Using Student-Produced Recordings With Monolingual Groups to Provide Effective, Individualized Pronunciation Practice

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The publication of The Phonology of English as an International Language (Jenkins, 2000) has provided help in determining suitable models and goals for work on pronunciation. The book focuses on pronunciation for English as an international language (EIL), providing important insights into deciding priorities and methodology for EIL pronunciation work, insights that have direct implications for classroom practice. Jenkins proposes a lingua franca core (LFC), a set of pronunciation features that her empirical research suggests are essential for mutual intelligibility in communication between nonnative speakers of English.

With respect to methodology, Jenkins (2000) reaffirms the value of traditional teacher-led activities such as drills and minimal-pair work, which she considers valid techniques for taking learners to procedural competence—the ability to successfully perform a given feature as opposed to possessing formal knowledge of it—in the different components of the LFC. Completely new in pedagogical terms, however, is her call to prepare learners for accent variation, an unavoidable fact of EIL settings.

To deal with variation, Jenkins advocates training students, through student-governed spoken interaction, in the deliberate use of the naturally occurring language phenomenon of accommodation (Giles & Coupland, 1991). In spoken interaction, the participants subconsciously adjust their output, or accommodate (e.g., grammatically, lexically, phonologically), toward their interlocutor(s). Regarding the pronunciation in an EIL framework, with speakers from different first language (L1) backgrounds, Jenkins (2000) found that accommodation is articulated through adjustments that overcome negative phonological transfer from the L1. That is to say, driven by the need to be understood, speakers adjust their pronunciation, consciously or otherwise, until communication is successfully achieved. Because of the different L1 backgrounds involved, these adjustments involve converging on the target forms of the LFC (Jenkins, pp. 58–67).
PRONUNCIATION AND MONOLINGUAL GROUPS

In EIL communication, with interlocutors from different L1 backgrounds, phonological accommodation helps international intelligibility. However, with a monolingual group, when activities move from the initial teacher-led drills to student-governed pair or group work, pronunciation accuracy can suffer. When an attempt at a minimal-pair discrimination is unsuccessful, for example, the speakers tend to converge not on an internationally intelligible LFC form of the problem sound, but on a pronunciation influenced by their shared L1 phonology. In other words, in monolingual settings there is a danger of increasing rather than decreasing L1 phonological transfer. For example, when a pair of students in one of my classes were unable to resolve the difference between wrote and road, I observed them converging on /ro-at/ for road, a variation strongly influenced by their shared L1 (Castilian Spanish). This led to intelligibility for them but their convergence would probably prove unintelligible in EIL communication with interlocutors of other L1s.

This strategy of convergence on the L1 is not adopted solely because of the desire to complete the exercise. Socio-psychological issues are also at play here, as Jenkins (2000) discovered when observing same-L1 pairs involved in the information-gap tasks she advocates for training learners’ in accommodation skills. Many of her subjects “admitted to feelings of embarrassment in situations where they had to speak English with members of their own L1 group” (p. 193). Clearly, using communication tasks to develop accommodation skills generates a problem; these tasks only prove effective with multilingual groups because to monolingual groups, accommodating means converging on the shared L1 phonology. Providing learners in monolingual groups with communication tasks invites them to move away from internationally intelligible forms of the target features.

In short, communication tasks are classroom activities that encourage learners in multilingual groups to actively adjust their pronunciation in search of intelligibility and to do so within the framework of a meaningful task that is integrated into their normal lesson. Communication tasks provide learners with individualized peer feedback about the effectiveness of each adjustment, and they avoid the anxiety or embarrassment many learners feel when corrected by teachers in front of their peers.
Because the EIL settings in which the effectiveness of communication tasks comes into play are “impossible to organize in monolingual classrooms” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 191), teachers need to find alternatives for monolingual groups. Although these alternatives will not help them develop accommodation skills, they should provide learners with opportunities to:

- work on pronunciation through meaningful tasks integrated into their coursework.
- speak with an international audience in mind.
- practice in private as opposed to performing in front of the whole class.
- consciously make adjustments to their pronunciation to achieve accurate pronunciation of selected target forms.

receive individualized feedback from their teacher as well as their peers. The remainder of this chapter describes a technique that fulfils these criteria.

**METHODOLOGY**

The technique is an adaptation of the pronunciation clinic (Bradford, 1995) and shares common ground with the oral dialogue journal (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996). However, whereas Bradford uses each recording as the basis for an obligatory one-to-one tutorial, in the technique I am describing, the finished, marked recording can, if student and tutor agree, be the end-point of the process. Tutorials are then reserved for students with significant problems. Similarly, where Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin aim to promote oral fluency, with feedback on selected aspects of accuracy, in my technique, pronunciation accuracy is the central concern. The technique essentially involves students recording texts that reflect how they might expect to use spoken English in their real lives, therefore increasing meaningfulness. The recordings can be either monologues or dialogues. The finished recording is given to the teacher, who marks it with a suitable, objective grading scheme. Each recording must target only a few features, and the pronunciation focus of the assignment must be made clear. Doing so improves the effectiveness of the learner’s efforts and prevents students with lower skill levels from feeling overwhelmed by the task.

Being asked to record themselves as a means of improving their pronunciation is completely new to my students. As a result, they need a clear framework in which to perform. For teachers in a similar situation, it is useful to keep the following points in mind:
The text to be recorded should be integrated into current work so as not to separate pronunciation from the rest of language practice and thus reduce its meaningfulness.

The text can be scripted (e.g., dialogue from a course book) or student generated. In both cases, learners must be fully familiar with the text before recording it so that they do not suffer from processing overload during the recording, which draws their attention away from pronunciation and leads to reliance on their L1 habits.

The text should be an appropriate length; 2 minutes is the maximum length because students have difficulty pronouncing longer texts and the teacher does not have time to mark longer texts.

Students should be strongly encouraged to work together both before and during recording. The presence of the other student can provide key feedback about the correctness of target features as well as the effectiveness of any adjustments each student makes. Such peer feedback is often more acceptable and more accessible than input from teachers (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996, p. 351; Pica & Doughty, 1985), which makes it a valuable aid to improved pronunciation. It can also be an alternative to the natural feedback provided during communication tasks with multilingual groups.

It is important to note that peer feedback does not necessarily invite convergence on the shared L1. The students’ focus on selected pronunciation features, as well as exposure to the models presented in class prior to the recording session, helps make peer feedback both constructive and supportive.

The exact text will depend on what the students are studying. The students in my classes are working toward a university diploma in tourism management. For a typical group of 20–25 students, with abilities ranging from pre-intermediate to upper intermediate level, I use dialogues or monologues on topics such as a hotel booking, a description of a monument (see Appendix), a weather forecast, and a complaint. In practice, most aspects of pronunciation can be found in such texts, but I employ the first recording a new group makes to introduce the technique itself. With later recordings my goals are more ambitious and clearly related to features of the LFC. For a unit on weather, for example, students produce a recorded forecast, which within the framework of tourism-related English represents a real-life task. I usually provide the text to be recorded so I can focus on
specific pronunciation targets, but sometimes I let students write their own forecast. A variety of activities prepare the class for the recording, beginning with listening to an authentic weather forecast. For pronunciation, the discourse they are working on determines the targets, in this case tone units and linking. The following is a typical basic teaching sequence:

- Introduce the topic. Work on vocabulary.
- Listen to weather forecast and answer questions on content.
- Listen again. Introduce the concept of tone unit.
- Practice detecting tone unit boundaries with the same text. (Use the term pauses in class.) Practice predicting where tone unit boundaries may or may not meaningfully be established. (A different text can be used at this stage.)
- Examine simple consonant-vowel and consonant-consonant linking. (Boundaries depend on a lack of pausing within the tone unit itself.)
- Clarify all issues related to making the recording.

Although tone units and linking are more commonly seen in Spain as part of university courses in phonetics, my intermediate-level students immediately see the value of breaking speech down into tone units, or thought groups (Rogerson & Gilbert, 1990, p. 54), and benefit from seeing that linking is a natural part of the speech flow in English, just as it is in their L1. <s6>

Marking
Communication tasks in EIL settings (i.e., with multilingual groups) are self-correcting with respect to pronunciation. If the learners successfully resolve the task, their pronunciation, by definition, is correct. Encouraging adherence to an EIL norm in a monolingual group, however, requires setting explicit pronunciation objectives and making them the sole focus of marking. There are a number of reasons for this:

- With multiple recordings of the same text, broad descriptors such as comfortably intelligible (Kenworthy, 1987) are not useful. Not only are such terms highly subjective, but for teachers who are non-native speakers, comfortable intelligibility is achieved when the student converges on the shared L1. In addition, through repeated listening, teachers quickly become familiar with the script and are consequently able to rescue what would often be unintelligible to first-time
listeners. Finally, in monolingual settings, the shared L1 allows the teacher to decode what might prove unintelligible to speakers of other L1s.

- Learners direct their attention to the selected features when preparing the recording, often practicing them quite intensely. (See the comments on students’ reactions in the next section.) This directed attention reduces the chance of convergence on the L1.
- Teachers who are native speakers should no longer feel overwhelmed by the frequently wide range of deviations from their internalized norm and so should be more able to judge if the target features have been adequately produced.
- With a reduced number of features to consider, almost all of which will lie well within their own phonological competence, teachers who are non-native speakers should feel more confident about assessing acceptable performance.

Teachers, native and non-native speakers alike, must educate themselves to ignore errors of pronunciation that are not formally part of the work under consideration. If a student drops a final consonant, conflates two consonants, inappropriately simplifies a cluster, or stresses the wrong word in a tone unit, the teacher must address this while marking. All are items in the LFC, and all are accessible to teachers who have only basic training in phonetics. Moreover, because the student’s work is recorded, the teacher can listen to it more than once if he or she is uncertain. Regarding this last point, texts of the type described in this article can and should be marked in no more than 5–6 minutes, administration time included. Spending longer too easily leads to an overly critical approach.

Student Reaction
Four years ago, I received informal, written feedback from students on the value of making recordings. The following is a selection of their predominantly positive comments:

- I like recording cassettes to see if my pronunciation is correct and where I am wrong.
- Very useful. I think I can learn a lot mainly in the pronunciation.
- The recording is a very practical activity where you can measure your progress.
For the 3 years since receiving this informal feedback, I have administered a questionnaire, which approximately 80 students have completed voluntarily. The feedback from this questionnaire has provided insight into why learners appreciate the recording task, and certain aspects of the feedback merit comment.

The average mark for students’ work during this period was higher than 7/10, and the vast majority of students declared themselves to be “happy” or “very happy” with their mark. One could argue that any student would automatically feel pleased with such a mark. However, these marks were not the product of lax grading. Rather, they were the outcome of strictly limiting marking to the targeted features. I am now happy to ignore error that lies beyond the task and so provide my students with the confidence many of them need in order to believe in their capacity to pronounce English intelligibly.

Another good indicator of my students’ attitude about this technique was a question about its usefulness, which was rated 3.25 on a scale from 1 (not at all useful) to 4 (very useful). However, some of the most interesting findings come from questions about dictionary use, checking pronunciation with peers, the amount of rehearsal prior to making the recording, and the number of attempts at recording before feeling satisfied. The averages from these last two (2.86 and 2.49, respectively) suggest repeated rehearsals and various attempts. This repetition parallels the intensive practice that teacher-led drills provide in the classroom and is beneficial when trying to establish automatic pronunciation habits.

With regard to dictionary use and peer support, the averages are similar (2.59 and 2.88, respectively), indicating that students are using the dictionary to some extent and, to a greater degree, are seeking help from their colleagues. These are laudable strategies, the latter especially so, both for the impact peer input can have in the learning process (Larsen-Freeman, 1985) and for how peer advice while making recordings parallels interlocutor feedback in the communication tasks Jenkins (2000) proposes for multilingual settings.

CONCLUSION
With multilingual groups in EIL settings, communication tasks develop essential accommodation skills. Because these tasks encourage convergence on the L1 phonology in monolingual groups in the same settings, an alternative to communication tasks is needed,
both to encourage making adjustments and to replicate the other pronunciation benefits that such tasks provide. The student-recording technique described in this chapter is one such alternative. By explicitly pushing learners to work together when producing their recordings, the technique encourages adjustments in pronunciation and allows for peer feedback. The recordings also offer students a non-threatening environment in which to practice meaningful tasks.

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REFERENCES
Sydney Harbour Bridge is one of the most famous sights in the world. It is many things—an essential link between the north and south sides of the harbour, the perfect postcard backdrop to the Opera House, and a great spot from which to take in the harbour panorama. It is the world’s widest long-span bridge, and it was completed in 1932. It took eight years to complete and a workforce of up to 1,400 men was employed. It is over 500 metres long and nearly 50 metres wide. Supported by massive double piers at each end, the bridge spans the north and south sides of the harbour in a single arch, which has a height of 134 metres above the water at its highest point, with a clearance of 49 metres for shipping. It has two railway tracks and eight lanes for road traffic, the direction of which can be varied according to traffic requirements. There is also a cycleway and walkways for pedestrians. An average of 170,000 vehicles cross the bridge every day, although increasing traffic led to the building of a tunnel under the harbour which was opened in 1992. Keeping the bridge freshly painted is a major job, and teams of painters are permanently employed.

Marking Focus

- The pronunciation of numbers and dates (as per work from Year 1 program).
- The correct pronunciation of consonants (t, d, b, f, v).
- The correct pronunciation of consonant groups, especially at the end of words and verbs (as per LFC).