

## Using dictation to teach pronunciation

(Usando o ditado para ensinar a pronúncia)

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*ABSTRACT: Although the teaching of pronunciation has not always been neglected, it has been for a long time, and this situation does not appear to be changing despite the best efforts of some prominent FLT professionals. The present article shows how dictation can be used in a novel way to teach pronunciation in almost any FL classroom. A practical, stepwise procedure is explained in detail, and follow-up activities are outlined. This way of working with students suggests that bringing the teaching of pronunciation back into FL classrooms will require a thorough re-evaluation of 'traditional' methods, especially those in which pronunciation used to play a crucial role..*

*RESUMO: Embora o ensino da pronúncia nem sempre tenha sido negligenciado, houve momentos em que realmente foi, e esta situação não parece estar mudando, em que pese o trabalho de alguns pesquisadores importantes na área da LE. Este trabalho mostra como o ditado pode ser usado de uma maneira diferente para ensinar a pronúncia em praticamente qualquer aula de LE. Um proce-*

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*dimento prático é explicado em detalhes e atividades afins são delineadas. Essa metodologia de trabalho com os alunos sugere que a volta do ensino da pronúncia para a sala de aula de LE requer uma reavaliação dos métodos tradicionais, principalmente aqueles em que a pronúncia desempenhava um papel importante.*

**KEYWORDS:** *dictation, pronunciation, foreign languages.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *ditado, pronúncia, línguas estrangeiras.*

### RATIONALE

According to Elliott (1995) and McGillick (1995), FL teachers tend to view pronunciation as the least useful of the basic language skills, partly because it seems to be so much more difficult to improve than other skills. In a 1998 TESOL Quarterly review of Celce-Murcia's 1996 book (Teaching pronunciation: A reference for teachers of English to speakers of other languages), Salah Troudi wrote, "In spite of a general awareness of its role in ESL and EFL programs, pronunciation is still an almost neglected area in teacher education programs...Nor does the teaching of pronunciation with all its related components play an obvious role in many EFL textbooks and syllabi". A year later, Correa Breña noted that this situation obtained<sup>1</sup>. In 2003, it would appear that Celce-Murcia's ex-

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1 "Celce-Murcia (1996) publicó recientemente un libro sobre pronunciación con un concepto comunicativo. En 1998, se puso en circulación un texto de Hewings y Goldstein también con ejercicios de pronunciación en contextos comunicativos. Sin embargo, estas

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cellent 1996 book has not had a significant impact either on teacher preparation courses or on language education programs, which belies its academic success.

Remarkably enough, pronunciation was not always a neglected area, even during the long reign of the Grammar-Translation Method, which lasted from 1840 to 1940. Richards and Rodgers (1986), as well as Moy (1986), point out that pronunciation played a signal part in the Direct Method, conceived at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Pronunciation was central to the Audio-lingual Method in the 1950s and 1960s (Moy, 1986), and to both the Oral Oral Approach and the Silent Way<sup>2</sup> in the 1960s and 1970s (Richards and Rodgers, 1986; Moy, 1986). Only then was it swept away by Noam Chomsky's structuralism, the theory that led to Cognitive Code Learning.

During the 1970s and the ensuing period, the teaching of pronunciation was either not especially important in, or virtually absent from, Total Physical Response, Community Language Learning, Suggestopedia<sup>3</sup>, the Comprehension Approach and the Natural Approach (Correa

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publicaciones parecen no tener todavía mucha incidencia en los cursos de preparación de profesores ni en los programas de inglés como segunda lengua" (p. 91).

<sup>2</sup> The Silent Way is paradoxically conducive to the learners' production of near-native speech. The sounds of the target language are represented by different colors arranged in comprehensive and rather complex charts. Other charts show the ways in which each sound can be represented in the writing system.

<sup>3</sup> In both Community Language Learning and Suggestopedia pronunciation plays a less important role than some might think, as it does not receive more emphasis than other skills and is mainly taught through modeling (which, in the case of CLL, is controlled by the students). Moreover, individual and choral repetitions vary in number and quality. There are few error corrections, if any. There is no formal instruction.

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Breña, 1999). At the same time, the increased popularity of the language laboratory further removed explicit instruction in pronunciation from the classroom (Elliott, 1995). Today's Communicative Approach, which Celce-Murcia (1987, 1996) espouses, may have been a partial reaction to this. Indeed, pronunciation seems most compatible with a communicative methodology (Van Ginneken, 1996), yet the Communicative Approach does not stress the need for accent reduction – its real emphasis is on 'intelligibility', therefore on the ability to make oneself clearly understood despite a foreign accent<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, pronunciation is still seen "as a small part of linguistic competence, which itself is a small part of communicative competence" (Moy, 1986, p. 82). And that is precisely where the problem lies: "The 'communicative approach' to FLT, whether deliberately or not, encouraged a tendency to leave pronunciation matters to one side" (Keys, 2000, p. 91).

The notion of intelligibility is not new: according to Correa Breña (1999), Abercrombie (1956) introduced it in 1949. In fact, the overarching importance of intelligibility is now so well documented (Dansereau, 1995; Munro and Derwing, 1995; Correa Breña, 1999) that we may be losing sight of a rather obvious reality, which is that the socioeconomic success of long-term foreign residents and immigrants everywhere is greatly facilitated by good writing, articulate speech and only a slight accent. Is this not, at least to some extent, why adult "learners consistently

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<sup>4</sup> However, Dansereau (1995) notes that intelligibility is highly dependent on pronunciation in the case of beginners, which is why most oral-proficiency-based FL textbook series include sufficient pronunciation practice in their early stages... only to leave it all aside at the intermediate levels (Harlow and Muyskens, 1994).

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give extremely high priority to mastery of the pronunciation of the target language when opinions and preferences are investigated” (MacDonald, Yule and Powers, 1994, p. 76)? If, as Correa Breña (1999) also suggests, a considerable number of FL students, with good reason, wish to reduce their accent in the target language, teachers should make greater efforts to fill that need.

Among the few FL educators who have already moved in this direction, some, like Freudenstein (1997), are (not surprisingly) advocating a well-focused and moderate use of 1950s-style drills. Others, like Elliott (1995) and Dlugosz (1997), do not recommend any particular method but generally agree that spending five to fifteen minutes of every class period on pronunciation activities will substantially improve the learners’ performance.

Dictation exercises are as old-fashioned as audio-lingual drills; and they, too, can periodically be employed in a novel way, not only to teach listening and writing, but also to bring instruction in pronunciation back into the classroom. Brown (2001) did not seem to have seen this when he wrote an article about “the interactive dictation”. Pennington (1989) came closer when she suggested that the articulatory aspects of voice setting could be explored through “silent dictation”. The way I use dictation, though, is far from being silent and goes beyond voice quality. In this article, I give a few simple directions that any fluent speaker of any alphabetized target language can follow to replicate what I do to teach pronunciation through dictation (in either English or French).

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### PROCEDURE

#### *Before class*

*Selecting the material.* Almost any ‘text’ (in the philological sense of the word), thus most parts of any book, textbook, newspaper, magazine, broadcast, play, screenplay, poem, speech or song can theoretically be dictated in a foreign language classroom. Having said that, the texts you select should be [1] in line with your students’ average ability, [2] relevant to their needs and interests, [3] not too long (always less than a fully printed page) and [4] capable of being cut up into short, self-contained portions. For follow-up activities, videotaped dialogues are best. Texts that were used for different teaching purposes several weeks earlier can be re-used: dictations make for good ‘reviews’.

*Preparing the material.* Type your chosen text, dividing it into six to twelve separate sections as you go along. Each section should not contain more than four separate utterances, nor should it usually exceed three lines in length. Double-spacing is a must. Number the sections, and leave some extra space between them.

After typing/printing out your text, connect all the words that should be uttered in the same breath with a line. Then highlight the tonic units (the parts that are most stressed) in each breath group.

Finally, make the same number of photocopies as the number of students in the largest of the groups you will later divide your class into, e.g. five copies. Place the copies one on top of the other in piles corresponding to the

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original pages of typed text. Make sure that none of the copies is upside down, sticks out, or faces the wrong way. Staple them together, one staple through the left end of every section of text, and cut out each section. This will give you six to twelve sets of stapled paper strips, with the same partial text written on all the strips in each set. Put the lot in an envelope, and you are ready to start your class.

### *In class*

*Warm-up.* Divide the class into six to twelve groups of two to five students. If your chosen text is one that is being re-used, your warm-up session can then be very short. If not, you must spend more time putting the learners in the picture, through an appropriate reading and/or speaking activity: they have to have some idea of what the text is all about before they begin working with it. Difficult words need not be explained at this stage, though.

*Silent reading.* Hand out your prepared strips of paper. Each group receives at least one set, and each student gets his or her own strip(s). Ask the students to read their partial text silently, and to identify the words they are not sure about or don't understand.

If the number of sections in the whole text is larger than the number of groups, some groups will get two sets and the respective students two strips, but remember to give only one set to the group handling the first portion of text. When two sets are given to another group, the two partial texts should not be consecutive and one or both should be shorter than average.

*Vocabulary work.* Ask each group to choose a delegate who will write problem words on the board. An ap-

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appropriately chosen text should not contain more than 10-15 such lexical items, thus you should not accept more than a couple of words from any group.

When these few lexical items are written on the board, help the learners guess their meaning, if possible, rather than giving straightforward definitions. For example, “Look at the board. The word I am thinking about now means (the same as) this [give a synonym or definition] or that [give an alternate definition]. Which word is it?” Every time somebody guesses correctly, repeat this word and have the whole class repeat it after you, first on its own, and then in a short sentence: you are beginning to work on pronunciation.

*Coaching.* Sit down with a group and ask the students to read aloud their partial text in unison for you. Then read it aloud yourself, and have them repeat it together after you. Tell them that they will soon be dictating this portion of text to the rest of the class, so their pronunciation must be very, very good. Finally, ask them to keep reading their lines aloud until they have memorized everything: explain to them that they will not be able to use their paper strip(s) or any notes when they dictate. Move on to the next group and repeat the process.

Go around all the groups at least once more and, this time, make the students listen for, and reproduce, breath groups and tonic units as units. Draw their attention to other supra-segmental features such as rhythm and stress, vowel reduction in unstressed syllables, morphological features at word boundaries, and intonation in general. Correct their most audible errors. If necessary, show them, with a drawing or even your own mouth, where the points of articulation of some sounds are. The learners can now ask you to repeat anything they want as often as they want.

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Thus you are combining Community Language Learning with the old Audio-lingual Method in a soon-to-be cooperative and interactive setting. Before leaving a group ask everyone to keep practicing without their paper strip(s), using as much body language as possible and standing up when it helps.<sup>5</sup>

If your chosen text is a videotaped dialogue, now is also the time to play the tape without the sound on. A little bit of manual dexterity will be required here, to show each group the segment corresponding to their partial text. This will enable the learners to see facial expressions and gestures they should later try to imitate.

*Dictation.* When all the students are ready, tell the group that has the first portion of text what they will do next: they will stand together in front of the class, then one person will say the lines, not forgetting to speak up and also to use body language, and after a four-second pause somebody else will speak, and so on, until everybody has had a turn, and then they will all say the lines in unison one last time.

Send these students to the front of the class and stand behind them. Ask the other learners to write down what will be said. Let the first person speak. If you hear (a) noticeable error(s), say the lines yourself in a low voice before the second person speaks. Keep doing this after the second person speaks – only when necessary, but always whisper the lines yourself before the choral repetition at the end.

Such multiple repetitions normally give note-takers enough time to write down what they hear. However, if

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<sup>5</sup> The focus on pronunciation and expression precludes the use of any written material shortly before and during the dictation.

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there are just two speakers in front, they should both say their lines individually twice before speaking together.

As soon as the first students have finished dictating, send them back to their seats. Every-one else knows what to do by now, so you can just go ahead and call the group that has the second portion of text to the front of the class. Stand behind the new speakers and have them continue the dictation, whispering their lines when required. If this second group, or any other group, initially received two sets of paper strips, they will need to come up to the front of the class one more time, since all parts of the text are to be dictated in the right order.

When the last students have finished dictating, all the groups will have written the entire text, minus the portions they dictated themselves. These ‘blanks’ can easily be filled in.

### *Follow-up activities*

Follow-up activities are ordained to a large degree by the nature of the texts initially selected. For instance, videotaped dialogues open more possibilities than recorded mono-logues – but this should not rule out the use of printed-only material.

Anyhow, here are a few of the things you can do after a dictation.

*Partial in-class correction of writing errors through listening.* If a CD/DVD/audio/ video/tape-script was used for the dictation, play the tape, CD or DVD once or twice. If not, read the text aloud yourself. The learners will see some of their mistakes when they hear/watch the whole, uninterrupted conversation or talk.

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*Complete in-class correction of writing errors through reading.* Every group could appoint a representative who would go around the other groups and read what other learners had respectively written. This person would inevitably catch the mistakes his or her own group had made, but in each group the other person(s) would be idle, therefore it would be better to do without representatives and rearrange the groups. For example, if you have seven groups of four (28) students, randomly form three new groups of five and two new groups of four (23 students in total). One way to do this is to go from the old 'group 1' to the old 'group 7' and give 23 people a number between one and five, counting from one to five three times and from one to four two times. The students who get the same number will be working together. While these learners move into their new groups, the five persons who were left out can start reading the whole original text in a different part of the classroom. Give the students in the new groups three minutes to compare notes and correct their mistakes, and then send one of your five 'knowers' into each new group to check everybody's work.

*Dramatization (speaking).* Dialogues can be acted out, poems can be recited, and songs can be sung (in unison, of course). This is where a lot more pronunciation work can be done. For instance, try real, sustained chanting after dictating some 'jazz chants' – and if it works, try a 'decent' (as opposed to obscene) rap song.

*Discussion (speaking).* Short newspaper/magazine articles often introduce topics that can be discussed in small groups after a dictation. Each group can express an opinion and different opinions can then be compared. This

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kind of follow-up allows you to go beyond pronunciation/spelling and to emphasize content and meaning in a communicative context.

*(Creative) writing.* The learners could obviously write down the results of a discussion of the type suggested above. Such writing would be a small group effort, both structured and creative, and suitable for high intermediate and lower advanced levels.

If you used a taped dialogue instead of an article, you have a framework that can be re-used: just change some of the original parameters (time and location, for example) and ask the learners to come up with a similar conversation. In this case, writing would be less creative, but lower-level learners could more easily do the work.

## CONCLUSION

Once the teaching of pronunciation moves beyond the focus on single sounds and away from the complexities of articulatory phonetics, it can easily be integrated into ‘general’ language classes (Keys, 2000). The procedure and activities I have just described are, I believe, a good illustration of this. They are inclusive (of reading, writing and speaking) rather than exclusive. They do not require a superlative knowledge of phonology<sup>6</sup> and work well at different levels and in large classes. They also reveal how dictation is congruous with the “top-down”, communica-

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<sup>6</sup> Which, incidentally, was not my favorite subject in graduate school.

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tive and holistic approach<sup>7</sup> to pronunciation teaching that Pennington (1989), Jones and Evans (1995), McGillick (1995), Keys (2000) and several others advocate.

Therefore, if most FL educators today still believe that the dictation as a technique can only be associated with a ‘traditional’, not a ‘communicative’, approach to language teaching (Brown, 2001), they are mistaken. The way I use dictation to teach pronunciation shows how this technique is compatible with cooperative, interactive and even self-directed learning, thus how meaningful dictation can be. In fact, any dictation is inherently student centered and student controlled, as the learners must decide for themselves how the message is going to be interpreted (Brown, 2001). Of course, dictation is probably not the only improbable tool we have to teach pronunciation. Nor does it suit everybody’s learning or teaching style. Yet it should certainly have a place in any modern, multi-modal FLT methodology.

From a more general perspective, we can see that bringing instruction in pronunciation back into the classroom calls for a thorough reappraisal of traditional methods. We have to go back there, but the point of return is not the same as the point of departure – we are now at a very different place than we were fifty years ago (Keys, 2000). And so, FL teachers have to learn how to use only the parts of these older methods that are relevant in today’s context.

Modern inductive methods are without doubt more engaging, diverse, flexible, and ultimately more efficient. They give students a wider choice of tools they can use to

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<sup>7</sup> Starting with connected speech instead of individual sounds, in contrast with more traditional, “bottom up” approaches.

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keep learning on their own once formal instruction has ended. Nevertheless, it would be unwise to belittle what traditional approaches enabled us to do in the areas of reading, grammar, writing, and especially pronunciation. For instance, the Audio-lingual approach turned out thousands of reasonably fluent speakers of German, Russian, Spanish and other languages for the United States Foreign Service in the 1950s and 60s.

I am old enough to remember the end of the Audio-lingual era. Thirty-five years on, I still cannot forget that, thanks to ‘mim-mem’, some of my students became good enough speakers of French after only 12-20 weeks of intensive instruction to do useful work for the United States Peace Corps in West Africa – instead of having to waste the best part of their youth in the Vietnam War.

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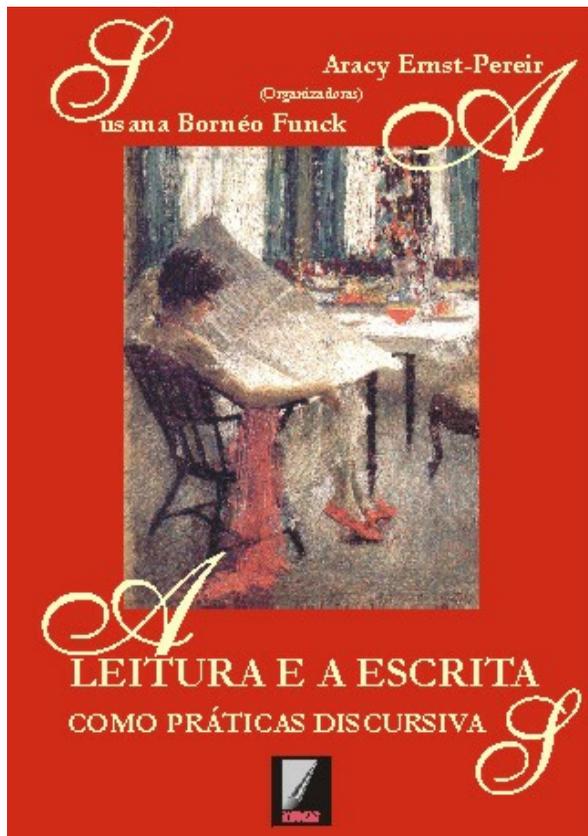
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