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Case Study in Pronunciation

Introduction

As with many accented nonnative speakers of English, inaccuracies or non-standard uses of pronunciation do not necessarily affect intelligibility. We know that a heavy accent does not always lead to incomprehensibility (Munro, Derwing 1995). We strategize remedies to 'improve' pronunciation as an important part of boosting a learner's communicative self-confidence. Of course vocabulary acquisition is also important. But that issue is for another time. We hope by helping learners 'pronounce better' we may stimulate their communicative ambitions. Issues that inhibit learners confidence in their own fluency often have to do with affective factors. Taesun Kim (CATESOL Journal 2008) sums up some these distinctions by quoting Munro and Derwing: "In addition, Munro and Derwing (1995) have emphasized the importance of distinguishing different dimensions of L2 speech—accentedness, comprehensibility, and intelligibility: 'accentedness' defined as 'the degree to which the pronunciation of an utterance sounds different from an expected production pattern,' 'comprehensibility' as 'listeners' estimation of difficulty in understanding an utterance,' and 'intelligibility' as 'the extent to which a speaker's utterance is actually understood' (see Note 1).

Biography of Subject

Yeshi Tenzin is a 40 year old (1977) man from a small town in southern Tibet. Tenzin's education in Tibet was entirely supervised by monks. He spent 17 years under their tutelage. His native language is Lhasa Tibetan. He was himself a buddhist monk until he decided to marry his present wife here in the United States. He had no prior knowledge of English when he emigrated from

Tibet 15 years ago. After failing to get a job due to his poor English in job interviews, he enrolled in an ESL program in Little Tibet (Jackson Heights, Queens) and found it very helpful. He proudly repeated the jazz chant 'past present future, past present future' to show off his knowledge of grammar. It was after getting his first job that he felt his English fluency improved. Workplace extrinsic motivating factors helped. If I had to place him in an outreach ESL environment like the one at the New School, I would say that his English level is high beginning (vocabulary is limited to commonly used words). Though without further testing I can only give an informal evaluation, I would place him in an advanced Level 1 class. He can talk about his car and his work as a day laborer for a high end wedding facility with intelligible fluency and without paralinguistic support. Limitations are apparent beyond this register of car and job vocabulary. He was very reluctant at first to do this interview, but accepted after assurances that I would not publicize the recording.

Method of Case Study

I will analyze aspects of Tenzin's pronunciation from recorded excerpts 2 and 3 of the following collected data.

1 First, I interviewed Tenzin with biographical questions e.g. 'Where were you born', 'When did you come to the States' etc. This took about two minutes of recorded time. This information was used for the biography of the subject.

2 I then allowed him to choose a topic and speak as long as he wanted. He chose to talk about damage that his car sustained while parked on the street not too far from the interview location. This took exactly 3 minutes of recorded time with minimal participation on my part.

3 I then asked him to read a short excerpt (see note 2). I first read the excerpt to him out loud. I then let him read through the excerpt on his own on twice. I answered any questions he had

about the text, pronunciation or otherwise, before asking him for a third reading which I recorded. This took about 45 seconds of recorded time.

4 I will use an International Phonetic Alphabet (see note 3) chart as a primary phonetic reference. My concern is addressing his nonstandard uses of General American phonology. My primary goal is to define phonetic and phonemic idiosyncrasies of Tenzin's pronunciation.

Analysis of Subject's Pronunciation
using dialect and phonetic transcriptions of key utterances

Key:

1 For high key **NUCLEAR STRESS** I will use **ALL CAPS IN BOLD**.

2 For medium and low key **nuclear stress** I will use **small cap bold**.

 3 For unstressed utterances I will use 'no character' style.

4 A single comma indicates a short pause (,)

5 Three periods indicates a longer pause (…)

Interview

In Example 1 Tenzin searches for the correct date his car was hit. The key utterance 'somebody hit my car' is evenly accented and given a rhythmic staccato. Though there are a number of tonal units in this sequence, the stronger nuclear stress in the tonal unit 'June 28' is given the highest pitch, the loudest volume, and carries new important discoursal information. It is a high key utterance. For Tenzin, discovery of the date fixes the event in time as fact. With this example he shows us that, though he is an L2 learner he can communicate information effectively.

One notable issue of pronunciation is the unenunciated /t/ at the end of /læst/ along with the substitution of /a/ for /æ/. Therefore, /læst/ becomes /las/.

Example 1 "Ya, **somebody hit my car** on, las uh, July, June…dis June, dis **JULY**… **July** (incomprehensible)… **JUNE 28**."

//ja//, //sambadi/hɪt/maɪ/ka/ɔn//, //las/a//, //d͡ʒulaɪ//, //d͡ʒun//…//dɪs/d͡ʒun//, //dɪs/d͡ʒulaɪ//…
//d͡ʒulaɪ//…//d͡ʒun/twentie:t//

In Example 2, a sequence of low key tonal units, Tenzin searches for vocabulary to identify his

front bumper. He has trouble finding the right words. His pitch descends and pitch direction

levels off to a monotone, volume decreases and, though stresses can still be identified, the

intonation contour flatlines.

Phonetically, Teznin's basic mouth position for vowel production is a wide and forward /a/. It is

more akin to the bright short German /a/ as in words like Mann /man/ and Hand /hant/ rather than

the slightly lower and longer Italian /a/ as in words like aria /arja/ and vaga /vaga/. He shortens

the long vowel /i:/ but the General American /ɪ/ is easily articulated. He seems comfortable with

shorter versions of /a/ /i/ ɔ and /u/. Longer /i:/ or /ɒ:/ are not in his ear and vowels with lower

laryngeal feeling like /ə/, /ɒ/, /ʌ/ are not in his muscle memory.

Example 2 "An **den** I loo…I was **tinking**…is **missing**, some uh, some o de, not a screw, is like
uh…uhhhh nts.…I dunno what to say…uhhh…de bumper…uhh, like a…nts…nts…**bumper**
cage sumtin'…"

//an/den/aɪ/lu://…//aɪ/waz/tiŋkɪn//…//ɪz/mɪsin//, //sam/a//, //sam/ɔ/da//, //nɔt/a/skrru://,
//ɪz/laɪk/a…/a/a/a/.…/'ts/ (a non phonemic sound)…/'ts/…//bampa/ked͡ʒ/samtɪn//…

Reading

Problematic suprasegmental issues of pronunciation emerged from Tenzin's reading of this

excerpt. It was evident that affective factors were also involved. Tenzin's lack of confidence in

his ability to read out loud was evident. Though he was given the chance to practice he was no

longer using the same skills of intonation he used in talking about his car. Though he chose the

article because he likes boxing and because Pacquiao is an asian boxer who wins, his discomfort

was clear. Of course, reading is a completely different activity than speaking .

Word Stress and Sentence Stress

Tenzin was unsure about sentence stress and he was preoccupied with his accurate pronunciation of multisyllabic words. Though he misplaced the stress on the first syllable of 'controversial' he hardly paused through the rest of its four syllables. He stopped for 'defeat' and paused for each syllable, stressing the first syllable. He rapidly negotiated through the phrase 'with a little help from the Boxing' then suddenly stopped. 'Council' gave him difficulty. And again he placed stress on the wrong syllable. Like speaking, reading out loud is an active skill I would encourage Tenzin to work on. As you can see below, I marked sentence stress with vertical lines, and word stress with a bold font. Sueyon Seo indicates,"reading aloud contributes not only to the comprehension of the text but also to phonological processing and this way, the two purposes are working interactively. " (Seo 2014) As you can see below, I marked sentence stress with vertical lines, and word stress with a bold font.

Boxing **|** great **|** Manny Pacquiao can take some **|** heart from his **| con-**trover-sial **| de-**feat **|** to Jeff **|** Horn **|** with a little help from the World Boxing **|** Coun-**cil**

Remedies

I believe bolstering Tenzin's self confidence in communicating and engaging the world around him, beyond his work or his car, is essential to addressing any nonstandard pronunciation. I might start by having him identify authentic materials that interest him. He wants to learn and he wants to know how things work. Reading through Grainger's Industrial Catalogue, an Insurance Policy he doesn't understand, or perusing a plant catalogue could be effective teaching activities. Though technical terms can present challenges, his interest is piqued by nomenclature e.g. names of plants and trees, instruction manuals for complicated machinery he uses around the facility

where he works. Direct accent correction and minimal pair drills could be helpful and might be administered at a later date as Tenzin's defensiveness with correction subsides. Teznin is intrinsically motivated to read short technical phrases from specialized authentic materials. Supervised sessions of these materials read out loud offers a useful activity. He seemed amenable to word stress correction and was soliciting accent correction as well, as long as I was not correcting him without permission.

Note 1

Taesun Kim quotes from Munro, Derwing, & Morton, 2006

Note 2

 "Boxing great Manny Pacquiao can take some heart from his controversial defeat to Jeff Horn with a little help from the World Boxing Council.

The 37 year-old, a world champion in no less than eight weight classes, now has the option of a potential shot at WBC welterweight title holder Keith Thurman thanks to ranking spot of number three on the July listings."

From WBN website 8 July, 2017 titled 'Manny Pacquiao rated #3 by WBC'

Note 3

International Phonetic Alphabet chart for English dialects & Wiktionary: International Phonetic Alphabet