The Importance Teaching Pronunciation to Adult Learners

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Abstract

If the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) is valid, what can be gained from attempting to teach pronunciation at the college level? According to Vitanova and Miller (2002), students were excited about their improvement in segmentals, supra-segmentals, self-monitoring and self-correction. Improvement is important and attainable even though native speaker like pronunciation may be impossible after a certain age. So while younger learners may have the advantage of being able to achieve such pronunciation proficiency, adult learners are able to use their cognitive abilities to improve through self-monitoring and self-correction.

Introduction

Those of us who teach English as a second language to adults might be tempted to avoid teaching pronunciation since the Critical Period Hypothesis suggests that adults won't be able to achieve native-like fluency. This is reinforced by the current language learning methodology, namely Communicative Language Teaching, failing to know what to do with the teaching of pronunciation (Krashen and Terrell, 1983, pp. 89-91; Terrell,

1989, p. 197) What, then, is to be gained by pursuing pronunciation instruction in our adult classes? The answer is quite a lot.

While adult students may never be able to pass as native-speakers, improving pronunciation can improve learners' confidence and motivation. Adults stand to improve their fluency and comprehension levels in both the segmental and supra-segmental areas of pronunciation as well as learn to self-monitor and self-correct. After all, one of the major advantages adult students possess is the ability to self examine how they learn. Hammond (1995) notes that we must also take into account the importance of handling both sound and meaning in the pursuit of the linguistic goals of our students (p.294). To do any less is to short -change our learners.

The paper will begin with an overview of the Critical Period Hypothesis. Segmental and supra-segmental aspects of pronunciation will be discussed and it will be shown that adults, specifically Koreans, can improve in these areas. Finally, self-monitoring and self-correction will be examined as tools for adults to improve their pronunciation skills. Korean language learners will be used as examples.

The Critical Period Hypothesis

The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) posits that after a certain period of time our language learning abilities decrease significantly. Scientists say that as we get older and our brains begin to mature, lateralization occurs as certain functions are assigned to either the left or right side of the brain. Children's brains, which have not lateralized yet, are able to use both hemispheres for language learning. But once lateralization is complete, research suggests that we rely solely on our left hemisphere for language skills.

Therefore, we have a critical period of time before we lose this ability to use both hemispheres simultaneously for language learning (Brown 2000).

There is a solid body of evidence supporting the CPH. Jayeon Lim (2003) cites Johnson & Newport (1991) who connect L2 proficiency with the age of exposure. Proficiency goes down as the age increases (Lim, p.1). Gina La Porta (2000) cites Patkosky's (1980) point which "found that learners under the age of fifteen achieved higher syntactic proficiency than those who were over the age of fifteen at the onset of exposure" (p.1). The concept of a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) also adds weight to the Critical Period Hypothesis because if the LAD does exist inside us, could it not shut off and cause a diminished ability to acquire languages?

Thomas Scovel (1969), cited in Brown (2000), spoke out strongly against the CPH. He pointed out that adults are superior learners in areas such as literacy, vocabulary and syntax. Accent was the only advantage that children possessed as language learners (Brown, 2000). Therefore, we can no longer expect our adult students to improve to what Guiora, Beit-Hallami, Brannon, Dull and Scovel (1972), cited in (Brown, 2000), called "authentic" pronunciation (p. 55). Teachers should help students improve in their weakest areas as well as areas that might hinder them from being understood.

Belief in the CPH -especially the wholesale kind- can cause an adult language teacher to lose heart. Why are we bothering to teach a second language to people who have lost the ability to learn the language well? However, if we take a closer look at the CPH, we see that it doesn't state that adults can't learn an L2. It doesn't even say that adults can't improve their pronunciation. What it states is that after lateralization occurs at a certain age (i.e. puberty) learners' accents are directly effected (Lenneberg, 1967,

p.9), and thus their pronunciation. Having said that, the inference is that adults aren't able to acquire a perfect accent and pronunciation while acquiring a language. While that may be true, there is still a great deal that they *can* learn and work towards in their language acquisition goals.

Segmentals

Hansen (1995) notes that segmental techniques, like drilling minimal pairs, have lost favor in the current pedagogical climes of CLT (p. 289). As often happens older methodologies and approaches that offer students something worthwhile are discarded in favor of more ideologically appropriate methodologies.

Yet one area where adult learners can improve rapidly is the pronunciation of segmentals. Segmentals are the individual sounds that can be broken down in a language and focused on individually. Hammond (1995) notes that adults learning a second language are capable of "perceiving and articulating subtle" differences. However, the inference is that these must be made explicit (p.300). Segmentals don't need to be taught technically, although a background in phonetics would be useful. Tricks such as telling students to make a rabbit face to correctly produce an /f/ sound can help them to remember longer.

Korean students can be taught to identify the differences between the sounds that aren't present in the Korean Hangul alphabet. Learning to distinguish differences aurally can help students recognize individual, distinct sounds so they are better able to focus on producing them. Fraser (1999) points out that there can be a sizeable gap between "what people think they are saying, a phonetic description of the sounds they are actually

producing, and how someone from a different language background describes their speech" (p.2). Students may not realize that they sound different from the teacher or an audio tape. Dalton (1997) suggests that students will convert unclear input into a similar sound in their own language. Since the Korean alphabet doesn't have an /f/ sound, Koreans will substitute /p/ or even /hw/. Through the use of contrastive analysis students can develop a better understanding of the differences between their L1 and English.

Improvement with segmentals can lead to a feeling of accomplishment and increased motivation. Vitanova and Miller (2002) cite a student who wrote:

"I changed my wrong consonant sounds likes F, P, B, V and RL sounds into correct enunciation. I was very happy to hear that my American friends told me, 'Your pronunciation is getting better'" (Vitanova & Miller, p.2). Conversely, segmental pronunciation mistakes can also lead to embarrassing misunderstandings such as asking for a cap but receiving a cup.

Supra-segmentals

The supra-segmental aspects of pronunciation can also be improved by adult learners. Supra-segmentals are comprised of language stress, rhythm, intonation, pitch, duration and loudness. Students whose first language is syllable timed, like Korean, will inevitably find mastering a stress timed language, such as English, a very daunting task (Bell, 1996). By placing more or less stress on certain words the speaker's context can change completely. Therefore, the differences in supra-segmentals between Korean students' L1 and English are topics that our students should not only be aware of but should make a conscious effort to study and focus on. Fortunately, intonation can be

learned as a set of rules similar to grammar (Wennerstrom, 1999). Cognitive learning, such as this, is generally easier for adult learners.

In order to help students improve what could be considered the musical aspect of pronunciation, teachers must start with the basics. Can your students identify the number of syllables in words? Many students aren't aware that most dictionaries show syllabic divisions. The ways that words are broken down vary between languages. The Korean language, for example, requires that a vowel sound be present between consonants. Therefore, one syllable words such as 'stress' or 'school' become 'suh-tuh-re-suh' and 'suh-kool'. Students can practice counting syllables with clapping or underlining drills. Teachers should keep in mind that, as with segmentals, "the learners actually hear speech very differently than the teachers themselves do" (Fraser, 1999, p. 4). Therefore, what might sound like one syllable to a native speaker might sound like two or even three syllables to a student and be reproduced incorrectly.

After students have mastered English syllables, teachers should discuss word stress. Students should be aware that by stressing certain words in a sentence the context will change. Let's consider a sentence like: He is driving to the beach. By stressing the word "He" we are ruling out other people. By stressing the word "driving" we are ruling out other forms of transportation. By stressing the word "beach" we are ruling out other locations for him to go to.

Vitanova and Miller (2002) mention a student who achieved positive results by focusing on suprasegmentals. The student wrote:

Before I took this course, my speech tone was very flat. The most important thing is I didn't realize it, but now, I know a lot of how to divide thought groups,

and where I should make an emphasis when I read sentences. I really think I made a big progress on it (p. 3).

Self-Monitoring and Self-Correction

Research has shown (Vitanova & Miller, 2002) that adults can see improvement in both segmental and supra-segmental areas of pronunciation. However, once students have mastered the basic sounds of English and identified some of the supra-segmental differences between their L1 and English, it is time to help them learn some strategies so that they can study more effectively on their own. The advantage of advanced cognitive awareness is something that adults possess but children do not. Self-monitoring is the conscious action of listening to one's own speech in order to find errors. Self-correction is the process of fixing one's errors after they have occurred by repeating the word or phrase correctly. By teaching our adult students to self-monitor and self-correct, we enable them to make their learning more personal and hopefully more meaningful.

Some strategies for helping students improve self-monitoring and self-correction include: critical listening, compiling learning portfolios, utilizing CALL resources and studying in pronunciation-specific classes. Critical listening can be very useful for enabling students to recognize and correct their own errors (Fraser, 1999). Once students recognize that a long /i/ sound requires that the mouth be stretched widely, they can feel the difference when they speak or watch others speak. Watching others serves to reinforce the forms that they have been taught.

Effective self-monitoring requires that students take control of their learning. Students can become more autonomous learners by compiling pronunciation portfolios

and keeping records of their progress (Thompson, Taylor & Gray, 2001). Pronunciation portfolios could contain tongue twisters, diagrams of mouth and tongue positions or any activity that pertains to pronunciation. Students can also keep learning journals, which outline their feelings or concerns while improving their pronunciation. This allows them to go back and think about their mistakes as well as monitor their own progress.

CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) can also be an important tool when attempting to help students become more autonomous by allowing them to hear their own mistakes and see both segmental and supra-segmental graphic representations. CALL benefits students by letting them study at their own pace in a semi-private environment as well as allowing them to build profiles which enable teachers to monitor their improvement (Nari, Cucchiarni & Strik, 2001). Molholt, Lane, Tanner and Fischer (1988) point out that when students see and hear similar words they are more able to differentiate both segmental and supra-segmental aspects of the language and thus self-correct their own pronunciation difficulties.

Pronunciation classes can also be an effective way for students to improve self-assessment skills. Rajadurai (2001) writes about Malaysian students who took pronunciation classes saying, "… students felt that pronunciation classes had helped make them more conscious of their own pronunciation and aware of ways in which their pronunciation differed from the model offered (p. 14)."

Helping our students take more control of their learning is an important "next step" in the learning process. We, however, must remember that students need a solid understanding of phonetics and phonology before they can be expected to monitor their own speech or utilize self-evaluation effectively (Vitanova & Miller, 2002). Research by Jones, Rusmin and Evans, (1994) cited in Jones (1997), showed that by teaching phonological rules, we can help students become better equipped to listen to their own speech and catch their own mistakes.

Conclusion

Adult ESL and EFL learners may never sound like native speaks. Therefore many language teachers read to reevaluate their teachers' goals in respect to pronunciation. Educators must focus on helping students improve their pronunciation and their ability to monitor and correct their own pronunciation. Robertson (2003) quotes Morley (1991) in saying that "intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence" (p. 4). Hammond (1995) suggests that this can be done in a CLT environment, but the best method is to provide explicit classroom pronunciation instruction. Language teachers can improve their students' pronunciation markedly drilling minimal pairs in order to help them improve their intelligibility (Hansen, 1995). By raising our students' awareness of supra-segmental aspects such as connected speech and word stress and helping them to become more autonomous learners, we can take advantage of the positive aspects of teaching adults instead of simply assuming that's it's too late to improve their pronunciation. We need to change our goals from expecting our students to speak like native speakers to having them make strides in different areas of pronunciation and helping them to identify, understand, and overcome their weaknesses.

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