

GADGETS :

Some Non-verbal Tools for Teaching Pronunciation

by Judy Gilbert

Language teachers are always asking "What's new, and how can I use it?" I think some extraordinary ideas from the fields of brain research and speech perception offer some useful answers to these questions.

For more than one hundred years, doctors have observed that the two sides of the brain have quite different functions. The most common observation was that an injury to the left brain often had a serious effect on language, whereas an injury to the right usually did not. Researchers puzzled over a variety of questions, such as: "If the left brain is so important for language, what is the *right* brain good for?" and, "Why do people with language problems (as a result of injury or disease) sometimes learn new words more easily if they *sing* them?" However, the search for direct answers was blocked by the apparent impossibility of testing each side separately.

Fifteen years ago, neurosurgeons divided a patient's brain down the middle, to treat his severe epilepsy. His condition did improve, but an incidental result was that no information could be transferred from one side to another. It therefore became possible, for the first time, to *test each side separately*. The subsequent study of this and later "split-brain" patients has produced findings of great significance for teachers.

Simply put, the left side of the brain prefers sequential thought, and the right side prefers simultaneous thought. Other labels are: logical vs. intuitive, abstract vs. concrete, and many other such pairs. A partial answer to the question, "What is the right brain good for?" is spatial relations, timbre and melody. For practical classroom purposes, I think it is useful to think of the right brain/left brain contrast as the difference between verbal and nonverbal

learning. The most productive teaching would seem to be that which appeals to *both* sides of the brain.

All of us with experience in teaching pronunciation are well aware that verbal explanations have a rather weak effect. Since pronunciation processes are basically spatial tasks (and melodic, in the case of intonation), it may simply be that the verbal approach is appealing to the wrong side of the brain. This may be especially true for our students who, after all, are not very good at English. Because of this, visual and musical aids should not be just a nice supplement, but a fundamental teaching approach; the verbal and nonverbal tools should be used as a matched pair. Toward this end, I invite you to share my Right Brain Gadgets.

Vanishing Letters

This technique is based on the simple fact that a transparent red plastic sheet placed over red marks will make them disappear, if the reds are close in color quality. I use the principle to demonstrate silent letters. I have a poster with the words "Can ghosts talk?" painted in blue letters, except for the "h" and "l", which are red. There is a red cartoon ghost below. When red acetate is placed over the poster, the ghost disappears, as do the letters "h" and "l". This could be used to trigger an art project for junior high and younger; making lists of words with silent letters, in crayon or colored pencil.

The Arrow and the Stop Sign

When the language learner is puzzled about a new sound, it is helpful to identify some of the physical differences. One useful distinction is the way the air flows or stops. In technical terms, is it a stop or a continuant?

The fastest way to explain the difference is not to explain at all, but to demonstrate. You can say "This is a continuing sound" and then walk across the room holding an arrow sign, while saying 'mmmmmm . . ." After a bit, hold up a stop sign and say "puh!" Then say "That was a stop sound." March back the other way saying "nnn . . ." with the arrow; then "duh!" with the stop sign. Now ask the class to judge a sound like "s"; is it a stop or a continuing sound? (or, with a beginner class; is it a 1 or 2?) If there is doubt on anybody's face, start marching again while sounding "sss . . ." The point should be clear before you run out of air.

The Visible Tongue

There are always some students in the class who simply can't make the sounds you are teaching; for instance, "r" and "l". Or, perhaps they can't hear the distinctions. There is no use going on with the drills if this primary step isn't complete. The usual procedure with the "hard case" student is to give him a careful verbal description of the articulation. This is a classic example of the use of a linear method to teach what is in essence a composite action. Profile drawings are helpful, especially if coupled with profiles from above. The difficulty with drawings, however, is that the crucial mouth relationships are actually *three-dimensional*. Many people, including me, do not have a good enough sense of spatial relationships to put all this information together into a simultaneous gesture.

My solution is a larger-than-life plaster mouth model. I ordered it (Stone Dentoform Model S-9634-MG) for \$7.00 from Columbia Dentoform Corp., 49 East 21st St., New York, N.Y. 10010. I put narrow hinges on it so that the student can look in the mouth from the back. Then I sawed the top jaw in half so that one side can be tilted back. The tongue is then visible from all angles, in its relationship to the roof of the mouth, teeth, etc. The interchangeable tongue forms are made from self-hardening clay, then painted.

Vowel Stretchers

Some students have a hard time lengthen-

ing the stressed vowel adequately. It goes against their deepest habits. Yet we know that length is the most important element in recognizing the important vowel in the important words. (Ladefoged, *A Course in Phonetics* 1975). For "right brain appeal" I use a piece of rubber sheeting, with a bar (representing the vowel) painted on in permanent ink. When stretched, this makes quite an effective visual contrast with the unstretched state. I find that putting this into the hands of students during drills adds a kinesthetic element of pulling the the vowel out while saying it, and helps focus on the task. Industrial latex can be bought from construction supply firms (see "rubber sheeting" in the Yellow Pages).

Judy Gilbert, co-ordinator of Intensive English Program: UCD Extension for the past three years, is an MA candidate at the University of California: Davis.

But it's heavy and an ugly color. If you want really thin rubber in beautiful colors, you can order it by the yard (\$6.00) from Inn-Skin, Box 888, Buffalo, N.Y. 14240.

The Kazoo

Second language learners don't hear intonation very well. When they listen to speech, they are powerfully distracted from paying attention to the "music" because they are struggling to understand strange sounds, word meaning, and difficult grammar. How can we do a better job of helping the student pay attention to the intonation? My suggestion is that we should offer him a speech model stripped of everything but melody and rhythm. Once he has learned to identify the musical elements, I think he is more likely to recognize them in natural speech. How can we strip the speech model? It could be done electronically (Ohala and Gilbert, forthcoming). But that would involve elaborate equipment. For a more practical approach, I recommend the kazoo.

A small plastic kazoo is probably the best tool a pronunciation teacher could have. By

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humming into it, you can demonstrate the intonation in a way which makes students more sharply aware. For instance, the kazoo can bring a very quick comprehension of the stress contrast between fifTEEN and FIFty. I make two columns on the blackboard for "teens" and "tens" and then ask students to tell me if I'm humming column one or two. In my experience, this gets faster results than simple visual cues, although I sometimes use these too. If students have their own personal kazoos (it takes just a small scuffle of time to help them learn to use it) the effect can be increased. The kazoo is useful not only for syllable stress, but for demonstrating emotional patterns.

Summary

Tasks vary, students vary. There is no best side of the brain; no single best way to teach. We can be certain only that the goal

of efficient language learning cannot be achieved through narrow channels, limited means.

Variety is the spice.

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COMING UP

The next issue of the TESL Reporter will feature a detailed report on the Second Annual "Year of Composition" workshop held February 17-18 on the BYU-Hawaii campus. Attended by an international group of English and ESL educators, sessions, centering around the theme "Practical Solutions to Practical Problems," should be of great interest to ESL teachers. The workshop, sponsored jointly by the Hawaii Council of Teachers of English and the Brigham Young University-Hawaii Campus is held annually.

There will also be a more detailed description of the operation of the new English Skills Laboratory at BYU-HC.

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