

## 24 Auditory and articulatory training for the language teacher and learner

*Peter MacCarthy (1976)*

The teaching of pronunciation can occupy only a portion of class time for the teacher of a foreign language, whose time overall naturally has to be divided among the different areas of language study. Only the individual teacher can properly decide how much time to devote to his pupils' way of speaking the foreign language: it is really not for the specialist in phonetics – who is in the fortunate position of not having to make this decision in his own teaching (since he can spend all his time on pronunciation) – to tell other language teachers what to do about this.

Now it is possible for a person to argue that pronunciation, though it must obviously be *learnt* (if a spoken language is to be acquired), need not be actually *taught* – whether on the grounds that pronunciation as such does not really matter and can remain faulty, or that, alternatively, a 'good' pronunciation will be picked up automatically by contact with the spoken language in question. Well, this is not the moment to argue the case for the contrary view that having a 'good' pronunciation does matter, and that it will not be picked up; but what seems very important is that such time as *is* devoted to pronunciation teaching should be *usefully spent*. Well, there is no doubt in my mind that at present any teaching of pronunciation is so ineffective as to be largely a waste of time! This is no reflection on the skill and expertise of the language teachers who do set out to teach their pupils how to pronounce the foreign language: it is simply the inevitable consequence of the fact that each learner needs *beforehand* to learn *how to listen*.

All oral teaching, all classroom instruction by means of the spoken word (whether the teacher is saying something *in* the foreign language or is saying something *about* the foreign language) is obviously dependent on the activity of listening. It follows that the efficiency of any work involving spoken language is determined by

the accuracy and reliability of all judgements made by the individual based on his listening. It is striking to note how teachers take it for granted, always and everywhere, that their pupils can correctly observe whatever reaches their ears (once allowance has been made for their inattention); in fact, precisely the opposite is the case: only a small fraction of a message, whatever it may be, is actually perceived. It follows that all teaching procedures, however theoretically sound, are highly inefficient – the teacher is, quite literally, wasting his breath! Largely wasted also, and for the same reason, are the splendid facilities (such as language laboratories and tape recorders – not to mention the periods of foreign residence) that are nowadays at the disposal of so many learners of foreign languages. Time, effort, and money are all wasted, and this is due simply to every learner's unpreparedness to profit from these things in the way he might.

It should be made clear at this point that 'learning to listen' has nothing to do with improving the physical properties of anyone's actual hearing mechanism: phrases such as 'to have a good ear for languages', to 'train' or 'improve the ear', refer to the ear in a metaphorical sense only. Aside from those individuals who are unfortunate enough to have truly defective hearing (most of whom will not even try to learn foreign languages, let alone teach them), it can be assumed that the actual hearing of the language learner is adequate to his task. What is required, though, is that he should learn to *direct his attention* to the auditory phenomena of the new language, and that he should do so in a way quite different from the way he listens to and understands his own language: through long training in the mother tongue people (quite properly) get into the habit of noticing by and large only the parts that are relevant to catching the meaning, and of paying no attention to – literally *not* noticing – anything else. Moreover, the language that is already stored in our brain is drawn upon, while listening, to an extent that is hard to realize – so that, for instance, under conditions of poor reception (indistinct speech, background interference and so forth) we still manage to grasp the meaning. What happens is that the brain of the hearer actually supplies the missing information to the extent necessary in the particular case: stored in the brain are memories of all the words and forms, with their meanings and associations, and of all the structures and the sequences; consequently we know what to expect, what is likely to follow what – as well as what cannot, or is very unlikely to follow. We are also enabled by our previous linguistic experience to cope with differences of accent in the mother tongue (whether we have met them before or not), differences of personal voice quality,

manner of delivery and many other things.

The situation with respect to any other language, when one comes to learn it, is entirely different. Firstly, the information on which one would want to draw is naturally not already in one's head, so the incoming sounds are all that one has to go on, and need far greater attention paid to them – until, that is, the stage is eventually reached when a new store of information has been properly laid down on which to draw. Secondly, the basic psychological process of relating new phenomena to previous experience, of interpreting the unknown in terms of what is already known, means that the mother-tongue experience (which of course can never be eradicated) and the speech habits acquired along with that experience, actually get in the way, leading to the well-known interferences of one language with another.

From this it is readily understandable that the acquisition of any second or foreign language poses a learning problem for each individual, and the teaching problem is to deal in the most prompt and effective way with this difficulty that everybody is faced with. Since every individual is so powerfully conditioned by his mother tongue to interpret in terms of it the phenomena of other languages learnt subsequently, the only effective solution must surely be to set out deliberately to achieve a certain amount of 'deconditioning' of every learner as he comes to his first foreign language, or as soon after as may be. Clearly the deconditioning can never be more than partial, but, once this has been achieved, the second language will cause far less trouble – and every language after that.

Now it is not here a matter of preparing the learner for a specific language – conditioning him *to* it, as it were. That is what is usually attempted by procedures such as presenting minimal pairs of words involving the vowels and consonants of the target language, it being taken for granted that the learner is capable of profiting from this. In reality, this type of thing is still quite beyond him: he is just not ready for doing it effectively, and he needs preparing so as to be ready.

The deconditioning process should take the form of presenting to the ear as a preliminary each of the basic phenomena of speech in its simplest form, far simpler than the form in which such phenomena would normally appear, when one thinks of the combination and superimposition of auditory features as they occur in any actual spoken language. The technique is as follows: the learner is first given a demonstration of some specific thing, and has to be told precisely what it is that is being demonstrated (by giving to each separate utterance an appropriate name or label); then his attention needs to be drawn, carefully and systematically, to the difference between the

separate auditory effects that he is being asked to notice, by giving him the chance to hear two stimuli juxtaposed, i.e. presented alternately. These stimuli are not necessarily in the form of words at all, still less are they particular sounds, words or phrases taken from the language to be learnt – that would be putting the cart before the horse. They consist of specific demonstrations of some of the basic effects to be encountered in speech, sequences and combinations of which make up spoken language (see below).

The next step is to give him, at each point, the chance to check on himself and see whether he personally is able to distinguish correctly between the two, or possibly three, things involved. By simple discrimination exercises or tasks he is put in the position of being obliged to make his own decisions; he is then supplied at once with the correct answers. If each task is elementary enough (as it should be), he will make no mistakes. In this way he is enabled to realize that he can rely on his auditory judgements, and this of course helps to give him the much-needed confidence in his own abilities without which so little is achieved. If exercises of this kind are too difficult (and even one word, of an unknown language confronting the learner from the outset in its entirety, is bound to be too difficult), confusion and mystification result, leading to discouragement, frustration and the absence of, or destruction of, that good general motivation for learning a language that is so necessary to progress.

As regards the essential need to know whether and to what extent one's own auditory judgement can be relied on, it must be stressed that people simply *do not know* whether they can rely on it or not, since they have never had an opportunity to find this out. Those who are by nature more diffident may quite expect their judgements to be often at fault (though in this they can be wrong); the more self-assured, and perhaps the majority of all learners (and teachers), will tend to assume that auditory judgements they make are correct. The fact is, though, that until each person has tried himself out, first on elementary and then on more advanced tasks, he simply does not know where he stands in the matter. In the kind of auditory training programme here envisaged, any mistakes that are made (and remember that listening exercises can always be raised in difficulty to the point where even the most able individual does get some things wrong) will clearly be a sign that particular types of exercise are in need of further rehearsal, until a standard considered appropriate has been reached.

One can describe in writing some of the ways of demonstrating, and then checking on the ability to discriminate, the various par-

ameters of spoken utterance, but one can convey little idea of the impact of such procedures on the hearer. The reader can only try to imagine this, while bearing in mind the prevailing tendency of every individual not to notice many audible effects at all; when he begins to notice them, to vary in the reliability of his observations, to judge two utterances to be the same when they differ, to be different when the same; to notice one feature when asked to identify another; when he hears a difference, to judge it to be of one nature when it is in fact of another nature – all for lack of previous training in directing and concentrating the attention.

Some of the basic parameters of speech are involved with number, order, duration, pitch, quality (e.g. vowel quality). A few specimen exercises on each of these follow below.

### NUMBER

Exercise: the student is presented with an utterance pronounced a different, stated number of times, e.g. twice, three times. He is then required to say what number of utterances he hears; they can take the form of syllables, e.g. CV or CVC, or of isolated vowels, or of 'words' of various lengths. Any child capable of counting objects up to about six could do this and get it right.

Exercise: 'Same or different?' A sequence of utterances (which may themselves be all the same, or may differ) is pronounced a given number of times, then a second sequence a number of times. Is the number of utterances in the two sequences the same or different?

Stimulus A	da	da	da	da	
	da	da	da		Answer <sup>1</sup> : DIFFERENT
Stimulus B	da	da	da	da	
	da	da	da	da	Answer: SAME

This type of exercise can be made more taxing by lengthening the sequences, and by saying them more rapidly – up to a degree of difficulty suited to the circumstances. (It is not hard to appreciate the value of this sort of thing for subsequent work on an actual language.)

### ORDER

Exercise (after the appropriate demonstrations):

Which comes sooner, bi or bu?

Stimulus C    ba ba ba bi ba bu bi ba    Answer: bi

Which comes last, bi or bu?

Stimulus D    bi bu bi bi ba bi bu    Answer: bu

Which comes last but one?

Stimulus E    bi ba ba bu bi bu ba    Answer: bu

Exercise (when the distinction between vowels and consonant has been established): Does the *last* syllable of the utterance *end* in a vowel or a consonant? (With appropriate utterances, followed by the correct answers.)

### PRESENT OR ABSENT?

(This type of exercise is useful in preparation for observing features such as elision in French, weak forms of syllabic consonants in English; it is also valuable for cultivating auditory awareness, alertness, speed of reaction, power of concentration.)

Exercise: Is a certain vowel, or a certain type of vowel (e.g. nasal, front rounded, central) present in or absent from an utterance? Is a certain consonant, or a certain type of consonant (voiceless, affricate, ejective, etc.) present or absent? It is immaterial that the technical terms for some of these are not previously known: all will have been defined and demonstrated first. It is beside the point that some of the phenomena are not found in a given language: the hearer is being deconditioned, and made 'ready for anything'. He is then much better able to take in his stride whatever his target language has in store for him. Needless to say, however, exercises have to be suited to the category of student: some of those illustrated here would clearly be unsuitable for use with the very young.

NB. The converse is not true: even the most elementary, the most basic exercises can be done by the mature student with profit to himself.

### DURATION

The demonstrations involve presenting longer and shorter vowel sounds, single and doubled consonants.

Exercises: Identify shorter vowels in a sequence of single sounds. Identify longer vowels in a sequence of single sounds. Identify shorter and longer vowels in various types of syllable, in all kinds of utterances.

### PITCH

The demonstrations are of higher vs. lower pitch, level vs. moving pitch, rising vs. falling pitch, followed by the appropriate identification tests, the listener having to recognize a given type of pitch in miscellaneous sequences of various pitches. Later, the listener is asked to locate pitch phenomena, e.g. to say which syllable of an utterance has the highest pitch, the lowest pitch, the moving pitch, the falling pitch. Still later, pitch has to be identified against variations in duration, and conversely duration identified against variations in pitch. Similarly with vowel qualities against variations of pitch and/or of duration.

### VOWEL QUALITY

Demonstrations of each of the parameters front/back, high/low, steady/changing, central/non-central, nasal/non-nasal, first singly then in combination. At each stage, simple identifying tasks follow. The categories front/back and high/low can be presented first with two, then with three, then perhaps with four distinctions. Very numerous are the possible exercises with vowels of the 'same or different' (ABX) variety. See below.

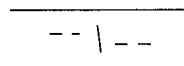
Whatever is being presented, the elementary must precede the more advanced, taking nothing for granted and with a view to eliminating any possible areas of uncertainty or misunderstanding. It is the basic work that is usually skated over, if not entirely neglected. There is no dearth of advanced material: every living spoken language is full of it. In preparation for the language itself, and after the basic listening has been carried out, it is possible to 'branch' the exercises in the direction of a specific language, e.g. the learner's target tongue, by introducing phenomena characteristic of it and not found in his mother tongue. But anything conforming to language-specific patterning or phonology should be looked upon as advanced material, and not be introduced too soon. Conditioning *to* the new and *systemic* language behaviour should come much later.

Many of the parameters can be rehearsed, at an appropriate stage, by the ABX type of task: two different stimuli A and B are presented, a third (X) has to be identified as being like A or like B. More advanced still, the third has to be identified as like A or like B or different from either.

Very much more difficult, because more taxing on the memory as well as on the powers of observation, are tasks involving the presentation of an utterance followed by questions asked about it; they are

not so advanced when the number of types of question is limited, or the type of question to be asked is announced beforehand, but they can be made progressively harder as the number of possible questions is stepped up.

Exercise: Listen to this:



Stimulus F. pala: bukilo

How many syllables were there?	Answer: 5
How many different vowels?	Answer: 4
How many different consonants?	Answer: 4
How many diphthongs?	Answer: none
Which syllable had a longer vowel?	Answer: the second
Which syllable had falling pitch?	Answer: the third

In conclusion, let me state my conviction that work along the lines suggested, though it might appear at first sight to be misguided, or going about the language instruction in a roundabout way, is on the contrary very much to the point – for any learner of any foreign language, irrespective of his own linguistic background.<sup>2</sup>

To the inevitable comment that it would take up valuable time, I can only reply that the few hours, in total, that would have to be devoted to a systematic auditory programme should be set against the countless hours of needlessly ineffectual endeavour that are currently expended by teacher and pupil on foreign language learning, far and wide.

### AUTHOR'S POSTSCRIPT

The 'articulatory' training referred to in the original title of this paper has to go hand in hand with the auditory training, and involves entirely different techniques and procedures. But it is worth pointing out that the person learning to *pronounce* is monitoring by ear his own performance as he goes along, and that the accuracy and reliability of his self-monitoring will determine the success or otherwise of the results he obtains.

### NOTES

First published in 1976 in *English Language Teaching Journal* 30:212–19. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

1 Answers can be given orally by student and teacher in class, or jotted down by the student, then announced or written up by the teacher; or they can be given by filling in a prepared questionnaire or answer sheet,

when the student is working alone on recorded material.  
2 In a very few cases (e.g. the Japanese approach to duration, and the idea of the syllable) the learner's mother tongue may have to be taken into account in the formulation of an exercise.