

## DRAMA WORKS IN TEACHING PRONUNCIATION

*by Toshiko Sakurai*

Many teachers feel that teaching pronunciation is not rewarding. According to an investigation of the papers given at the 1978 TESOL convention, less than 2 percent dealt with pronunciation (Gilbert: 1970). However, Lane (1963) reported that foreign-accent speech was approximately 40 percent less intelligible than native speech under all experimental conditions and the gap between understanding the foreigner and the native might have been expected to grow wider with an increasing level of distortion. Since "communicability" is our concern, we should not give up teaching pronunciation and therefore we should seek effective methods in doing so. The aim of this paper is to present a process of developing effective methods by introducing four syllabi of my design. Two of them were found to be effective and the rest were ineffective. This is not a scientific paper supported by research, but is a paper based on the eight-years experiences of a group teachers<sup>1</sup> who have struggled with teaching pronunciation at a junior college.

### 1. The Goal of the Syllabi

The goal is to lead the students to acquire acceptable pronunciation of a foreign language, i.e., English. In the context of my junior college the specific goal is to develop

oral paragraph reading ability, as this is necessary for some other courses.

What does "oral reading" require the students to do? Research on miscue analysis indicates that it is just not a matter of relating letters to sounds. Hudelson (1981) summarizes:

Numerous analyses of native English speaking readers' oral reading and retelling have shown that even young readers are not bound to letter-by-letter processing of print. Rather readers use both selected visual cues and their knowledge of language and the real world to anticipate, to predict, and to hypothesize about print.

I have designed the syllabi to make the students integrate all the tasks required for oral reading.

## 2. General Course Work

The students practice segmentals as well as supra-segmentals. In each class, several elements are emphasized. The students are instructed to transcribe the words, phrases and sentences to be practiced in the following class by I.P.A. This is an effective way to relate letters to sounds. Action (1984) advocated this work:

... the relationship between pronunciation and orthography cannot be overemphasized. Many mispronunciations, especially with vowels, are simply a matter of the students' not knowing the correct sound in a particular environment or even realizing that it is being mispronounced. To effect significant and lasting change often requires developing a highly visual strategy, that is, a strong visual awareness or sensitivity to the shapes of words (see Dickenson 1975 and elsewhere).

With the aid of their transcriptions, they learn how to use their articulators. This work, as part of the following syllabi, has yielded varied results.

### 3. Syllabi

#### a. The First Syllabus

It took a year to cover the segmentals and the suprasegmentals. Sentences, dialogues and several short paragraphs were used to practice. At the end of the course, the students recorded several sentences, a few dialogues and one paragraph, most of which were new to them. They managed to read the sentences and the dialogues satisfactorily but not the paragraph. The paragraph reading was awkward, not natural. They paused at the wrong places and stressed too many words. I assumed that the paragraphs were meaningless to the students and that they did not motivate the students to learn how to convey the contents of the paragraphs and how to integrate the tasks necessary for oral reading. In the second syllabus therefore, a famous folklore tale was adapted instead of short paragraphs. I believed that familiar content would motivate the students to retell the story and to develop oral reading skill.

#### b. The Second Syllabus

It took a year to cover all the segmentals and the suprasegmentals. Dialogues and one folklore tale were practiced. By the end of the course, the students read sentences and dialogues well. Again, however, many failed to read a paragraph satisfactorily. They seemed to have reached a plateau at sentence and dialogue level

and were not able to go beyond that level. Reading a full paragraph was beyond their skills. Although I could not deduce the causes of the failure, the syllabus was drastically changed to find a more effective way to teach pronunciation.

### c. Third Syllabus

Most of the segmentals as well as the supra-segmentals were covered in the spring term. Dialogues were used for practice. In the fall term, a skit, two short paragraphs and three or four short stories were utilized. The paragraph and some of the stories contained dialogues in them. Dramatization was the purpose of using the skit, the paragraphs and some of the stories. With the dramatization I tried to create a co-operative atmosphere and to put the students into the world of the reading materials. I thought this would help the students realize that oral reading is not just the work of relating letters to sounds, but the work of conveying meanings. Most of the materials were dramatized first and then read individually. At the end of the year about two thirds of the students attained the goal of good pronunciation. Their articulation was not awkward. They stressed the appropriate words and their intonation was expressive. I used a questionnaire to find out the students' reactions to the dramatization. This will be discussed later. This syllabus was powerful, but to increase the number of successful students it was modified a little.

#### d. The Fourth Syllabus

The syllabus for the spring term remained the same. In the fall term, two new works were added to the skit, paragraphs and short stories. The students were asked to record a short paragraph at home. No class instruction was given for this work. Their reading was evaluated and some comments were made. The model reading tape was then given out and the students were asked to re-record the same paragraph. In this way they read three or four paragraphs in the fall term. The other work involved spontaneous reading. A story of about 800 words was distributed and 20 minutes were allotted to understand the content. Then the story was discussed. After the discussion, the students were asked to practice oral reading for 15 minutes. Afterwards some of the students were asked to read a few sentences. Some were asked to read half of the story and some the whole story. Their reading was understandable. At the end of the year, more than two thirds of the students read a paragraph at a comprehensible level. No questionnaire has yet been used to ascertain the effectiveness of the newly added works. Interestingly, the students seemed to discover strategies for integrating all the tasks necessary for oral reading in this syllabus. This syllabus will be tried again to see whether it is not a "hit and miss" type of program.

Of the above mentioned syllabi, the third and the fourth were effective. The key factor in these syllabi was dramatization. In the following sections, the students' reactions to the activities of the third syllabus will be discussed in order to find out why the

dramatization worked.

#### 4. The Students' Reactions

The questionnaire was used to see how the students reacted to the dialogue reading, to the dramatization and to the individual storytelling after the dramatization. This questionnaire, a modified version of Stern's questionnaire<sup>2</sup> that had been developed to find out the effectiveness of dramatization, is found in the appendix. It was completed by three classes; one advanced and two intermediate classes at the end of the third syllabus year. There were 34 students in the advanced class and some of them had lived in English speaking countries. The number in the intermediate I and II were 33 and 32 respectively.

Part I asked the students to evaluate the usefulness of the dialogues practiced in the spring term and the storytelling in the fall term. Table 1 and 2 list the means of each item in this part. Table 3 shows the differences between the dialogue and the storytelling. Interestingly, the students said the storytelling was less effective in improving pronunciation. However, it was good for improving intonation and expression. Storytelling worked better in helping the students gain confidence in speaking English and in reducing their embarrassment.

**Table 1. Means of Items on Questionnaire on the Dialogues<sup>3</sup>**

	Advanced class n=34	Inter- mediate I n=33	Inter- mediate II n=32
1a Improving pronunciation	3.8 <sup>a</sup>	4	4.2
1b Improving intonation and expression	3.5	3.4	3.6
1c Gaining self-confidence in speaking English	2.4	2.9	2.7
1d Becoming less inhibited, or less embarrassed when speaking in front of a group	2.7	2.9	1.8
1e Increasing/enriching your vocabulary	2.1	2.0	2.0

<sup>a</sup> The figures are based on the following Likert scale response: 1-not successful; 2-a little useful; 3-somewhat useful; 4-quite useful; 5-very useful

**Table 2. Means of Items on Questionnaire on the Storytelling**

Items on questionnaire Part I-2	Advanced class n=34	Inter- mediate I n=33	Inter- mediate II n=32
2a Improving pronunciation	3.7 <sup>a</sup>	3.6	3.9
2b Improving intonation and expression	3.9	3.9	4.4
2c Gaining self-confidence in speaking English	3.0	3.3	3.5
2d Becoming less inhibited, or less embarrassed when speaking in front of a group	3.3	3.5	3.5
2e Increasing/enriching your vocabulary	2.7	2.8	2.8

<sup>a</sup> The figures are based on the following Likert scale response: 1-not successful; 2-a little useful; 3-somewhat useful; 4-quite useful; 5-very useful

**Table 3. The Differences between the Storytelling and the Dialogue**

	Advanced class n=34	Inter- mediate I n=33	Inter- mediate II n=32
a Improving pronunciation	-0.1 <sup>a</sup>	-0.4	-0.3
b Improving intonation and expression	+0.4	+0.5	+0.8
c Gaining self-confidence in speaking English	+0.6	+0.4	+0.8
d Becoming less inhibited, or less embarrassed when speaking in front of a group	+0.6	+0.4	+1.7
e Increasing/enriching your vocabulary	+0.6	+0.8	+0.8

<sup>a</sup> + means that the students gained more in the storytelling than in the dialogue while - means that they gained more in the dialogue than in the storytelling.

Part II asked the students to indicate how they felt about dramatizing the stories with their classmates and reading them individually. Two classes said they were somewhat<sup>4</sup> satisfied with the dramatization. These two said the dramatization somewhat helped them reduce both nervousness and embarrassment. All the classes said it somewhat helped them understand the characters in the stories and identify with the roles of the characters.

In the storytelling, on the other hand, which was an individual work, they were more than somewhat nervous and embarrassed. Two classes said understanding the characters was somewhat difficult. All said identifying with the characters was quite<sup>5</sup> difficult. However, all of the classes somewhat enjoyed both the storytelling and the dramatization.

Table 4. Student Reaction to Storytelling

Items on questionnaire Part II	Advanced class n=34	Inter-mediate I n=33	Inter-mediate II n=32
1. Satisfaction with Ability/Reduction of Frustration	2.4 <sup>a</sup>	2.4	2.8
2. Difficulty in understanding characters	3.2 <sup>b</sup>	3.0	2.9
3. Nervousness in reading by yourself	3.4	3.9	3.9
4. Difficulty in identifying with or stepping into roles of characters	3.7	4	4.4
5. Embarrassment when reading in front of a group	3.8	3.9	3.9
6. Enjoyment when reading	3.3	3.0	3.5
7. Evaluation of own performance	2.6 <sup>c</sup>	2.6	2.6

<sup>a</sup> The figures in the first section are based on the following Likert scale:

1	2	3	4	5
Overall I was displeased with my ability. I felt frustrated.				Overall I was pleased with my ability. I felt I was able to express myself with ease.

<sup>b</sup> The figures in the second section are based on the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	somewhat	quite	very much

<sup>c</sup> The figures in the third section are based on the following Likert scale:

1	2	3	4	5
I didn't like it. It was worse than I thought it would be.		About average		I like it very much. It was better than I thought it would be.

Table 5. Student Reaction to Drama

Items on questionnaire Part II-1	Advanced class n=34	Inter- mediate I n=33	Inter- mediate II n=32
1. Satisfaction with ability/Reduction of frustration	2.8 <sup>a</sup>	2.3	3.1
2. Understanding the characters in the stories	3.7 <sup>b</sup>	3.5	3.9
3. Reduction of nervousness	3.2	2.9	3
4. Easiness in identifying with or stepping into roles of characters	3.5	3.1	3
5. Decrease of embarrassment	3.4	2.9	3.6
6. Enjoyment when reading	3.8	3.3	3.8
7. Evaluation of own performance	2.8 <sup>c</sup>	2.4	2.9

<sup>a</sup> The figures in the first section are based on the following Likert scale:

1	2	3	4	5
Overall I was displeased with my ability. I felt frustrated.				Overall I was pleased with my ability. I felt I was able to express myself with ease.

<sup>b</sup> The figures in the second section are based on the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	somewhat	quite	very much

<sup>c</sup> The figures in the third section are based on the following Likert scale:

1	2	3	4	5
I didn't like it. It was worse than I thought it would be.				I like it very much. It was better than I thought it would be.

Though they reported they were more than somewhat embarrassed when reading the stories in front of the class, they still suggested they were less inhibited and less embarrassed when reading the stories than reading the dialogues (Table 3a).

From this questionnaire, we can get a better idea of the effectiveness of the dramatization. Firstly, it helped the students understand the characters and identify with them. Secondly, it reduced inhibition and embarrassment. *Drama functions as a group effort, giving safety through numbers (Stern: 83)*. In this group activity it was easier for them to identify with the characters and to deliver the intonation and expression which fitted. This carried over into the storytelling. The students' report in part II supports this carry-over. They reported that the storytelling was good for improving intonation and expression. Their involvement in delivering the stories drew their attention away from the segmentals. Table 3 a and b support this. However, as the segmentals had been practiced intensively in the spring term, they did not deviate from the comprehensible level. At the same time, the inhibition and the embarrassment of the students were found to be more reduced in the storytelling than in the dialogue. These reductions made the students concentrate on the suprasegmentals. Thus a lot of the students could attain the goal of good pronunciation.

Table 6. Activities to be Desired

Item on question- naire Part III	Activity	Advanced class %		Inter- mediate I %		Inter- mediate II %	
		(n=34)		(n=33)		(n=32)	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1	Reading dialogues	45	56	89	11	52	48
2	Storytelling without dramatization	33	67	33	67	26	74
3	Storytelling with dramatization	72	27	74	26	74	26

Part III of the questionnaire asked about activities the students desired. More than 70 percent wanted to dramatize stories and read them individually (Table 6).

The students' responses to the questionnaire reveal the causes of the failures with the first and the second syllabi. In spite of the fact that a lot of the students attained the goal with the fourth syllabus, they said it was still difficult for them to identify with the characters when reading the stories by themselves, even after the dramatization. Without the dramatization, it might have been much harder to do so. Besides, much embarrassment and great inhibition might have prevented them from delivering appropriate intonation and expression. Consequently, they stressed too many words and concentrated too much on the segmentals. This led to exaggerated and awkward oral reading.

## 5. Conclusion

Failures in teaching oral reading led me to the most effective syllabi. These syllabi were powerful in the reduction of inhibition and in encouraging identification with characters in the stories. Although it is surprisingly time consuming to carry out the ideal syllabi, I can conclude that it is rewarding when I hear that native speakers of English understand what the students say and also when I see them doing English activities. I want to encourage you who are struggling with teaching pronunciation to keep looking for more effective ways appropriate to your own context.

## NOTES

1. I owe a lot to Ms. Yasuyo Edasawa who was a co-teacher at Osaka Jogakuin Junior College. However, I am solely responsible for the content of this paper.
2. See Stern's questionnaire in the appendix of Stern (1983).
3. The formats of the tables on the questionnaire are Stern's.
4. 'Somewhat' indicates 3 on the following Likert Scale.

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	somewhat	quite	very much
5. 'Quite' indicates 4 on the following Likert Scale.

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	somewhat	quite	very much

## APPENDIX

### Evaluation of the Course

Part I: Circle the number that most closely reflects your opinion.

#### 1. DIALOGUES PRACTICED IN THE SPRING TERM

How useful were they for you in each of the following areas?

	Not useful	A little useful	Somewhat useful	Quite useful	Very useful
a) Improving pronunciation	1	2	3	4	5
b) Improving intonation and expression	1	2	3	4	5
c) Gaining self-confidence in speaking English	1	2	3	4	5
d) Becoming less inhibited, or less embarrassed when speaking in front of a group	1	2	3	4	5
e) Increasing/enriching your vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5
f) Did they help you improve your pronunciation? Please explain.					

## 2. STORIES READ IN THE FALL TERM

How useful were they for you in each of the following areas?

	Not useful	A little useful	Somewhat useful	Quite useful	Very useful
a) Improving pronunciation	1	2	3	4	5
b) Improving intonation and expression	1	2	3	4	5
c) Gaining self-confidence in speaking English	1	2	3	4	5
d) Becoming less inhibited, or less embarrassed when speaking in front of a group	1	2	3	4	5
e) Increasing/enriching your vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5
f) Did they help you improve your pronunciation? Please explain.					

This questionnaire was copied from "Why Drama Works: A Psycholinguistic Perspective" by Susan L. Stern with modification. This article appears in *Methods that Work* edited by John W. Oller, Jr. and Patricia A. Richard-Amato, Newbury House, 1983.

**PART II**

**STORYTELLING**

1. Think back to when you were reading the stories after dramatization, and try to remember how you felt about your ability to express yourself in English at that time.

Overall I was displeased with my ability. I felt very frustrated.

1

2

3

4

Overall I was pleased with my ability. I felt I was able to express myself with ease.

5

2. How difficult did you find it to understand the characters you were reading?

Not at all  
difficult

1

A little

2

Somewhat

3

Quite

4

Very  
difficult

5

3. How nervous did you feel when reading by yourself?

Not at all  
nervous

1

A little

2

Somewhat

3

Quite

4

Very  
nervous

5

4. How difficult did you find it to identify with, or step into the roles of the characters you were reading?

Not at all  
difficult

1

A little

2

Somewhat

3

Quite

4

Very  
difficult

5

5. How embarrassed did you feel when reading in front of the class?

Not at all  
embarrassed

1

A little

2

Somewhat

3

Quite

4

Very  
embarrassed

5

6. How much did you enjoy reading?

Not at all

1

A little

2

Somewhat

3

Quite

4

Very much

5

7. How would you evaluate your own performance?

I didn't like it. It was worse than I thought it would be.		About average		I like it very much. It was better than I thought it would be.
1	2	3	4	5

DRAMATIZATION

1. Think back to when you were participating in the dramas, and try to remember how you felt about your ability to express yourself in English at that time?

Overall I was displeased with my ability. I felt very frustrated.				Overall I was pleased with my ability. I felt I was able to express myself with ease.
1	2	3	4	5

2. How much did it help you understand the characters in the stories?

Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Quite	Very much
1	2	3	4	5

3. How much did it help you reduce your nervousness?

Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Quite	Very much
1	2	3	4	5

4. How much did it help you identify with, or step into the roles of the characters of the stories?

Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Quite	Very much
1	2	3	4	5

5. How much did it help you ease your embarrassment?

Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Quite	Very much
1	2	3	4	5

6. How much did you enjoy participating in the dramas?

Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Quite	Very much
1	2	3	4	5

7. How would you evaluate your own performance?

I didn't like it. It was worse than I thought it would be.		About average		I like it very much. It was better than I thought it would be.
1	2	3	4	5

### PART III

1. Would you like to read the dialogues as you did in the spring term?

Yes No

2. Would you like to read the stories without dramatization?

Yes No

3. Would you like to read the stories with dramatization?

Yes No

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