



Techniques of Testing Pronunciation: Production and Recognition Levels

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Abstract

The current research is an attempt at giving a general look at techniques of testing pronunciation: production and recognition levels. The research falls into four sections, where section one concentrates on testing pronunciation, what to test and the stages of a test, types of testing and ideal testing. Section two shades light on sound production techniques and their types. Explanations and illustrations that are concerned the sound recognition techniques are involved in section three. Whereas Section four includes conclusions and pedagogical implications.

1. What Is Testing Pronunciation?

Testing can be defined according to Hartmann (1972:236), where he says that testing is

The setting of exercises and tasks to measure either the student's aptitude for a particular subject or his achievement in a particular subject. Tests in language teaching should be related to the aim of the instruction, and ideally all linguistic skills taught . . . should be represented in language examinations.

While pronunciation can be defined as “The way an individual speaker or group of speakers within a speech community articulate speech sounds.” (Ibid:186)

Concerning testing pronunciation, a very interesting point of view has presented by Lado (1961:40) who has announced that “unless an utterance or part of an utterance sounds exactly like that of native speaker it is considered incorrect.” He adds that these tests are extremely difficult to give and particularly to score objectively because the examiner must be trained phonetically, trained teachers will be reflected in the scores.



1.1 What to Test?

Throughout this subtitle, I'll try to make a summery to what has been mentioned by Lado (Ibid:42-5), where he has pointed out some main points to be tested. Accordingly, he has expressed that “by a systematic comparison of the phonological system of the native language with that of the language to be learned, we discover the learning problems. These learning problems constitute the content of a test.”

The suggested points to be tested are:

- 1- Stage 1: Find or prepare a linguistic analysis of the sound system of the language to be learned and a similar description of the language of the learner.
- 2- Stage 2: Compare the two sound systems phoneme by phoneme in order to locate, describe the points of difficulty.

The comparison of each phoneme should include at least three queries. First, does the native language have a similar phoneme? For example in comparing the sound system of English with that of Kusien, a language spoken by about 2000 people in the easternmost part of the Caroline Island, we should find that English /d/ as in *day* has no counter part in this language.

Second, are the variants of the native language phoneme similar to the variants of the foreign phoneme? For example, we would find that Spanish /d/ has a stop variants [d] as in *de* and a fricative variant [ð] as in *Lado*. The fricative variant is more similar to English /ð/ as in *they* than to /d/ as in *day*. Thus, he will pronounce English “ladder” as “lather” because he normally uses the fricative variant between vowels in Spanish.

Third, is the phoneme similarly distributed? Does it occur in the same positions that it occurs in the foreign language? For example, in comparing French with English we find that French /ʒ/ as in *je* has a parallel English phoneme /ʒ/ as in *measure*.

3-Stage 3: Prepare the list of problems to be tested. Since the problems will differ somewhat for production and recognition, different lists are necessary to test the student's pronunciation in speaking and in listening.(Ibid)

4-Stages 4&5: Production and recognition levels consequently will be explained in details later on.

1.2 Testing Types

A language test can either be subjective with the examiner's judgment and opinion dominating the scoring, or objective, but it is not a test for language achievement. It simply tests one's ability to write an



essay. The same applies to translation. A person who translates well does not necessarily pronounce or speak or write the foreign language well. Objective tests are appropriate for testing the pupil's general efficiency in the foreign language.

An objective test can be as difficult as any other test and may require a lot of thinking on the part of the pupil. Its only shortcoming is that it does not test the pupil's ability to recognize his thoughts.(El-Bettar, 1965:91-4)

1.3 The Ideal Testing

A good clarification of the ideal testing is presented by El-Bettar (Ibid), who says that

An ideal test is that which is valid, reliable, scorable, economical and administrable. By 'valid' is meant that it tests a specific linguistic element such as 'pronunciation' alone or vocabulary alone in a living communicative situation. By 'reliability' is meant the correspondence in the grades scored by the pupils in two different consecutive tests of the same skills or elements.

Moreover, he adds that objective tests are easy to score, unlike subjective tests, particularly through the use of a specially-prepared answer sheet. The administrability of a test depends on the availability of the equipment needed, if any is necessary and on the personnel of the school.

2. Sound Production Techniques

Sound-Production is the testing of pupil's ability to distinguish between contrastive sounds but it does not mean testing his ability to pronounce English accurately. El-Bettar (1965:97) states that

The procedure followed in testing the pupil's control of a certain pronunciation problem is to stimulate the pupil to produce utterances containing them, and to score the responses, but the type of stimulus used and the kind of scoring adopted may vary largely. The stimuli used to elicit utterances containing the pronunciation problems may be verbal, pictorial or written.

Pictures can be used with verbal instructions as stimuli as demonstrated below:

Example: What is he doing?

Possible responses are:

1- He is reading.



- 2- The man is reading.
- 3- He is reading a newspaper.

Reading out aloud a passage containing the pronunciation problems to be tested is a simple uniform method but not reliable enough, because of the extraneous factor of another variable, namely the ability to read.

Generally, Lado (1961:45) tries to comment on production technique in which he says that

We list the phoneme of the foreign language that the student misses, not the one he produces in error. The problem will be more complicated when one variant in the native language becomes one phoneme in the foreign language and another variant becomes a different phoneme. For example, English /ð/ produced as /d/ initially, after pause, and after /l/ and /n/. In final position English /d/ becomes /ð/ or is omitted altogether.

2.1 Types of Sound Production Tests

We can classify sound production tests into three main types: scored interviews; highly structured speech samples and paper-and-pencil tests of pronunciation.

2.1.1 Scored Interviews

The researcher puts down the explanations of the best illustration of this technique which is made by Harris(1969: 83-5). He mentions that “The simplest and the most frequently employed method of measuring oral proficiency is to have one or more trained raters interview each candidate separately and record their evaluations of his competence in the spoken language.” Consequently he tries to comment on the weakness of some points and he declares that

The great weakness of oral ratings is their tendency to have rather low reliability. No two interviews are conducted exactly alike, even by the same interviewer, and even though it may be argued that some variation is desirable, or even essential, it is clear that the test reliability will be adversely affected....no interviewer can maintain exactly the same scoring standards throughout a large number of interviews, and these inevitable shifts in standards will lower the rater reliability of the measure.

Lado (1961: 81-2) has called this type of technique as a ‘verbal stimuli technique’.



2.1.2 Highly Structured Speech Samples

As a rule, these tests are in several parts, each designs to elicit a somewhat different kind of speech sample. The following item types, which are drawn from foreign language tests for native speakers of English, will show some techniques that test foreign students:

NOTE(1): *The rater listen to the pronunciation of sentences and marking whether or not each pronounces correctly.*

1-Sentence repetition. The examinee hears and then repeats a series of short sentences. For example:

<u>Sentences</u>	<u>Points to be rated</u>
a-Hadeel always likes good food.	Vowel contrast in "good": "food"
b-It'll be done through six weeks.	Vowel contrast in "six": "weeks"
c-They've gone farther south.	Voiced-voiceless fricatives in "farther": "south"

2-Reading Passage. In English and other languages, the most precise technique “for testing pronunciation of the sound segments of a language is to have the student read out aloud the material you prepare for the test.” (Lado, 1961: 83).The examinee is given several minutes to read a passage silently, after which he is instructed to read it aloud at normal speed and with appropriate expression, for example:

<u>Examiner's copy of the test</u>	<u>Points to be rated</u>
While Mr. Hassan watched T.V, his wife finished packing his clothes for the trip. The suitcase was already quite full, and she was having a great deal of difficulty finding room for the shirts, socks and handkerchiefs.	Primary stress Voiced final consonant(s) Vowel quality Primary stress Series intonation

3-Sentence conversation. The examinee is instructed to convert or transform sentences into specific ways (from positive to negative, from statement to question, from present tense to past, etc.)

4-Sentence construction. The voice on the tape asks the examinee to compose sentences appropriate to specific situations.



indeed. Furthermore, correlation with more direct measures of pronunciation indicated that the written pronunciation tests had very low validity, and that the theoretical basis of such tests is open to question.

3. Sound Recognition Techniques

Some techniques are used for testing recognition of the sound segments. These techniques are as follows:

3.1 Sound to Phonemic Symbols

El-Bettar illustrates that sound to phonemic symbol is most important in classes familiar with a phonemic alphabet of the foreign language. The pupil either writes the phonemic symbol of what he hears or checks the phonemic representation of what he hears if it is given on his answer sheet. Although, the problem sounds and contrasts should be included within the stimulus words or sentences. Some variations of using phonemic symbols are possible. For instance, the teacher (examiner) pronounces several phonemic symbols, and the student, who has a list of the phonemic symbols, marks the ones he thinks he perceives. (Lado, 1961:51)

3.2 Minimal Pairs of Words

Minimal pairs of words is an excellent technique for class room testing. It uses the troublesome contrasts for a certain language background. The examiner chooses minimal pairs of words and reads these words to the students whom are listening: 1. fit; hit. 2. may; my. 3. sit; seat. 4. life; live. 5. pin; pan, etc. The examiner should check whether the students could distinguish phonemes of each pair of words or not. (Ibid: 53-4)

As a result, (Ibid: 45) assures that it is

difficult to hear for speakers of a particular native language and the ones with which they are likely to confuse them. We usually list these problems in pairs. For example; the Spanish speaker has trouble hearing English /ð/ because he does not have a parallel phoneme in Spanish. He hears it as Spanish /d/, which he transfers as English /d/.

The using of pairs of words, phrases or sentences introducing a sound contrast is more valid than isolated words, as in:

- 1- They heat it.
They hit it.



2- Let me see the sheep.

Let me see the ship.

The pupil has to decide which pairs are the same and which are different. The two perception techniques set out above require that the pupil identifies phonemes regardless of the meaning of the words and sentences in which they appear. (El-Bettar, 1965: 95)

NOTE(2): In order to avoid the process of students guessing, the examiner can use either ' triplets' in which he reads three words or sentences aloud that differ only by one of the troublesome contrasts, or 'quadruplets' where he reads four words or sentences instead of three.(Lado, 1969: 53-5)

3.3 Sound to Pictures

The following perception technique calls for recognizing the phonemic distinction between the components of a minimal pair through the meaning of the utterances used. The examiner reads a word or sentence and the pupils choose from two or more pictures the one that fits the sentence. (El-Bettar, 1965: 95)

4. Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

The researcher hopes that he provides a general satisfactory exposition to the techniques of testing pronunciation and reaches at the following points:

First, concerning the sound production techniques:

- 1- The validity of paper-and-pencil objective techniques remains largely unproven, such techniques should be used with caution, and never as the sole measure of oral proficiency.
- 2- The technique of highly structured speech samples shows much promise, but such testing is still in the experimental stage and requires very great test-writing skill and experience.
- 3- The scored interview is still probably the best technique for use in relatively informal, small-scale testing situations, and ways can be shown for substantially improving the effectiveness of this testing device.

Second, the points that are related to sound recognition techniques, can be shown as:

- 4- The emphasis on the use of minimal pairs of words is to distinguish and recognise the differences among phonemes.



- 5- The application of the technique of sound to phonemic symbol on sheets may bring attention to, sometimes, the validity of the testing.
- 6- As a result, the flavour technique of testing recognition of the sounds of a foreign language is that phonemic contrasts units throughout an ordinary classroom quizzes and tests.

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