Cinderella, integration and the pronunciation turn

Adrian Underhill

Pronunciation infuses all of our language use and experience, just as grammar and vocabulary do. In some way and at some level pronunciation is operating all the time in our students' language activities, even when they are not attending to it, and even if they have not been taught it. But the way we teach pronunciation does not reflect its ubiquitous nature, and in our hands it easily becomes dis-integrated from the rest of language, not for lack of teacher will, but because our methods do not permit integration.

I suggest this is partly because we do not teach pronunciation as a physical, embodied activity. Instead we teach it in two main non-physical ways:

- Cognitive description and discussion (the way we talk about grammar and vocabulary), which in the case of pronunciation is like teaching someone to dance by talking about it.

- Repetition, which is like teaching someone to dance by telling them to watch me and then do it.

Both have their place, but neither is based on the teacher's experiential, felt and sensed kinesthetic insight into what their own muscles and tissues are actually doing when they speak, which would enable them to develop tactics and strategies to help their learners do the same. Unless learners are helped to renew their conscious kinesthetic contact with the muscles (known as *proprioception*) that make the pronunciation difference, they remain by default in the 'grip' of their mother tongue phonetic set, from which no amount of discussion or repetition will free them.

The consequence of not integrating pronunciation fully is that we teach a reduced form of the language, *'right words plus right order minus embodiment',* which I suggest disables the systemic quality of language, making it less coherent and more difficult to learn. This in turn undermines a key motivator, the ongoing discovery by learners that they can go beyond their habitual limits, and escape (relatively but significantly) the 'grip' of their L1 pronunciation and sound more like the speakers they listen to. Before taking this further I will underline the ubiquitous nature of pronunciation by looking at the four skills.

Pronunciation and reading

As you read this article you are likely to be sub-vocalising, registering the text internally through an inner voice or an inner ear, without external vocalising and without any detectable movement of your articulating muscles. But whether you register your reading through an inner voice or an inner ear, your are rehearsing your pronunciation while you read. Regarding our students the question is whether the inner pronunciation with which they register the text rehearses the grip of their LI pronunciation, applied to the L2, or whether it rehearses their best approximation of their L2 pronunciation. I am suggesting that unless some discipline prevails, the activity of 'silent' reading rehearses the mother tongue pronunciation applied to the new language. And the same goes for writing.

Pronunciation and writing

The activity of writing allows time for inner process of composition, of putting words together to see how they flow, whether they carry the intended meaning and whether they follow the grammar rules as they know them, whether the construction feels like English, and so on. It is likely that learners of a language will say or hear the words of the composition 'silently' though their inner voice or inner ear, and once again an inner pronunciation is employed. Which pronunciation? Unless an aspirational learning discipline has been established, such rehearsal is likely to be in an English gripped by the writer's mother tongue phonetic set.

Pronunciation and speaking

Obviously pronunciation is at work when speaking. It is the outcome of muscles working using the breath and the soft tissue and hard surfaces of the mouth, throat, nose and tongue. It is a thoroughly physical activity, relating words and meanings to the acoustic formations dictated by L2 and shaped by the agility of the user's musculature, and the degree to which they have managed to become free from the grip of their L1 phonetic set.

Pronunciation and listening

As for listening, we know that sounds we hear affect how we say them. It is also the case that we may not be able to hear a certain sound discerningly if that sound is one we cannot say, if it is outside our L1 phonetic set. We probably also have the experience that once we can 'get our mouths round' a sequence of sounds in a word or phrase, we suddenly become able to hear it more precisely when spoken by another. The L1 phonetic set, the grip of mother tongue as I call it, affects both the ear and the mouth together. To put it crudely, listening and speaking are like two ends of the same neurology. But

there is something else interesting here. While speaking and listening may be neurologically wired together, the inner ear can nevertheless sometimes create or 'record' a pronunciation of the second language more faithfully than the mouth can reproduce it. You can hear a sound, let it repeat on the phonetic loop in your mind's ear, but as soon as you try to say it aloud, you notice that it is less faithful to the original than the one you seem to hear internally. So, though the grip of the mother tongue affects both inner ear and external production, the latter is likely bring an extra degradation to the pronunciation due to the habitual muscular grip of L1. We probably all know this through what I call the *cake shop experience*:

Inner and outer voices

Imagine you are in a country where you speak only a little of the language. You are outside a cake shop and see in the window a cake that you want to buy and eat. You stand by the window for a moment and rehearse, in your mind's ear, the words in this foreign language that you will need to purchase the cake. You assemble the words and the stress and intonation you will use, and internally massage the utterance into shape and rehearse with your inner voice. It sounds good. You open the door, and then open your mouth…. But what comes out is not the same as you just heard in your inner rehearsal. Ideally, you should then go back and listen again to the mind's ear, re-rehearse it internally, and try for the cake again. But convention does not usually allow for this, and other strategies must be employed.

This illustrates how a sentence can be composed and polished to a high quality using the inner ear and the inner voice, yet when amplified through the muscles of speech it may lose that quality. Here lies a rich resource, the ability to create and compare two versions of the same utterances, the inner one, and the outer one that gets distorted by the muscular grip of the mother tongue habit. This opens up to the learner a way into self-reflection, a position from which to view personal learning processes, to glimpse some of the internal movements of learning and to compare, critique and choose learning strategies.

(Underhill, 2013)

Thus tucked away out of sight is an important and under-used pronunciation learning resource: the capacity to compare and critique two utterances (one internal, one external) both produced in oneself. The comparison can lead to a revised effort. This ubiquitous quality of pronunciation can be seen from perspectives other than the four skills, for example memory and thinking.

Pronunciation and short term memory

Inner pronunciation and its associated rehearsal can be seen in the actions of short-term remembering. If I look online and find a phone number that I want to dial, I find that I say that number internally as I look at it, and then as I turn away from the screen and pick up my phone I will rely on an inner phonetic loop which keeps repeating the number until I dial. A similar thing happens if a person across the room calls out the number to me, and I then 'hold' it in my inner auditory loop until I have dialled, at which point I let it go. Inner speaking, with its pronunciation, is integral to this short-term memorisation. I don't only remember the number sequence in some disembodied way, through their mathematical relationship, or the pattern they make, or their similarity to another number, though that may be part of it.

Pronunciation and thinking

Another example is the activity of thinking. How much of your thinking involves an inner voice saying things internally and perhaps in dialogue with real or imaginary others? And when these processes take place in a language you are learning, will that not by default involve applying the L1 pronunciation grip to the new language, unless you 'install' another discipline?

Pronunciation as Cinderella

The key point so far is that pronunciation is in all language activities. It is integral to the planning, processing, receiving and producing of language, not just acoustic speech. This could have implications for how we teach it, how we intervene and what resources we use. For example we could exploit and develop the intentional and skilful involvement of the learners' inner voice and inner ear in language learning activities. And we could make use of the potential difference in fidelity between the inner ear, and the outer voice. This can be quite easy for the students to learn to perceive (as in the cake shop description), and once seen makes available to the learner a new learning resource.

In spite of all this, pronunciation has somehow become the neglected and excluded Cinderella of language teaching and learning. Of the three language systems, pronunciation, lexis and grammar, it is the last two, Cinderella's captivating sisters Lexis and Grammar, who have cornered the perceptual space of language teaching in coursebooks, materials, lesson plans, classroom preoccupations, and teacher training. They receive more attention in both time and priority, and between them they provide a powerful two-dimensional matrix which enables learners to put the right words in the right order to say what they want to say. And we have created teaching methodologies to suit. But the third dimension is missing. The dimension that would give *volume* (in both senses of the word) to the two dimensional space of Lexis and Grammar, that would allow the 'right words in the right order' produced by the first two dimensions to be

embodied and amplified into the world through the use of muscles and body tissue, vibrating air, ear drums and neurology, escapes sufficient attention.

Why this Cinderella status for pronunciation? Why does integrated pronunciation teaching seem to elude our best intentions? Here are two possible reasons and two corresponding ways forward.

Problem 1. The need for a mental map of pronunciation

The first reason is that pronunciation is viewed by many as somehow mysterious, unknown, endless, and thus beyond control. The problem is that teachers do not have a way to 'see' or think about phonology that enables them to frame the task that they and their students have to embark on. Teachers and students *lack a perceptual map of the territory to be explored*. And a syllabus is not the answer since all sounds are needed from the beginning.

## Problem 2. Pronunciation is primarily a physical activity

The second reason is that pronunciation is taught cognitively, when in practice it is primarily *a physical and muscular activity*, like dance. If you want to learn a new physical activity in which the required muscular coordination is different from your customary use of yourself, then you need to re-educate the muscles and the neurology that coordinates them. Learning a new dance is a good illustration. If I want to learn to samba, I find I am up against the 'grip' of my habitual muscular coordination which has automatised me to the movements and dance of my own culture. And if I am to free myself from this muscular 'grip' I need to put my conscious attention to work on my muscles, first to learn to sense them and connect with them, to know what they are doing, and then to develop the new movements and coordinations which at the moment I cannot perform (due I think to my neurological setup rather than to my physiognomy). *Proprioception* is the useful term from neurology which essentially means 'knowing from the inside what your muscles are doing'. And for this I may need a teacher.

It is the same with pronunciation, I am so much in the grip of my L1 muscular movements that even if I try to talk nonsense it is likely to come out using the sounds of my L1 phonetic set. If I want liberation from this L1 grip, I need to consciously contact the muscles involved in order to interrupt their habitual moves and make them do something unfamiliar (which may in turn become automatised later as an additional grip).

Solution 1. The provision of a mental map, a gestalt of pronunciation

A step towards solving the first problem is the provision of a pronunciation roadmap of the territory to be explored. The pronunciation chart illustrated below offers such a map, or thinking tool. It shows the phonemes generally used to represent British English, not in the form of a list, but in a geographical relationship to each other. It presents the whole thing in one gestalt, showing the relationship of the parts to each other and to the whole. Information about WHERE & HOW sounds are made is embedded in the layout, so in the classroom the chart is something not only to look at, but to interact with. By pointing at sounds in sequence it becomes a worktable, the pronunciation equivalent of a whiteboard or blackboard on which sounds, words and phrases can be worked out, exercised, compared, played with, recognised, confused, reassembled, tried out, put together and taken apart again. The chart provides a place for learners to inquire and experiment, where words and phrases can be threaded together, where reductions and simplifications can be tracked and compared, and where mistakes can be transmuted into successes.

A further point is worth making in respect of Cinderella and her enticing sisters Grammar and Lexis. If I say to you '…look, to get anywhere in English you need to learn about 1000 pages of grammar…' you may flinch but you may say 'OK let's get started'. And if I say '…look, you also need to learn about 1000 pages of vocabulary' you might say '…ok, let's get going'. But if I then say '…and look, there is *only one page of pronunciation*, and here it is on this chart and there isn't even a page two … and what's more you already know some of these sounds pretty well', then you might well be amazed and delighted. And yet we make heavy weather of this pronunciation simplicity.
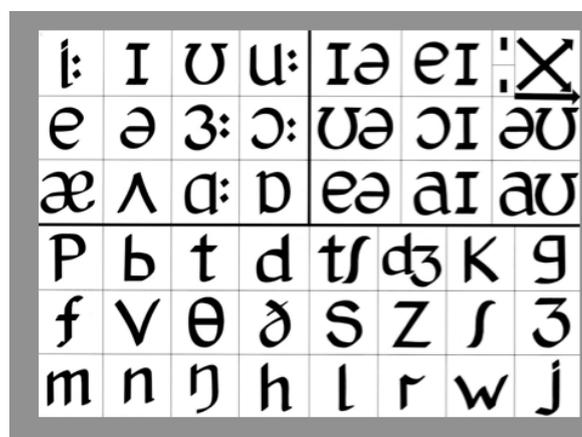
Figure 1. The BrE Sound Foundations Chart © Adrian Underhill.

Solution 2. Teaching pronunciation as a physical activity, a subtle dance

A step towards a solution to the second problem is to teach pronunciation physically, as a subtle inner dance. To liberate learners from the muscular grip of their L1 pronunciation think of yourself as a dance teacher, helping learners to discover a set of new movements outside their habitual repertoire. At the beginning this means helping learners to reconnect with the muscles that make the pronunciation difference, and to do that I have found that the conscious rediscovery of as few as four 'muscle buttons' is enough to navigate almost anywhere amongst the new vowels and consonants. These buttons are:

- Tongue (moving forward and back)
- Lips (spreading and coming back, or rounding and pushing forward)
- Jaw + tongue (moving up and down)
- Voice (turning it on or off, to make voiced or unvoiced sounds)

The way I do this is to help learners 'discover' the first three buttons while working with the 12 vowels, and the fourth button (voice/unvoice) while working with the top 2 rows of consonants. For me this all takes place in the first hour or so with a new class, no matter what level. Other teachers might spread it across the first two or three sessions. This is a process of putting all the sounds into circulation as an interrelated set whose members affect each other and are all needed from the first moment. It is not a matter of teaching sounds individually to a required standard. Note that since muscles work by moving, nearly all sounds have a visible component, in some cases strong. Therefore using the visibility of pronunciation (as our deaf colleagues do) is a strong learning resource, just as watching a dance is.

Pronunciation as choreography

One can take the dance metaphor further. I help my students to think of these 44 sounds as *positions*, and to take internal 'sensation snapshots' of these sound positions as they find them, so they start to know them from the inside, and to sensitise to the required muscular moves and postures. I do not teach the symbols, I teach the internally sensed positions, and as students get to know these through experience it becomes effortless to name the experience (eg. with a symbol). What is harmful is to expect the student to learn the symbol when the muscular positon it represents has *not yet been internally experienced* by the students. This happens when the teacher has not experienced it either. In my work I find that many teachers (native and non-native) do not know what is going on in their own mouths and so are unable to guide or instruct their learners. In this respect there are three kinds of teacher:

- The teacher who neither knows theoretically nor senses in themselves the internal muscular positions of the sounds they make.
- The teacher who has learnt the positions and movements in theory but does not sense in themselves the internal muscular positions of sounds they make.
- The teacher who knows the positions and movements from personal, kinesthetic investigation and verification.

Of these three, only the third will do.

Connected speech

But speech is not solely these positions, speech is the positions joined together in movement, using the short cuts characteristic of that language, overlaid with a distribution of energy. This is like ballet, where the basic arm and feet positions are not in themselves the dance. The dance comes alive when you join the positions with the movements in between which have a flow, connection, timing, energy distribution and beauty. Thus we can talk about pronunciation as choreography, and indeed every word has its own distinctive inner choreography, shown in the dictionary, which gives the basic positions, leaving the user to join them into the flow of a word.

These extra awarenesses available to both teacher and student should not be seen as just *extra work*, but as the *missing work* that you need in order to make everything easier, to work with the complete system, to scaffold the language, to make the whole language endeavour more possible and more engaging. The physical, here-and-now focus of pronunciation complements the cerebral aspect of grammar and vocabulary, and from this can arise a kind of 'super-motivation' as students discover a new holistic field to explore, *and* see that they can quickly get the hang of it, and that this may well lead to success. It brings the class alive.

To recapitulate, these are the key points I have tried to make:

- Pronunciation is everywhere, so let's exploit that fact.
- Teachers and students need a mental map of the pronunciation territory; the chart may provide this.
- Pronunciation needs to be taught physically, like a subtle inner dance.
- The map and the physicality together enable us to teach the language as a coherent interdependent system, making (I suggest) the language learning endeavour more engaging

- The map and the physicality together have the potential to integrate pronunciation into the moment by moment language work of the class.

The pronunciation turn – a glimpse of integration?

To conclude I want to suggest some possible features of a more fully integrated approach to pronunciation teaching and learning. What might it look like? Here are some points arising from this discussion. Perhaps:

- Attention to connected-up pronunciation (stream of speech supported by word and individual sounds) would be a permanent feature of all language work and class discussion. Such attention would infuse all activity, just as words and grammar currently infuse all activity, and impact all four skills systemically. The chart provides a workspace for conceiving of and mapping pronunciation work (e.g. through pointing out sound and word sequences), just as the white board does for grammar and lexis (e.g .through writing letters and words in sequence). Physicality allows pronunciation to be attended to *at the same time* as the more cerebral work of getting the right words in the right order.

- There would be an emphasis on pronunciation at the *point of purchase* of new language, and this would take priority over our current practice of attempting to *retrofit pronunciation* (as for example in 'pronunciation slots' and remedial activities, which require un-learning of the default pronunciation already established wherever pronunciation is 'left until later').

- Inner voice and inner ear, the locations of the inner learning moves that precede the outer visible moves of student production in the classroom, would receive as much attention as the outer moves. Exercising and attending to these inner processes would be allowed for, attended to, talked about, critiqued.

- Integration would not be a matter of doing *more* of what we do now. The pronunciation turn would be *different* from current practice, characterised in this discussion by the mental map and the physicality.

- Integrating pronunciation would not be more time consuming. Rather, by providing all the tools for a *whole* language-learning job it should take less time and do the job better.

- Integrating pronunciation would mean more things being able to happen simultaneously in the language class. And maybe this would allow a quality of demand necessary to really enagage the full potential of the human brain.

- Teaching and learning a compete and *re-abled* language could lead students to say or to feel, *'Thanks, that's what I was hoping for…'*

References

Underhill, A. (2013). The Inner Workbench: learning itself as a meaningful activity. In J. Arnold & T. Murphey (Eds), *Meaningful Action: Earl Stevick's Influence on Language Teaching* (pp 202-218*).* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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