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Warming up and activating mind, body and emotions in pronunciation instruction

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Abstract

Integrating pronunciation instruction into L2 lessons can be an area which teachers can find challenging and students, anxiety-inducing. Preparing students with an effective, quick warm-up can help by enhancing both physical and emotional connections and readiness prior to instruction. This article describes three warm-up techniques used in L2 classrooms. Drawing on a haptic approach to pronunciation teaching (one making strategic use of gesture and touch), the warm-ups focus on engaging students' attention, activating and releasing muscle groups, and moderating their inhibitions. For the moderately kinaesthetic instructor, the routines can be done as is, as presented on the linked videos, or tailored more to pronunciation issues relevant to a specific set of students. Suggestions for alternative types of warm-ups and further integration into pronunciation instruction are provided.

Introduction

Pronunciation has made a comeback in the second language (L2) classroom (Levis, 2015), even though many teachers report a lack of confidence and training in how to teach pronunciation. Teachers can find it challenging to make decisions about which features of pronunciation are a priority to teach, or which teaching approaches will most effectively meet their learners' needs (Darcy, 2018). One aspect common to all teaching approaches, however, is the need for learners to feel confident and relaxed during instruction; this can be key to developing intelligible pronunciation (Macdonald, 2018). How this can be achieved or maintained is an area of research that has not received sufficient attention in the field to date. This paper presents three warm-ups created specifically to establish a more positive physical and emotional 'connectedness' in the classroom prior to pronunciation instruction.

Pronunciation in the context of communication

Before discussing pronunciation teaching approaches, it is helpful to situate pronunciation in the context of spoken communication. How we understand a message is affected by physical, social and cognitive factors, including:

- a) The individual units of sound that make up a word and how those are articulated by the speaker,
- b) The type of information being conveyed in the message and the role or attitude of the speaker in relation to the hearer,
- c) The identities and backgrounds of the people involved in the interaction, and
- d) The words within phrases or longer turns of conversation and how they are processed by those involved in the interaction.

Pronunciation plays an important role in communication, because it is the "initial layer of talk" (Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019, p. 7) through which a spoken message is conveyed and understood. Among L2 teachers, if our approach to teaching pronunciation is underpinned by an understanding of its place within the communication of a message, this will guide our decisions as to what, how and why we teach in the L2 classroom. With this in mind, we present sets of teaching strategies in the form of warmups to help teachers and learners make better connections with the physical and emotional aspects of pronunciation, a small part of the big picture of how a message is communicated in an L2.

The brain, body, and emotions in L2 pronunciation teaching

The body's role in learning, well established in cognitive science research, is gaining increasing attention in the field of education (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2011.) This promises to provide teachers with a more empirical basis on which to make decisions as to how and why to integrate movement into their practice. Whereas in the past, teachers may have used some physical movement in their lessons to, for example, engage students in an "ice breaker" activity, or as a short "warm-up" exercise prior to the main part of a lesson, research now suggests there are valid reasons for including movement in L2 teaching. Physical movement, for instance, increases oxygen and blood flow through the brain and can enhance attention, learning, and memory (Cozolino, 2013).

In L2 teaching, pronunciation is one specific area in which knowledge of how the brain and body work together to promote learning can be especially beneficial, in part because pronunciation is an extensively kinaesthetic and tactile activity (see, for example, Underhill, 2005). L2 learners can also benefit from a deeper understanding of the physical aspects of pronunciation (Carey, Sweeting & Mannell, 2015). However, while some pronunciation experts have described the importance of movement, gesture, breathing, and articulatory warm-ups in L2 pronunciation learning (e.g., Chan, 2018), there is still a tendency for teachers to view the body as coming last in the process of pronunciation teaching, often just to "reinforce what has been 'taught'" (Acton, 2018, para. 2) through disembodied teacher-led drills and repetition.

In addition to the physical side of the process, emotions play an equally important role in pronunciation instruction (Sardegna et al., 2018). Emotions can be characterized as driving learning, affecting areas engaging memory, decision-making, and motivation (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). Research on the effects of emotions on learning in the L2 classroom has been discussed for decades, with Krashen (1982) exploring the relationship between emotions and second language acquisition in the 'Affective Filter Hypothesis'. More recent research has examined the role of emotions in students' motivation to learn an L2 (Saito et al., 2018), their identity development as L2 learners (Chevasco, 2019), and enjoyment and anxiety factors in L2 learning (Dewaele, 2019; Nation & Newton, 2009). Emotions are also an important consideration for teachers working with vulnerable L2 learners who may have come from backgrounds of interrupted education, low literacy, and trauma (Bigelow & Watson, 2013). In that particular context, emotions feature strongly in L2 pronunciation learning as they are linked to identity and comprehensibility development (Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2019; Macdonald, 2015).

Considering the application of the physical and emotional aspects of pronunciation in a classroom context, it is important to note that pronunciation teaching and learning involves both "risk taking on the part of the learner and the ability of the instructor to 'conduct' the class in an atmosphere of genuine trust" (Acton, 2016, para. 2). Therefore, given the personal nature of accent and identity, pronunciation teaching which ignores "gesture, bodily movement, and facial expression as well as...psychological and emotional [factors]" (Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019, p. 381) can easily be perceived as invasive and anxiety-inducing and not surprisingly, ineffective. In order to reduce such factors, students need to feel safe in taking risks in speaking in class. A teacher who provides opportunities for students to adequately prepare, or warm-up, their minds, bodies, and emotions for learning pronunciation can foster this more positive, relaxed classroom environment.

Warm-ups in L2 pronunciation teaching

In athletics, understandably, an appropriate warm-up is critical. What constitutes the right warm-up is not only discipline-specific but subject to a wide range of individual and competence-related

variability. Included among the important functions fulfilled by pre-exercise warm-up are the activation of individual muscles and warming up muscle groups for overall body coordination. Warm-ups can serve to lock in attention, stretch or extend range of motion, increase blood flow to target muscle groups or the entire body and, not least, encourage a sense of well-being and motivation (Jeffreys, 2018).

Having argued for the value of warm-ups in pronunciation teaching, we describe three warm-ups that we have used in L2 teaching, drawn from haptic pronunciation teaching (Acton et al., 2013) which incorporates a systematic use of movement, gesture, and touch to improve L2 learners' pronunciation, confidence, listening comprehension, and vocabulary recall. Empirical classroom-based research on the effectiveness of haptics is currently being conducted by doctoral and graduate students in Australia and Canada. To date, more general practitioner-focused research on the haptic system has noted the overall positive responses of L2 English trainee teachers who have engaged in learning to use its techniques (Burri & Baker, 2019), as well as positive student feedback on its use in classroom practices (Playsted & Burri, forthcoming).

A warm-up stage prior to any haptic pronunciation teaching work has become a key element of the system's approach, although the principles of using "a well-designed warm-up [to engage] the body and mind" (Acton, 2018, para. 10) can be beneficial in any pronunciation-oriented classroom activities. As described in the following section, the first warm-up focuses on activating the muscles of the upper body and enhancing attention. The second warm-up encourages a wider range of motion and fuller muscle engagement, which can assist in reducing the typical anxiety and negative emotions accompanying pronunciation work. The third warm-up generates more optimal learner engagement and emotions.

Three warm-ups

1. Activation Warm-up

The demonstration video of the Activation Warm-up can be accessed here:

<https://vimeo.com/438602833>

This 6-8 minute warm-up has been designed to gently activate the upper body, in this case specifically for pronunciation work, but it functions well as just a general "wake up" for anyone. The idea is to engage even the most reticent student in a graduated set of gentle, non-threatening exercises that serve to move key muscles of the upper body, stretching up to just short of the comfortable range of motion (i.e., not stretching the muscles beyond their current degree of elasticity). The aim is for students to loosen up the head, neck, shoulders etc. down to the hips through five to ten light repetitions of each of the following muscle areas:

1. Mandibular muscle/joint: gentle massage
2. Jaw: loosening of jaw muscles with side to side movement
3. Neck: easy isometric stretch in four directions
4. Trapezes: Forward and back light shoulder rolls
5. Rotator cuff: tight circles with arms extended
6. Shoulders: Light shaking loose of upper body
7. Laterals: leaning side to side
8. Hips: circling back and forth quickly
9. Nasal resonance and abdominals (plus core and abdominal breathing): focus on key nasals and area of articulation, along with activation of core, abdominal muscles
10. Back: reaching out, leaning forward
11. Chest: reaching back, arching back

2. *Vowel Circle*

The demonstration video of the Vowel Circle (VC) Warm-up can be accessed here:

<https://youtu.be/Z8xgRzrTOao>

The aim of the VC is, in part, to get L2 learners to experience and practice lip rounding in a fun, engaging, and exaggerated manner, ultimately helping them improve lip positioning in pronouncing monophthongs (short vowels). This is especially important for learners who find rounding their lips challenging due to the lack of it in their first language, such as Japanese speakers of English (Rogerson-Revell, 2019). The VC also offers self-conscious students an opportunity to work around some of their inhibitions, but teachers should never force learners to follow them. Generally, once the more reluctant students notice how much fun others have with doing the VC, they begin to follow suit. Burri has used this warm-up not only with adult English learners of all ages, but also with graduate students in the pronunciation pedagogy course he teaches at the University of Wollongong. The VC draws on emotions and body movement, plus it adds some much-needed comic relief and an opportunity to stand up and move around. At the same time, the VC seeks to correspond with the monophthongs positioned in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) vowel chart, thus contributing substantially to learning the vowel system.

3. *Vowel-o-fant*

The demonstration video of the Vowel-o-fant Warm-up can be accessed here:

<https://youtu.be/M6Rn5Di7ucl>

Playsted used this warm-up each teaching session with a class of preliterate, beginner level, Arabic and Kurdish L1 refugee background students. Students had experienced interrupted schooling, forced displacement from their homes and significant trauma due to conflict, and so establishing trust with the class while fostering positive classroom learning experiences was essential. This warm-up uses expansive, physical arm movements to emphasise vowel positions used in other haptic pronunciation teaching work. As in the VC, these correspond roughly to the IPA vowel chart positions, and so begin to establish a physical connection to sounds prior to introducing students to alphabetic symbols. During the warm-up, each vowel sound is preceded by a consonant, which introduces learners to vowel and consonant blends: an important step for preliterate adult learners who are making initial phonological and literacy connections.

Importantly, the Vowel-o-fant warm-up is fun! Doing a physical warm-up with sounds and movement encourages laughter and a connection in the classroom. From a mind, body, and emotional perspective, laughter, trust, encouragement, and enthusiasm in the classroom are all emotions which release chemicals in the brain to enhance learning (Cozolino, 2013). This is important for all students, of course, but it is a particularly important consideration for teachers working with students from refugee backgrounds.

Future steps

Warm-ups can serve several functions, from releasing muscle groups, to reducing anxiety and activating readiness for pronunciation instruction. While the activities described in this article relate to pronunciation teaching, *per se*, the emotional and cognitive benefits of engaging the mind and body through a warm-up also apply to other areas of L2 teaching. As teachers we have used these warm-ups to help with voice preservation and stress reduction prior to delivering classes, webinars, conference presentations, or face-to-face lectures. For students, routinely warming up at the beginning of L2

speaking and listening lessons can help them relax and focus, as physical comfort and movement can reduce learner anxiety and improve learning (Cozolino, 2013; Nation & Newton, 2009). This can be particularly helpful for students as they prepare for assessment tasks, or prior to speaking in a high-stakes environment (e.g., an interview or delivering a final presentation). Given the growing interest in applying principles from neuroscience to L2 learning and to education more generally, it is timely for L2 instructors to consider how they might incorporate such kinaesthetic activities and approaches in their classrooms.

Notes

While a full description of haptic teaching techniques is beyond the scope of this article, descriptions and video demonstrations can be found at actonhaptic.com, or in published literature (e.g., Burri et al., 2019; Burri & Baker, 2016).

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