

Phonetics

— A Minor Error in Pronunciation —

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Abstract

Possibly one of the most frustrating obstacles facing the second language learner is how to accurately pronounce the 'new' language they are acquiring. Many teaching materials still tend to rely on outdated or discredited methodology which only appeals to the student's intellect and expects almost instantaneous acquisition. This brief paper will analyze the pronunciation patterns of a young Arab learner studying English (herein L2), and propose that for successful learning to take place a '*process approach*' must be considered. Section 1 focuses on the learner's inability to consistently pronounce the dental fricatives and will identify the source of this problem. Section 2 examines a unit from a popular pronunciation text and evaluates how successful it would be in aiding the learner with his error(s) in pronunciation. Finally, an extended conclusion will suggest a number of activities that may help the learner, taking into consideration the '*process approach*' to learning.

1 . Context & Analysis

Context

The learner was a Yemen national, male and in his early twenties. In anticipation of career advancement in the civil service, the learner had been directed to undertake a three month English intensive course in the U.K. In a 'level-check' during the admissions

process, his standard of spoken English was determined to be lower-intermediate. Although the student had never been to England (or any English speaking country before), through satellite T.V. and the internet, he was already extremely interested in British culture before his arrival in the country. As such, it could be assumed that the learner had both strong *integrative and instrumental motivation* to learn English⁽¹⁾. In addition to group lessons in *Communication, Reading & Writing* and *Presentation Skills* in a multi-lingual classroom, the learner also took one private lesson per week in *Pronunciation*. Although the student's L2 was rapidly improving, the learner thought that on a number of occasions he had difficulty being understood by his fellow-students, he lacked what is termed '*comfortable intelligibility*'⁽²⁾. In an attempt to combat the student's anxiety, the teacher decided to record the learner and transcribe parts of the resulting speech with phonetic script (Appendix A). The instructor hoped to firstly, isolate the pronunciation error(s) and then adopt exercises and activities which may correct the problem.

Analysis

The edited transcription of the learner highlighted one major area where his pronunciation differed markedly from that of a native speaker; his inability to articulate the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ consistently. On a number of occasions the learner's pronunciation is perfectly acceptable 'Standard English', but in many instances there is a tendency for the learner to articulate /θ/ and /ð/ as /t/ and /d/ respectively. (For native English speakers, these allophones are normally associated with the alveolar plosives.) By examining each fricative, in respect to their position in the word (initial/medial/final) and their position within the sentence, the teacher hoped to identify the reason for such inconsistency.

Although it was not entirely feasible to deal with each fricative separately as they only differ from each other in their 'voicing', the teacher began by examining the 'voiceless' /θ/. As the transcription testifies (Appendix A), in the initial and medial positions '*think*' /θɪŋk/ (L.13), '*things*' /θɪŋz/ (L.19) and '*everything*' /evriθɪŋ/ (Ls.11/12) are all correctly pronounced. The exception is '*something*' (L.12), which is pronounced /sʌmtɪŋ/ as opposed to /sʌmθɪŋ/. It is impossible to draw a concrete conclusion from such a limited number of examples. However it is worth noting that /θ/ is pronounced correctly when it is preceded within the word or over the word boundary by either a vowel or the voiced alveolar /z/. Coincidentally, when /θ/ is in the word initial position, there is also a tendency for the learner to pronounce it correctly, if it is preceded over the word boundary by a vowel or the voiced alveolar /z/, (Ls. 2/15). Fortunately, there are also a num-

ber of examples of /θ/ in the word final position and an exploration of the preceding vowel gives evidence of a 'pattern of occurrence'. This 'pattern' helps explain the reason for the learner's incorrect pronunciation.

When /θ/ is preceded by the 'long' vowel /ɔ:/ as in 'north' /nɔ:θ/ (L3), the voiceless fricative is clearly pronounced. But when it is preceded by a diphthong /aʊ/ as in 'south' /saʊθ/, there are only two instances of clear articulation (Ls7/9). On the other occasions, the learner realizes the allophone /t/ as in /saʊt/ (Ls. 1/5/14/16) and in one instance /θ/ isn't pronounced at all, it is completely 'lost':/saʊ/ (L18)! The clear articulations (Ls 7/9) are heavily stressed which suggests the learner is concentrating on getting his pronunciation correct. The student is aware of what is necessary to produce /θ/ after the diphthong /aʊ/, and in relative isolation appears to have no difficulty with pronunciation. This is also the case when /θ/ is in the word final position. Additionally the voiceless dental fricative is also correctly pronounced when it is heavily stressed, for example; 'clothe' /kləʊθ/ (L11). However, in rapid speech there is a tendency for the learner to pronounce the alveolar plosive /t/ instead. Why should this happen? To find the answer we need to turn to the vowel diagram below.

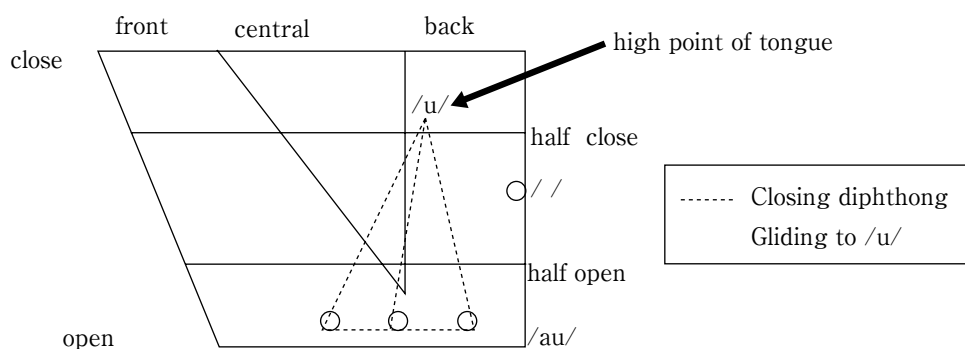


Figure 1.

As Figure 1 illustrates, to pronounce the diphthong /aʊ/ entails a glide from the open dimension to somewhere between half close and close. After such a potentially large glide of the tongue, the learner finds it easier to let the tongue continue to the alveolar position. Here contact, or near contact, is made between the tip of the tongue and the alveolar ridge, resulting in /t/. For the learner to pronounce /θ/ clearly, would entail near closure between the tip of the tongue and the back of the lower front teeth, with the blade of the tongue just behind the upper front teeth. Such a movement after the diphthong

glide, (in rapid speech), is difficult for the learner and therefore is only achieved on two occasions, when he is totally focussed. Such an explanation would also account for the learner's clear pronunciation of /θ/ in *north* /nɔ:θ/. The tongue position for the preceding vowel /ɔ:/ is between the 'half open' and 'half close' positions, with the back of the tongue raised (see Fig. 1.) The tongue movement from this position to the dental position is not so great and one the learner can accomplish with ease. Thus on no occasion is the voiceless /θ/ 'lost', the word *north* /nɔ:θ/ is always correctly pronounced.

Now let's turn our attention to the 'voiced' dental fricative /ð/. It would be convenient to find some 'pattern of occurrence' for /ð/ in the word initial position, but unfortunately one doesn't exist! As observed earlier, there is a tendency for the learner to pronounce /ð/ clearly when it is preceded over the word boundary by the voiced alveolar /z/, for example *they* /ðeɪ/ and *them* /ðem/ (L2) and *they* /ðeɪ/ again (L15). However in general, the learner's pronunciation of /ð/ is articulated as the alveolar plosive /d/. It is significant though, that the learner does pronounce /ð/ correctly when it is preceded by silence as in a pause; *'the'* /ðə/ (Ls.11/12). This lead the teacher to believe that as in the correct pronunciation of the voiceless fricative /θ/ in '*south*' /saʊθ/, the learner can pronounce it's 'voiced' counterpart /ð/ correctly when given his full concentration. The learner has already been 'sensitized' on how to pronounce /ð/ but, generally, in moments of particularly rapid speech, he subconsciously finds it easier to let the tip of the tongue make contact with the alveolar ridge and produce the alveolar plosive /d/ than to make the more 'complex' movement to produce /ð/.

It may seem unusual, for a learner who has been 'sensitized' to a sound to persist in pronouncing it incorrectly. As it would be assumed that the response from the listener would be such, that the learner would realise something is amiss! However, if the learner remains 'intelligible' to the listener, there is no reason why incorrect pronunciation wouldn't continue. In the case of the Yemeni student, even in extreme cases of poor pronunciation (Ls 3/4) and the unusual examples of assimilation and elision (Ls.4), he remains intelligible. This is due to the fact that /ð/ in the word initial position, generally occurs in function words (i.e.: the definite article; pronouns; conjunctions; adverbs). If the learner's poor articulations had been in content words instead, intelligibility wouldn't have been possible. Equally, with /θ/ in the word final position, the learner's realisation of the allophone /t/ doesn't effect intelligibility, as the word can be easily understood within the context.

In summary, from this brief analysis of the example transcript, it can be asserted that the learner's tendency to realise the allophones /t/ and /d/ does not greatly effect *intelligibility*. However, this doesn't necessarily mean he may be so easily understood in other contexts. For example, although the learner may be '*intelligible*' to a native English speaker (in this case, his teacher) there will a greater possibility of misunderstanding with a non – native speaker. Which is exactly what was happening when the learner conversed with his fellow students! In an attempt to correct the learner's problem, the instructor suggested a number of exercises. These exercises are outlined in the conclusion.

2. An evaluation of published teaching materials

One of the most popular teaching texts in the British English classroom is the '*Headway Series*' (O.U.P.), which consists of a 'classbook' supplemented with a student's 'workbook' and (at some levels), a pronunciation text. In *Headway Intermediate Pronunciation*, all the units follow a similar format. Each unit is divided into five sections with each section addressing a different pronunciation feature. In Unit 3 (p.12), the 'Sounds' section focuses on the dental fricatives (Appendix B).

The opening activities can be loosely defined as '*sensitising*' and '*awareness building*' exercises. The learner is given a brief instructions on 'how to make the sounds' /θ/ and /ð/. This is followed by a '*listen and practise*' exercise with minimal pairs to highlight the 'voicing' distinction. Two exercises in the revision section at the end of the unit also incorporate the '*listen and repeat*' pattern (9.1/9.3). The revision section focuses on the pronunciation of dates where the use of the definite article with ordinal numbers gives extended practice with both fricatives. '*Freer practice*' is encouraged (9.4), when the learner is instructed to find out the date of birth of other students in the class.

It is highly unlikely that any of the above activities would help the Yemeni learner with his identified pronunciation problem. Firstly, the opening explanations tend to focus on the difference in '*voicing*' between /θ/ and /ð/, and the student is already aware of this! The root of the learner's problem is really one of difference in place of articulation, when pronouncing the fricatives.

Secondly, the minimal-pair exercise would also be of little help. Like the opening explanations it tends to focus on the '*voicing*' distinction, but perhaps more significantly it

only deals with words in isolation. As already noted, the learner appears to have little difficulty in articulating the fricatives in isolation (i.e. after a pause), it is in spontaneous speech which he faces problems.

Thirdly, it is dubious as to whether the above activities would be of use to any learner! Activities which involve explanations in words, by diagram, or both, are only appealing to the learner's intellect. In our case, the student is almost certainly aware of what is necessary to produce the dental fricatives, but this does not mean he will be able to 'decipher' such information intellectually and then transfer it to the correct physiological movements of the vocal organs.

Additionally, the '*listen and repeat*' exercise (9.3) assumes the learner is capable of hearing the sound in question. This is not always the case! Furthermore, even if the student is capable of hearing the sound they may still not know how to produce it correctly. Such a '*behaviourist*' approach to the teaching of pronunciation, where learning is expected to be '*instantaneous*' is of course, now regarded as somewhat antiquated. Learning, in general, is a gradual process and as in any subject, for the teaching of pronunciation to be successful a gradual or '*process approach*' is necessary.

However, in support of the text, it does attempt to provide exercises which are '*meaningful*' to the learner. For example, exercise 9.2, where students are challenged to match the dates of birth with famous people. Depending on the learner group and environment, there is of course the possibility they may be unfamiliar with many of the 'famous' people⁽³⁾. However, this activity could be easily adapted. Additionally, exercise 9.4 strives to provide '*real communication*' in the classroom. This exercise can certainly be regarded as '*communicative*', but it is somewhat limited, in that its form and content have already been determined and that it can only be applied to specific learner groups. Age can be a sensitive issue and as such, this activity may not be suitable for the adult classroom.

Conclusion

To help the student with his pronunciation problem it was essential to take into consideration the '*process approach*' noted above. Firstly, the '*sensitisation*' phase. In Section 1, it was summarised that the learner had obviously been '*sensitised*' on how to produce the dental fricatives. However since the learner had no difficulty pronouncing the alveolar plosives, he must also be '*sensitive*' to the distinction between both sets of consonants. Taking this assumption to its logical conclusion, if the learner was '*sensitive*' to the distinction between both sets of consonants he must obviously have been aware of his problem!

In this respect it is dubious as to how successful any '*awareness-building*' activities could be! Clearly, such a 'defeatist' attitude could hardly be of benefit to either teacher or pupil and an attempt had to be made to perhaps (if anything), try and increase the learner's awareness! As such, the instructor originally suggested the following activities:

The learner hears two words in quick succession. The words would be identical in sound except for one phoneme to distinguish between the alveolar plosives and the dental fricatives. The challenge for the learner would be to determine when he is hearing the same word spoken twice or two different words, and then being able to distinguish between the two.

a) For example:

	/ð/	/d/
1.	they	day
	/ðeɪ/	/deɪ/
2.	then	den
	/ðen/	/den/
3.	though	doe
	(ðəʊ/	/dəʊ/
4.	thirty	dirty
	/ðɜ:tɪ/	/dɜ:tɪ/
	etc...	

- b) The teacher reads a short sentence (or exploits a short recording), 'loaded' with dental fricatives. The learner has to listen carefully and count the number of times he hears the 'target sound'. As the student improves the teacher can increase the speed of his delivery.

i.e. The 'voiced' /ð/.

'When the famous clothes shop closed down, everyone thought they'd lose their jobs.'

- c) The student writes 1~5 on a piece of paper. The teacher says a series of words, all are identical except for one:

	1	2	3	4	5	
i.e.	den	den	then	den	den	/ð/

The learner has to circle the number which corresponds to the odd word.

There are of course many other activities which could be exploited, but they are all similar in style to those listed above. The major disadvantage of such activities is that they are really just variations of minimal pairs and as already noted in section 1, such activities are more suitable in a post-learning phase. Additionally, in the case of example b), any exercise which tries to 'mask' the 'voiced' fricative /ð/ in a sentence will probably fail, as the learner would have no difficulty in identifying /ð/ in the word initial position in function words, as this is where it nearly always appears. In this respect it is also dubious as to how successful example a) could be, as there really aren't so many words in which /ð/ appears in the word initial position! Thus practice in this exercise is somewhat limited.

So how do we help a learner whose attention is already clearly focussed on his pronunciation problem but persists in making the same error in spontaneous speech? The answer may lie in the application of activities which the learner himself finds stimulating. If the learner's attention can be drawn to authentic activities and subject matter which are particularly meaningful, there would surely be a greater possibility of learning taking place. Such an emotional appeal may not be suitable or practical all the time, but as a last resort to a seemingly intractable problem it may be the most powerful. For the Yemeni learner, taking into consideration his background and the traditions he discusses on the

transcript, meaningful subject matter could be English translations of the following:

- quotes from famous countrymen
- verses from his favourite songs
- a brief history of his country
- possibly even passages from a religious text such as the koran

As long as the dental fricatives appear, any subject matter which appeals to the learner would be appropriate. If the learner has a strong desire to acquire the lines from his favourite songs and recite them clearly, the unique sound quality of /θ/ and /ð/ will be such, that the contrast with the alveolar plosives would be acquired indirectly.

Finally, upon returning to his native Yemen the learner must continue to 'immerse' himself in as much authentic English as possible. This can be achieved through watching satellite television, listening to the radio or through the plethora of opportunities offered through the internet. Regardless of the approach adopted, the more the learner is exposed to the English which is at his disposal, the greater the possibility of successful acquisition taking place.

Notes

⁽¹⁾ The extensive studies of Gardner et al; (1972); (1975); (1991) proposed two aspects of motivation which have been particularly influential in the field of SLA. Namely '*The Integrative / Instrumental Orientation Dichotomy*'. Essentially this hypothesis asserted that the learner will possess *integrative motivation* to learn the L2 if they have an interest in the people and culture of the target language. In contrast, *instrumental motivation* sees motivation as arising out of a need to learn the L2 for functional or external reasons; for example, to pass an exam which will open up educational or career opportunities.

⁽²⁾ '*comfortable intelligibility*', was a term coined by Abercrombie (1967) who asserted that if a language learner remained 'comfortably intelligible' during L2 spoken discourse there was really no reason for them to make a greater effort to improve their spoken English (or attempt to achieve English of almost native speaker-level). Abercrombie argued that the extra effort could be devoted to more important & attainable areas of language development.

⁽³⁾ From my own experience teaching at a tertiary level institution in the Middle East, I quickly learned one should not make cultural assumptions. In one lesson, I encouraged the class to complete a 'cloze exercise' of a famous Beatles number whilst listening to the song, only to discover that the students had never heard of the world's 'most famous' pop group!

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Appendix A

Transcript

- 1 “Er people in the south are more educated...and also they have erm, more experience in ‘cos they use to travel abroad – to go everywhere. You can meet er any of them in every place..but the north they · they are all...they all the time, if they travel they go only to Saudi Arabia. They work there · they get money then they return, they return with the
- 5 money. But erm., the people from the south as er I told you are more educated and...and quite different from the rest. (I) Yes, of course it’s very different. Now we have become one country, the south and the north but the people are still quite different in their attitudes. (I) Yes also in respect to de...development there is a big difference. (I) Yes, a contrast. In the south the buildings are much older, not so many big offices or new
- 10 buildings. Of course, it used to be Communist. And erm the way of life is different. The we clothe – the way of our food of course – everything. (I) Yes, of course different ‘cos everything is different between us except something – what that we are all Arabs and also because we are Muslim. And this is I think the main similarity. (I). Yeah, for the men they wear er in the south they wear a trouser and er...and er shirt and sometimes
- 15 they wear a small or short like skirt – but not really a skirt, it’s only for men. And in the south they never carry any kind of arms. But in the north you can find a dagger. One person can carry a lot of different arms. It’s surprising. For example, not only a dagger but also a gun. It’s their culture. But in the south, most people won’t buy these things.”

(I): Instructor’s elicitations

Incorrect pronunciation:

south: ~ /saʊt/ or /saʊt/ the ~ /də/ they ~ /deɪ/ there ~ /deə/
then ~ /den/ something ~ /ʌmtɪŋ/

Appendix B

Unit 3

P.12

The Sounds /θ/ and /ð/

1. To make the sounds /θ/ and /ð/ your **tongue** should touch the **back of your teeth**. If you find this difficult try putting your finger in front of your mouth and touching it with your tongue. For the sound /ð/ you should use your voice - for the sound /θ/ you should not.

T. 3.1 Listen and practice these words:

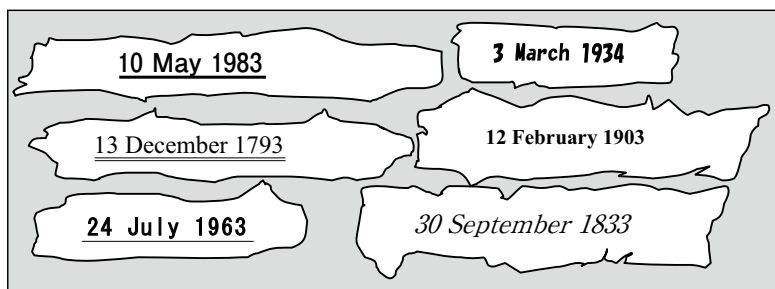
/θ/	/ð/
thick	this
thin	those
thinks	these
thirty	there
three	then
theatre	with
both	mother
path	father
teeth	together
healthy	although

For more practice do point 1 of exercise 9 on page 17 of this book.

P.17

9. Saying Dates T.3.9A

Listen & practice saying these dates. Make sure that you pronounce /θ/ and /ð/ correctly.



2. Try to guess when these famous people were born, by matching up the people and the dates like this.

- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------|
| a. Marie Antoinette | 6 March 1475 |
| b. Napoleon Bonaparte | 23 April 1564 |
| c. Michelangelo Buonarroti | 2 November 1755 |
| d. Agatha Christie | 15 August 1769 |
| e. Greta Garbo | 5 May 1818 |
| f. Mikhail Gorbachev | 25 October 1881 |
| g. Karl Marx | 15 September 1890 |
| h. Marilyn Monroe | 18 September 1905 |
| i. Pablo Picasso | 13 October 1925 |
| j. Elvis Presley | 1 June 1926 |
| k. William Shakespeare | 2 March 1931 |
| l. Margaret Thatcher | 8 January 1938 |
- 

3. T.3.9A Listen and check your answers.

Listen again and repeat, paying attention to your pronunciation of the dates.

4. Find out when the other people in your class were born.

Headway Intermediate Pronunciation: Bill Bowler & Sarah Cunningham (OUP 1990)

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