
Teaching the Concept of Allophones Using Analogies

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Introduction

ESL and EFL teachers frequently encounter questions about complex points of English that are difficult to answer without overwhelming students with linguistic information that they can neither absorb nor appreciate. For example, students may ask questions when they notice that the pronunciation of the [l] in *laugh* and the [l] in *dull* are not exactly the same or that the four [t] sounds in *Tom pet the little kitten* are different. Teachers with formal training in linguistics might be tempted to address such questions

- by launching into a lecture on allophonic variation and rules of assimilation,
- by explaining that the [l] in *laugh* is a “clear” [l] with the front of the tongue raised whereas the [l] in *dull* is a “dark” [l] with the back of the tongue raised, or
- by trying to help students see features of the articulators using a mirror to see the position of the tongue when pronounced those two words.

Soon, students are overwhelmed with jargon and/or information and may be sorry that they raised the question.

Using Analogies to Explain Complex Notions

Over the years, I have learned to resist the temptation to explain linguistic complexities in technical terms and instead look for concrete analogies that my students are already familiar with as a way to answer some of their language questions. For example, I have found that variations in printed or written letters of the English alphabet serves as a useful analogy for teaching the concept of allophonic variation for answering questions like the ones posed in the introduction above.

All students of English have been exposed to different ways of writing letters of the English alphabet. They know, for example, that whether we write *A*, *a*, *ɑ*, *ɒ*, or *ɔ*, the letter is still the first letter of the English alphabet. Teachers can ask different students to write the letter *a* on the board. No doubt, students' versions of the letter will vary. Teachers can then draw an analogy between the different ways of writing an English letter and the different ways of pronouncing an English phoneme. The letter is an abstract concept, but the versions that we write or see are the actual realizations of the letter and may vary. Similarly, the phoneme is an abstract concept, yet the versions that we utter or hear are the actual realizations of the phoneme and may vary.

Similarly, we can use analogies to show that phonemes may be modified by their phonetic environment. To do this, I write a few other letters in cursive form on the board, such as:

b *c* *q*

Next, I ask different students to add the letter *a*, also in cursive form, to the given letters. Now, we are looking at something like this:

ba *ca* *qa*

Then, I ask students to pay attention to how the cursive *a* is connected to the *b*, *c* and *q* and to identify the modifications made to accommodate the *a* to the previous letters. With some guidance, students are generally able to point out, in one way or another, that the *a* after *b* begins at a higher level than after *c* and *q*. Furthermore, they can see that although both the *a* after *c* and the *a* after *q* begin at a lower level, the connecting line after *q* has a steeper slope than the connecting line after *c*. These differences between the different versions of *a* are inevitable because of the influence of the environments in which they occur, but no matter whether the *a* begins at a higher or lower level, we still identify all the variations as different realizations of the same letter.

The same is true of sounds in the language. The sound /f/ can be pronounced in slightly different ways because of the influence of its environments. Notice, for example, the differences in the articulation of the *f* before a vowel with

rounded lips as in *fool* or before a vowel with spread lips as in *feel*. These different versions of /f/ are different realization of the same sound, that is, allophones of the phoneme /f/.

Conclusion

Abstract concepts can be difficult to address, but using concrete analogies, especially those with which learners are already familiar, can make them more teachable. The technique described here has proven highly successful in teaching the notion of allophonic variation in my classes.

About the Author

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