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**Learning to Pronounce**

**Through**

**Tongue Twisters**

1. **Context**

* Subject matter:

Our lesson uses tongue twisters to teach and improve foreign language learners’ pronunciation. Placing emphasis on teaching pronunciation is beneficial, as many language learners do not pay much attention to pronunciation and think that it is less important than other aspects of learning language. However, pronunciation plays a crucial role in communication, which is why foreign language learners want to learn the language. It is also important in terms of helping to improve listening comprehension and to enhance self-confidence. Specifically, our project aims to help learners develop self-awareness of specific phonemes in the target language that they have difficulty with, and begin to strategize ways of improving their pronunciation.

* Learners:

Our project could be adjusted for language learners at all levels of proficiency as well as for different age groups. Pronunciation development begins during the early stages of language learning. Since learners do not often have a model or any guidance, they perceive the sounds of the target language based on the standard native language sounds taught by teachers. So it is good to have pronunciation practice for learners at the beginning level of learning the language. Our lesson plan could also be easily adapted for intermediate or more advanced learners. Compared to the learners at the beginning level, they are more self-conscious and able to notice their shortcomings in the process of language learning. Therefore, with the help of teachers and the course they design, it would be easy for them to figure out their problems of pronunciation and correct them.

* Type of course

Our lesson could be used for many different types of course: both ESL and EFL course, and any foreign language courses. It could be used for the specific pronunciation course, and also for more general language teaching since our lesson not only focuses on pronunciation, it also requires students to practice listening and speaking at the same time.

1. **Learning Objective**

* The learning objectives for our project are to enhance the students listening, speaking and pronunciation skills with the help of tongue twisters and technology, as well as to foster a cognitive awareness of individual pronunciation difficulties and challenges.

The sounds, which we are aiming to improve with our project, entirely depend on the learners target and first language. We have three possible scenarios: For Chinese learners of English this could, for example, be the r/l differentiation or the ‘th’ sound, while English learners’ of Chinese often have difficulty differentiating between the Chinese sounds ‘x’ and ‘sh’. The last learner group could be English learners of German, who have problems, for instance, pronouncing the German ‘r’ sound in its trilled and untrilled variety.

However, good pronunciation is essential for a fluent conversation and can only be acquired by equally working on both the speaking and listening skills of the learners. In improving students listening skills they learn to evaluate their own and their fellow students speaking abilities, because they learn to differentiate between the sounds which they are unfamiliar with in their own native language. Our exercise aims to help students develop all three skills (pronunciation, speaking, and listening) in combination with each other. Additionally, questions that prompt explicit awareness of specific challenging phonemes will hopefully create a meta-awareness of students’ individual pronunciation challenges.

1. **Technical prerequisites**

* Before students and instructors can use the available technology both sides have to know how to use the software. In this project we will mainly work with *voicethread* as the platform where students will share their projects with each other and where they can leave comments on each other’s slides. Furthermore, we will use two websites as resources that give pronunciation guidelines (www.soundcomparisons.com and [http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics/](http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/%20phonetics/)) and one of two different text-to-speech softwares. The more primitive software is called *eSpeak –* and is available in multiple languages. The better text-to-speech software is *Sinovoice*, but is limited to Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, & English.

In the case of *voicethread* teachers should get a *voicethread pro account* first (email to voicethread) to be able to open a group and share the link with the students so they can join and share their material with the class. Furthermore, it is important to show the students how *voicethread* is used, especially how an account is created and how they activate their *voicethread* slides after joining the group so that everyone can see their project and comment on it. They can access *voicethread*, just as the teachers do, with their psu account. First, they will have to create an account and upload a picture or similar file and give the project a name. Following this they can start working on their project by adding pictures and then comment on their slide by either writing or speaking, in this case the tongue twister. Important: After they have finished they have to click the little eye button and the little comment box button (under edit/share), otherwise no one will be able to see them and comment on their *voicethread*. Alternatives to *voicethread*, at least for the recording of files, are *aviary.com* and *audacity software*. The problem with these programs is that they do not provide a similar platform to voicethread, so the teacher or group would have to safe the sound files and send them to each other, having to create an additional file for their answers. This would make the project for the students more difficult.

An additional software for the students to use outside of the classroom is *eSpeak*. *eSpeak* is a software where you can type in a text (in this case the tongue twisters) and after you have adjusted the settings to the right language you will hear the tongue twister spoken in the target language. This provides students with the wonderful opportunity to practice their project outside of class and to improve their pronunciation for a successful voicethread project. An alternative to *Espeak* is the speaking function from *google.translate.com*. However, the problem with this website is that the spoken version of the text is usually not very understandable and students would have problems to hear the correct pronunciation.

Though *eSpeak* is helpful for the students and provides them with a source for hearing the sounds of words pronounced, the end product is quite primitive – as *eSpeak* produces a definite ‘computer’ voice production. A better option (in terms of quality) is *Sinovoice* (sinovoice.com). The *Sinovoice* tool produces a much better quality output, as the sounds and words are recordings of an actual person speaking. The weakness with *Sinovoice* is that it can only be used with Mandarin, Cantonese, English, and Korean.

1. **Task Description**

* Lesson Plan & Task Description
  1. Explicit in-class Instruction – The task will begin with explicit in-class instruction on both the technology that will be used as well as instruction on sounds that are difficult for the students to pronounce. The technology will be explained (as described above), and then the focus of instruction will be on pronunciation. This, of course, will depend on the class’s L1 and L2 backgrounds. For example, English L1/Chinese L2 students might be instructed on differentiating between */x/*  and */sh/*, English L1/German L2 could be instructed on pronouncing the trilled */r/*, etc. As part of the explicit instruction, students will also be pointed to several websites (see handout) that provide further assistance with pronunciation.
  2. In-Class Activity – A small in-class activity will expose students to tongue twisters in the foreign language and give them the opportunity to begin practicing pronouncing different tongue twisters. Again students will be directed to websites (see handout) that have lists of tongue twisters in their target language. During the in-class activity, students will be given several tongue twisters by the instructor that contain specific sounds that are particularly challenging for the group of learners to pronounce. The ‘selection’ of tongue-twisters for class will be strategic in selecting samples that are challenging for students, but that they are able to pronounce. (In other words, the instructor will try to approximate the learner’s ZPD)
  3. Student Activity and/or Homework Project – The activity can either be completed as an in-class activity (in a technology classroom) or be given as a homework assignment for students. Either way – the steps and requirements are the same. Students will form groups of 3-4 in which they will work. Each student will then be responsible for finding a tongue twister that was not used in class, and then uploading it to *voicethread*. The students will be instructed to upload the text for the tongue twister as the image for the voicethread recording. Then, students will upload an example of ‘correct’ pronunciation of the tongue twister. Students can do this by either finding a recording of a native-speaker pronouncing the tongue twister (via youtube or another onling media source) OR by uploading the voice recording of text-to-speech software pronouncing the tongue twister. *Sinovoice* and *eSpeak* are the two optional softwares – depending on the target language. Afterwards, the student will then be expected to record themselves pronouncing the tongue twister. Then, each member of the group will attempt to pronounce the tongue twisters uploaded by their group members, and record and upload their attempts to *voicethread*. In the end, each student in the 3-4 member group will have uploaded a tongue twister and then recorded themselves pronouncing ALL of the tongue twisters uploaded by the group members.

As a group, the students will then discuss which recording is best and why. The group will then be expected to answer a series of questions (see handout) regarding their recordings. The objective of the group reflection and questions is to prompt students to reflect on their pronunciation and analyze specific elements of their speech that they both excel at and struggle with.

* 1. Class Reflection – In the class following the activity/homework using *voicethread*, the instructor will review several of the recordings together with the class. The teacher will use the few specifically selected samples to point out specific sounds that the students struggled with and did well with. The instructor will work together with the students in constructing an explanation of what sounds were difficult and why, as well as work on developing tools for improving those sounds.
* Class Handout:



1. **Theoretical and/or pedagogical considerations:**

* The objectives and methods of our project correspond with a Sociocultural Theoretical perspective. The goal of our lesson is to help students improve their pronunciation, especially the sounds they have difficulty with. In order to improve pronunciation the students will be mediated through the use of technology, peer-mediation, and instructor guidance. The project will function in helping the instructor approximate students’ ZPD’s with regard to pronunciation as the normally diachronic spoken language will become synchronic and analyzable through the use of recordings, and allow the instructor to listen to and become aware of students ‘best’ pronunciation in the target language. Additionally, the questions given in the activity will prompt students to become explicitly aware of their own ZPD and ability for improvement. At different stages in the assignments students will receive feedback through the use of the technology from their peers and the instructor and be advised on how they can continue to develop their pronunciation.
* With regard to pronunciation, Cheng (1998) mentions that using tongue twisters can increase student motivation in a pronunciation class, and motivation is a highly significant factor in pronunciation. The more motivated the student is to improve his speech, the more rewarding the teaching will be. Cheng also states that “Tongue twisters are particularly useful for the students who have unique pronunciation problems,” and that, “Tongue twister means to articulate the same sound over and over again.” Linse (2005) also attests tongue twister activities are a fun way to teach pronunciation to young children in EFL classroom because children love tongue twisters to recognize saying the sounds as a game or challenge. Thus the activity incorporating tongue twisters is applicable for all levels of language proficiency, as well as for students of almost all ages. (Though the incorporation of technology would undoubtedly have to be adjusted to match the technological abilities of the age of students.
* References:
  1. Cheng Fangzhi, 1998. The teaching of pronunciation to Chinese students of English. Forum, 36 (1). 37-41.Linse, C. T. (2005). Practical English language teaching: Young learners. United States: McGraw-Hill Publishing. Little, D. (2002). The European

1. **Sustainability**

* In considering the sustainability of our project, and the technology being used – it is best to consider the specific websites and software being used:
  + Primary Website sources::
    - http://www.soundcomparisons.com/
    - http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics/ (American English, German)
    - http://voicethread.psu.edu/
  + Software:
    - http://www.sinovoice.com/english/tiyan.html/ (Chinese, English)
    - http://espeak.sourceforge.net/ (Chinese, English)
* The sound comparisons website functions to differentiate various accents of the same word in different areas. Since there is no “standard” pronunciation of the word in English, it is necessary to let the students have the access to the same word that may sound a little bit different due to the accents. The reason to do that is the raise the awareness of the different accents, which may be a problem in listening.
* The introduction of the phonetics website has the advantage over traditional phonetic instruction. It provides an overall picture of how the sound is made. The traditional instruction of phonetics was simply copying the sound that students hear. However, they may not have the idea how the tongue works in pronunciation. The lack of the instruction of the tongue may lead to the incorrect pronunciation. The animation in this website demonstrates to the students how your mouth works to make the sound.
* *Voicethread* provides the platform for teachers and students to get involved outside the classroom. Usually there is only limited time for class instruction and it is impossible for students to master pronunciation only within the class time. So it is necessary to have practices outside the classroom to review what students have learned. Practices outside the classroom often face the problem like the lack of instruction. Also it is difficult for teachers and students to find a proper time to meet. However, *voicethread* can solve all these problems. *Voicethread* offers the following advantages in pronunciation instruction for teachers and students:
  + Teachers can track the progress of the students.
  + Students’ practices can provide reflections of the classroom instruction.
  + Students’ practices can have implications for future teaching
  + Students can get feedback from teachers/ peer learners
  + Students are able to make comparisons from peer learners to know the strengths and weaknesses.
  + There is no limitation of time and space to the access of the website.
* The two softwares implemented in the project have similar functions. They are text-to-speech software that provide the pronunciation for students to make the comparison. The biggest difference between the sound made by the machine and by the human beings is that the machine cannot add emotion to the sound, so when students make the comparison, they can have a picture that tone is also a part that cannot be neglected in pronunciation. Overall *eSpeak* is very limited as its sound production is very ‘machine’ and does not resemble actual speech – though it does provide a baseline of pronunciation that enables students to hear the sounds they are trying to produce in the target language. *Sinvoice* is a much better option as it more closely resembles human speech.
* In summary, the technologies we used have the following advantages: they raise the awareness of the different accents for students; provide students with the clear animation of how the sound is made by the speech organ; offer students convenient access to the online learning platforms in order realize the importance of tone in pronunciation. All of these contribute to the sustainability of our technology-enhanced model of learning and teaching, which is hardly achieved with traditional instruction alone. Each of the websites as well as the platforms can be continually referred to by students and be resources for them to go back to later on in their language learning process for assistance with pronunciation. Thus, from a sustainability perspective – the technology being used for this project isn’t just for this project, but rather provides students with ‘long-term’ tools that they can use in language learning.

1. **Evaluation**

* The evaluation would basically be reflected in the results from the students. We would collect tongue twisters made by students and their responses and self-critique of pronunciation for evaluation. Though the speech recordings could be analyzed in terms of pronunciation proficiency and ability, the primary data for analysis would be the students’ responses and self-analyses of their speech. This would allow us to evaluate how thorough the students were in applying the tools provided to them, and if their engagement and self-awareness of speech production was more detailed and enhanced in comparison to standard pronunciation activities and lessons given in class.