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Teaching rhythm and rhythm grouping: The butterfly technique

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Abstract

For years, teachers have been lamenting how difficult pronunciation is to teach to second language learners (Baker, 2011; Macdonald, 2002). So challenging, in fact, it may even be neglected in the classroom. In cases where it is included in the classroom, it may be either treated in isolation (e.g., done for 5 minutes at the end of a lesson) or done unsystematically (e.g., without a clear goal or learner needs in mind). Another reason for pronunciation's lack of attention in the classroom may be that teachers and students alike may simply find pronunciation boring to teach or to learn.

CLASSROOM TALK

Teaching Rhythm and Rhythm Grouping: The Butterfly Technique

MICHAEL BURRI & AMANDA BAKER

For years, teachers have been lamenting how difficult pronunciation is to teach to second language learners (Baker, 2011; Macdonald, 2002). So challenging, in fact, it may even be neglected in the classroom. In cases where it is included in the classroom, it may be either treated in isolation (e.g., done for 5 minutes at the end of a lesson) or done unsystematically (e.g., without a clear goal or learner needs in mind). Another reason for pronunciation's lack of attention in the classroom may be that teachers and students alike may simply find pronunciation boring to teach or to learn.

These pressing issues have led us to kinaesthetic language teaching (e.g., Acton, 1984) and specifically to the development of a haptic pronunciation teaching system (Acton, 2015). Simply put, haptics is the use of movement and touch to make pronunciation learning and practice more systematic, engaging and enjoyable. So, 'How is haptics different than just clapping hands or tapping out word/sentence stress on my desk?' Good question. In some ways, haptic teaching in general, and tapping/clapping are similar – except that we do not use hand clapping for emphasizing stressed syllables. Haptic pronunciation teaching is not just a technique for one feature of pronunciation, but rather a complete system, encompassing a combination of kinaesthetic and tactile learning to teach most areas of pronunciation (Acton, Baker, Burri, & Teaman, 2013).

In classes we have taught over the years, our students have repeatedly commented on how 'fun' and 'easy' this practice is, leading to an increase in confidence in speaking English. In this article, we will demonstrate how to use one of the 10 techniques in this system[1], that is, the Butterfly Technique.

What is the Butterfly Technique?

The Butterfly Technique – inspired by the 'Butterfly Hug' used by some psychologists to help their patients maintain focus or control distraction (The Institute, 2010) – has been adapted by Acton for L2 learners to feel and experience strong and weak syllables while working on rhythm (thought) groups.

As the picture below illustrates, students place their left hand on their right shoulder and their right hand on their left forearm (brachio-radialis) muscle. The right shoulder signifies stressed (i.e., strong) syllables whereas the left forearm represents all of the unstressed (i.e., weak) syllables occurring in individual words and/or rhythm groups. In other words, when a multi-syllabic word or rhythm group is pronounced, the left hand firmly taps the right shoulder on the strong syllable and the right hand gently taps the left forearm on every single weak syllable (Acton, 2014). It is important to note that this rhythmic touch, not just the gesturing, enhances the process of L2 students experiencing and learning English rhythm.

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[1] The Butterfly Technique is one of 10 distinct techniques in Acton's 'Essential haptic-integrated English pronunciation' (2015). These 10 techniques are used to teach various segmental (vowels and consonants) and suprasegmental (stress, rhythm, intonation) features of the English sound system. More information about the haptic system, including Acton's blog and several demo videos of the different teaching techniques can be found at http://hipoeces.blogspot.com.au/

Procedure

Once students have been introduced to how to tap according to strong and weak syllables, the following key words are used to train the learners in the Butterfly Technique (the underlined parts represent strong syllables):

1. <u>Nice</u> – one firm tap on right shoulder

2. <u>Ea</u>sy – one firm tap one right shoulder, one gentle tap on left forearm

3. <u>Beau</u>tiful – one firm tap on right shoulder, two gentle taps on left forearm

4. <u>Fa</u>scinating – one firm tap on right shoulder, three gentle taps on left forearm

Once completed, weak syllables preceding the target words are added, such as:

1. That's <u>nice</u>

2. Very <u>ea</u>sy

3. That's very <u>fa</u>scinating

The following link can be accessed for further details on the Butterfly Technique: http://vimeo.com/61190793

In the initial training phase, doing these key words and rhythm groups should be done slowly to ensure that all the learners are able to feel the strong and weak syllables. At the same time, they should become comfortable with moving their bodies, attending to the syllables and articulating English (for some students this can challenging at first). However, once the entire cycle is completed, the pace can be increased. Also, when students have gained confidence (and the classroom volume increases while overall enjoyment rises), they can practice by themselves and/or be put in pairs to go through the cycle.

After a few minutes of practice, the class then typically moves on to dialogue work. Simple dialogues (such as those in a speaking textbook) in which the strong syllables are highlighted and rhythm groups are identified typically suffice for this (more advanced students could be asked to highlight the prominent/strong syllables by themselves or in small groups). The following is an example of a dialogue we created and used with students during a lesson featuring the theme of 'travelling':

A: Hey, <u>Pe</u>ter. // How's it <u>go</u>in'?

B: <u>Su</u>per. // <u>You</u>?

A: <u>Same</u>. // What'cha <u>got</u> there?

B: A <u>tra</u>vel brochure. // I <u>think</u> I'll go / on a <u>hi</u>king trip.

A: <u>Cool</u>! // <u>Where</u>?

B: It's a <u>trek</u> / in the Snowy <u>Moun</u>tains. // Wanna <u>come</u>?

A: <u>Sure</u>!

It should be noted that the teacher should model the dialogue first. Once done, students can then practise the dialogue a few times in pairs. Afterwards, learners should be given opportunities to use the Butterfly Technique in a less controlled setting. To achieve this, we usually use a question and answer format. For example, the students could be given the following question and answer (more advanced students might be asked to create their own questions based on the lesson theme):

A: What did you <u>do</u> / on the <u>week</u>end?

B: I went to a <u>mo</u>vie / and ate some <u>pop</u>corn.

Again, the instructor models the question and answers before having the students practice in pairs. Proficiency level and time permitting, students can then create their own questions (still indicating strong syllables and rhythm groups) and mix and mingle, asking and answering questions. This final stage tends to be a great deal of fun and often results in high student engagement.

Additional applications

Once students are trained in the Butterfly Technique, it can easily be integrated in any L2 lesson. We have used the technique even with beginner-level students, having adjusted the dialogue(s) and questions/answers according to the proficiency level of the learners. Based on our experience, we would argue that the Butterfly Technique can be used in almost any L2 teaching context, irrespective of learners' ages and proficiency levels (although using it with small children might be a bit of a stretch).

The Butterfly Technique may also be used as a feedback tool. In large classes, it can be very difficult for a teacher to identify which students experience difficulties correctly stressing the strong syllable. But, with the Butterfly Technique, it is very easy for a teacher to visually spot whether a student attends to the strong syllable correctly. If it is done incorrectly or a student finds it challenging to attend to the appropriate syllable (occasionally learners tend to tap the shoulder on every syllable, especially in the early stages of learning the technique), the instructor can provide immediate feedback and assistance.

Furthermore, the Butterfly Technique (like all the other haptic techniques) can be utilised to assist with vocabulary learning (Burri, 2014; Burri, Baker, & Acton, in press). Students could, for example, use the Butterfly Technique to practice new words, first in isolation and then in context, following the same process as outlined above.

Conclusion

The Butterfly Technique is a fun and effective way to have students experience English syllables and syllable grouping, and later transfer this knowledge into their spontaneous speech. We have found that in some contexts, for the technique to work best, learners (and teachers alike) need to be given opportunities to practice outside of the classroom. This can be achieved, for example, by giving them additional dialogues to practice as homework. But, by far the most effective approach is still to integrate the Butterfly Technique, as with many other pronunciation teaching techniques, into regular classroom instruction in all skills.

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