Language Input and Choice of
English Pronunciation Models in Local Contexts

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ABSTRACT

We present a methodological approach which takes into consideration the quantity and quality of language input the student encounters so that EFL instructors may choose the appropriate English pronunciation model. We have analyzed the language input in an EFL class at the university level. Our evidence shows that learners are exposed to a pronunciation standard (General American) that is often divergent from the speech norms that are the focus of instruction (so-called British standard, formerly Received Pronunciation).

Our methodological model can especially be used when there are no other features to be considered, such as interaccent acceptability, sociolinguistic weight, the learners' attitude toward the target accent, etc. This model fits into a pronunciation course where the student encounters the varieties of English pronunciations in use throughout the world.

1. INTRODUCTION

Practitioners and researchers of English pronunciation have been debating, for a number of years now, how to choose among the model accents of the English-speaking world. Traditionally, the practice has been to opt for a 'geographical' principle: learners in or around Europe have been taught the British standard accent, while those students nearer the United States (Central and South America, the Pacific) have been trained in American English. Learner populations from other areas, like Africa or Southeastern Asia, were likely to be educated in the British standard, but mainly for historical reasons.

While these alignments are to a great extent still maintained today, espousing the British standard as a preferable accent model may be open to question, for the pedagogical reasons that will be elucidated below. Other criteria normally used to adopt a pronunciation model include the sociolinguistic implications of the diverse English accents, such as political and economic importance, which, increasingly for many practitioners, seem to carry negative connotations, such as the desire to approximate to native norms, interpreted as a concomitant aspiration to enter into the native-speaking community (and hence to abandon one's peers).

In addition, the 'global' spreading of English as the language of international communication could override pronunciation models that are more native-speaker oriented; in a near future, most interaction in English will happen mainly among non-native speakers, consigning native speech norms to a less central role. Recent work in pronunciation models has taken into account this emerging situation [1].

In this paper our concern is with the type and amount of language input that our learners, Spanish-speaking university-level students, have contact with, an aspect of pronunciation learning for which there is little data, according to many researchers [2].

We felt that our learners are exposed almost exclusively to American accent models, and that that must be the situation in other areas of Spain, beyond our local context. In order to substantiate these impressions, we conducted the study that follows.

2. THE STUDY

As we have stated, the choice of a pronunciation model is usually done taking into consideration sociolinguistic aspects, such as interaccent acceptability and the sociolinguistic weight of the different English standards and varieties. Sometimes the model is devised to accommodate to the learner's attitude toward the target accent.

In this paper we have tried to devise a method to choose a pronunciation model for the EFL classroom. We have analyzed the linguistic background and the quality and quantity of language input that 4 groups of university students show at the University of Seville, Spain. These students take an introductory course on English pronunciation in their first year. The course implies no previous knowledge of English Phonetics and Phonology. However, the course requires an intermediate level of English pronunciation and the ability to discriminate at the perception level.

The information that we present in this paper has been obtained from a diagnostic test and a questionnaire given to the students in the 4 groups. We have also conducted a survey among all the teachers in the English Language

Department at the University of Seville. Finally, some information has been gathered in a study on linguistic resources and linguistic programs in the same university.

The characteristics of the course made it necessary to adhere to one particular model, which is compulsorily extended to the following years. Several considerations had to be made before the adoption of a specific pronunciation norm was effective.

First, we must take into account the students' linguistic background. We think that it is very useful to know which pronunciation model our students may have already acquired. This information can easily be extracted from a diagnostic test at the beginning of the course. Thus, we have grouped this first consideration under the labels of "linguistic background" and "accent acceptability".

The second consideration to be made is precisely the adequacy of a particular pronunciation model. Taking into account the objectives of the course, we believe that the quantity and quality of the input the learners receive is actually more important than other sociolinguistic aspects. The aim of the course is not oriented to any specific purpose, rather, the objective of the course is the study of the English sound system. What we imply with this is that the students do not take the course to improve their pronunciation, but to know more about the target language as a linguistic system. Nevertheless, the study of the English sounds require practicing them and the course also gives a lot of importance to pronunciation and listening skills. We refer to the importance of the quality and quantity of language input as "cultural influence" and "use of the language".

Finally, we have also considered which pronunciation models our students are likely to encounter in future courses. This information can be obtained but only to a limited extent. These features are called "pronunciation models in other courses", "linguistic resources" and "exchange programs".

a) *Linguistic background:*

We had to make sure that the majority of our students did not adhere to any pronunciation model in particular. We conducted a survey where we fist asked our students what pronunciation model they thought they have been exposed to in their secondary schools, prior to entry in the university. The results clearly showed that most of them had been taught the British model (82,85%) and not the American model (2,85%).

We have not only relied on students' answers on this issue, but have given them a diagnostic test where we have been able to discern what influence they could possibly have. The results clearly showed that 95% of our students had a strong Spanish accent, with very little influence from neither model.

b) *Accent acceptability:*

The results in this section are comparable to the ones mentioned above. Students of introductory courses do not have a clear opinion on the subject in particular. Their competence of English is still at a low level and does not allow them to show linguistic prejudices. Much of the ideas that they have on the language are taken from what they hear or read, but they are not based on any real experience or contact with the cultural reality.

Only a minority of students had spent more than one month in an English-speaking country. 65,71% of the students had spent some time in the United States, while 17,14% of them had been to the British Isles. The rest had traveled to other countries: South Africa, Hong-Kong (China), Australia.

This lack of contact with the English culture and society does not allow us to consider their answers, for only 25,47% of students admitted having gone through some kind of linguistic immersion. However, their answers in the questionnaire show an open-mind attitude towards the acceptability of one accent or another. Actually, 51,42% of the students state not having any kind of prejudice or even preference over one accent or another.

c) *Cultural influence:*

We defend the thesis that the quantity and quality of input the student gets is vital to adopt a pronunciation model. When there is not a specific purpose to achieve, we must not forget that most of the language feedback the learners receive takes place outside the classroom. This statement is especially true in our global society.

American and British cultural influence on our students has to be considered and appropriately evaluated. In the questionnaire that we gave to these learners, we included several questions eliciting recognition and identification of American/British actors, movie titles, singers/groups and song titles. They were also asked to answer questions reflecting the amount of interaction and exposition to language contact with television, radio programs, and other media.

Our intention was to discover if our students had any contact at all with real language outside the classroom and to what extent that contact was associated with exposition to American or British models.

The students' answers confirm the impact that American culture and economy have on our this learner population: 75,34% of the cultural items that our students are in contact with are American in origin. (We, for example, asked our students which movies they had watched in original version).

d) *Use of the language*

Cultural influence is in fact related to the real contact that students have with native speakers. In this respect, 65,71% of our students use the language with American native speakers, while 17,14% interact with British people. The rest have little or no oral interaction at all.

e) *Pronunciation models in other courses*

Being an introductory course on Phonetics to be given during the students' first year at the university, we can not choose a pronunciation model which is clearly in conflict with other courses. For this reason, we have conducted a survey among our fellow teachers to discover to which extent students will be exposed to different pronunciation models.

Some of our fellow teachers are native speakers of English: 1 Irish, 1 Scottish, 2 English and 2 American. According to these figures, we can not speak of any general accent.

The majority of teachers have English as a foreign language. According to our study, 61,53% of teachers affirm that they adhere to the British standard while 38,46% of them declare having an American-oriented pronunciation model. We can see that the percentage is higher for the British model.

f) *Language resources*

We have also considered other sources from which our students may obtain language input. In this respect, we have searched through the linguistic resources available at the university library to find out how much of the material there is connected with American pronunciation models and how much is to be related to a British pronunciation model (we have only considered audio and video material).

The results are interesting: 43,33% of the material is clearly American, 22,79% reflects British pronunciation models and 33,88% shows a miscellany (International English, Australian, Scottish, etc.)

g) *Language program*

Following the section above, we must also mention that our university offers a series of linguistic programs for undergraduate and post-graduate students. These programs are designed so that students can spend some academic years in an English-speaking country.

Around 75% of these programs, and exchanges have been organized between the University of Seville and other American universities.

3. CONCLUSION

There are some interesting implications of these results for pronunciation instruction. Our study clearly points out a contradiction between the real language input to which these learners are exposed, and the reference model accent that they are taught and evaluated in their classes, by their teachers.

Moreover, the English Phonetics and Phonology university-level courses that these students take are built on British pronunciation norms, a type of input that seems increasingly challenged in the media and more generally in most international communication situations. It is remarkable that this contradiction originates in the secondary level (where 82,85% of the students are instructed in the British standard), and is extended up to the university level.

Second, our learners have a neutral orientation toward accent standards, possibly because they lack experience with one standard or another. Logically, this would imply that they will be open to any teaching model. Third, when considering the specific features of the language input that the students experience, it is remarkable that on all measures (residence in English-speaking countries, interaction with natives, real language exposure), a vast majority of learners report contact with American speech norms. Fourth, the formal setting features (accent used by other teachers, language resources, language program) evidences again a contradiction: a majority of the teachers in the courses the students are taking follow British accent standards, but the materials and exchange programs available to students are more related to American English.

Hence, formal setting versus real-language exposure in this local context stand out as a pedagogical dilemma that practitioners need to address. We believe that similar conflicts are evident in other local contexts [3], and that English pronunciation models will have to be better tailored to the real language contact students are likely to experience

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