Teaching Note

Using Speech-Language Pathology Techniques to Enhance Pronunciation Instruction

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At first glance, Speech-Language Pathology (SLP) and ESL differ in their approaches to pronunciation. However, both disciplines share a goal: to enable students to communicate with confidence and clarity. Since 2011, the Intensive English Language Program (IELP) at Portland State University has collaborated with the SLP department to create a pronunciation course offering IELP students focused work on individual pronunciation challenges. Students in this inter-departmental course have reported gains in self-confidence while instructors have observed increased intelligibility.

The course is co-taught by an IELP instructor, who focuses largely on suprasegmentals, and SLP graduate students, who meet individually or in pairs with IELP students to focus on individual pronunciation difficulties. This article outlines the most helpful techniques SLP offers ESL teachers.

Speech-Language Pathology Perspective and Techniques

Pronunciation is a unique aspect of language learning in that it invokes a motor act overlaid with linguistic knowledge. Both teachers and students can benefit from the specialized knowledge of motor learning and its application to pronunciation that Speech-Language Pathologists can offer. The following techniques and concepts are ideally applied in a small group or one-on-one setting but can be useful in a larger classroom setting.

- **Do not be afraid to drill:** *Motor learning* involves practice. Multiple productions of target sounds are necessary. While "drilling" in this way is often avoided in ESL classes, SLP practices demonstrate that it is helpful for establishing motor control.
- **"Shape" your students' speech**: Facilitating motor learning involves *shaping*. Shaping is the procedure of breaking down target behaviors into small components and teaching them in an ascending sequence. Each step moves the behaviors in successive approximations toward the target. Each successful approximation is reinforced to assist in changing the overall behavior. Example: Teaching "th" involves bringing the tongue tip between the teeth in an exaggerated movement, then pulling back slightly without losing the phoneme.
- **Make comments, ask questions**: Another key element in motor learning is *feedback*, both external

and internal. External feedback comes from sources outside of the speaker and refers to intelligibility to both native and non-native listeners. It might include requests for repetition that inform the speaker they have not been understood. Internal feedback relies on sensory input: auditory, tactile, and proprioception, which is the knowledge of where one's body is in space. To help students develop internal feedback, ask questions like, "Are you able to sense where your __ (tongue, lips, jaw) is?" or "What did you feel when you produced the sound?"

How to Get Started

1. Determine baseline production of English phonemes using IPA (i.e., what sound is the student producing now?)
2. Determine the difference between the attempted target and the actual target (i.e., what sound does the student want to produce?)
3. Instruct simple changes in articulators (tongue, lips, jaw, etc.) to *shape* the current behavior toward the target behavior.
4. Ensure multiple productions at each step to promote *motor learning*.
5. Provide *feedback* at each step.

Through this partnership, IELP students have benefitted from focused, intense practice in gaining a new way of speaking, and through these techniques, students and teachers in other contexts may also benefit.
Additional resources can be found at this website:
https://sites.google.com/a/pdx.edu/pronunciation-and-slp-resources/

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