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Improving Students' Phonetic Memory Using Rhythm

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One of the most important preconditions of success in a foreign language is a good memory. This statement goes in agreement with Bloom's taxonomy according to which the first level of the cognitive process is remembering (Bloom et al. 1956). If we analyze carefully our mental activity we can notice that no matter how much we value understanding actually it is not possible for us to understand something which is not in our head yet, something which we have not remembered. So, memory plays an essential role in learning a foreign language because it gives us opportunity to remember great amounts of words quickly and easily, to keep in mind grammar forms and their functions, to memorize spelling.

Phonetic memory

Nowadays a variety of memory types are known in the academic world and one of them is the phonetic memory.

Phonetic memory is the first ability that is challenged when a person decides to learn a foreign language because at the very starting point of learning it becomes necessary for all the students to catch and fix in mind sound sequences unused before. A so-called phonetic code must occupy a unique place in people's memory (Brian and Shea 1979).

Foreign students' malfunction of phonetic memory that occurs in learning English from time to time causes the following mistakes: 'practice' is sometimes

mispronounced as /prək'taɪs/, 'notice' as /nə'taɪs/, 'recipe' as /rɪ'saɪp/, 'pause' as /paʊz/, 'police' as /pə'lɪs/, 'tea' as /ti:ʌ/ and so on. As we can see the given examples are directly connected with pronunciation of the English sounds but they are not caused by physiological difficulties to produce new articulatory actions necessary for foreign sounds because it is in no way harder physiologically to pronounce /ɪ/ instead of /aɪ/, /ɔ:/ instead of /aʊ/ and /i:/ instead of /i:ʌ/. These mistakes take place because of phonetic memory deficit when learners fix in mind wrong variants of the sound form of the words and stick to those variants.

So, phonetic memory is regarded as ability to maintain in mind normative sound-stress consistency of foreign words.

Reasons for phonetic memory failures

There are a number of reasons of why this consistency can break.

Firstly, a student can hear a new word for the period of time not sufficient for fixing it in memory.

Secondly, a student can be tired, frustrated or distracted while learning new words thus remembering only parts of them.

The third reason is the influence of the written form of the foreign language. Unlike the mother tongue acquisition where the oral speech precedes reading and writing, in teaching and learning the foreign language students are usually exposed to the written form of the language from the starting stage as the result of which pronunciation mistakes such as 'writer' /'wraɪtə/ or 'head' /hɛd/ appear since learners concentrate on letters instead of sounds.

Furthermore, there are inner psychological reasons. Despite the fact that a noticeable area of language learning is based on reproduction, in general, language

learning is a productive activity and there is a certain degree of creativity on the part of the students even in imitative actions. It is claimed that while learning a foreign language students themselves create a language system with new elements and new laws (Gass and Selinker 2008). As a result learners sometimes mispronounce English words because they just like their own variant of pronunciation.

All these reasons lead to formation of wrong phonetic images in students' memory that definitely stand in their way of becoming competent language users in English.

Overcoming phonetic memory failures

This situation makes it necessary for teachers and methodologists to reconsider the existing approach to teaching pronunciation where attention within the segmental level is totally paid to forming students' articulatory flexibility. It is required to take a step further and to include development of phonetic memory as an obligatory part of teaching pronunciation course.

Dealing with phonetic memory failures is a challenging task because memory is a mysterious thing. No matter how hard scientists try to dissect it and to form complete comprehension of this phenomenon there are still unsolved problems concerning memory. The greatest one is caused by its nature.

On the evidence available to date we can say that memory functions on both conscious and subconscious levels.

On the one hand, a foreign language learner is constantly aware of existence of memory, he/she is able to make his/her brain memorize new information, he/she always knows sensations of remembering and forgetting. On the other hand, all this conscious awareness mostly concerns the results of functioning of memory but not the inner

process of its mechanism. It means that knowingly we only fight with consequences of phonetic memory failures ignoring malfunctions of its mechanism.

To change this situation for the better it is necessary to develop phonetic memory on both conscious and subconscious levels.

Therefore, in teaching and learning the foreign language alongside with explicit instruction we should use methodological tools that are able to reach students' subconscious phonetic stock and to form correct variants on that level. I believe that rhythm has a good potential to be used as such a methodological tool and this potential can be revealed in several ways.

The role of rhythm in language learning

Firstly, rhythm resembles memory in its nature. Judy B.Gilbert, for example, supports the idea that memory is intrinsically rhythmic process (Gilbert 2008). Despite the fact that we are aware of the existence of rhythm and we can feel and describe it, rhythm is believed to be deeply subconscious (Kenworthy 1987). It appears from psychological research that listeners' brains tend to hear timing regularities even where there is little or no physical regularity (Roach 1992).

Secondly, rhythm is believed to influence intelligibility (Kenworthy 1987) because it maintains consistency across speech (Banzina et al. 2014). "Regular timing contributes to optimal perception by the listener, making speech transmission and understanding faster and better" (Kohler 2009). Thus, rhythm has a guiding function for the listener (Kohler 2009). It means that the integration between rhythmic and segmental structures is supposed to help make the phrase readily understandable (Hawkins and Smith 2001).

On the evidence given above there seems to be a harmonious agreement in the scientific world about a beneficial potential of combination of rhythm and sound practice for teaching and learning English, though the ways of how to realize this idea are still being searched.

This article is supposed to contribute to solution of the methodological problem of improving students' phonetic memory and to introduce a method of teaching English pronunciation combining sound practice and rhythm.

The method of using rhythm to form phonetic memory

The method offered here has been successfully implemented in H.S.Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University at classes of practical English phonetics, though it is not specific for higher education and can be used with different categories of learners whenever there is a need to improve students' pronunciation.

The main principles of the method are:

1) rhythm is introduced on three levels of sound practice: word level, sentence level, text level;

2) there is a constant alternation of imitative and productive activities based on the same language material.

Introducing rhythm we can proceed from the assumption that "rhythm is characterized by the alteration of strong and weak syllables" (Kenworthy 1987). There is an opinion that rhythm depends "on a relatively regular occurrence of the stressed syllables" (Underhill 1998). At the same time P.Roach argues that "it is rather more controversial to suggest that normal speech is also structured in terms of regularly repeated patterns of syllables" (Roach 1992).

So, when the rhythm is introduced according to the given method the emphasis is placed on the contrast between more and less prominent syllables and, where it is possible, on regular occurrence of the stressed syllables. The most important feature here is that contrasts between stressed and unstressed syllables are created in such a way that it is the position of the target words that preconditions formation of the correct sound-stress consistencies in learners' memories.

Alternating imitative and productive activities is necessary to teach learners to pronounce target words correctly regardless the initially created position and to use them in their own utterances.

Activities: pronunciation of the words ending in –ice and rhythm

Word level

1. Listen and repeat.

justice - practice – lattice – notice – practice – prentice – notice - justice

2. Find the words mentioned more than once and pronounce them in the alphabetical order.

Sentence level

3. Use the words *justice, notice, practice* to complete the sayings.

Without 1) _____, **courage** is **weak**.

People don't 2) _____ whether it's **winter** or **summer** when they're **happy**.

3) _____ **makes perfect**.

4) _____ **knows no friendship**.

When you **do good work**, **people** will 5) _____ you.

6) _____ **puts brains** in your **muscles**.

Keys: 1) justice 2) notice 3) practice 4) justice 5) notice 6) practice

4. Read the sayings pronouncing the syllables printed in bold more prominent.

5. Choose the saying(s) which you like most of all and pronounce it (them) by heart.

Text level

6. Rearrange six parts of the sentences to make up a rhyme.

- 1) And **calls** for **justice**
- 2) He **doesn't** **notice**
- 3) Does **baseball** **practice**
- 4) A **young** **apprentice**
- 5) His **neighbor** **Doris**
- 6) Who **works** in **Greenpeace**

Keys: 4) 3) 2) 5) 6) 1)

7. Now read the rhyme pronouncing the syllables printed in bold more prominent.

8. Answer the questions on the rhyme above using the sayings from Activity 3,
e.g. Will the apprentice notice Doris? – Probably yes, because when you do good work,
people will notice you.

- 1) Will Doris cheat to help her friends?
- 2) Is the apprentice happy?
- 3) Is Doris's courage strong?
- 4) Can the apprentice become a good baseball player?

9. Ask the following questions to your partner and let him/her answer them.

- 1) Have you got enough English practice?
- 2) Do you always notice and correct your mistakes in English?

3) Is your opinion about your learning results based on justice?

Conclusion

One of the challenges that appears in the process of learning English as the foreign language is a necessity for students to remember how English words are pronounced. The emphasis here is placed on peculiarities of remembering sound-stress consistencies of words but not on articulatory abilities of pronunciation. It is explained by a considerable amount of pronunciation mistakes that occur not due to mispronunciation of difficult sounds but because of students' choice of wrong sounds in certain words that can result from phonetic memory failures. To overcome this problem it is necessary to consider the nature of phonetic memory the big part of which dwells on the subconscious level making it difficult to be formed with the help of explicit teaching instructions. Therefore, usage of additional teaching tools such as rhythm is required. Using appropriate contrasts (the basis of rhythm) it is possible to create the phonetic context that preconditions accurate remembering of the sound-form of the words thus incorporating rhythm in sound pronunciation practice.

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