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Developing oral skills by combining fluency- with accuracy-focused tasks: A case study in China

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Abstract

This paper reports an evaluative case study in which the researcher working as facilitator, assessor and evaluator critically analyzed the value of his contribution to a Spoken English program offered at Shanghai Normal University in China. The subjects who participated in this research were 268 Chinese third-year college students pursuing different majors excluding English. In this study the data were systematically collated using a range of qualitative elicitation methods and the results obtained were interpreted and explored in depth. Finally, some avenues for further research were highlighted.

Introduction

Although much effort has been made to improve the teaching of English in China by both Chinese and foreign teachers, the traditional grammar-translation method, careful explanation of word meaning and usage followed by drilling and mechanical exercises are

still widely used in many contexts all over the country. However, during the last decade, a shift toward more communicative approaches of second language teaching around the world has led to a change in instructional styles allotting more classroom time for students to actively communicate with one another. This change reveals the principle that a communicative syllabus should combine structural, functional, and communicative aspects of the target language (Johnson, 1995), a fact that has so far been ignored by several local and foreign teachers of English working in China.

If a communicative syllabus should combine all the above mentioned aspects, then, learners must be conscious of the structural or grammatical features of the target language, be able to associate those features to their functional usage, and have the ability to use both forms and functions properly for establishing meaningful communication. This, as a result, calls for an eclectic approach in which teachers working as controllers, facilitators, and/or assessors should adopt various roles and use a wide selection of activities ranging from form-focused tasks to more informal and meaning-focused interactions whereby students are led to converge purposefully and successfully with one another.

This paper will take the format of an in-depth evaluative case study in which, the researcher also working as facilitator and evaluator, critically analyzed the extent of the effectiveness of his contribution to a spoken-English program offered at Shanghai Normal University (SNU) in China.   In this study, data elicited from third-year college students pursuing different majors at SNU will be systematically collected, analyzed and interpreted and, lastly, the results obtained will be evaluated.   In the first section the empirical background to the study will be presented. In the following part the case study will be outlined and some important assumptions concerning the use of this research methodology will be discussed. Next, the participants and the methods of data collection will be described and analyzed. Finally, some recommendations and areas for further research will be given.

Empirical background to the study

Nowadays, pushed mainly by economic and political needs almost all trades and professions around the world demand people who are able to use a foreign language effectively as an essential tool for establishing meaningful communication, an essential condition to be able to work in today's global context. For a long time, many people in China disregarded the relevance of learning a foreign language, a fact which denied them the possibility of entering our present-day global era. However, over the last decade, together with the shifting political situation in China and her open door policy, foreign language education, especially the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL), has been given ever-increasing importance (Dzau, 1990).

Yet EFL in many educational institutions in China is still unable to meet the requirements of the political and economic growth of the country as many school graduates find it hard to communicate in English effectively after spending a long time studying the language. Traditional teaching approaches, dated language material, the use of memorization and rote learning as a basic learning technique, the use of translation as both a teaching and learning technique, the perceived role of the teacher, and the rigorousness of teaching and learning to written exams, among other things, may have hampered the effectiveness of both the teaching and learning of EFL (Liu, 1995).

At present, China has a very strict exam system which is in essence knowledge - rather than skill-based. Students' language competence is then assessed using written exam papers where neither listening nor speaking skills are tested. This has had a substantial impact on teaching practices since, overall, teachers find themselves teaching to a test rather than helping their learners to develop their basic language skills. The consequence of this is that, although many students manage to pass their tests, most of them do not succeed in using the language to communicate effectively.

For the last twenty years or so, there has been a steady growth in the theory and practice of English language teaching worldwide. More importance has been given to the

ability to use a second language effectively for establishing meaningful communication than to master the rules of the language. Moved by this new tendency, language teachers and researchers in China have joined other local and foreign academic professionals with the aim of bringing about a comprehensive change in the way EFL is taught and learnt all over the country.

In 2003, and as a way of coming into line with this new movement, SNU developed a pioneering English language program to be taught by foreign English language teachers, deliberately intended to assist college students to build up their oral skills in the target language. Therefore, as a member of the ELT profession, I was invited by this university to participate in the implementation of this new program.

Among foreign EFL teachers and specialists in the field there are a number of commonly held assumptions about Chinese learning methods and their effect on the teaching of English in China, some of which were mentioned earlier in this paper. With these assumptions in mind, the responsibility was put on the foreign teachers in charge of running this spoken-English program at SNU (myself included) to decide to what extent we wished to take on, improve, adapt or discourage 'typical' Chinese strategies, given our views on learning and those of the participants.

As for this study and considering this particular context of situation and the cultural background of Chinese students, I decided to use a multiplicity of techniques in which two or more learners were assigned a task that involved collaboration and self-initiated language. The rationale underlying the use of group work in the language classroom is that through this technique the students are given opportunities for "self-initiation, for face to face give and take, for practice of negotiation of meaning, for extended conversational exchanges, and for student adoption of roles that would otherwise be impossible" (Brown, 1994:173). In a similar vein, and in reference to the use of group work with Chinese students, Flowerdew (1998) suggests that the use of this valuable technique may turn out to be sensitive to the three Chinese Confucian values of co-operation, the concept of 'face', and self-effacement.

Nelson (1995:9) states that "within the Confucian tradition, students learn through co-operation, by working for the common good, by supporting each other and by not elevating themselves above others" (in Flowerdew, 1998). This value system operates inside as well as outside the classroom, whereby the concepts of group agreement and consistency are above the principles of the self and sensitivity shown to the other students. Because all students are expected to work for the common good, all group members pull their weight together, while idlers are not welcomed.

According to Confucian values, society is hierarchically structured with due respect shown for age, seniority and rank. Within this context, peers and in particular superiors, must always be accorded 'face' and not caused to lose it overtly through explicit criticism. A face-saving methodology where students are assigned to work in small groups may turn out to be a secure environment in which each individual is not so starkly exposed to public display, susceptible to the criticism of others. When engaged in group work, on the other hand, by voicing the group's opinions, a student may feel he/she is not taking the individual responsibility for it, but presenting it as the group's shared opinion, and this, in turn, might be a valuable vehicle for breaking down some of the Chinese students' cultural constraints (Dzau, 1995).

The concept of self-effacement requires that individuals maintain a certain level of humility and balance in line with their rank and do not elevate themselves above others. On several occasions, I have heard Chinese students underestimating their language performance by making such comments as "My English is so poor" when in fact this was more a perception rather than a reality. The group work technique, indeed, may contribute to counteract this sort of comments as students are pushed to help each other by working co-operatively in a non-threatening, safe, collaborative learning environment where their learning opportunities are fully exploited (Flowerdew, 1998).

When students work collaboratively in groups they are pushed to use language to learn as opposed to merely demonstrate what has been learned. Therefore, group work

offers more informal language use and student-centered styles and strategies for learning that are generally inhibited during teacher-directed instruction. (Johnson, 1995)

Although some researchers and teachers may think that learning occurs only between teachers and students and that student-student interaction represents off-task behavior, discourages achievement, and leads to classroom disorder, others uphold the view that cooperative learning may be more important for educational success than teacher-student interaction. Constructive student-student interaction influences students' educational aims and success, develops social competencies and encourages taking on the perspectives of others, boosts students' self-esteem, and contributes to improving not only the relationship among students but also to generating a positive attitude toward school (Johnson, 1995)

However, it could be argued that putting students to work in groups is not enough if they are to develop their language skills and learning strategies successfully. For this to happen, instructional as well as learning goals should be structured appropriately in such a way that students can work collaboratively, compete for fun and enjoyment, and at the same time work on their own receiving direct instructional support from their teachers (Johnson, 1995)

Collaborative group work or meaning-focused instruction will create more opportunities for students to use language for learning, to negotiate meaning, self-select when to participate and manage the topic of discussion, while teacher-directed or form-focused instruction will create more opportunities for students to reflect on the structure and organization of the language. Preferably, second language classrooms should create opportunities for students to participate in both meaning- and form-focused instruction, as both are supposed to contribute to second language acquisition (Johnson, 1995).

Some researchers point out that second language acquisition occurs when input is made comprehensible to the learner, that is, when optimal input is not grammatically

sequenced but focused on meaning and not on form, either through the context within which it is used, or as a result of simplified input (Johnson,1995). On the other hand, and rather polemically, some others researchers hold the view that comprehensible input alone is not enough for second language acquisition to happen.

Indeed, Swain (1985) claims that besides the comprehensible input, learners must have opportunities to produce the language if they are to become fluent speakers. For learners to really use the language, they must attend to both the meaning of what they say and the form of how they say it. Van Lier (1991), on similar grounds, expands this concept by proposing an optimal progression in which learners are made, first, to notice the language, then understand it, and, finally, use it appropriately (in Johnson, 1995). .

On looking back at all these assumptions, it could be said that an ideal situation for second language acquisition to occur would be to stress the importance of creating opportunities in the classroom for students to have to focus their attention on the language, of giving them vast opportunities to use the language for both meaning-focused communication and form-focused instruction, of their receiving enough instructional support from their teachers, and of creating a variety of authentic contexts that allow for full performance of the language.

After exploring the different opinions on what seems to be the most effective way for second language acquisition to occur, based on the literature and on my own teaching experience, in this study, I decided to adopt an eclectic approach which conflated both meaning- and form-focused instruction whereby the participants were presented with some kind of comprehensible input featuring the target form they would then have to produce.

The theoretical assumptions underpinning this section were partly used as criteria to determine to what extent my contribution to the implementation of this spoken-English program was effective or not.

The Case Study

In this section, some important considerations regarding case studies as a research method will be discussed. Altman (1976) describes a case study as an "instance in action" (in Nunan 1992, p. 75) where the researcher usually observes particular characteristics of an individual unit in the context in which it occurs. The main aim of case studies is to explore what constitutes the life cycle of this unit with a view to establishing generalizations about the wider population to which it belongs.

Although some researchers claim that the construct validity and reliability of case studies may be easily threatened due to the frequent failure to develop a sufficient operational set of measures and because subjective judgments are used to collect data, some others suggest a number of advantages of adopting case studies as a method of research. Altman (1976), for instance, suggests that case studies are strong in reality and consequently likely to appeal to practitioners because one can generalize from a case or from an instance to a class, a variety of view points can be made which may offer support to a wealth of diverse interpretations, and lastly, case study data are usually more accessible than conventional research accounts, and therefore capable of serving multiple audiences (in Nunan, 1992).

The purpose of this case study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of my contribution to the spoken-English program offered at Shanghai Normal University. The data from this research comes from the students' self-assessment reports and an evaluative questionnaire administered to the learners towards the end of instruction. In the next section the participants and the methods of data collection will be described in depth and, later, the results obtained will be analyzed.

The context and participants

During my stay in China (six months), I was in charge of nine EFL spoken-English classes at SNU, with a total of 30 students in each.   I met each one of these classes once a

week for two periods of 40 minutes each. The subjects who took part in this research were 268 third-year college Chinese students pursuing different majors apart from English. Their level of English language competence ranged from low-intermediate to intermediate and most of them had been studying this language for more than eight years. In this study, I worked as facilitator, assessor and evaluator of the courses I taught.

Developing oral skills by combining fluency- with accuracy-focused tasks

The implementation

Consistent with the principles and notions presented in the empirical background section above, in this part, I will briefly illustrate how this methodology for teaching oral skills was implemented in practice. As was pointed out earlier, the eclectic approach used in this study combined both meaning- and form-focused instruction whereby the students, arranged in permanent groups of five or six members each, were presented with some kind of comprehensible input in the form of reading material, video-tape, tape-recording, among others, featuring the target form they would then have to generate in the output sessions.

Once the students had been introduced to the input session, they were then put to work on collaborative tasks in pairs or in their fixed groups. At that point, guided by the input given, the students were expected to complete the task set by using their interlanguage resources at hand. As the task was performed, the students were made to notice gaps in their outputs which were filled out in subsequent sessions where they were asked to analyze and usually compare their own performance with the material used in the input session. Then, the students reported their findings to the class and at that moment the target language focus was formally introduced. After that, occasionally, the students were put to work on a similar task which required them to consciously use the same target form introduced in the previous activity, but on this second time a different context was used. This last sequence was generally used as a means to test their level of internalization, if any,

of the new target form. Oftentimes, a final discussion and reflection section followed after each task aiming at raising the students' awareness of how language operates when they are engaged in tasks that promote oral speech.

The assessment instruments used

With the intention of obtaining some information about the students´ learning and the effectiveness of instruction in relation to the course objectives set, the learners participating in this study were assessed on three different occasions prior to taking their final exam. The format of the assessment instruments used throughout this course was consistent with the type of activities done in class (see previous section).

Thus, the first in-class assignment consisted of a meaning-focused oral interview where each student chose one of the four theme-related units dealt with in class to prepare a short speech related to it. Once the presentations were over, the assessor was free to ask the candidates any type of impromptu questions - personal or content-based - related to the topics selected or to the other remaining units covered in class.

The second assessment method was in turn form-focused and aimed to test the candidates' ability to read aloud a prepared script containing target segmental features which had been previously introduced and practiced intensively in class.

The third assessment method was a comprehensive one in which the students were given the opportunity to integrate form with meaning. The learners, in their fixed groups, were asked to put on a ten-minute play on a chosen fairy tale which they had previously worked on.

Finally, all the students taking part in this spoken-English program were required by the school authorities to take and pass a final test at the end of instruction in order to win promotion to the subsequent academic term.

Despite the many assessment instruments used throughout this study, no pre-test/re-test technique was used, a procedure which would have allowed the researcher to measure the impact of instruction on the learners' outcomes providing invaluable evidence to support the rest of the qualitative findings obtained in this study.

Methods of information collection

The elicitation instruments used in this study were the students' self-assessment reports, and evaluative questionnaires administered to the learners after instruction.

Self-assessment reports

Towards the end of the course the students were asked to write a self-assessment report in which they were expected to divulge their feelings and perceptions concerning the development of their oral skills by comparing their present-day situation when they wrote their reports with earlier times prior to taking this course. The results yielded very helpful information that contributed to determine the degree of effectiveness of my contribution to this program.

For practical reasons the results coming from the students' reports will be shown in the form of a matrix (Table 1) containing rows which display, on the one hand, those recurrent aspects of learning that the students most frequently referred to in their reports and, on the other, the number of students (in percentages) who made reference to the above mentioned aspects of learning.

Recurring aspects of learning as presented by the students	Number of students in percentages
Development of awareness of how language works (particularly pronunciation)	86.69%
Development of self-esteem and self-confidence	96.88%
Improvement in their oral skills (in both accuracy and fluency)	78.54%
Development of listening skills	62.82%

Table 1 – Shows the recurring aspects of learning and the results obtained in percentages

On looking at the matrix above, it can be observed that 78.54% of the 256 students participating in this study claimed that after taking their spoken-English course they noticed they had made significant gains in their oral skills. With regard to this aspect some students pointed out:

Student A: In this period, I find that I have improved a lot in my oral-english. I found some mistakes in my spoken English, so, I can improve it now and be care of it.

Student B: I think my oral English is better now. Because I have more chances to speak in class, so my oral English is improved and I am more brave.

Student C: In the past, my English is just the same words. Like a mess. During this course, I became to organize the mess words together, to form sentences. Then to express my meanings correctly.

It is fairly probable that this indicator (78.54%) could be the result of the students' inferential judgment rather than a realistic fact. Indeed, it would be idealistic to think that after taking a four-month course of instruction with classes meeting only once a week for

an 80-minute period each, these learners could have made noticeable improvement, if at all, in their oral language competence.

However, a more attainable goal would be to think that after being exposed to some sort of comprehensible input in the form of reading texts, video- and recorded-tapes, their own peers using the target language and their teacher's talk, after this period of instruction, some students were able to increase their receptive skills, in particular, their listening skills. In fact, on looking at the matrix above (Table 1) it can be observed that 62.82% of these students revealed having made important gains in this learning aspect. With regard to this, three of the students said:

> Student D: By reading the text and answer the questions I trained my ability of my reading comprehension. I can read an article now and know the main idea of it and then do the activities even if I can't understand some words in it.

> Student E: After taking this course, the pronunciation of some words are corrected and my speaking and listening levels are improved much.

> Student F: Before this course, my English was so so. Now I feel so good. I have learnt many techniques to learn English and back up my oral English and my listening comprehension have been improved. It's so exciting to me.

It seems that the use of different task-types in the classroom (form-focused and meaning-focused), most of them aimed at raising the students' awareness of how language works, played a crucial role in their language development. In reference to this two students pointed out:

> Student G: The pronunciation tests helped me to realize my wrong pronunciations. I will practice more after class.

> Student H: I think in this class I have encouraged to speak in English. It can improve my English. I think it's a good way. The teacher is humor and teach us in different

ways such as working in groups, listening to songs, fairy tales, games, role-plays, pronunciation, and so on. It is very useful.

Student I: I think what is the most helpful to me is the 2nd in-class assignment about pronunciation. Before that, I didn't pay attention to the pronunciation difference of "**th**ink" and "**th**ey". I just say them like /s/ and /z/. But now I can say '**th**' as in "think" and '**th**' as in "they"

On looking at the matrix above it can be observed that the aspect that scored the highest percentage (96.88%) was the one in which the students acknowledged having notably increased their self-esteem and self-confidence in their language classroom. This high score, in turn, might have a direct link with the use of group work in class which, as was said earlier, could be a helpful technique responsive to the three Chinese Confucian values of co-operation, the concept of 'face', and self-effacement (see Empirical background section above). Regarding this aspect, some students indicated:

Student J: In the past time, I was afraid of talking to other people in English. Usually I was too nervous to say a word. But now I feel confident to speak English. I think it is a good progress for me. I feel that my English has been improved, not only my oral English but the comprehensive level of English.

Student K: At the beginning of this term, I was a little afraid about oral English class. It was my biggest enemy. But now, shy is going out of this world. That is because of the teacher's help. His smile encourage me speak bravely. Open my mouth now is my belief!

Student L: I'm glad to be in this oral class. Nearly three-month happy time we've spent together gives me not only fun and joy but higher-leveled spoken English. I tried my best to overcome shame and awkward in each class step by step. As a result, I feel strongly about my progress in pronunciation and expression.

Student M: Before this class, I feel very nervous and awkward when I speak English in the class. Now, I can speak English with my group members, which make me feel free. And I have more chances to practice my oral English.

Upon analyzing these comments coming from these testimonies, it can be said that the implementation of this eclectic methodology for teaching oral skills was, at least at this stage and in this particular context, partially effective. However, much more research would be needed to determine truly whether these learners after taking this course actually made significant progress in their oral language competence or not.

Questionnaire

Before classes were over, I decided to give the students a questionnaire which aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of the implementation of this project. Out of the 268 students taking part in this research, only 256 were present the day this questionnaire was administered. This evaluative questionnaire consisted of a multiple-choice section whereby the students had to indicate their responses to the questions asked by choosing a number along a 4-point scale (1- A lot, 2- Reasonably, 3- A little, and 4- None) that best corresponded to their feelings or impressions (Table 2).

The information coming from this elicitation instrument provided interesting and useful information regarding the effectiveness of the implementation of this project. Table 2 below shows the questionnaire administered to the students and the results obtained in percentages:

Questions	A lot	Reasonably	A little	None
1- How far has this course met your expectations?	30.47%	49.61%	17.58%	2.34%
2- To what extent the activities done in class were useful for you?	44.14%	47.66%	7.42%	0.78%
3- Was the feedback given to you helpful?	51.56%	32.81%	15.63%	
4- Have you noticed any improvements in you Spoken English after taking this course?	35.55%	44.92%	19.53%	

Table 2- Questionnaire and results in percentages

Before instruction began all the 268 students participating in this study were asked to come up with a list of their expectations regarding their spoken-English class. To reduce the amount of data collected on this occasion and thus facilitate their analysis, I decided to narrow down their lists to specific areas of common concern (Appendix A). This, in turn, I thought, would allow me to define clearly the course objectives and to organize the instructional plan accordingly. Once classes were over, together with the students, I evaluated how far their learning expectations set prior to instruction, had been met. On analyzing the findings obtained, it was found that 30.47% of the students acknowledged having met their expectations fully while 49.61 admitted that their course main aims had been sensibly accomplished. Conversely, 17.58% of the students indicated having met their expectations to a degree, while only a 2.34% completely denied having done so.

On looking at the students' responses to the type of activities done in class, 44.14% acknowledged that they had found them very useful for their learning process, while 47.66% of the learners admitted that the tasks completed in class had been moderately helpful, a fact which was also observed when analyzing the students' self-assessment reports above. Nevertheless, only 7.42% of the students asked pointed out that they had found the activities done in class scarcely of use, and 0.48 referred to them as being totally impractical.

With regard to the provision of feedback, most of the students involved in this study recognized its usefulness for the development of their oral skills (see matrix). This information correlates with the data elicited from the students' self-assessment reports (see above) in which they acknowledged the contribution of post-task feedback to the building up of consciousness-raising and to the development of self-awareness of their own learning strategies.

As to their evolution in their oral skills after taking this course, 35.55% of the students admitted having made significant progress, 44.92% referred to their oral language development as reasonable, while 19.53% suggested having made only small gains. Again

this evidence, as was said earlier (see learners' self-assessment reports above), could be a perceptual belief rather than a true fact considering the low frequency with which classes had met and the relatively short length of the period of instruction.

Upon interpreting most of the data coming from this evaluative questionnaire, it can be observed that there is a strong correlation between these findings and the information elicited from the students' self-assessment reports. The result of cross-referencing information coming from different data sources, as is this case, may help to strengthen the validity of this study. However, in order to claim that this methodology which combines both types of tasks - fluency with accuracy - is really effective for teaching oral skills, much more research would be required.

Discussion

In this section, after interpreting all the data coming from the different elicitation instruments, some constructive observations will be made.

In order to reassure the internal reliability of this case study, instrument-related reliability was improved by using a mixture of two different instruments of data collection: the students' self-assessment reports and an evaluative questionnaire. However, using information about the students' performance or achievement collected on different occasions throughout the project under study would have provided interesting data which would have enabled the evaluator to measure the learners' outcomes and thus determine whether they actually made any language acquisition gains and, if any, corroborate whether this progress was the result of the impact of instruction or of any other factor external to it. Indeed, as was said earlier, the idea of using the pre-test/re-test technique in this study had to be disregarded considering that the language laboratories at the university where the tests could have been administered, were not accessible at the time they were needed.

Regarding the students' perceptions about their improvements in their oral skills, it would be fairly unlikely to think that after taking a four-month course where they met their instructor once a week for an 80-minute period, these learners managed to make considerable headway in their spoken-English. A more realistic conclusion would be to say that after this short period of instruction, the learners seemed to have been able to make moderate progress in their oral skills. However, they appeared to have raised considerably their language awareness and, to some extent, developed their self-monitoring strategies, a fact which, in the near future, will hopefully help them modify those aspects of language learning that at present may need further improvement.

Despite these fairly discouraging observations, on analyzing the findings obtained, it can be said that, at least, at this preliminary stage of this project, the implementation of this eclectic approach for teaching spoken-English, which combined fluency with accuracy tasks, was sensibly effective in the sense that upon the completion of these activities, the learners were able to raise their self-awareness, develop their noticing-skills and promote their own learning autonomy, three basic fundamentals for second language acquisition to happen.

However, as was said earlier, more research would be necessary to be able to state that this methodology that conflates both form- with meaning-focused tasks, is really effective for the teaching of oral skills in foreign language contexts.

Conclusion

In this evaluative case study data have been collated from two different sources, interpreted and critically analyzed. Some interesting pedagogical issues related to the integration of form- with meaning-focused tasks were discussed and some of the implications of using group work in the Chinese classroom were highlighted. With regard to the development of oral skills by integrating form- with accuracy-focused activities, it should be borne in mind that, ideally, foreign language classrooms should create opportunities for learners to participate in both forms of instruction, since both are believed

to contribute to second language acquisition. Although this paper supports the use of group work for Chinese students because of their Confucian values, the methodological insights described in the above sections may also have implications for the teaching of EFL to non-Chinese students in other contexts as well. This is because of the notion that the teacher should encourage collaborative learning strategies and create a low-anxiety teaching/learning environment for students to make the best use of their learning opportunities.

Appendix A

Students' expectations before instruction began:

- ✓ To improve our oral English
- ✓ More chances for us to speak
- ✓ Learn English actively
- ✓ To learn information about Argentina and other countries
- ✓ To make friends with you
- ✓ Play English songs and watch English films
- ✓ Have more games in class
- ✓ Communicate with us more
- ✓ Have more interaction
- ✓ Talk about interesting topics
- ✓ Help us improve our pronunciation and accent

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