

CAN PRONUNCIATION LEARNING BE COMMUNICATIVE?

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In the teaching and learning processes of a second or foreign language, it is very important to develop a clear pronunciation. Pronunciation in communication plays an important role if we consider that it is through an acceptable pronunciation that communication can be successfully achieved. The up-dated methodology for English teaching and learning processes deals with the use of communication in the classroom, but it is also true that these communicative methodologies do not mention the training students should have in pronunciation skills as a complement to the development of communicative competence. There is no clear evidence that the communicative approach places importance on the teaching of pronunciation. The training of students in the pronunciation of English as a second language is a need that ESL teachers cannot ignore. Differences in sounds, stress and intonation can represent differences in meaning. Students need to produce and know differences in pronunciation.

For acceptable communication to take place, intelligibility is needed. Pronunciation plays an important role in intelligibility. To clarify this role, two definitions of intelligibility can be examined. Byrne (1986) defines intelligibility in phonological terms. He argues that intelligibility is the capacity to "make the difference between key

sounds such as /i/ and /I/" (p.11). Kenworthy (1987) argues that "intelligibility is being understood by a listener at a given time in a given situation" (p.13). The relationship between pronunciation and intelligibility is clearly expressed in these two definitions. The more words a listener understands, the more intelligible a speaker is. Nonnative speakers need to be intelligible to be able to communicate in a second language.

Given the above, it is possible to argue that communicative approaches which do not deal with the teaching of pronunciation need to implement communicative activities to develop an acceptable pronunciation in students. Since communication is heavily stressed in communicative approaches, it is almost impossible to fully communicate without any training in pronunciation. How pronunciation can be taught in a communicative way will be discussed in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

To begin with, it is important to establish that this section will present one activity that can be used to train students in pronunciation. The examples presented to develop this technique have been chosen with native Spanish speaking students of English as a foreign language in mind. In pronunciation, it is important to consider those sounds which are more difficult due to the background of the

student according to his/her first language. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that the description of how to teach pronunciation in a communicative way can apply to the teaching of EFL in different contexts to students of different backgrounds. Adaptation of the activity may be required. The emphasis made is mainly in working with segmentals since the work on suprasegmentals should be developed in every class.

The first step in incorporating communicative activities in the teaching of pronunciation is to stress the general goal expected from the lessons which is for students to develop a pronunciation which is easily understood and facilitates the communication of a message (Carruthers, 1987). Moreover, it is also important to consider that in accordance to the principles of the communicative approach, the language to be used in pronunciation practice should allow the integration of skills. The materials should be presented in meaningful contexts and in situations that are relevant and interesting to the students (Bowen, 1979). Instruction in pronunciation should also involve students in the exchange of ideas in an active way. Students' attention should be focused on conveying a message. They should internally deduce that to a certain extent the understanding of a message will be based on the accuracy of their pronunciation (Pica, 1984). Thus, while students' attention should be on the content rather than on the form of the language to be communicated, they must also be aware that form influences comprehension.

To propose activities or techniques which

develop pronunciation in a communicative way, it is important to take into account what Rivers and Temperley (1978) refer to as "skill getting" and "skill using" activities. For students to develop communicative competence, both kinds of activities should be practiced in the classroom (p.4). The distinction between activities that acquire skills and use skills permits teachers of an L2 to introduce pronunciation practice in communication. Activities that acquire skills, according to Rivers and Temperley, allow students to manipulate phonological and grammatical forms. Skill using activities allow students to apply their acquired linguistic knowledge to the comprehension and production of communicative language.

Skills getting activities in pronunciation teaching are those related to listening. In pronunciation teaching, listening is an important skill. It is the basis for students to acquire a particular pronunciation pattern and later, produce it by means of speaking which represents the skill using activities suggested by Rivers and Temperley. A way to apply skill getting and using activities is shown in the following technique that can be used to train students in pronunciation.

Bowen (1979) calls it the "Contextualization" model. Here, meaningful contexts are the basis for pronunciation teaching and practice. Drills are designed to reinforce pronunciation in communicative competence. Minimal pair work is included, but with a change of its traditional presentation. Traditionally, minimal pair work was developed to

establish the difference between two sounds presented in two isolated words. Here, minimal pairs are presented in the context of situations, and can be accompanied by visual images. The context presented should be of interest to a particular group of students (the teacher who knows his/her students can identify interesting topics relevant to the needs of his/her students). A lesson designed using this model follows these steps:

- ❖ First, the teacher (or one student) draws pictures on the board. The drawings refer to the minimal pair to be practiced. For instance, the words “pill” and “bill” can be represented by two different drawings. It is necessary to choose words that can be illustrated. While the teacher draws, the students guess the name of the object.
- ❖ Second, other elements that give information on the objects are drawn (if drawing is difficult, pictures can be used). For instance, drawings describing the use of the object or other objects which complement the object can be drawn. Here, students deduce the words of a minimal pair in the context of meaningful sentences. Each word is presented in a different sentence.
- ❖ Third, an identification exercise is developed. The teacher utters one part of a sentence and the students complete the sentence by uttering the word of the minimal pair which corresponds to each sentence.
- ❖ Fourth, the teacher presents a reading or any other kind of text (recorded material) which incorporates the pronunciation point taught. Students

read, paying attention to the context of the reading but without overlooking pronunciation of the minimal pair, since it can change meaning in the reading.

- ❖ Fifth, students work in pairs or groups commenting on the reading by means of comprehension questions.
- ❖ Sixth, a problem solving or reaching a consensus activity is developed. The activity should include the pronunciation point studied.

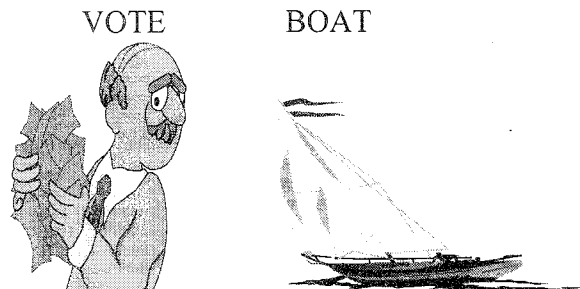
These kinds of pedagogic activities can effectively be used in pronunciation. According to Nunan (1989) these activities can be used to practice skills which develop fluency, mastery of phonological elements and mastery of grammar as well as discourse and interaction skills.

Sample Lesson

Teaching point: differentiation of /v/ and /b/

Minimal pair: vote – boat

Drawing:



Sentences:

- You are too young to vote
- People travel by boat

Sentences to present to students for oral completion.

- If you want to cross the river use the _____.
- Citizens have the right to _____.
- Women acquired the right to _____ recently.
- Traveling by _____ is cheaper than traveling by plane.

Reading:

The Right to Vote

Vote is a word which has represented big changes in every country in the world. The word in itself reflects some change. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines vote as "an act of making a choice or decision on a matter by means of voting" (p.1231). One of the big changes deals with the right to vote. In history, it was men who first had the right to vote excluding women. Even men who lived in isolated places surrounded by water traveled by boat to a city where vote took place. Later, women acquired the right to vote promoting the first change in the history of many countries.

Comprehension questions:

1. What is the meaning of vote?
2. Who acquired first the right to vote?
3. Have women had always the right to vote?

Problem solving activity:

Situation: There are ten people traveling by boat from a small island in the Pacific Ocean to the nearest continental city. It is

urgent for the ten people to arrive at the city between two and five in the afternoon to vote for the construction of a bridge which will join the island with the continental city making it easier to travel back and forth. Suddenly, the small boat runs out of combustible. People in the boat could not find any paddle. The boat was overloaded. The only things they could find were three life vests. There was not the possibility to ask for help, unless one of them got to the shore and they were afraid because the sea level was rising.

What do you suggest for them to do in this situation?. Remember, they can be in danger of dying, and they really have to get to the continental city on time.

Variation: A reaching a consensus activity can be presented instead of the problem solving. A tape recorded text can be presented to vary the reading activity (Adapted from Bowen, 1979).

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