunciation as tools to develop better differentiating and communication skills. Just because we are teaching language does not mean that we are teaching students how to communicate. We should not let grammar, pronunciation and other parts of language detract us from our ultimate goal, the ability to communicate better.

Notes:

1. *Course in General Linguistics* was not written by Ferdinand Saussure, but published posthumously by some of his colleagues. This text was compiled from a collection of disarrayed students' notes that took Saussure's classes.

Work Cited:

1. Burleigh, P. *A Manual of English Phonetics and Phonology*. Frankfurt: Gunter Narr Verlag. 2011.
2. Crystal, D. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1991.
3. Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*.

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