

PHONETIC SYMBOLS: A NECESSARY STEPPING STONE FOR ESL LEARNERS

IT IS NOT UNCOMMON TO FIND CANTONESE SPEAKERS IN HONG KONG WHO have strong accents when speaking in English. Although the accents are not always strange to native ears, they can impede communication. English is an official language here, and there is a favourable environment for learning English as a second language. So, why don't Hong Kong learners of ESL have better English pronunciation? The answer seems to be a lack of knowledge of English sounds. Because no practice in using phonetic symbols is required in the curriculum, learners have to facilitate their English pronunciation by marking English words with Chinese characters that bear similar sounds. As a result, most Hong Kong students are not sure of the correct pronunciation of new English words when they come across them. To read the words aloud they simply rely on their implicit knowledge of English pronunciation, acquired by comparison to the complex sound system of Cantonese, and struggle through by reading hesitantly and in a low voice, resulting in distorted sounds. Moreover, teachers of English do not receive relevant professional training in the use of phonetics symbols.

This article discusses why English pronunciation and intonation have been neglected in Hong Kong ESL lessons, why it is essential to teach English phonetic symbols, and what remedial measures should be taken to implement this neglected component of teaching ESL.

Weak foundation at the beginning stages

English has been designated an official language in Hong Kong for over one and a half centuries. The extensive use of English in government, education, commerce, and legal service creates a favourable linguistic environment for ESL learners here. Bilingual road signs, TV and radio programs, and commercial publications can be found everywhere. Unfortunately, these facilitating factors—particularly the acoustic linguistic input from TV and radio programs—have not been put to good use.

What is worse, the teaching of English does not start with phonetic lessons, even though common sense suggests that good pronunciation and intonation require persistent practice in listening, speaking, and reading aloud. Students at all levels of education do not receive such practice. They learn English word for word and have to memorise the pronunciation of individual English words. Many students use Chinese characters with similar sounds as helpful hints for reading and memorizing English words. This undesirable learning strategy leads to distorted pronunciation. When these habits of learning English pronunciation are firmly established, it becomes difficult to change them. In a sense, Hong Kong students learn the pronunciation of English words in exactly the same way people were taught Chinese characters before the system of Chinese phonetic symbols were invented—verbatim, one by one.

A 1994 project of the Education and Manpower Branch, conducted by a research team at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, found that “less than half of the [302] sampled secondary English teachers have received training in the subject [English] during their education and/or took the English language as their tertiary education” (Education Commission 1995:29). No indication is available as to whether or how secondary teachers learned English pronunciation. Because English is used as the medium of instruction, it is wide-

ly believed that students will pick up sufficient knowledge of English sounds solely by listening to lectures in class. However, this belief is unfounded. In my observations, teachers seldom teach the phonetics of English words and few of them are familiar with phonetic symbols. That being the case, it can hardly be expected that teachers would use the standard phonetic system to teach English pronunciation to their ESL students.

Hindering effects of limited knowledge of pronunciation

Research has shown that a command of native or close-to-native pronunciation of a foreign language is no easy task, especially for learners who begin studying a foreign language after puberty (Lenneberg 1967; Seliger 1978). Although non-native pronunciation and intonation are not necessarily obstacles to successful communication with English speakers from other parts of the world, too much accented or distorted speech will frequently give rise to misunderstandings, miscommunication, and frustration. Incomprehensible non-standard pronunciation and intonation will produce psychological nervousness in speakers, which is likely to also block their efforts to seek clarification or to paraphrase using alternative expressions with phonetically different pronunciation and intonation.

Grice (1975) argues that all communication is intentional communication and that understanding is a matter of interpreting what is intended rather than decoding the referential meaning of utterances. It is obvious that in face-to-face spoken interaction, this kind of interpretation should take the interlocutors' speech as its basis. But meanings are blurred, distorted, or buried when pronunciation is grossly unclear or inaccurate. Young (1994:12) found that to Westerners, many of the spoken constructions in English by native speakers of Chinese are “foreign-sounding, giving rise to various statements about ‘limping sentences,’ ‘fractured syntax,’ and ‘drifting words.’” What is not noted is that these constructions are largely reflective of the fact that the linguistic system of Chinese provides an altogether different way of producing sounds, connecting sentences, and indicating grammatical relationships.

As a result of learning English words without knowledge of phonetics, the majority of

Hong Kong ESL students cannot pronounce or read aloud unfamiliar English words, such as *rhinoceros* or *Gaelic*, even when they can identify the words and find their meanings in dictionaries. Although the meaning is accessible, the pronunciation of the word remains a riddle. Because learners are unable to make use of phonetic symbols to remember unfamiliar words, they have difficulty developing extensive vocabularies in English, which is also detrimental to effective use of the target language in oral communication.

Most Hong Kong students can only read new English words by comparing them to Cantonese, but this learning strategy is ineffective. English has an alphabetic system of writing, but its sounds and spellings are far from consistent and regular. The same combination of letters can have quite different pronunciations. For example, *ch* in *chair*, *Christmas*, and *machine* are pronounced, respectively, as [tʃ], [k] and [ʃ]. The letter *a* in *page*, *tall*, *dare*, *rabbit* and *dilemma* are, respectively, pronounced as [ei], [ɔ:], [ɛə], [æ] and [ə]. The combination of *oo* in *book* and *food* have different pronunciations. The irregularity of sound combinations makes the learning of phonetic symbols indispensable for ESL students.

An analytical view of Cantonese

A simple explanation of the sound system of Cantonese helps explain why it is essential for Hong Kong ESL students to learn phonetic symbols. Cantonese is a tonal language with a phonetic and phonemic inventory and syllabic structure that is quite different from English and that causes a variety of accented English by Cantonese speakers. Not only does Cantonese use nine tones to express various meanings, it also has 19 consonants and 53 vowels.

The tones (for vowels and consonants) make up a far more complicated sound system than that of English. A naïve viewpoint, based on comparing the number of phonemes in English and Cantonese, holds that Cantonese-speaking learners of English should not have much difficulty with English pronunciation and intonation because English has fewer phonemes. This seemingly feasible viewpoint must be rectified for a better understanding of the necessity of teaching phonetic symbols.

It is true that Hong Kong people grow up with the complicated sound system of Can-

tonese, can discern even small differences in the sounds of their language, and are very sensitive to foreign sounds. But the complexity of their phonetic habits interferes with their pronunciation of the phonetic forms of the new language. For example, many Cantonese-speaking students pronounce the English pronoun *she* in the same way they pronounce the Cantonese word for *book*. Without clear awareness of English phonetic features they can hardly distinguish the sound [s] from the sound [ʃ] when they come across relevant words. The lack of the sound [ʃ] confuses Cantonese speakers of English. They can imitate the sound according to their acoustic intuition, but they cannot accurately produce it. As a result, their pronunciation and intonation while reading English aloud sounds bizarre to others. This explains why Cantonese speakers use English with a kind of local accent that originates from their mother tongue. It is difficult for them to significantly reduce their native accent unless they acquire and apply some knowledge of English phonetics.

A feasible remedial solution

Because English is an official language in Hong Kong and English teaching starts as early as kindergarten, early integration of the basic phonetic symbols into the classroom is essential to the students' formation of accurate English pronunciation and intonation. Early practice of the phonetic symbols will also be to the students' advantage in learning other foreign languages. What's more, with early practice they can minimize interference from their mother tongue.

Phonetic symbols are not difficult to learn, but before students can do so, language teachers must learn how to use them effectively to correct students' accented pronunciation and intonation. Putting phonetic symbols into practice for teaching ESL in Hong Kong can be implemented through pre-service and in-service training for teachers. Teachers should keep in mind that it does not take much time to become familiar with the system of phonetic symbols. However, it does require a lot of practice before a strong command of the symbols is possible.

As I indicated earlier, phonetic symbols should be introduced to students as early in their education as possible because pronuncia-

tion and intonation are the foundations of verbal language. If bad habits are formed, it will require double the effort later to correct them. If the teaching of phonetic symbols were stipulated in the curriculum, students at all levels could be using them to unravel the pronunciation of unfamiliar English words and to avoid the bad habit of marking the words with Chinese characters bearing similar sounds. Students need to understand that this latter habit will not help them learn how to correctly pronounce the target language.

Five strategies for teaching phonetic symbols

Some languages have a close fit between sounds and letters of the alphabet, that is, most letters have just one sound. This does not apply to English, however, so teaching phonetic symbols might pose special difficulties for those non-native speakers of English who are accustomed to a one-to-one correspondence between sound and letter. English has a highly variable spelling system. Students need to learn how to make use of sound-letter combinations and develop competence that enables them to pronounce the correct or approximately correct sounds when they encounter the written forms of unfamiliar words. They also need plenty of practice in pronouncing English sound combinations, such as consonant clusters, with the help of the phonetic symbols. The following five teaching strategies can be applied to classroom instruction in using phonetic symbols:

1. Make analogies from the known to the unknown. Sometimes ESL learners can solve pronunciation problems by applying what they know about familiar sounds to unfamiliar ones (Brown et al. 1989). Teachers may start with some sounds that are common in the learners' native language and in English, then ask the learners to practise them.

2. Teach unfamiliar sound symbols. The emphasis at this stage should be placed on those sounds that are unique to English so learners become aware of the differences between the target language and their mother tongue and take extra caution when they have to read words containing these unique sounds. For example, the English sounds [dʒ] in *junior* and [ʒ] *pleasure* are missing in Cantonese, so

the exact pronunciation should be explained explicitly in class. Also, the English sound [ʃ] in *shopping* is phonetically different from the Cantonese sound [s], so particular attention should be given to the correct pronunciation.

3. Select and prepare some common letter combinations and show students the normal way to pronounce them. For example, the letter combination *ea* is often pronounced as [i:] as in *peak, team, beat* and *treatment*; *ope* is pronounced as [əʊp] as in *cope, microscope, antelope* and *envelope*; *ire* has the sound [aɪə] as in *fire, acquire, desire* and *inspire*; *gh* at the end of a word is read as [f], as in *rough* [rʌf], *tough* [tʌf], and *cough* [kɒf].

This strategy must not be overused because English does not have a fixed, one-to-one correlation between letters and sounds. The same letter combination *gh* has many exceptional cases, as in *through* [θru:], *bough* [bau], *although* [ɔ:lðəu]. *Sh* is very reliable in that when it appears, the sound [ʃ] will be heard. However, the combination of letters represented by the sound may vary greatly. Words like *sure, motion, machine,* and *special* also contain it. Another example is *ow*, which frequently is represented as [əʊ], as in *bowl, snow* and *flow*, but may also represent [au] as in *now* and *coward*.

4. Have students practice phonetic symbols communicatively. For example, teachers may ask learners to create an alliterative shopping list of all sorts of things (real and imagined) that a store might sell. The teacher can make a game of it by saying "I went to the store and I found a balloon to buy." Then each learner must add something to the list that begins with the same letter and sound as *balloon, banana, basket, bread, book, biscuit, bean,* etc. A list of the sounds on the chalkboard ensures that everyone is aware of each sound under review.

5. Challenge learners to look for words spelled with letter combinations that represent more than one sound. For example, students might look in reading material for words that have an *oo* combination, such as *cook* and *school*. They then put words into columns according to the sounds. For the *oo* example, learners would make two lists: words in which *oo* represents the sound heard in *cook, look, book, took,* and *shook*; and words in which *oo* represents the sound heard in *school, tool, boost, boot* and *noodle*. Learners can then share lists with everyone

in the class and discuss the different sounds the letters in combinations represent.

Conclusion

Learning phonetic symbols may not be worth doing for its own sake. However, it is invaluable as a tool for decoding and pronouncing words correctly. As Anderson et al. (1985) recommend, phonetic symbol instruction should be completed at the early stages of learning. Once students have some facility in reading words, they no longer need instruction in this skill unless there is a special need. Emphasis should be placed on applying the knowledge of phonetic symbols to actual pronunciation rather than to the learning of generalisations. The knowledge of the phonetic symbols and letter-sound combinations should also support the growth of students' English vocabulary.

Achieving good pronunciation and reducing the interference of the students' native language can be a lengthy task but it is worth the effort as a way to improve the quality of ESL teaching and learning and to solve a long existing pronunciation problem that requires urgent attention.

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