PRAXIS

FACULTY OF WELLBEING, EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE STUDIES
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PRAXIS Scholarship Research Final Report Form

Project Title

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Abstract

Pronunciation is active not only when speaking aloud, but when reading, listening, writing or even remembering events or numbers. It also has a strong impact on language learners' self-esteem. In the field of Spanish language teaching, however, the persistence of certain myths related to the teaching of pronunciation has contributed to this feature not receiving much attention. The aims of the present project are to identify Spanish tutors' professional development needs in the area of pronunciation teaching through the evaluation of an open educational resource, a five-week course on teaching Spanish pronunciation and as a result, adjust our syllabi to systematically incorporate pronunciation teaching into our modules.

Literature review

Despite the fact that the ultimate goal for most language learners is being able to speak with proficient speakers and other learners, the teaching of pronunciation is underestimated in curricula and in classroom practice. There are several reasons behind this: it is generally believed that pronunciation will be acquired over time anyway (Rao 2019); native speaker teachers often lack specialist training (Kirkova-Naskova 2019) while non-native teachers are often insecure and prefer to focus on other language skills (Henderson et al. 2012).

Traditionally, the purpose of second and foreign language (L2) pronunciation teaching was to acquire a native-like competence. It is widely accepted by now that this is an unrealistic goal that places an enormous burden on both students and teachers, and priority should be given to comprehensible and intelligible pronunciation (Munro and Derwing 2005). It has also been demonstrated that language learners benefit from explicit pronunciation teaching (Thomson and Derwing 2015; Saito 2011, Elliot 1995). In the past decade a few resources have been developed to support Spanish teachers who aim to enrich their practice, understand the phonological background of pronunciation and focus systematically on pronunciation teaching (Gil Fernández ed. 2012; Rao ed. 2019). It is evident that the languages already spoken by learners have a strong impact on their pronunciation in the subsequent languages. For this reason, an open course on _Teaching Spanish Pronunciation_ published at OpenLearn was developed at the Open University in 2019.

The course is aimed at teachers of Spanish working in the United Kingdom and is based on a contrastive approach applying a comparison between the realisation of the segmental and suprasegmental features of British English and Spanish.

The aims of the present project are to identify Spanish tutors' professional development needs in the area of pronunciation teaching through the evaluation of the mentioned open educational resource, and as a result, adjust our syllabi to incorporate pronunciation teaching in a meaningful way.

Methodology

Two Associate Lecturers and a visiting scholar provided critical comments on the above-mentioned open course with the help of a comments form designed by the principal investigator. Questions addressed the content and structure of the course, specifically the relevance and interest of the content, the level and development of the course, the inclusivity and diversity of content and the number of visual aids and stimuli, the length of the sections, the variety and interest of activities and possible niches. The second step in data collection were the semi-structured interviews the PI carried out with the critical readers to gain an in-depth understanding of their answers and tease apart the challenges and best practice in teaching Spanish pronunciation. A thematic analysis of the interviews was carried out to determine the relevant topics that are meaningful for identifying Spanish tutors' professional development needs for teaching pronunciation at distance and ways of integrating this teaching into our new modules.

Findings

Reviewers agreed that the course was thorough and well structured, the objectives were clear and convincing. It has a strong theoretical base and explains complex phonological topics in an accessible way which will allow practitioners to make better informed choices when designing pronunciation activities. Although there is a wide variety of materials (including charts, tables, links to relevant websites) and activities (including audio activities with sample answers, which will be of great usefulness for teachers of Spanish), it has been found to be a bit "too silent", that is, practitioners would appreciate more audio-visual aids.

The key points that were identified as potential extensions to the course were the following:

- The course would benefit from more audio files – not only Spanish, but also English - to illustrate the problems and topics that are explained. A glossary might also be helpful.
- Practitioners need more ideas for exercises, a "book" of levelled activities. They would benefit from a range of tried and tested pronunciation activities. (Note that this was not the aim of the present course.)
- The phonological differences between Spanish and English are worth pointing out. However, attention should be paid to the fact that an increasing number of learners of Spanish at the OU are not native speakers of English.
- Students should be exposed to a variety of accents, apart of course, from that of their tutor or teacher. The course might put more emphasis on the varieties and their implications for pronunciation (and listening).

The semi-structured interviews shed light on the following:

- How to identify and correct pronunciation errors is a problem for many Spanish teachers. The course would benefit from a section on techniques for correcting pronunciation (on segmental and suprasegmental level).

- A bank of resources with levelled activities (in accordance with the CEFR levels) would be a huge help for Spanish teachers. It would also be helpful for teachers if there were more ideas on how to integrate the teaching of pronunciation into the regular teaching, when to teach it and how to link it to the teaching of other skills and language content (grammar, vocabulary).
- The link between the teaching of pronunciation and listening comprehension could be more explicit, and activities for the latter could be included as well.
- A section on different pronunciation teaching methods would also be beneficial, as the course only focuses on the verbo-tonal method.

Recommendations

As the ultimate goal of the present project is to improve and enhance the learning experience of students and to enable them to achieve their study goals, several actions have already been taken as a result of the findings, and more will be implemented in future modules (see below).

At the National Associate Lecturer Conference in January 2021 I held a workshop where a number of pronunciation teaching techniques were presented as well as criteria to consider when teaching pronunciation: e.g., whether to treat pronunciation as a separate or an integral language skill, whether the aim is to acquire an intelligible pronunciation or a native-like one what the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches are (intuitive-imitative approach, analytic-linguistic approach). This was followed by a sharing best practice session where we discussed how pronunciation teaching activities can be implemented in distance and online teaching. It became evident again that error correction is a sensitive issue in pronunciation teaching, on the one hand, because teachers might find it hard to identify pronunciation errors and, on the other, they would like to make corrections without causing anxiety.

As a response to this, I created a template for tutors on L194 that helps them identify systematic pronunciation difficulties at A1, A2 level. I also created screencasts for students on L194 to help them prepare their oral TMAs. As a result, the average scores on the oral TMAs (TMA01 and TMA03) were 3% higher than in 19J.

I developed a detailed pronunciation syllabus for L106 (the new Beginners Spanish module) to help authors systematically integrate pronunciation teaching into the course.

I recommend that language teachers consider the following topics:

Benefits of explicit pronunciation teaching
Research studies investigating the effectiveness of phonetic instruction and pronunciation instruction report an overall positive effect on learning: it improves adult learners' comprehensibility and intelligibility in the target language, it draws learner's attention to phonetic information which naturalistic input rarely does. Pronunciation has an impact on all language skills, not only when speaking aloud. It is active whenever the inner voice is active.

Pronunciation improves listening comprehension: the mouth teaches the ear, and the ear teaches the mouth. Students of languages become aware of this when they have learned to pronounce something correctly and suddenly start to hear it clearly. For instance, when a student of Spanish has learnt how to say a rapid colloquial expression such as *p'alante* and finds she can suddenly hear and understand it.

Pronunciation affects self-esteem. The impact of feeling a more competent speaker and a more competent listener gives a sense of capability in interactive tasks and confidence. Learners often have a good sense of areas of L2 pronunciation that they avoid, so it is very important that the teacher can give them systematic

help. Thus, teaching pronunciation to teenage and adult learners from the beginning should be taken as seriously as teaching grammar and vocabulary.

Barriers and challenges in teaching pronunciation (online)

Despite the fact that pronunciation is recognized as a crucial component of second language (L2) learning, classroom practice shows that it is largely underestimated as a language skill in the curricula across language programs. Research shows that the reasons behind this are varied like the teachers' choice of textbooks. Another uncertainty is that L2 pronunciation is not necessarily tied to proficiency, that is, a beginner can have excellent pronunciation and an individual with a superb grasp of grammar and vocabulary can have a very strong accent which is difficult to understand.

There are also opposing theoretical approaches to teaching pronunciation: (i) Should it be taught as a separate language skill with a strong focus on the acquisition of the target language sounds and suprasegmental features? (ii) Or should it form part of the communicative process?

Another difficulty is to choose the target language model, especially in the case of languages like Spanish or English that are pluricentric. Shall we teach the variety with the greatest number of speakers? The one generally considered the most "respected"? The variety spoken by the teacher? All varieties? It might also be hard to create a low-anxiety environment where students are not shy to speak and try out their oral skills.

Pronunciation teaching techniques

There are two main approaches to teaching pronunciation: 1. Intuitive-imitative approach and 2. analytic-linguistic approach. Naturally, the language teacher can combine these. "The basic premise of the intuitive-imitative approach is that learners are capable of listening and imitating L2 prosody and sounds, thus implicitly acquiring the phonological system of the target language. The approach also assumes that they are exposed to a standard pronunciation model, presented by a teacher or audio equipment, resulting in their developing acceptable pronunciation.

The main principle of the analytic-linguistic approach is that learners clearly benefit from explicit instruction of the L2 sound system. A variety of teaching tools facilitate this process, such as charts with phonemic symbols and vocal apparatus, detailed descriptions of articulatory movements, L1-L2 contrastive information, etc." (Kirkova-Naskova 2019: 120).

Ideas for tasks that can be used:

- Simple mechanical drill of words/phrases (listen and repeat). It trains the muscular memory. The activity is controlled and decontextualised. Visual aids might be helpful.
- Practice a specific form, but in a wider communicative context.
- Practice oral skills focusing on the meaning and communication and not correction: games, drama techniques, etc.
- Targeted listening tasks like phoneme identification, recognising different varieties, connected speech phenomena, etc. Many researchers claim that learners should learn to perceive L2 sounds first and then attempt to produce them. Not all agree, though.
- Explicit instruction of phonetic and phonological features of the two languages to be contrasted or the target language only: articulatory features (visual aids come handy); contrastive segments; phonotactic restrictions, etc.
- Multisensory practice with visual, tactile, kinaesthetic features involved may be a nice change.

Pronunciation errors

Making mistakes is a natural process in language learning that provides the opportunity to obtain feedback and improve. Students are aware of this and generally have the expectation that their mistakes will be corrected, but this is an expectation that can vary substantially from student to student, and some may feel ashamed that this is done explicitly in front of their peers. Furthermore, it is not always easy to distinguish foreign accent and pronunciation errors. As a rule of thumb, pronunciation errors impede understanding or make it difficult while listeners get used to a foreign accent without major difficulties.

In order to create a friendly environment, teachers often opt for indirect correction, that is, when the student finishes speaking, they correctly reformulate what the student said, keeping the focus on the meaning expressed by the learner. The advantage of this correction method is that it does not interrupt communication and is less interventionist. However, students are generally too nervous to realize their mistake and correct forms upon hearing indirect correction. It is also accepted that speaking anxiety is associated with careful monitoring for errors and focusing on precision and thus prevents greater fluency in speaking. A situation most language teachers would like to avoid. It may be helpful to clearly distinguish between activities that are directed: a) towards linguistic form, that is, grammatical or pronunciation precision, and b) those whose focus is developing fluency. It is also helpful, if students are not put on the spot, or speaking/pronunciation activities are first done as a group and not individually. A recommendation in online teaching could be for anxious students to practice with the microphone off. In activities designed to practice fluency, in the case of homogeneous groups, translanguaging can be useful for the emotional well-being of students and for maintaining fluency. Students can also be involved in conversations about error correction and peer correction that should be guided and supported by the teacher. Autonomous learners must be able to manage errors during their learning journey, we can encourage to create a positive internal dialogue to achieve this goal.