

PRONUNCIATION AND CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING:
DESIGNING A COURSE FOR TEACHERS AT AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

Elizabeth M. POW
(COGEAE/PUC-SP & Faculdade São Bernardo)

ABSTRACT: This paper reports on the process of designing a pronunciation improvement course for Brazilian teachers at an international school in São Paulo. Starting from a survey of participants' English language learning experiences and of their pronunciation needs as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) teachers, we examine the course design, pronunciation priorities, and put forward pedagogical suggestions that can provide the teacher with independence in pronunciation improvement.

Keywords: course design; pronunciation for specific purposes; Content and Language Integrated Learning; teacher training; pronunciation improvement.

RESUMO: Este artigo relata o processo de elaboração de um curso de aperfeiçoamento da pronúncia para docentes brasileiros em uma escola internacional em São Paulo. Partindo de uma sondagem das experiências de aprendizagem da língua inglesa e das necessidades dos participantes como docentes de Aprendizado Integrado de Conteúdo e Língua (CLIL), examinamos o desenho do curso, prioridades da pronúncia, e apresentamos sugestões pedagógicas que podem proporcionar ao professor independência no aperfeiçoamento da pronúncia.

Palavras-chave: desenho de curso; pronúncia para fins específicos; Aprendizado Integrado de Conteúdo e Língua; formação docente; aperfeiçoamento da pronúncia.

This paper is a special tribute to Zaina A. Abdalla Nunes, as it reports on our last project together.

1. The landscape

The last two and a half decades have seen an increasing demand for international and bilingual schools worldwide, especially in Brazil. Although the first international schools in our country date back to the fifties, they were mostly designed to cater for the educational needs of foreign or expatriate families in Brazil on short to medium term contracts.

More recently, it may be safe to say that such a demand has most probably been caused by parents' growing awareness of the benefits of providing their children education with a foreign language from a very early age to be better prepared for today's internationalized world. As a result, pedagogical changes have had to be implemented in school curricula so that a second language could be used as a medium for teaching social studies, experimental sciences, and maths, in other words, non-language content.

Such changes have given rise to Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), a proposal that arose in the nineties (GRADDOL, 2006: 86), and it has since been implemented in its various approaches: from full to partial immersions, regular 20-30 minute subject lessons in English or language crash courses. Basically, CLIL means that subject teachers are required to teach their subject in English, while English teachers may be asked to teach subject matter, i.e., content, in their English classes.

As can be seen, in terms of teaching standards and requirements, CLIL is bound to make great demands on teachers, especially on non-native speakers teaching a range of subjects. They are not only expected to be well qualified to teach a subject matter, but also to have well grounded pedagogical skills and a high level of spoken and written command of English. It is precisely on the teachers' language skills that lies the scope of this paper, which is to report on a speech/pronunciation improvement course specially designed for a group of Brazilian teachers working at an international school in São Paulo, as part of their ongoing professional development. Another aim is to reflect on the outcome of such a programme combining Pronunciation for Specific Purposes and Teacher Development.

2. The school and the students

As an accredited member of the International Baccalaureate (IB)¹, the school offers the IB Primary Years Programme (3 to 12-year-olds), IB Middle Years Programme (11 to 16 year-olds) and IB Diploma Programme (16 to 19 year-olds). Also, it must ensure that the curriculum and standards established by IB for each programme are strictly adhered to. Set in a residential area of São Paulo city, the institution had over 600 students and a faculty of approximately 50 members at the time.

Although the student population mostly consisted of Brazilians, there were students of various nationalities, whose families were either permanent or short-term residents in Brazil.

With regard to faculty, teachers are hired locally and abroad. Foreign applicants must have at least two years' teaching experience to be considered for a work visa.

3. Course participants' profile

Six teachers who taught various subjects such as Biology, Physics, History, English as a Second Language, Social Studies, and Physical Education took part in the pronunciation programme. All of them had teaching qualifications, while one of the teachers – the head of the Science department – had a PhD in Biology; one teacher had an MA in History and two were working towards a MA degree in Pedagogy and Science, respectively. Besides, the course participants had had some experience living and working in English-speaking countries for some years and had also attended language courses locally and/or abroad. It is worth mentioning that, but for a two-year English course at a language school, one of the teachers was mostly self-taught.

All teachers were committed to a forty-hour working week at the school, which also involved taking part in staff and parent-teacher (PTA) meetings, as well as in field trips abroad with students, social and cultural projects.

¹The International Baccalaureate is a non-profit, mission-driven foundation offering international education for students aged 3 to 19. For further information on curricula and regulations, please go to: <http://www.ibo.org/programmes/index.cfm>.

As for linguistic competence, the teachers were fluent speakers and competent listeners of English, who were constantly exposed to varieties of English as part of their daily interactions with native speaker colleagues from various parts of the world. However, it was felt by the school board that some teachers could benefit from a pronunciation improvement programme, as none of them had previously received pronunciation instruction to address the most common problem areas that were found to affect their speaking adequacy and intelligibility as Brazilian teachers teaching their subjects through English.

4. Sounding out teachers' needs and expectations

To design a course that could best meet the teachers' speech needs and wants (GRAVES, 2000; HUTCHINSON & WATERS, 1987) and the school's expectations, we felt it necessary, as tutors and course designers, to carry out an initial survey by having teachers answer the following questionnaire:

Name:

E-mail address:

Your subject:

Hobbies and interests:

What is your view on learning a foreign language?

In your opinion, what is the role of someone's native language in the process of learning a foreign one?

How did you learn English? Give a brief account (including number of years).

Describe how well you can perform the following skills in English:

Listening

Speaking

Reading

Writing

Besides teaching, where else do you use English? And what do you usually do to keep it up?

The responses showed that teachers' appraisal of their speaking and listening skills was quite positive in that they were competent users in

their daily teaching, and in the school activities such as meetings and events, but felt a bit uneasy about certain grammatical issues and pronunciation areas, such as syllable stress, sentence stress, intonation, as well as individual sounds. In addition, participants expressed the need to hone up their pronunciation skills so as to feel more confident in their classroom practice and in carrying out school tasks such as taking part in meetings and giving presentations.

Although the questionnaire served the purpose of raising some useful data to be taken into account in designing the programme, the tutor also held an interview with teachers in order to get to know them, present and explain a provisional course plan and have a clearer picture of teachers' pronunciation needs and wants.

5. Designing a pronunciation improvement course for CLIL teachers

Taking into consideration each participant's previous learning experiences, the data provided by the questionnaire and by the interview, the course was designed so as to:

- Enable participants to reflect on their own learning process;
- Encourage participants to notice pronunciation elements emerging from their subject areas and which are related to their speech improvement needs;
- Focus on core phonological elements involved in both comprehension and production which are crucial to adequacy and intelligibility;
- Suggest practical work (to be done individually) geared to improving and consolidating the teacher's expression, while developing self-confidence in his/her use of the target language;
- Encourage autonomy in teachers' language skills development, considering the range of resources available in and out of the work place.

6. Course schedule and content

In all, thirty-two weekly tutorials of ninety minutes were held over two school terms, including individual assessment sessions by participants and tutor. Tasks were discussed and agreed on after each

tutorial so that teachers could work on specific pronunciation features and observe them in their own speech during the week.

We also considered that course participants were operating in an international community of teachers and students. So, in defining the participant's pronunciation improvement goals, we relied on the Lingua Franca Core (LFC), as proposed by Jenkins (2000), who drew up a list of pronunciation priorities, essential for learners who need to achieve international intelligibility². Course content included, among other features:

- The phonemic chart: interpreting symbols and optimising its use;
- The dictionary as a pronunciation learning tool;
- From connected speech to individual sounds. From perception to fluent speech;
- Making sense of connected speech – linking and elision, stress and unstress, intonation and other features;
- Making sense of the word: encouraging teachers to think beyond the individual sounds and minimal pairs – syllable structure, stress and unstress;
- Making sense of English vowels, consonants and sound combinations;
- Making sense of letter and sound correspondence.

7. Setting teachers' pronunciation priorities

During that year-long course, participants gradually developed greater awareness of certain priorities in their speech and, with the tutor, agreed to focus on and keep track of the following pronunciation elements:

- Sentence stress & unstress;
- Nuclear stress or prominence;

² The concept of intelligibility has been interpreted in many ways. Here, we have adopted Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin's (2010) view that intelligibility can be defined as success in spoken interactions, taking the listener and speaker into account, depending on the setting – ESL, EFL, or EIL.

- Intonation (classroom instructions, questions, statements and lists);
- Word stress (strong and weak syllable stress);
- Grammatical word-endings (-ed, -e/s endings and suffixes);
- Short and long vowel sounds: /I/; / i:/; /ʊ/; /u:/; /ə/; /æ/;
- Clusters such as: /bl/; /dl/; /tl/;
- Consonantal sounds in middle and final position: /l/; /m/; /n/;
- Stop consonants: /p, b/; /t, d/; /k, g/.

8. Applying pedagogical procedures

As a course designed for professionals who use English as a tool for dealing with various areas of study, the methodology included initial pronunciation input by the tutor drawing on participants' knowledge of first language phonology and targeting L2 pronunciation issues for Brazilians (LIEFF & POW, 2000; WALKER, 2010), followed by participant-centered activities, namely discussions, viewing and analysis of film clips, individual recording of a range of texts, 3' speeches, reading aloud, brief presentations on their specialist subject or area of interest, peer-listening and feedback, as well as practical activities with materials exploiting various languages: verbal, visual, and aesthetic.

In addition, teachers were asked to reflect on and assess their own learning process as a means of providing further data which the tutor could focus on in subsequent tutorials. Basically, the selected procedures had the purpose of helping teachers become aware of their progress and of their difficulties, in other words, recurrent problems that their field of action presented language-wise.

Both sensitization and awareness-raising – continuous processes in Education – play a crucial role in speech improvement and they were emphasized in each activity of the course in order to bring to surface the required ongoing, self-monitoring process. A few suggested activities are presented further on.

9. Devising pronunciation-based activities for CLIL teachers

The challenging experience of designing a course for very specific purposes led us to adapt and devise pronunciation-based activities,

some of which were rated by the teachers as helpful in raising their awareness of and transferring adequate pronunciation to their speaking, as follows:

- 1) 5' self-recording in class: Participants were asked to record themselves in action, i.e., while presenting, explaining their subjects or instructing students. Recordings were first handed in to the tutor, who then provided individual feedback on pronunciation elements which were important for intelligibility.
- 2) Recording of selected texts: Tutor and participants chose a range of texts such as news reports, jokes, poems, excerpts of film scripts, and instructions and decided on which pronunciation elements to focus on.
- 3) 1' to 3' spontaneous talks about a topic or aspect of subject area: Talks were recorded by the tutor, and then shared with the group, which would discuss salient points, such as word stress patterns and prominence with regard to clarity.
- 4) Talking shop: Teachers were asked to talk about a successful class they had taught and a not so successful one – “How did you feel after having taught them? What factors helped make it successful and not so successful? If those factors depended on your re-planning and re-teaching your class, what would you do differently?”. After each talk, the speaker noted down his/her strengths and weaknesses. Tutor provided feedback at teacher's request.
- 5) Peer-work and classroom speech: Thinking of everyday classroom situations, teachers wrote down ten of their most frequently used classroom expressions. Next, they passed them on to a colleague so that he/she could mark his/her colleagues' expressions for: a) the unstressed vowels /ə/ and /ɪ/; b) stressed words in sentences or phrases; and c) intonation and linkups. In pairs, they read each other's marked text and listened carefully. Then, for peer-feedback, they compared their readings.
- 6) Pronunciation and content language: This was an end-of-course self-assessment task, which required teachers to think over and note down elements of speech they had been able to notice as a result of the pronunciation sessions throughout the course. Teachers shared their self-assessment reports and then were asked to draw up a pronunciation improvement action plan.

10. A new-found interest, an achievable target

Five out of six teachers regularly attended sessions and participated by raising difficulties and questions on pronunciation elements that came up in their own classes and that needed fine-tuning. Also, their assigned recordings showed that feedback given during tutorials had been taken into account, and this was especially true when teachers engaged in reading aloud during tutorials and in spontaneous talks.

Arguably, these tasks were pronunciation-focused which required teachers to be attentive to accuracy, but as the course evolved, participants developed more confidence in and a critical attitude to identifying problems and in moving towards clearer speech. As the final assessment report showed, participants had become perceptive of and more intent on focusing on pronunciation elements they found needed correcting:

I know I'll always have a Brazilian accent because that is who I am. But I can now keep my ears tuned to what could be a problem... In word stress, for example (Biology teacher).

When I was living in the UK, no one corrected me. I didn't know I had to learn pronunciation here... in Brazil... to find out about my problems (Physical Education teacher).

When I plan my classes, I go for the transcription in my dictionary, which I didn't used to do, because I couldn't make out what those symbols meant... I also check out pronunciation with the help of the accompanying CD (Science teacher).

-ed endings are still a bind for me. I can spot my mistakes. I've been observing the teachers I work with... They have different accents but certain things, like -ed endings, are common (History teacher).

The aspects I've become more familiar with are sentence stress and intonation. I've focused on them because I see they are important in making ideas

clearer when I'm presenting and discussing in class or simply talking to colleagues.

The experience of designing and teaching a pronunciation course for specific purposes is thought to have opened doors for further studies. Also, it ensures that a clear tripartite message may be given to course designers and curriculum developers at undergraduate and graduate levels: that pronunciation has a key role to play in teacher education and development, particularly in view of the various educational contexts which have emerged; that the learner's knowledge of L1 phonology and phonetics and the setting of pronunciation priorities can be sensible yet powerful resources in helping learners move towards greater speech intelligibility.

References

CELCE-MURCIA, M.; BRINTON, D.; GOODWIN, J. *Teaching pronunciation: a course book and reference guide*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

GRADDOL, D. *English next*. London: British Council, 2006.

GRAVES, K. *Designing language courses: a guide for teachers*. Boston: Heinle Cengage Learning, 2000.

HUTCHINSON, T.; WATERS, A. *English for specific purposes*. A learning-centered approach. Cambridge: Cambridge Language Teaching Library, 1987.

JENKINS, J. *The phonology of English as an international language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

LIEFF, C. D.; POW, E. M. Understanding and empowering the learner-teacher in pronunciation instruction: key issues in pronunciation course design. *Humanising Language Teaching*, n. 6: 1-4, 2000.

WALKER, R. *Teaching the pronunciation of English as a lingua franca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.