# Teaching Speech to English Language Learners

## A Theoretical and Practical Focus

*Martin R. Gitterman*

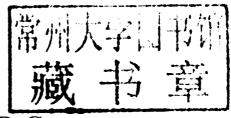# TEACHING SPEECH TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL FOCUS

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# TEACHING SPEECH TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL FOCUS

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# PREFACE

One of the many pleasures of my career has been teaching the basic college speech course for ESL (English as a second language) students. My goal in writing this book is to bring to the attention of current (and aspiring) teachers my thoughts on teaching speech to English language learners. The basic college speech course typically includes both public speaking and group discussion. I have, therefore, included chapters on these two areas. Pronunciation, which was a basic component of the course I taught for ESL students, is also addressed. The material presented is applicable, however, to speech courses for adult learners in general (particularly at the intermediate and advanced levels) as well as to the speech component of more broad-based ESL courses.

A central theme of the book is that theory and practice are intertwined and knowledge of both is essential for effective teaching. It is hoped that the link between theory and practice (pedagogy) is made clear in this book. In addition, the attributes of an effective instructor, in general, and of an instructor of speech to English language learners, in particular, are highlighted.

This book is aimed at providing specific teaching recommendations for instructors and the fundamental principles underlying these recommendations. Teaching speech to English language learners is a most rewarding endeavor, and this book is intended to facilitate achieving that objective.

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# CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

Diversity is an attribute that brings a special richness to a society. One very apparent manifestation of such diversity in the United States is the multitude of native languages and countries of origin represented by students enrolled in schools. Not surprisingly, the study of teaching English as a second language (or, in frequently used current terminology, teaching English language learners) has been a focus of many teacher training programs. All would agree that the adequate preparation of teachers is essential in meeting the needs of English language learners. Admittedly, however, the means to that end is not always a clear-cut path, with differences of opinion evident in the methods recommended by researchers. This is not surprising as unanimity of belief in teaching methodology is unlikely to be found in any discipline. In fact, it is reasonable to assert that there exist some principles of teaching methodology (in any subject area) that are correct and some practices that should clearly be avoided. Beyond that there remains an area of flexibility, enabling teachers to choose a methodology with which they are comfortable and that works well with a given group of students. It is the purpose of this book to suggest ways in which teachers of English language learners can enhance the oral communication skills of their students. Accordingly, this book is aimed not only at prospective teachers of English language learners, but at current teachers as well. Prospective teachers can benefit by developing an initial/pre-teaching familiarity with recommendations. These basic recommendations can serve as a core around which some methodological fine-tuning can eventually be done by these aspiring teachers. Current teachers ideally reflect regularly on their teaching in an effort to see if any modifications/revisions should be incorporated into their teaching metho-

dology. The proposals in this book, it is hoped, will provide some suggestions for current teachers to consider. Finally, this book is aimed at numerous language professionals (particularly applied linguists) who have an interest in examining ways in which principles of language (theory) can be useful in facilitating applications (practice).

The focus of the book is the adult (high school age and beyond) English language learner. As there is an intent to provide a link between theory and practice, chapter 2 ("Second Language Acquisition in Adults: The Linguistic Dimension") and chapter 3 ("Second Language Acquisition in Adults: The Individual/Learner-Based Dimension"), which address areas of theory/ research, are presented prior to the chapters which center on more applied aspects. Matters discussed in chapters 2 and 3 are revisited in subsequent chapters in an effort to highlight the link between theory and practice. In order to gain a better understanding of adult language acquisition, it is essential to compare the process, in some measure, to child second language acquisition. Thus, reference to child language acquisition is incorporated, as needed.

Chapter 2 presents a linguistic overview of the process of second language acquisition, with an emphasis on aspects most relevant to issues in second language teaching. This overview includes treatment of some of the major phenomena that have been addressed by second language acquisition researchers. A primary example is the matter of interference (interlingual) v. developmental (intralingual) errors. While it is agreed that some errors (interlingual) produced in a second language can be explained by contrasting the structures of a learner's first and second languages, other errors (intra-lingual) are common to second language learners, regardless of first language. Additional issues covered include, but are not limited to, the Critical Period Hypothesis, an age-related proposal, which has been the subject of much controversy. Models of second language learning, such as Krashen's Monitor Model (drawing on an acquisition/learning distinction), are described as well. Universal Grammar (UG), a model proposed to account for the ease with which children acquire a first language, is treated with reference to second language acquisition (an area of ever-expanding research).

Chapter 3, examining individual/learner-based aspects of second language acquisition, treats issues such as attitudes/motivation and personality. Central to the discussion is the point that second language learners are not a homogeneous group. They come to the language learning task with very different mindsets. These mindsets play a significant role in determining their readiness to acquire the target language. An effective classroom instructor will do everything possible to shape the mindset of students in ways that will

maximize their potential for success in second language learning. The all too common phenomenon of heritage language loss in the United States is also addressed as well as the role classroom instructors can play to lessen the likelihood of this unfortunate erosion of one's first language. The classroom atmosphere, which the instructor is instrumental in shaping, is seen to be of critical importance (and an integral part of) the individual/learner-based dimension of learning.

In chapter 4 ("Pronunciation Improvement") suggested procedures for teaching pronunciation to English language learners are proposed. An introductory overview of articulatory phonetics is provided to serve as a framework for the discussion of pronunciation. While linguists agree that native-like pronunciation is not an achievable goal for adult second language learners, it is also agreed that eventual attainment in pronunciation differing from native-like performance is in no way a limiting factor. All (both instructors and students) must recognize that less than native-like pronunciation in a second language is in no way a "deficiency" or "failure" in language learning. In fact, there is no reason to suggest that native-like pronunciation in a second language is preferable. What is important is that instructors strive to have students reach their maximum performance level in L2 phonology, with the primary objective being speech that is readily intelligible. The method recommended for teaching pronunciation involves more focus on form than many currently advocate. This method, an applied phonetics approach, has students consciously aware (at least in the early stages) of much of what they do in the production of the sounds of English. Teaching pronunciation requires the instructor to recognize the importance of both productive and receptive skills. Accordingly, exercises of both types are referred to in this chapter. In addition, the matter of intelligibility is shown to be related to both segmental and suprasegmental aspects of language. Vocal characteristics such as rate and volume are also related to intelligibility and the effective use of these components is addressed. Of note, the ineffective use of vocal (paralinguistic) features of language frequently lead to less than readily intelligible speech when produced by native speakers of a language as well.

Chapter 5 ("Public Speaking") provides guidelines for effectively delivering both informative and persuasive speeches. Speeches of both types are generally included in most basic speech courses at the college level. Treatment in this chapter goes beyond what is generally appropriate for the basic course to include suggestions for classes where the students are English language learners. For both informative and persuasive speeches material is provided regarding selection of a topic, methods of delivery, and organization.

In addition, suggestions for delivering the speech are spelled out (e.g., eye contact, body language, visual aids, interpreting and acting upon feedback). Suggestions are also made regarding public speaking activities other than formal informative or persuasive speeches (e.g., speeches of introduction). Assessment of student performance in public speaking activities is also addressed. Assessment is dynamic in nature, not limited simply to the instructor providing evaluative comments to students following their public speaking assignments. All students should be active in the assessment process. The classroom atmosphere must be one in which students seek and appreciate constructive criticism, not only from the instructor, but from other students as well. Students should feel comfortable providing feedback to their classmates. In addition, this chapter aims to highlight the fact that public speaking activities can, and should, be linked to a plan for pronunciation improvement. Public speaking is only one of numerous units, all intertwined, in a carefully crafted syllabus designed to foster the development of oral communication skills. In the end, the material provided in this chapter should be useful to teachers in selecting public speaking activities to include in their classes with English language learners. The type and ultimate format of the activities selected for inclusion should, of course, be determined by the overall scope and level of the particular course.

Chapter 6 ("Group Communication Activities") focuses primarily on the problem-solving group discussion. Group discussion is frequently studied at the college level (as part of a basic speech course and/or as an independent course). Problem-solving discussions usually constitute a major component of the study of group discussion. Again, as with public speaking (covered in chapter 5), this book goes beyond the issue of teaching group discussion, in general, to addressing its role in a program of study for English language learners, in particular. Among the topics included are procedural guidelines to follow in a problem-solving discussion (with particular attention directed at the establishment of appropriate criteria by which to evaluate potential solutions). The problem-solving discussion provides the instructor with many opportunities to assess the progress of English language learners in their development as effective communicators in English. In addition to the problem-solving discussion, attention is paid to other group activities (e.g., role-playing, interviewing, debating). In each case, the group activity has a dual-faceted purpose. One is to become a more effective group participant; the other to hone one's skills in the development of oral proficiency in English.

Some very general/cross-disciplinary principles of lesson preparation are applied to teaching speech to English language learners in chapter 7

("Teaching Methodology"). While the components of a developmental lesson plan may vary somewhat, in all variants there should be a natural progression and sense of direction, readily apparent to the students, as a particular lesson evolves. Most teacher training programs familiarize aspiring teachers with teaching a developmental lesson. In this chapter two developmental lessons are outlined (in lesson plan format), each based on a different component of the speech syllabus. Each of these developmental lesson plans includes an aim, instructional objective(s), motivation, development, application, summary and assignment. While it is the case that not every lesson must be a developmental lesson, some certainly should be. The examples provided in this chapter, it is hoped, prove useful particularly to aspiring, but, in some measure, to in-service teachers as well. The lesson plans on the topics covered should, it is hoped, facilitate writing plans on other topics. It is noted that the lesson plan is only a means to an end. A beautifully organized lesson plan that is not successfully implemented in the classroom is of little value. Beyond the preparation of a lesson plan, this chapter lists, with explanatory details, some basic pitfalls to avoid in teaching, regardless of the subject being taught. In the case of the pitfalls included in this chapter, specific mention is made, as needed, to the teaching of speech to English language learners. Chapter 7 also takes a look at the qualities of a good teacher. These qualities certainly include, but go beyond, planning and presenting satisfactory lessons. In effect, this chapter suggests answers to the question -- What makes a good instructor, in general, and of students who are English language learners, in particular?

Chapter 8 ("Conclusion"), serving as a summary, highlights the critical role played by the classroom instructor in facilitating the development of oral communication skills in English language learners. It is stressed that teaching is a dynamic activity, requiring adherence to certain generally accepted pedagogical practices, but also permitting a flexibility based both on teacher preferences and the needs of the students in a given class. Also highlighted is the hope that this book encourages teachers to consider theory/research in decision-making about classroom practices. It is suggested that teachers step back periodically to objectively assess their own teaching. While this chapter is intended to provide a sense of closure by looking back at the material covered in the preceding chapters, it also notes the importance of looking ahead.

Chapters 2 through 7 conclude with some questions that should lead to additional thought and analysis.

# SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN ADULTS: THE LINGUISTIC DIMENSION

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The prevailing view about second language acquisition some fifty years ago was based on the assumption that performance in a second language was determined primarily by the structure of one's first language. In one of the most frequently cited (and now classic) works of that period, Lado's (1957) *Linguistics across Cultures: Applied Linguistics for Language Teachers*, it is claimed that areas in which the native and target languages are similar will pose no problem for the second language learner. On the other hand, areas where the languages differ will be problematic. Not surprisingly, Lado advises teachers to engage in contrastive analysis, a process of systematically comparing the first to the second language. Lado states, "The teacher who has made a comparison of the foreign language with the native language of the students will know better what the real learning problems are and can better provide for teaching them. He gains an insight into the linguistic problems involved that cannot easily be achieved otherwise" (p.2). Lado refers to various components of language to explain the process of contrastive analysis, providing numerous illustrative examples. Regarding a comparison of sounds systems, he asserts that one must determine for each phoneme in the second language whether there is a phonetically similar phoneme in the first language, whether variants of the phoneme in question are similar in the two languages, and finally whether the patterns of distribution are similar in the languages. The process of contrastive analysis predicts that speakers of Spanish learning

English will have a problem with segments that do not exist in Spanish (e.g., /v/ as in *vote*). Going beyond the level of the segment, Lado refers to sound sequences, again guided by the underlying assumption that similarities between languages will facilitate acquisition of the second language, with differences creating difficulties for the learner. Accordingly, Lado notes, the consonant cluster /θr/ as in <u>*three*</u> will be difficult for native speakers of Spanish because that cluster does not occur in Spanish (see Lado, 1957, chapter 2, for an in-depth treatment of these and other issues related to the contrastive analysis of sound systems).

Similarly, in the domain of grammar, Lado provides examples where first and second language differences serve to delineate areas of difficulty for the learner. Thus, the native speaker of Spanish, it is asserted, is likely to find question formation in English particularly troublesome as questions formed in English with changes in word order are formed by intonation pattern changes in Spanish. Differences in plural formation in Spanish and English, to provide another example, are likely to lead to problems for the second language learner. Lado points out that the plural formation of Spanish expressions like *la paloma blanca* ("the white dove") requires changes in the determiner (article), noun head (noun), and modifier (adjective) to form *las palomas blancas* ("the white doves"), while English requires a change only in the noun head itself (i.e., *the white dove<u>s</u>*). Lado argues, "Because of this difference in distribution the Spanish speaker will add a plural inflection to the modifier, *white*, and the English speaker learning Spanish will tend to omit the plural inflection in *blancas*" (p.66).

Lado proposes a procedure to enable teachers to do a contrastive analysis of grammatical systems across languages. This procedure includes a detailed examination, one structure at a time, of the grammatical features of the languages (see Lado, chapter 3, for an in-depth treatment of grammatical systems).

In the area of vocabulary, Lado, consistent with his views expressed on sound systems and grammar, states, "Similarity to and difference from the native language in form, meaning, and distribution will result in ease of difficulty in acquiring the vocabulary of a foreign language" (p. 82). Accordingly, cognates, because of their similarity in both meaning and form are argued to pose little difficulty (e.g., words like *hotel* and *hospital* in languages like Spanish and English). On the other hand, words classified by Lado as "deceptive cognates" (where similarity in form conceals a difference in meaning) prove difficult for the second language learner. Examples provided of such cognates are *milk*, borrowed from English into Japanese (but

with only "canned milk" as a referent for a period of time in Japanese) and *asistir* (Spanish) and *assist* (English), with the Spanish form meaning "to attend" (the latter example, Lado notes, leading to utterances like *assisted* rather than *attended a class* by learners of English as a second language with Spanish as a native language). Detailed steps are proposed for comparing vocabulary across languages (see Lado, chapter 4, for an in-depth discussion of vocabulary-related matters) .

The types of errors produced by second language learners can shed light on the intricate process of second language acquisition. To the extent that the fundamental underpinnings of contrastive analysis are correct in ascribing difficulties in acquiring a second language to areas in which the second language differs from a given learner's first language, one would expect most errors in the second language to be interlingual (i.e., based on interference from the first language). The error in the utterance *they have hungry* produced by a native speaker of French learning English could be classified as interlingual as the expression in French, *nous avons faim* ("we are hungry"), makes use of the verb *avoir* ("to have") rather than the verb *être* (to be). Similarly the production of *he has thirty years* (with the intended meaning "he is thirty years old"), produced by a native speaker of French, contains an interlingual error. In French, one says *il a trente ans* ("he is thirty years old"), again using the verb *avoir*, not *être*.

The framework within which Lado and so many others of that period (e.g., Fries, who wrote the Forward to Lado, 1957) were operating is known as behaviorism. It regards the acquisition of language to be largely a process of habit formation. As Ellis (1997) points out, in reference to behaviorism, ".....it was believed that errors were largely the result of interference (another term for negative transfer). That is, the habits of the L1 were supposed to prevent the learner from learning the habits of the L2" (p. 52). Understandably, the role of contrastive analysis in guiding second language teaching methodology is dependent largely on the extent to which one believes behaviorism accurately describes the process of language acquisition.

By the mid 1970's there was growing doubt about the major role previously attributed to contrastive analysis as a predictor of errors in the target language. The behavioristic model had fallen out of favor. In its place was a model known as mentalism in which language was not viewed as a stimulus-response (i.e., habit formation) activity. As Ellis (1997) states, "From a preoccupation with the role of 'nurture' (i.e. how environmental factors shape learning), researchers switched their attention to 'nature' (i.e. how the innate properties of the human mind shape learning). This new paradigm was,

therefore, mentalist (or 'nativist') in orientation" (p. 32). The decade of the 1970's saw a series of morpheme studies, which are to this day frequently cited as evidence consistent with a mentalist view of language.

Roger Brown (1973), in his seminal work, *A First Language: The Early Stages*, found that the three children he studied (Adam, Eve, and Sarah) acquired the 14 morphemes of English examined in virtually the same order. Included among these morphemes were the present progressive, the prepositions *in* and *on*, the past regular and irregular, the contractible and uncontractible copula, the contractible and uncontractible auxiliary, and the articles *a* and *the*. Brown established correct use of a morpheme in 90% of obligatory occasions as the criterion for acquisition. Interestingly, the findings of Brown's longitudinal study were consistent with the findings of a cross-sectional study on the acquisition of morphemes by first language learners of English conducted by de Villiers and de Villiers (1973). Because de Villiers and de Villiers was a cross-sectional (not longitudinal) study, the order of morphemes found in their study was technically a difficulty order rather than a true order of acquisition.

Brown (1973) sparked a series of morpheme studies with second language learners as participants. Of note, Gitterman and Krashen (1975), in their review of Brown (1973), state, "Brown's work is definitely a landmark in developmental psycholinguistics. However, when one considers all of its implications for second language learning ….. this fact seems almost incidental" (p. 242). The second language morpheme studies motivated by Brown's research were for the most part cross-sectional in nature, thus providing difficulty orders rather than true orders of acquisition. However, as the results of the de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) cross-sectional study were consistent with the results found in the Brown (1973) longitudinal study, some support (although clearly not definitive proof) was provided for the viewpoint that difficulty orders might also represent true orders of acquisition (see, for example, Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982).

In a cross-sectional study of L2 children, all native speakers of Spanish learning English, Dulay and Burt (1973) found a consistent order of difficulty for the morphemes (a subset of the 14 morphemes studied by Brown) examined in their study. However, the order found by Dulay and Burt was different from the order found by Brown. Dulay and Burt speculate that the differences found in the L1 and L2 orders are not surprising as the children (L1 v. L2) were at different stages of development. While it is true that participants in the Dulay and Burt study were not a homogeneous group in terms degree of exposure to English, there existed a measure of homogeneity