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Using Poetry to Teach Pronunciation

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What can be done to improve the teaching of pronunciation? Yvon Rolland suggests some lively activities with poems to help students tackle English pronunciation.



Using Poetry to Teach Pronunciation

Phonology was at the heart of many language courses produced in the 1960s, but it has been sadly neglected in recent decades — ever since audio-oral materials were supplanted by audio-visual, notional-functional and communicative approaches.

Yet scientists have shown that most phonological acquisition difficulties are due to an auditory gap that scientists have called "the phonological sieve". Teenage and adult language learners are deaf to high frequency sounds which do not exist in their own languages.

In an effort to give pronunciation its due, the French Ministry of Education recently recommended that phonological teaching be given greater prominence. (See the B.O.'s secondary instructions in 1996, 1997 and 1998, primary instructions in 1999.)

KINAESTHETIC TEACHING AIDS

It is important to choose lively, entertaining material. Songs, stories, cartoons, chants and poems will be all the more attractive if multisensory aids are provided. Visual elements help students to contextualise, understand and memorise audio data. Kinaesthetic activities include gestures and mime, which can help students to integrate language; action songs and games are also valuable classroom tools. According to neurolinguists, visual and kinaesthetic aids compensate for the auditory gap. Blind people, for example, are known to develop their auditory and tactile sensory channels. But we must bear in mind that kinaesthesia also includes facial expressions, gestures, touching and emotions. According to H  l  ne Trocm  -

Fabre, "There seems to be a synergy in mental imagery that explains why, through affectivity, a sensory channel can develop another one." This is why pleasure and positive emotions — or fun — should help to develop the weak auditory channel.

The visual memory process should include kinaesthetic mental images. Baddeley's working memory theory describes an attention-control system consisting of the "articulatory loop" which handles verbal materials, and of a "visual-spatial sketchpad" which deals with visual images. Data presented visually can enter the phonological store by being silently articulated. In other words, this type of short-term memory is efficiently based on visual and kinaesthetic images. The affective memory reinforces the visual and physical imagery: "Look!", "Speak quietly (or to yourself)!", "Mime!" or "Do!" are important tasks, integrating visual, physical and "fun" data.

As Daniel Goleman explains, "The amygdala in the limbic brain imprint in memory most moments of emotional arousal with an added degree of strength; an emotional signal is much more quickly activated than a visual one." This shows the importance of the affective limbic brain. Affective memory is certainly powerful and strengthens the working memory, which is more cognitive.

"There is an interactive and affective dimension in memory." P. Buser

Entertaining activities can be developed if the materials are appropriate and if the teacher uses a suitable task-oriented

approach. As we have seen, favouring fun and affectivity can help students to contextualise, understand and memorise all the better.

ADVANTAGES OF POETRY

The advantages of poems are obvious: a short poem can be easily studied in one lesson and it contains short statements. Yet using poems in ESL teaching is not very common. Some are chosen simply because recordings of them already exist. The teacher's role in choosing a poem is particularly important. The poem must suit the children's age and taste. The linguistic elements should be well adapted, and the document should allow the teacher to develop cultural awareness, or to introduce a new grammar structure. S/he should listen to the recording, if there is one, to master most phonological obstacles: sounds, intonation patterns, rhythm and rhyming.

A poem's intonation can be exaggerated; it can be clearly and sharply articulated; its rhythm can be amplified. Rhymes and short verse also help to acquire basic phonological data. A poem should be contextualised and understood through numerous visual as well as kinaesthetic aids that can be memorised. Choosing a poem related to a festival or tradition can help increase the emotional impact. Exaggerating the rhythm, intonation and articulation, as well as miming the language and treating mistakes as a normal part of the learning process should enhance pupils' sense of fun.

We have used the poem "Christmas is Cool" (from *Easy Street*) as our example. The same type of activities could be adapted to the poems for Saint Valentine's Day which can be found in Resource File (p. 50).

Christmas is Cool

*It's December 25th,
Merry Christmas! Happy Christmas!
Christmas is cool,
Merry Christmas everyone!*

*I have got great presents,
Me too! Me too!
We have got great presents,
In front of the tree.*

*Whose computer is that?
It's for me! It's for me!
And whose Discman is this,
In front of the tree?*

*The computer's for Jane,
For you? For me!
And the Discman's for Chris,
In front of the tree.*

*It's December 25th,
Merry Christmas! Happy Christmas!
Christmas is cool,
Merry Christmas everyone!*

GOALS

- Learning to learn
Basic skills: listening, speaking, learning to read, learning to write
Other skills: developing attention and concentration; sound, rhythm and intonation acquisition; practising pronunciation, rhythm and intonation patterns; expressing possession; listening for detail; matching phonic skills and sight recognition; mastering handwriting

LANGUAGE GOALS

- Linguistic competence: expressing possession (question and answer)
- New grammar structure: Whose computer is this / that? / Mine / His / Hers.
- Simple recognition: cool
- Recycling: the date, Merry Christmas, I have got presents, in front of, me too
- New vocabulary: everyone, great, computer, Discman
- Phonology: everyone O o o / great / whose / the 25th computer o O o
Whose computer is that? (glide down)

for you? (glide up) for me! (glide down)

Merry Christmas! Happy Christmas! O o O o O o O o
Merry Christmas everyone! O o O o O o o
Whose computer is that? O o O o o O

CULTURAL GOAL

Talking about Christmas

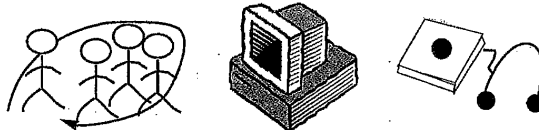
PROCEDURE

Step one: warming up

Welcome pupils, ask them the date, how they're feeling.

Step two: introducing new words

Look and listen. Show a flashcard and everyone mimes: computer, Discman, great.



- Look, listen and mime: pupils mime in silence (emphasis on meaning).
- Look and listen: (phonological acquisition: sounds and rhythm) great: show one, then two fingers (to emphasise the diphthong) everyone: O o o / computer: o O o say the word and snap your fingers on the stress.
- Listen and silently imagine making the sound: pupils articulate and show one or two fingers.
- Listen and snap: pupils "snap" fingers in silence.
- Listen and repeat: collective and individual repetitions.

Step three: introducing new structures

- Ask the class to stand up.
- Hand out objects to several pupils. Make sure they know the name of each object (check by asking "What is it?").
- Listen: "Is it your pen?" "No" (mime the question and the answer).
- Look and listen: "Whose pen is this?" / Mine / His / Hers (introduce and mime).
- Listen and mime: pupils mime.
- Look and listen: snap your fingers on the stressed syllables.
- Listen and snap your fingers: pupils "snap" silently.
- Look and listen: use your arm to show the falling intonation pattern, and sit down.
- Listen and sit down: ask the class to stand up; then pupils sit down to indicate the falling tone.
- Listen and articulate in silence: pupils articulate the question and the answer in silence (working memory).
- Listen and repeat: collective and individual repetitions.

Step four: practising new structures

- Repeat after me: ask the question to a pupil who then repeats.
- Repeat: give the answer to another child who then repeats.
- Ask and answer: ask another pair of children, do the same with another pair.

YOUNG LEARNERS

Teaching & Learning

Step five: listening to the poem

Play the tape twice, ask the class to stand up again.

- Listen and mime: set an example of a few words that will have to be mimed: everyone, great, in front of the tree, computer, Discman, for you? for me!

Then check pupils' understanding of the poem.

- Look and listen: snap your fingers on the stressed syllables, sit down for the falling intonation and stand up for the rising one. Display visual aids on the board (flashcards of objects and of the stressed syllables).
- Look, listen, snap, sit down or stand up.

Step six: saying the poem

Play the tape, gradually turning the sound down, and then off.

- Listen, snap, sit down or stand up.

Step seven: learning to read

- Listen, read and go to the right place in the circle.

Each pupil has a flashcard with words. S/he has to listen, read and go to the right place in the circle (pupils walk round the classroom showing the others their flashcards in the order that the words appear in the poem).

Step eight: learning to write

New words and sentences are written on the board.

- Look and write: visual aids are drawn.

Step nine: language production, a guessing game

Walk around the class, pick up the pupils' objects (step 3) and put them inside a bag. The bag is given to a child who has to ask a question when s/he picks out an object ("Whose pen is this?"). Then the bag is passed on to the pupil who answered.

CONCLUSION

This poem allows the teacher to illustrate Christmas and encourage cultural awareness with visual and kinaesthetic aids. Pupils understand the new words with the help of flashcards and miming. They integrate new words, new grammar and phonological data thanks to visual symbols and physical response. They articulate in silence the new linguistic elements that were introduced visually (fingers for diphthongs, snapping for rhythm and stress patterns, sitting or standing for intonation). Pupils will have fun miming words, watching the others mime, moving and snapping. Walking in a circle and playing a guessing game will make the language come alive. These forms of active teaching — based on doing — could also be used with students at other levels.

Yvon Rolland is a primary and secondary English-teacher trainer at the IUFM in Reunion. His research (DEA d'anglais de spécialité, Université de Bordeaux 2, 1994; doctoral thesis, Université de Technologie de Compiègne, 1999) is based on neurosciences applied to ESL teaching.