
**PHONOLOGICAL COMPETENCE OR COMPETENT
PHONOLOGY?**

*Mustapha Moubarik
Universidad de Sevilla*

In this paper we discuss whether the learner of English should aim at acquiring native-like pronunciation, or instead, intelligible pronunciation, i.e. competent phonology, is sufficient for his/her needs. It offers a brief review of research in language acquisition in general and phonological competence in particular. We draw on our lengthy experience as a learner and teacher of foreign languages at both secondary and tertiary levels. We also discuss pedagogical implications, insisting on the pressing need to enhance home-made materials designed and produced by non-native speakers, because these are better placed to know the needs of their learners on the one hand, and the goals of language learning in their own environments on the other.

Key words: Intelligibility, lingua franca, home-made materials, ridicule and inhibition.

1. Introduction

Language teaching materials in general and English language textbooks in particular, have often omitted a systematic treatment of the sound system of the target language. Even when they did, the sound system has been treated incidentally. That is to say, pronunciation problems are tackled according to the unit in which they are met in the textbook. Another reason why pronunciation has been neglected is due to the belief that the phonological

aspects of language can be picked up without recourse to formal instruction, inductively, so to speak. Hence, a mere exposure to the teacher's voice as well as authentic audio materials would induce, as it were, the learner to absorb the phonological facts of the target language. Moreover, and to a lesser extent, some teachers avoid dealing with learners' pronunciation deficiencies because of lack of adequate training in phonetics. In fact, the way pronunciation is dealt with in the classroom clearly reflects how it was introduced to the teacher-in-training in the first place. Speaking is, after all, a physical activity that can be described scientifically, and thus taught and learnt.

There are other motives why pronunciation has not been treated with rigour:

-The fallacy that native-like pronunciation is necessary for intelligibility to take place.

-The misleading belief that correct pronunciation can take place only by means of imitating the native speaker, etc.

These questions, in addition to others, will be contemplated in this article. The writer also suggests the consideration of *competent phonology* rather than the often-repeated phonological competence when language learning is at stake.

2. Language competence

2.1. Language competence in the first language

Native speakers are said to be competent speakers of their language. This means that they are endowed with many abilities that make them competent in their native language, e.g.:

- Ability to judge the well-formedness / ill-formedness of an utterance
- Ability to disambiguate lexical and grammatical words and sentences
- Ability to make spontaneous use of language for communication

-Ability to use language creatively

-Ability to identify different varieties of a language and recognise whether these varieties are social, regional, etc.

All these abilities make the native speaker competent in his/her language.

2.2. Language competence in the second language

Whereas native speakers' competence is clearly identifiable as a number of abilities, which native speakers possess, it is not so easy to find adequate definitions for proficiency in second language research. Proficiency has had a chameleon-like behaviour and has been defined accordingly. Sometimes, proficiency has been defined in terms of behavioural and performance objectives, other times it is defined in terms of linguistic and communicative goals. And still at others, it has been associated with transitional competence.

Up to the seventies for instance, proficiency was likened to linguistic content, that is phonology, lexis, and syntax. But proficiency has also been defined in psychological and behavioural terms, i.e.: language activities or skills such as listening, reading, speaking and writing. Later on definitions started to include semantic, discursal and sociolinguistic parameters. Today, proficiency is emphatically viewed in communicative rather than linguistic terms: "Proficiency can be viewed as linguistic competence or communicative competence in L2. It is usually measured in relation to native speakers' proficiency". (R. Ellis, 1985: 302)

Proficiency has equally been abstractly defined as communicative competence and analysed into grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980).

Thus, for a learner of a second or a foreign language, to qualify as competent in the target language, s/he must possess various competences: phonological, grammatical, discursal, communicative, strategic, lexical competences, to name but a few. In order to acquire all these competences the learner should

ideally dedicate his/her entire life to language learning, and even so, his/her language knowledge will come short of the native speaker's competence. Do not native speakers themselves have loopholes in their language knowledge? So, why, we might ask, should we require the non-native speaker to possess what seems to be a life-long search of the very native speaker?

3. Optimal age for language learning

There has been much controversy about the optimal age for learning another language. The views of Penfield and Roberts (1959) have been influential for years. They consider that acquisition of a second language in a natural, apparently effortless way, is possible only until puberty. That is the age when the brain loses its plasticity. According to them the best years for language learning are between 4 and 10. They claim that language learning after the early teens is: "...difficult, though not impossible... because it is unphysiological". (Penfield and Roberts, 1959: 525)

Lenneberg (1967) developed his views arguing that:

As the individual matures, the left hemisphere of the brain gradually takes over most, but not all, language functions. After that, the brain has reached its mature state at puberty, and cerebral lateralisation is irreversibly established. (Lenneberg 1967: 168)

Krashen (1975) re-examined Lenneberg's clinical data and reached the conclusion that lateralisation of the two hemispheres may be complete by the age of 5, an age which coincides with the completion of first language acquisition.

The matter of a clearly identifiable critical period for language acquisition for acquiring a new language has not been established by scientific investigation. Nor is the common belief that young children learn new languages faster than adolescents and adults without its critics. Burstall (1978) argues that: "The research studies which have striven for a high

degree of precision and control have failed to produce evidence favouring the young learner of a foreign language”.

3.1. Optimal age for phonological competence

Traditionally it has been considered axiomatic that young children acquire authentic sounding pronunciation in a new language much more readily than older learners. This has been a common observation with children of immigrants. Research in this area has been conflicting and inconclusive. The results of Fathman’s investigation (1975) showed that adolescents acquired the morphology and syntax more rapidly than children, who acquired the phonology faster than the adolescents.

Despite these contradictory results, the bulk of evidence seems to be on the side of children especially in the area of phonology. The ability to learn certain aspects of a second language may be age-related resulting from maturational, physiological, or environmental factors. There may actually be different critical periods, which are optimal times for learning different aspects of a second language. The pre-teen years may encompass a period during which ability to discriminate, to interpret, or to imitate sounds is manifested most fully, whereas after puberty, the ability to learn rules, to make generalisations, or memorise patterns may be more fully developed.

The multiple critical periods hypothesis has some value since language learners and teachers alike become very concerned with pronunciation and intonation, despite the fact that their importance varies according to circumstances. In a second language situation, sounding different as having a different accent may have a negative effect on the individual: from complete acceptance to permanent exclusion. In a foreign language situation, however, preserving one’s accent may be willingly employed in order to protect oneself from criticism and irritation, especially when foreign behaviour does not match the native speaker’s expectations. In fact, sounding like someone else often generates a feeling of malaise and anomie.

4. Phonological competence, or competent phonology?

The continuing spread of English as a world language or *lingua franca* has had a tremendous impact on pronunciation needs and goals, syllabus design and materials development. Up to the present days, the English language paradigm has insisted on native-like pronunciation assuming that language learners use the second language in order to interact with target language speakers exclusively. As a result, specialised books on phonetics and pronunciation materials have thrived. Furthermore, nonsensical, if not horrendous, observations are often met in introductions to pronunciation materials, which call for laughter, if not indignation such as the following:

Non-native speakers should be weary of the fragility of native speakers' ears, their sensitivity to the atrocious phonological deviations committed by non-native speakers must be avoided.

Pay attention to weak form words in order not to irritate the native speaker!

Be careful of misuse of adequate intonation that might offend the native speaker!

There are convincing motives why interest in pronunciation should be redirected:

Research has proved that native-like pronunciation is an unattainable goal, at least for learners who are beyond their teens.

Second language learners rarely use the target language to interact exclusively with native speakers. In the EU, where the spread of the English language is in the increase, English is often used as a *lingua franca* among its member states.

Pronunciation models are not uniform. The choice of which model to imitate is frequently based on ad hoc decisions made by policy makers rather than scientific grounds.

As a result, what is needed is to sensitise native speakers to get used to foreign accents – this is an unavoidable fact; they should also be trained to appreciate speakers of their language who cannot but use foreign accents. Native speakers must also be aware that native-like pronunciation is undesirable because adopting it could present a threat to the non-native-speaker's heritage, if not his/her emotional ability.

Superimposed upon the speech sounds of the words one chooses to utter, are sounds which give the listener information about the speaker's identity.

Ridicule the way I sound, my dialect, or my attempts at pronouncing French and you will have ridiculed me. Ask me to change the way I sound and you ask me to change myself. To speak a second language authentically is to take on a new identity. As with empathy, it is to step into a new perhaps unfamiliar pair of shoes. (Guiora et al., 1975)

Thus, English language materials ought to reconsider the notion of phonological competence, and substitute it for competent phonology which is both a reasonable and a workable goal to aim for. The aim of using a second language is, above all, to guarantee communication between those who do not share the same linguistic code. As long as communication break down does not obtain, there is no harm in sounding foreign.

5. Pedagogic implications

If we can ensure communication by the use of foreign accents, the use of audio materials that are based on the native speaker will soon be undermined. As a consequence, we need to train non-native speakers to be phonologically competent and worthy of imitation by language learners.

Authentic listening materials will soon be replaced by real authentic materials. That is to say, trained non-native speakers of English will design and produce home-made language materials. This way the model will share with the learner the first language, i.e. the same linguistic background, an asset which will allow teachers to diagnose and identify pronunciation

trouble areas of their learners. Hence, the design of remedial work to shape the foreign learner's pronunciation will become rather easier. In other words, the teacher can devise pronunciation exercises to tackle his/her students phonological deficiencies.

Also, the role of the first language will be put in the spotlight and will gain importance accordingly. In other words, the concept of interference, which has been the black sheep of linguists, applied linguists, and language professionals for many years, will be taken as a normal process of language learning instead of a handicap to fight against.

To develop phonologically competent speakers of a language other than the first language will be based primarily on the sound system of the first. Thus, learners will develop a positive attitude towards pronunciation teaching. As a consequence, fear of ridicule and inhibition will be partly downgraded.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to discuss the notion of language competence, with a special emphasis on phonological competence. We believe that it is high time we redirected fallacious concepts of the native speaker with respect to the phonological capacity of the non-native speaker. Sounding foreign is quite natural as long as communication is guaranteed. What does seem unnatural is to require non-native speakers to attain native-like pronunciation when present day research keeps reminding us that efforts in that direction are not worthwhile.

I would like to conclude this paper with a quotation from an article written by Jennifer Jenkins who said:

It is a current irony that although pronunciation teaching tends to be marginalized throughout the world, it is non-native teachers who are generally the better versed in all these areas and the better prepared to embark on teaching pronunciation or EIL. (Jennifer Jenkins, 1998: 125)

References

- Abecrombie, D., 1971. *Studies in Phonetics and Linguistics*. London: CUP.
- Bustall, C., "Factors affecting foreign language learning: a consideration of recent findings". in *Kinsella*, 1978:15
- Canale, M., and Swain, M., 1980. "Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and learning". *Applied Linguistics* 1: 1-47
- Ellis, R., 1985, *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: OUP.
- Fathman, A., 1975 : "The relationship between age and second language acquisition ability." *Language Learning*, 1975: 243-245.
- Guiora, A.Z., Paluzny, M., Beit Hallami, Catford, F.C., Cooley, R.E., and Yodder Dull, C., 1975: "Language and person: studies in language behaviour". *Language Learning*, 25: 43-61.
- Head, K., and Taylor, P., 1997. *Readings in Teacher Development*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Jenkins, Jennifer, 1998. "Which pronunciation norms and models for English as an international language". *ELT Journal* Volume 52/2, April 1998. OUP.
- Krashen, S., 1975. "The critical period for language acquisition and its possible bases". in *Aaron Rieber*, 1975: 219
- Lenneberg, E.H., 1967. *Biological Foundations of Language*. New York: Wiley and Sons.
- Moubarik, M., 1999. "Teaching the native speaker to speak". *III Simposio Internacional de Didáctica de la Lengua y la Literatura*. Córdoba, 29-3 de Diciembre de 1999.
- Penfield, W.C., and Roberts, L., 1959. *Speech and Brain Mechanisms*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.