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Moving to L2 Fluency: The Tai Ball Chi Technique

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One of the challenges faced by teachers is to successfully guide second language learners to integrate what they learn as part of controlled classroom practice into daily conversation outside of the classroom. This paper introduces one particular haptic (movement and touch) technique, the Tai Ball Chi, that, when used appropriately, supports learners to develop fluent, intelligible speech. The Tai Ball Chi brings together what students have previously learned about syllable reduction, linking, and thought group use and provides a vehicle with which they can practice these features together, and over time, integrate them into conversation.

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Abstract

One of the challenges faced by teachers is to successfully guide second language learners to integrate what they learn as part of controlled classroom practice into daily conversation outside of the classroom. This paper introduces one particular haptic (movement and touch) technique, the Tai Ball Chi, that, when used appropriately, supports learners to develop fluent, intelligible speech. The Tai Ball Chi brings together what students have previously learned about syllable reduction, linking, and thought group use and provides a vehicle with which they can practice these features together, and over time, integrate them into conversation.

Pronunciation and fluency

After decades of neglect, pronunciation instruction is seeing a genuine resurgence in the second language (L2) classroom. Evidence is abundant in the number of publications, resources and handbooks (e.g., Derwing & Munro, 2015; Grant, 2014; Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2017; Jones, 2016; Kang, Thomson, & Murphy, 2018; Reed & Levis, 2015), dissemination of The Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching (PSLLT) proceedings, establishment of the Journal of Second Language Pronunciation, organisation of specific pronunciation conferences and events in North America, Europe and Australia, and the SPLIS Newsletter – not to mention 30+ years of PronSIG's *Speak Out!*

Concurrently, there has been a pedagogical shift from the native-speaker-as-target principle to the intelligibility principle (Levis, 2005). Intelligibility, defined as the '[e]xtent to which listeners' perceptions match speakers' intentions (actual understanding)' (Munro & Derwing, 2015, p.14), is vital to effective communication. In addition to intelligibility, fluency is integral as well. Fluency is defined as 'the smooth and rapid production of utterances, without undue hesitations and pauses' (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005, p. 326). L2 speakers whose speech falls outside of typical English rhythm and fluency patterns (consisting of word stress, prominence and syllable compression) are frequently viewed as difficult to understand.

Perhaps the default approach to helping L2 learners achieve fluency involves what is often characterized as automatization: 'constant use and repetitive practice' (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005, p. 326). Supporting automatization in classroom practice, however, is problematic from at least two perspectives. The first issue relates to fluency. 'Constant use' could be defined as just doing a great deal of talking in conjunction with using relatively appropriate rhythm patterns. But how do learners 'get' those patterns? The answer is simple. By repetitive practice, of course! This answer, although simple, leads to the second issue in developing automatization in speech, that is that repetitive practice, without appropriate guidance, can easily become boring and meaningless for students. In many respects, historical rejection of pronunciation teaching over the past few decades stemmed from dissatisfaction with the behaviourist-structural emphasis on

drill, devoid of immediate context, utility and meaning. In the modern classroom, however, guiding students to move along a continuum from controlled, guided practice to free, fluent conversation has become the gold standard. In most cases, instructors tend to do guided fluency work, such as drills of various kinds, poetry or drama – and then leave it to learners to take over from there. One effective means to better enable this automatization process, to go from fluent, controlled practice to ‘fluent’ (free+fluent) conversation in the L2 classroom is to engage more of the body in the process.

Haptic Pronunciation Training (HaPT)

The term ‘haptic’ goes back to the Greek word ‘hapticos’, which broadly means ‘touch’. The technological application of ‘haptics’ can be found everywhere in modern society, including surgical procedures, haptic cinema, smartphones and gaming. In early 2000, inspired by haptics, Acton began creating a haptic approach to pronunciation teaching that combines movement and touch to enhance pronunciation teaching and learning in the L2 classroom (Acton, Baker, Burri, & Teaman, 2013). In this haptic pronunciation teaching approach, the senses (sight, movement, sound and touch, or visual, kinaesthetic, auditory and tactile) are better integrated to create an exploratory learning experience that fosters language awareness and intelligible production of segmental and suprasegmental features of L2 learner speech.

The underlying premise of HaPT is that pronunciation teaching and learning must be done more experientially. The systematic engagement of touch and movement not only enhances the acquisition of phonological features but allows L2 learners to experience English more holistically. One key quality of our sense of touch is that it serves to connect or integrate the other senses (Fredembach, de Boisferon, & Gentaz, 2009), enhancing memory, while movement and gestures reinforce learning, including pronunciation (Nguyen, 2016; Smotrova, 2017).

HaPT has undergone significant refinement since the inaugural haptic intonation presentation at the 2008 TESOL Convention in New York (Acton, Baker, & Burri, 2008). The most recent version, v5.0 (Acton, 2018) encapsulates a wide range of techniques to teach various features of English pronunciation, including vowels (Burri, 2014), consonants (Acton, 2013) syllable production (Burri & Baker, 2016), rhythm (Burri, Baker, & Acton, 2016) and intonation (Acton et al., 2008). Each technique features several specific movements, controlled and intensified by touch. We call the combination of these two aspects a pedagogical movement pattern (PMP). The PMPs have been designed so that they can be systematically used in modelling, practice, feedback and correction, and be integrated into classroom instruction. HaPT is easily accessible by L2 teachers of all career stages and diverse linguistic backgrounds. Given that many L2 instructors find pronunciation instruction challenging (Foote, Trofimovich, Collins, & Urzúa, 2016), HaPT has been created to be ‘taught’ either by web-based video or live in the classroom. This paper describes a specific technique, the ‘Tai Ball Chi’ (TBC), which promotes fluency by directing learners across the ‘bridge’ from guided practice to spontaneous, fluent conversation.

‘Tai Ball Chi’

Before students are trained in the technique, they will have some basic understanding of syllables, thought groups (i.e., group of words) and prominence (i.e., the most strongly

stressed syllable or word within a thought group). We usually start off with a number of exercises that highlight the importance of thought grouping (e.g., the need to give the listener time to process information, and the need for the speaker to breathe) and to provide our learners with opportunities to parse text into thought groups themselves. We also explicitly teach them that within a thought group there is one syllable or word that carries the most stress and that this part is called prominence. The Butterfly technique (Burri & Baker, 2016) and the Rhythm Fight Club technique (Burri et al., 2016) help students experience the compression of weak syllables and foreground prominent syllables (or words) within a thought group. Working on these rhythmic features is important because rhythm is 'learned in the first year of life and [is] deeply rooted in the minds of students' (Gilbert, 2008, p. 1). Having worked with those two techniques, learners are gradually becoming more aware of the unique rhythm of the English language, both cognitively and experientially.

The TBC functions as the driver of fluency development as it encourages faster speaking, syllable grouping (of up to 7 syllables), natural linking, and further reduction of syllable length. As such, the ostensible focus of the technique is purely on the prominent syllable (or word) within a thought group. Students are each given a tennis ball, and instructed to hold the ball in their right hand while positioning it in front of them at about chin height. The left arm is stretched out and then moves in while the right hand releases the tennis ball for the left hand to catch the ball on the prominent (i.e., stressed) syllable. As soon as the left hand catches the ball, the right arm stretches out to the right. This movement is a typical PMP that incorporates movement, touch, sight, sound, and oral production. In part aligning with English literacy format, the direction of the TBC is from left to right. The PMP commences with the left and moving toward the 'ball' and the right hand continuing off near the right thigh after the 'catch' on the stressed syllable.

The goal of the TBC is to develop automaticity and more fluent speech. Thus, we provide our students with ample opportunities to use the technique in controlled, guided, and free pronunciation practice stages (Baker, 2014). These three stages are described in the following section.

Controlled practice

In this first stage, the teacher is in control of the students' oral production. The following short phrases, which are in essence thought groups including a prominent syllable or word (in bold and underlined), are used:

Nice

That's **nice**

Really **nice**

That's really **nice**

Easy

That's **easy**

Really **easy**

That's really **easy**

Beautiful

That's **beautiful**

Really **beautiful**
That's really **beautiful**

Fascinating
That's **fascinating**
Really **fascinating**
That's really **fascinating**

The teacher models each PMP initially and then does it with students. For a demonstration of what this teacher-led training phase typically entails, a short video clip is available at <https://vimeo.com/294987935>. This video could, of course, also be used in the classroom to train students, if the teacher lacks confidence in conducting the training.

Guided practice

Once students are trained and appear relatively comfortable and confident in doing the PMPs, we move to the guided practice stage. The teacher now relinquishes some of their control, letting students experiment and practice in a less controlled and a more spontaneous and creative environment. We typically put our learners in pairs and give them a paper-based dialogue in which the thought groups and prominent syllables are highlighted (see below). The pairs read out their parts in the dialogue while simultaneously doing the PMP with the tennis ball. We provide the pairs with ample time to practice their dialogues. Below is a typical dialogue we give to our students:

Airplane Chat

Tomo: Exc**use** me. / Could you put my **bag** / in the **o**verhead?
Miho: **Sure**. / **Glad** to. / **There** you are!
Tomo: Thank you so **much**!
Miho: You're **wel**come. / Where're you **from**?
Tomo: I grew up in **Japan** / and **live** there now.
Miho: **Japan**! / **Where** in Japan?
Tomo: **Sendai**. / About **two** hours / north of **Tokyo** / by **train**.
Miho: That's a **beautiful** area.
Tomo: It certainly **is**. / But it is be**com**ing / **very** crowded.
Miho: I've **heard** that. / Are you **staying** in / **Canada** for a while?
Tomo: **Yes**! / I'm going to be **work**ing / in **Toronto** this summer.
Miho: **Well**. / Welcome to **Canada**, eh!

The following video clip shows two of our students demonstrating the dialogue work in this guided phase: <https://vimeo.com/294987820>.

Free(er) practice

In the third stage, there is minimal, if any, teacher involvement, and students practice language in a relatively free learning environment. To begin this phase, we give students the following question and answer, with thought groups and prominence highlighted:

Tomo: What do you like to **do** / in your **free** time?
Miho: I like to **party** / and I like to **sleep**.

After a quick demonstration, the students spend a few minutes creating their own question (including identifying its inherent thought groups and prominence) and practice it a few times by themselves. The class is then asked to stand up so that the students can go and interview three to four classmates using the PMP. What proves to be more of a challenge, however, is that they must also answer questions using the TBC, but this becomes easier with a little practice. For a demonstration of this question and answer activity, a video is available at <https://vimeo.com/294987790>.

This phase can be difficult, at least initially, for some of the students since they need to ask and respond spontaneously, and, at the same time, they must move their arms and catch a tennis ball! After a few rounds, however, the students become more confident and their fluent production of these short questions and answers improves markedly. With the more confident students we sometimes take it a step further and have a spontaneous conversation using the TBC or even class discussion in the same style. With advanced learners, additional complexity can be added in that the right arm could mimic the intonation pattern of a particular utterance or thought group as well. For example, for a standard yes/no question, after releasing the ball, the right arm could move out and upwards to indicate rising intonation.

Irrespective of how far a teacher takes this free practice stage, there is always a buzz in the classroom accompanied by a great deal of laughter. If tennis balls are not available, students could clap in the centre where they would normally catch the ball (see, for example, Teaman & Acton, 2013, or the demo videos on www.actonhaptic.com). Once students have done several rounds of asking and answering questions, we bring the class together and have some of the pairs demonstrate their question and answer exchanges. Following this, we give feedback to the entire class on some of the challenges and progress that we observed during this third stage.

Part of what makes the TBC so powerful (or a ball!) is its 'fun' element and the manner in which it controls or limits gesture positioning and students' range of motion. The overall PMP is consequently accessible to virtually all students, regardless of the natural 'kinaesthetic intelligence'. The technique also adds the possibly helpful distraction of catching a ball to limit conscious attention to the task itself. The TBC literally embodies fluent speech with fluent movement. As such, because students must focus on catching the ball, as well as talking, automaticity seems to be enhanced subconsciously. The strong tactile (i.e., sense of touch) element further enhances the learning process by providing a (literally) striking awareness of the stressed syllables.

From a pedagogical point of view, monitoring classroom practice is easy. One of the advantages of using a yellow tennis ball is that the students' PMPs are clearly visible. This is particularly important when teaching large classes. Techniques that facilitate teachers' ability to monitor learner performance and give more focused feedback on their pronunciation are always a welcome addition to the teachers' toolkit.

Conclusion

The TBC (and an earlier version *sans ball* in Teaman and Acton, 2013) has always been well received by our L2 learners and graduate students in training. What is most innovative about the TBC is that, when learners are provided with enough practice to

cross over the 'bridge' to using the ball in spontaneous Q&A or classroom discussions, the immediate and often lasting impact on the fluency of their speech can be striking.

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