Developing Speech Skills

Pramod Pandey

Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi

Introduction

Approaches to the teaching and learning of speech skills have been influenced by developments in the fields of language teaching, linguistics and speech technology. Within the broad area of language teaching, teaching and learning of speech skills have passed through three stages. These stages involve comparing the mother tongue (L1) and the target language (L2), the analysis of errors in the process of language learning, and the analysis of a text beyond a sentence. In addition to this, there have been several developments under the influence of linguistics, especially in the domain of speech sounds. Technological advances such as recorders, players, CD-ROMS and various software packages have helped analyse speech sounds enormously. In fact, technology has made it possible to teach all varieties of a given language.

Early stages

The first stage of teaching and learning a language and its pronunciation has led to the creation of language teaching materials based on a scientific description of the language to be learnt and the mother tongue of the learner. In these materials the assumption was that a positive transfer would take place if the mother tongue of the speaker's language(s) (X) and the language being learnt (Y) have similar features, and a negative transfer or interference would occur if X and Y have different features. For example, for Punjabi speakers learning English, the consonant sounds 's' and 'š', as in *same* and *shame* is a matter of positive transfer because Punjabi has that distinction between the two sounds. However, learning the English consonant sounds at the beginning of say *thin* and *then*, for the Punjabi learners, is a matter of negative transfer because Punjabi does not have these sounds (the beginning letters are pronounced by the native speaker with the tip of the tongue between the teeth). However, in the years to follow, this assumption was proved wrong because it failed to predict cases of both transfer and interference. It was felt that the failure was natural for language learning, as language learning does not depend on linguistic structure alone but is essentially a psycholinguistic phenomenon. Therefore, errors were necessary stages in the process of learning. However, despite the inadequacies of the transfer theory, practitioners continued to use the tenets of the transfer approach in language teaching and materials production.

Error snalysis

While the linguistic comparison of speech sounds continued to occupy the interest of experts on speech development, the focus gradually shifted to the errors that learners made. **Error Analysis (EA)** involved a more scientific approach to predicting errors and multiple types of error (e.g. errors of sounds, word structure, sentence structure, and spelling, etc.). The shift in focus also involved a change in the psychological view of learning from habit formation (Behaviorist), to the innate ability for learning and drawing generalizations

(Cognitivist), and more recently for a combination of the two. This in turn meant a shift from learning through only practice of drills and memorization to learning through drawing subconscious generalizations, and more recently combining the two methods.

A move to learning from the subconscious processes of generalizations led to the concept of 'Interlanguage', which underscores the idea that language learning is a continuum, gradually moving from L1 to L2, through continuous modifications of linguistic generalizations. Moreover, errors are systematic and natural in language learning.

The field of **Discourse Analysis,** which has come to be developed relatively late in pedagogy, includes the phenomena of intonation and rhythm in general. More generally, it deals with the questions of where to pause and break in speech, what pitch to use in different types of sentences and their parts and for what communicative effects, and where to lay emphasis, etc. Speech in discourse is an area that provides the learner with a scope for improving conversational control in terms of communicative functions such as introducing and ending topics, etc. In addition to this, it also provides competence in establishing social meanings and roles by choosing the tempo of speech, pauses, stresses, tones, etc.

Modern study of language and language teaching

Modern linguistics in its early stages in the 1940s and 50s, laid great emphasis on the primacy of speech, with its slogan 'Speech is primary, writing secondary'. In sum, the main units of speech that have to be recognized are the following:

I. Inventories of significant units of segmental sounds and their contextually sensitive pronunciation must be maintained. English, for instance, has 24 linguistically significant consonantal sounds and 20 vowel sounds. Learners of English should be able to pronounce all these sounds. Thus English has both long and short vowels as in *ship/ sheep, get/gate, book/root*, etc. The short and long vowel distinctions in them must be maintained.

II. Constraints on the occurrence of speech segments, known as phonotactic constraints. For example, English words can sometimes have only 3 consonantal sounds at the beginning of a word and four at the end. Therefore, words such as street, spray, screw, split, etc. have three consonantal sounds at the beginning of a word and words such as 'sixths' has four consonantal sounds at the end. However, in Hindi, Kashmiri or Punjabi, such patterns are rare. Hence, Hindi, Kashmiri and Punjabi learners of English have to be specially trained in the pronunciation of consonant clusters.

III. Features of connected speech such as sentence stress, pauses and intonation, in sentential and discourse contexts. Knowledge of these is also connected with the pronunciation of segments.

The third point can be explained in more detail as follows. It has been shown that Indian languages differ from English in speech rhythm. English is said to have a stress-timed speech rhythm with a patterning of prominent and reduced syllables. For example, in the words *nation*, *national* and *nationality*, the underlined vowels are different depending on when they are stressed or unstressed. This phenomenon is widespread in English, but less

commonly found in the speech of Indian speakers. For example, the word *photo* is often pronounced in the same manner in the words *photo, photograph* and *photographer* in Indian English, but in native English pronunciation it is different. Sometimes the speech of the Indian speakers, when very close to the vernacular sounds, is considerably different from international varieties. Indian languages are said to have a more syllable-based rhythm. What this distinction means in general is that in English, stresses occur at roughly equal durations, and stress units range over words and longer stretches, as for example, shown below:

A	B
Follow	Do it.
Believe	Toweave
Distemper	We told you.
Wonderful	What is it?

In native English, the single words in column A and the multiple words in column B are spoken within the same duration. However, we tend to hear the words in column B separately in the speech of some Indians. This is because in the Indian languages, the arrangement of utterances is more sensitive to the production of syllables, and the pattern of the organization of speech is more dependent on words. It has been found that unstressed syllables do not undergo processes of reduction and weakening with the frequency that is found in a stress-sensitive rhythm.

Trends of tomorrow

For better learning programmes, more in-depth studies of the spoken aspects of different languages are required. Thus, one of the reasons why British English has been used for a long time for learning English, and importance has not been given to the mother tongues of the learners in India, is that so much is known about British English, and so little is known about Indian languages.

The use of speech technology in teaching and learning pronunciation has increased manifold since its beginning. Speech technology was first used in different forms of recorders and record players for listening and production of speech, in both individual segments and continuous speech. It was done with the belief that a given standard form of speech, such as the Received Pronunciation (RP) of British English, had to be learnt. There is a continued support for this practice now with new technology. Roach (2002), for example, discusses the possibility of using advanced speech technology (developed for remediation of speech pathology) for the purpose of second language teaching. However, we can use technology to teach any form of standard English—British, American, Australian or Indian.

Speech skills require exposure to the source language so that there are adequate opportunities for the learner to develop speech perception. In second language contexts, the situation has considerably improved with the wide use of audio-visual mass media. In addition to this, there are electronic dictionaries of pronunciation for learning the pronunciation of words. Thus Daniel Jones' English Pronouncing Dictionary is now available with a CD-ROM in its latest edition (Roach, Hartman, & Setter, 2003). Besides, the availability of CD-ROMs for learning connected speech is also growing (e.g. Cauldwell, 2002). The latter is potentially full of promises, as it gives complete freedom and time to the learner to get exposure to the variety she aims to learn.

Apart from the technological support for learning languages, softwares such as PRAAT have proved to be a rich resource for studying the acoustic properties of speech of various categories of learners, and even more so for teachers. PRAAT is software that can be downloaded freely. Although familiarity with it requires a little training, it can be arranged for by schools. Users of PRAAT can examine the facts of a spoken language on their own. Teachers and learners can use the software to look at the acoustic properties of speech with the help of recorded speech or by recording speech through the software.

Suggestions towards pedagogy for developing speech skills

Having presented an overview of the advances made in the fields soliciting the development of speech skills, some pertinent points need to be taken up by way of suggestions towards curricula for speech development.

One, there is need to give full consideration to the significant contribution of speech in developing communication skills--awareness about grammatical and pragmatic meanings, as well as issues of language identities, attitudes, and sociolinguistic variation. Teacher training is critically important towards this end.

Two, the sagacity of the teacher in using his/her knowledge to suit the needs of individuals and groups of learners, plays an important role in developing speech and communication skills. There are teaching materials available for international varieties of English, such as Standard American English and Standard British English (or British Received Pronunciation). The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad also has teaching materials for General Indian English.

Recent experience in the use of English in the development of indigenous software for educational purposes, however, reveals that users may show a preference for a more regional variety. This was indeed the case for a group of visually challenged learners, using software for learning computers developed by the Government of India. The visually challenged learners from rural Tamil Nadu demanded Tamil English in place of the General Indian English used in the software (Hema Murthy, IIT Madras- personal communication, 2009). This instance clearly shows the need for the teacher to be prepared to adjust his/her speech for the learners at different levels.

Three, the teacher has to take care to develop listening among learners by taking recourse to suitable methods. These methods could be of the following main types:

a. The speech productions of the teacher should be a help to the learner. At the early stages in learning, this means adapting his/her tempo to the learner's competence, willingness to repeat and explain the usage of difficult and technical words, and pausing frequently to help the learner to process utterances.

b. Learners should be encouraged to listen to the speech of the target language in order to get a feel of its features of pronunciation, rhythm and intonation.

Four, learners should be encouraged to produce language in context. The use of dialogues for role play, and spontaneous responses to audio-visual stimuli such as pictures, movies, etc., go a long way in getting the learners to gain fluency in a language and become aware of the need to develop speech skills.

And **finally,** technological advances should be made accessible to the learners to work independently as well as in groups to develop speech skills. The facilities that are available but rarely used in the Indian context are the CD-ROMs of target language spoken material, and software for speech analysis. The software of speech analysis is expected to bring a critical change in the methods of developing speech skills with a scientific and research-oriented temper, which is the need of the hour for education in India.

References

Cauldwell, R. (2002). *Streaming speech*. Birmingham, UK: Speechinaction.

Roach, P. (2002). SPECO: Computer-based phonetic training for children. In D. Teeler (Ed.), *Talking computers* (pp. 25–27). Whitstable, UK: IATEFL.

Roach, P., Hartman, J., & Setter, J. (Eds.). (2003). *English pronouncing dictionary* (16th ed.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Pramod Pandey is professor of Linguistics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. His interests include speech technology, phonological inventories, phonological interfaces, writing systems and multilingualism.

pkspandey@yahoo.com

Writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks. In some countries, such as China, Egypt and Mesopotamia, writing was practiced thousands of years ago, but to most of the languages that are spoken today it has been applied either in relatively recent times or not at all. Moreover, until the days of printing, literacy was confined to a very few people. All languages were spoken through merely all of their history by people who did not read or write; the languages of such peoples are just as stable, regular, and rich as the languages of literate nations. A language is the same no matter what system of writing may be used to record it, just as a person is the same no matter how you take his picture.

(From *Language* by Leonard Bloomfield, 1933, Holt, New York, p. 21)

Contrary to popular misconception, sign languages are not pantomimes and gestures, inventions of educators, or ciphers of the spoken language of the surrounding community. They are found wherever there is a community of deaf people, and each one is a distinct, full language, using the same kinds of grammatical machinery found world-wide in spoken languages.

(From *The Language Instinct* by Steven Pinker, 1954/ 1995, Harper Collins, New York, p. 36)