A rationale for teaching primary word stress in ESL classrooms

Andrea Barber

Research in ESL Pronunciation

ANG-3510

Département de langues, linguistique et traduction

Faculté des lettres

Université Laval

Québec

April 23rd, 2012
A rationale for teaching word stress in ESL classrooms

1. Introduction

The main goal of learning a new language is usually to communicate with speakers of the target language, so it is important for language learners to achieve a high level of proficiency. Having correct prosody will help students become proficient (Liscombe, 2007). Prosody refers to the suprasegmental aspect of pronunciation (Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson, & Koehler, 1992; Liscombe, 2007; Peppé, 2009). Features such as the language’s word stress patterns, intonation, and pitch are included in prosody. In evaluating proficiency, intelligibility and comprehensibility are important elements. Intelligibility, as defined by Smith in Smith and Nelson (1985), refers to the recognition of words and utterances (Nelson, 1995, p. 274). Comprehensibility is defined as “the category of understanding meaning” (Nelson, 1995, p. 274). With a comprehensible message, the words said are not only understood but they are also meaningful. For example, a phrase such as ‘cat the door’ may be intelligible, that is, all the words are clearly identifiable but incomprehensible because the meaning of the words put together does not make sense.

Increasing English second language (ESL) students’ awareness of prosody and teaching it in an ESL classroom context is one means of achieving the communicative goal. Yet, teachers are sometimes left without necessary tools to help them teach pronunciation as efficiently as possible. This study will examine the role of prosody in the development of ESL pronunciation and demonstrate how ESL teachers can maximize their pronunciation teaching with regards to stress placement. We will attempt to answer these research questions:

a. Why should stress be taught to English language learners?

b. What should be taken into consideration when teaching word stress?

In section two of this paper, a survey of the literature will be done. In the following section, section three, the focus will be on aspects of pronunciation teaching that should be
emphasised by teachers in an ESL classroom. Section four will contain the conclusion and state further implications.

2. Survey of the literature

When learning a second language (L2), the students’ first language (L1) often influences them and interferes with their ability to produce the L2’s prosody correctly (Hahn, 2004). In L2 teaching, prosody must therefore be taken into consideration because intelligibility can be hindered by L2 prosodic difficulties (Munro, 2011). Moreover, L2 learners sometime fail to use the target language’s prosodic features adequately; either learners do not use the features or they use them wrongly.

With respect to intelligibility, misplacement of word stress is one of the main causes for communication breakdowns according to Hahn’s result (2004). Misplacement of the primary stress may impede the listener from understanding the meaning of the word such as a difference in meaning (eg. REcord vs. reCORD or two vs. to), it may make the word completely unintelligible. For this reason, the rest of this paper will focus specifically on primary word stress. Word stress, a prosodic feature, helps listeners reconstruct meaning of the message transmitted thus making the message more intelligible (Cutler, Dahan, & Donselaar, 1997). For example, native speakers rely on correct word stress to identify words (Hahn, 2004). Lack of prosodic proficiency impedes the message. More specifically, atypical prosody impairs intelligibility. In Peppé (2009), Monsen’s (1983) results were presented and revealed that deaf people usually have prosodic difficulties and it is the main cause for low intelligibility. Klopfenstein (2009) also states how a deaf person’s inadequate use of prosodic features when speaking affects intelligibility. Although, encounters with deaf students in ESL classrooms are
not common, it exemplifies the importance of prosody in pronunciation and the close relationship that prosody has with intelligibility.

Teaching prosody to English learners is valuable because it makes a difference in students’ pronunciation level of intelligibility. Although students’ improvement will regress after their training has stopped, pronunciation training still benefit students, especially those who had greater needs for the training (Couper, 2006). When pronunciation training is carefully done, students retain most of the information and it is acquired into their linguistic competence (Couper, 2006). Another study also revealed that pronunciation learning strategies taught to students are beneficial and students remember the strategies even after finishing their language course (Sardegna, 2011). This reinforces the value given to the need of teaching pronunciation in an ESL classroom. Moreover, Derwing and Munro (2005) underline the necessity of teaching pronunciation by comparing it to grammar instruction. They state that if students can benefit from increased awareness of grammar rules, there is no reason why they shouldn’t benefit from increased phonological awareness (Derwing & Munro, 2005). Speakers need to be intelligible when they want to communicate with others. Although students cannot remember everything that is taught in a language classroom, their exposure to important prosodic features as well as explicit teaching will help them develop their skills and they will become more intelligible.

Comprehensibility is also influenced by prosody. As Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson, and Koehler (1992) had predicted at the beginning of their study, prosody has the greatest effect on pronunciation in comparison to syllable structure, segmental and voice quality and this in turn has an effect on language learners’ comprehensibility. Since sentence prosody is mainly used to direct the listener to understand cues that present important information, incorrect prosody can lead to confusion and misunderstanding of the message. E.g. The use of word stress and overall
sentence prosody will influence the way a listener will interpret the following sentence: “You took the apple”. First, if the pronoun “you” is stressed more than the other words, it could be understood that no one else took the apple but “you”, though, the same stress but with a rising intonation at the end of the sentence would lead the listener to understand it as a question such as “Did you take the apple?” If a speaker of the language cannot use prosody correctly when speaking or another cannot hear the prosodic differences, there can be communication breakdowns. In the example provided above, not hearing the rising tone at the end of the sentence could lead the interlocutors to misunderstand each other. One could feel falsely accused in the context where he hadn’t taken the apple. Second, placing the stress on another word would redirect the listener’s attention to another meaning. For example, stressing the noun “apple” rather than the other content words would suppose that “you” could have taken something else rather than the apple but stopped his choice on the “apple”.

Derwing and Munro (1997) also revealed the correlation between prosody and comprehensibility. Although their results were not statistically significant, they revealed a tendency: good use of prosodic features was linked to higher comprehensibility rates. A study by Carlson, Frazier, and Clifton (2009) also supports the findings of this correlation. The three experiments done for the purpose of the study led to the conclusion that sentence comprehensibility is influenced by prosodic boundaries. Carlson (2009) also explored the topic and concluded that prosody, especially stress placement and the use of pauses, is used by speakers to help listeners understand the intended message. Although both prosodic and segmental features improved participants’ comprehensibility, only prosodic training enhanced participants’ comprehensibility when using free speech (Derwing & Munro, 2005). Prosody has an important role in the development of learners’ language skills. Many language competences
are influenced by it. It influences the discourse competence or more generally the communicative competence when introducing new information (Hahn, 2004). Primary stress directs listeners towards new or important information as well as emphasising two contrasting elements (Hahn, 2004). For example, the main word stress would primarily be on “swimming” in the sentence “I like swimming.” This would emphasis the fact that swimming is a good activity that the person likes to do. If afterwards another person said “I love swimming”, it should be the verb “love” that is emphasised since it is the new element in the sentence. Indeed, “like” was replaced by “love” and this would signify the particular enjoyment of the person; not only does the person enjoy swimming but the person prefers it to many other activities. Always in the same idea, two contrasting elements in a same sentence should be stressed in order to place an emphasis on the words. The degree of politeness can also be interpreted through the use of word stress and intonations thus affecting the sociolinguistic aspect of the language (Hahn, 2004). Knowing how to use prosody, when speaking English, is important in order to be comprehensible. This is interesting for the realm of this study because it demonstrates how prosody is applied to help sentence comprehensibility and it can direct teachers in applying prosody teaching in the classroom.

Current L2 and cross-linguistic models agree that language backgrounds interfere with the learning of an L2 (Lengeris, 2012). Learners’ L1 also influence their ability to decipher word stress. As stated in Peperkamp, Vendelin, and Dupoux (2010), certain L1 leads to a strong word stress deafness, a weak deafness or no deafness at all. For example, since Mandarin, Cantonese, and Japanese are tone languages, it is interesting to observe how prosody is influenced by their language background. Although So’s (2005) study does not specifically analyse ESL, it is valuable because it demonstrates how learners confused tones when learning Mandarin. Learners
were unable to dissociate their first language from their L2. In this sense, it would be expected that learners’ L1 would also impede their pronunciation with regards to their ability to correctly produce English primary stress. Depending on the students in the classroom, activities will greatly differ. For example, students who present a strong deafness to word stress will require a greater time in perceiving the distinctions in stress whereas a language presenting no stress deafness will simply require more practice in producing the sounds rather than perceiving them. Moreover, stressed languages are more prone to acquire new stress patterns than non-stressed languages (Guion, Harada, & Clark, 2004). The researchers came to this conclusion by analysing a study by Archibald (1997) where participants of non-stress languages seemed to have problems with prosodic features rather than lexical class and syllabic structures.

Stress placement can be acquired by learners. Guion, Harada, and Clark (2004) found that students’ age influences their abilities to learn stress placement. The researchers examined whether young learners and older learners were able to acquire English stress patterns equally (Guion, Harada, & Clark, 2004). To do so, they studied the syllabic structure, lexical class, and phonological similarities. Results demonstrated that as native English speakers rely on lexical class and syllabic structure to determine stress placement, early Spanish-English bilinguals also used them to produce correct stress placement. On the other hand, older ESL learners used those two categories less systematically and instead often placed stress at the beginning of words. This stress placement, according to the researchers, may be caused by negative L1 transfer. Older ESL learners also relied more on lexical class to perceive stress than the other two groups. Though, young learners also showed a stronger reliance of lexical class than native speakers. Finally, later ESL learners also used phonological similarities more than native speakers. The findings are interesting in the context of applications to teaching because it demonstrates the
influence of learners’ age in prosodic development as well as the strategies used by learners to learn English. Moreover, it demonstrates the need for teachers to teach prosody explicitly to students in order to maximize their learning experiences.

3. Main steps into teaching word stress

Considering the amount of time teachers are given to teach an L2 in school, concessions must be made as to what to emphasize on in class. Unfortunately, pronunciation is usually seen as secondary and only a small amount of time is consecrated to teaching students the pronunciation of the target language. Since time is the main constraint, teachers need to focus on this crucial aspect of pronunciation. Prosody has an effect on intelligibility and comprehensibility, thus it is important to focus pronunciation teaching mainly on prosody since the main goal of learning an L2 is to be able to communicate with other speakers of the target language.

Teachers are faced with the responsibility of choosing meaningful activities for ESL students. Although pronunciation teaching is important, a study by Baker (2011a) has shown that many teachers do not know how to teach pronunciation adequately. Many teachers do not currently have the necessary training to fully grasp their students’ needs and prepare activities that will focus on their needs. Some teach pronunciation based on intuition (Breitkreutz, Derwing, & Rossiter, 2001); others rely on textbooks that focus mainly on segmental aspects of pronunciation (Baker, 2011b). However, as Derwing and Munro (2005) stated, it is unrealistic to expect teachers to base pronunciation on their observation and experiences and so teachers should be trained how to teach pronunciation to ESL learners.

There are three main phases that should be considered when teaching prosody. Unfortunately, it is very hard for learners to perceive their pronunciation properly, thus
misinterpreting their own productions, so teachers should integrate pronunciation teaching in order to increase students’ awareness of their weaknesses (Couper, 2006). The first step for students to acquire proper primary word stress is to learn the importance of prosody in English. It is suggested to teachers to discuss with ESL learners about the importance of acquiring proper word-stress as it would increase their awareness and may be a source of motivation for their learning (Hahn, 2004). In order for learning to be meaningful to students, it is better for them to understand the importance of the notions that are presented to them. Pennington and Ellis (2000) also mentioned the importance of increasing students’ awareness. After noticing that Chinese students did not use their knowledge of English prosodic cues, they stated the importance for teachers to increase learners’ awareness of the necessity to refer to prosody in English (Pennington & Ellis, 2000). They state that when students were directed to use and notice prosody, they were better able to complete the task (Pennington & Ellis, 2000). This denotes the importance for teachers to guide students in their L2 development and increase their awareness of important features such as primary word stress in English.

The second phase of ESL students trying to develop their skills in correctly producing English word stress is perception. After students have learnt the importance of word stress in the English language, teachers must train them to perceive the differences between an incorrect prosodic use and a correct one. Moreover, pronunciation teaching can only be efficient for learners if they are able to perceive the differences between their pronunciation and a native speaker’s pronunciation (Couper, 2006; Derwing & Munro, 2005). Being able to perceive the differences requires a great amount of repetition and one way to achieve this goal is to have students record themselves so that they may compare their voice with the model (Couper, 2006).
Prosodic features are learnt at a very young age for L1 learners. As Stephens (2011) mentioned in her article, caregivers’ exaggerated usage of prosody will help children learn the language, perceive prosody and decipher meaning from the words said. In the same way, students learning ESL should be exposed to highly prosodic material; that is, they should be read stories with exaggerated word stress so that students may learn the importance prosody has on meaning. By exposing students to situations with exaggerated prosody, they will be able to learn how prosody helps decipher words and meaning such as where words start and end. It is only after they have acquired sufficient knowledge about the language’s prosodic features, or after having the ability to perceive prosodic features, will they be able to pronounce it properly.

While developing students’ abilities to perceive prosodic differences, students should also be exposed to phonological aspects as well. This should be done by explaining patterns and rules, using an appropriate metalanguage, providing students with constant feedback, and giving practice opportunities to students in order to help them progress as much as possible (Couper, 2006). Hahn (2004) also suggests teaching students prosodic perception by contrasting minimal pairs and having students place the primary stress correctly after hearing words. Having a good perception of the sounds pronounced will lead students to an improvement of their pronunciation abilities afterwards (de Bot & Mailfert, 1982). It is therefore important to provide students with opportunities to exercise their perception skills.

Finally, producing correct primary word stress placement is the third and last phase. In order to master this phase, students must be given opportunities to communicate and practice using the English language. With regards to word-stress, teaching is not only valuable but necessary since it is one of the aspects that is highly influential and teachable (Hahn, 2004). Other studies referred to by the researcher supported her claim. Various activities can be done to
teach word stress production. As it was mentioned earlier, prosody influences two competencies in particular: discourse and sociolinguistic. Therefore, activities should lead to an improvement of these two competencies. For example, Hahn (2004) suggests teaching word stress related to the two competencies by having students practice arguing and disagreeing together, or by having informal conversations where students must learn to do contract and blend phonological sounds. Students can practice word-stress by practicing pre-made dialogues and oral presentations while ensuring that they carefully place stresses properly and used appropriate intonations. Finally, another suggestion as to exercises that students can do when learning how to correctly use word stress is by simply making students aware of the necessity to unstress old information. Students may stress a word properly but once another word is added to the sentence, they may not know what to do with the primary stress that was on a word, thus producing two main stresses in the same sentence. For example, if two people are talking and one asks “You ate the cheese?” and the other person answers “I did not eat the cheese,” the stress in the second sentence should be on “not” in order to put an emphasis on the new information thus providing the listener with a better orientation of the meaning of the phrase.

In a communicative approach context, the focus of language learning is communication. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to provide students with opportunities to speak and learn how to naturally use word stress (Lewis & Grant, 2003). This involves learning word stress in a naturalistic manner; that is, students should be able to progress throughout their learning. To communicate effectively, the speaker must be intelligible and comprehensible. As stated in Reed (2012), students must collaborate with one another and negotiate together and learn to decipher prosodic cues. The researcher also mentions the importance of having language learners practice with native speakers and helping students acquire a natural prosodic flow when speaking so as to
engage the listener in the conversation (Reed, 2012). By aiming for a communicative approach, word stress is important because it affects whole utterances, therefore a wrong placement of word stress would impede on the speaker’s comprehensibility (Lewis & Grant, 2003). One activity that is proposed by Lewis and Grant (2003) is practicing word clarity by having students choose key words of their oral presentation and practising saying those words correctly. Further details of this activity require that the students to record their presentations and hand in a copy to the teacher on the day of the final oral presentation so the teacher may assess the student’s progress.

4. Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explain why stress should be taught to English language learners and to explain some important points that should be considered when teaching word stress. Different studies have shown how prosody, and more precisely primary word stress, influences intelligibility and comprehensibility. Although its influence is sometimes undermined when it is incorrectly used, lack of prosodic abilities leads to communication breakdowns because it impedes intelligibility. Prosody helps direct attention to highlight important parts of sentences thus increasing comprehensibility. Moreover, students of various backgrounds, either due to their exposure to the target language or their first language, will acquire word stress differently. Teachers must be aware of this in order to respond to each student’s needs adequately. Not only is it important for teachers to be aware of the benefits of teaching prosody to students, but it is also important for teachers to explain this to their students as so they can understand why they are learning prosody. After arousing the students’ awareness of prosody and its importance, teachers need to help ESL learners perceive differences in word stress and train them to use prosody correctly. Different activities are possible to help students develop
their prosodic skills. Future studies are necessary so that researchers can analyse the different types of activities that can best help students acquire English prosody. Studying the advantages of various activities, along with knowing why prosody should be taught to students, would enable teachers to take better pedagogical choices as to pronunciation activities done in class.
References


