

INTEGRATING PRONUNCIATION ACTIVITIES IN BRAZILIAN EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: This paper presents a study on how to work with pronunciation and rhythm with Brazilian students learning English as a foreign language integrating pronunciation activities with the usual contents of a lesson. The Integrative Approach by Chela-Flores (2001) is followed when conducting the action research with eight students in an English private school. Besides, an analysis of teaching course books designed for Brazilians is carried out with the objective of verifying their adequacy in the approach mentioned and helping teachers in integrating pronunciation and rhythm in their classes.

Key words: rhythm; Integrative Approach; pronunciation teaching.

¹ Artigo recebido em agosto de 2012. Artigo aprovado em setembro de 2012. A autora é professora de língua inglesa no Programa de Línguas Estrangeiras da Universidade de Caxias do Sul.



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Introduction

Pronunciation and its teaching is a widely debated subject in the language teaching world currently. There are many aspects to be considered regarding good pronunciation when learning another language. And teachers are supposed to pay attention to them, especially when we want our students to communicate well.

According to Widdowson (1996, p.41) "language is both knowledge and behavior. When we act upon our knowledge, we use some physical medium or channel to produce perceptible behavior in speech sounds and written letters". In other words, language is manifested through spoken and written utterances.

Although we use physical features to produce speech, we do not focus on them when we listen or speak. The focus is always on what sounds represent, not how they are produced, so that the listener can find the significance of the utterance and the speaker is able to send out a meaningful message.

This process of producing and perceiving intelligible speech becomes harder when learning a foreign/second language due to the differences in sounds between the mother-tongue and the target language.

Barney Griffiths², a teacher trainer and a materials writer from Spain mentions that "pronunciation needs constant attention for it to have a

² GRIFFITHS, Barney. Integrating pronunciation into classroom activities. In <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/pron/integrating/shtml>. Last accessed in July, 2007.



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lasting effect on students, which means integrating it into daily classrooms procedures.”

There are still many controversial points of view regarding pronunciation teaching. According to Otlowski (1998), some of them suggest that teachers make little or no difference in improving their students’ pronunciation. In contrast, there is research that indicates that the teacher can make a noticeable difference if certain criteria, such as linking pronunciation with listening practice, are fulfilled.

Moreover, older pronunciation studies claimed an evaluation of students’ ability to differentiate between sound contrasts such as in ‘bit’ and ‘bet’ (e.g. Firth, 1992, p.173) and practice those contrasts. Nowadays, this view has been changing in order to emphasize the importance of the suprasegmental aspects of speech, such as stress, intonation and rhythm. This new approach suggests that students should be first introduced to pronunciation in a more global aspect, such as speaking habits (Firth 1992), and as they master the elements which contribute to a better communication and comprehension, pronunciation should be narrowed to more local aspects, such as segmentals.

The integration between listening comprehension and pronunciation seems obvious when learning English, due to the need of comprehending English well enough in order to communicate; and the need of being understood if students do not want to be cut off from conversation with native speakers. This integrated class gives the



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teacher a special role, in the sense that he is the one who facilitates the learning and encourages the involvement of the students in the learning process, trying to make them aware of the learning strategies to be developed by each individual in a different way. Teacher and student work together constructing their goals and viewing pronunciation as a crucial part of communication.

Students can be expected to do well in the pronunciation of English if the pronunciation class is taken out of isolation and becomes an “integral part of the oral communication class” (Morley, 1991, p.496).

Nevertheless, the goal of pronunciation should change from the achievement of a “perfect” pronunciation in the foreign or second language, to the developing of communicative and awareness skills, monitoring abilities and creating speech modification strategies to be used outside the classroom and which may increase the students’ self-confidence as a foreign language speaker. This would be a more realistic objective according to some researchers like Morley (1991).

Most Brazilian EFL teachers seem not to pay much attention to pronunciation in the classroom, maybe because they do not stop to think about the importance of knowing and teaching it. Some of them are reluctant to teach pronunciation because they seem not to feel comfortable or secure enough. Besides, not all course books bring these issues in their table contents. These are the reasons for the present study on classroom activities which integrate pronunciation from elementary levels.



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Due to this lack of attention to pronunciation, it is important to prepare Brazilian EFL teachers to become more aware of the relevance of integrating pronunciation teaching in their classroom activities, as part of the whole context of a lesson. Thus, helping teachers on how to integrate skills and pronunciation with simple classroom activities justifies this research elaboration in the sense that pronunciation improvement is a need for Brazilian EFL learners.

This study followed a research done by Chela-Flores (2001), when she developed some pronunciation activities integrating the grammar and vocabulary contemplated by the lesson which elementary Spanish EFL students were being taught. These pronunciation activities were concerned with rhythm rather than isolated sounds. The intention was to carry out the same experiment in a Brazilian environment to validate her research, and, as a result, help teachers to deal with pronunciation in a more effective way.

The main objective of this research was to try out Chela-Flores's (2001) proposal of integrating pronunciation activities into classroom activities in a Brazilian Portuguese language background and environment in order to try to make students and teachers profit from this study through suggested activities on how to apply the Integrative Approach (Chela-Flores, 2001) in their classrooms.

To do this research in a thorough way, some steps were followed. First, it was necessary to identify some pronunciation problems that Brazilian EFL learners might have in order to analyze their



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improvement after the study was carried out. Then, an analysis of the effects of the Integrative Approach in the Brazilian environment was made to find out if this approach is feasible in the specific environment.

It was also necessary to verify if the Course Books used with the participants' groups during the experiment contemplated Chela-Flores Approach (2001) and make some suggestions on how to adapt them in case they did not contemplate the approach.

The Integrative Approach

As mentioned earlier, it was found that the best way to teach pronunciation is integrating it in the oral communicative part of a lesson, instead of dealing with it as an isolated feature. How exactly pronunciation should be integrated with the rest of the language learning activities is still an issue.

In order to integrate pronunciation effectively into other language activities, we should give priority to factors that contribute more significantly to an intelligible communication; that is, factors that cover the utterance as a whole: the division of the stretch of speech into meaningful chunks, so that the listener can process them as units (Kaltenboeck 1994); and suprasegmental aspects, such as rhythm and certain features of intonation, which have been considered significant phonological factors in helping to organize speech into units of information. (Chela-Flores, 2001, p.88)

Chela-Flores (2001), discusses the importance of integrating pronunciation activities with the rest of the language learning activities stating not only that pronunciation should be also treated as a priority



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in the classroom, but also that formal pronunciation instruction should be given that importance since the early stages of the language learning process.

She presents a viable method and samples of corresponding exercises for the teaching of pronunciation in an integrated manner. She states in her conclusions remarks that “the basis of the discussion is that integral teaching helps to overcome three main problems in pronunciation teaching: insufficient time in class, miss-targeting of lessons to intermediate and advanced students, and lack of awareness by students and teachers of the connection between pronunciation teaching and effective aural-oral communication.” (Chela-Flores, 2001, p.99)

Chela-Flores (2001) suggests rhythmic patterns to start the pronunciation teaching with elementary students because rhythm is considered one of the most difficult aspects of pronunciation when learning another language, therefore, focusing on rhythm since the beginning of the learning process appears to be the most logical starting point. She even mentions researches showing that once the rhythm patterns of the target language are achieved, it is easier to teach the segmental aspects of speech and intonation as well.

Rhythmic patterns are suggested as a starting point in the instruction.

Within this pedagogical approach, the integration of pronunciation into the aural-oral activities of a course is feasible even at a beginner level. An issue of concern when teaching pronunciation to beginners is whether exercises should be built up from the smallest units (syllables),



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devoting early lessons to single words, or whether the instruction should consist of phrases and sentences right from the start. If, as suggested above, the same grammatical structures and vocabulary used in the course are used in the pronunciation exercises and the instructor deals only with the immediate phonological needs of the course, the pronunciation instruction is not only possible at any level in the program, but the grammar and vocabulary would also be reinforced. (Chela-Flores, 2001, p.94)

The exercises procedures she states are the following: first, rhythmic patterns are presented by means of dots and dashes. In order to be able to practice the rhythm in isolation from lexical and syntactic information, the rhythm contour is echoed with the nonsense syllables *ti* for unstressed syllables, *TA* for stressed ones, and *TAA* to indicate the tonic syllables (these nonsense syllables were changed to *ni*, *NA* and *NAA*, with no pedagogical implications). Two rhythmic patterns are presented at a time, as a minimal pair, to make the students understand and discriminate the auditory effects of rhythm. The students' attention should be focused on the contrastive syllable length of the patterns perceived as a chunk. Then, students can start to imitate the patterns, still using the nonsense syllables.

According to her, it is also very important to make learners aware of reduced sounds and especially of the *schwa* at a very early stage in the learning process. The *schwa* was already presented early in this paper. However, teachers must be very careful when presenting this weak vowel because not all unstressed syllables are reduced to a schwa, retaining their vowel quality even when they are not lengthened.



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To conclude the relevance of the activities proposed by Chela-Flores (2001, p.97) she states that “if the correct sentence focus is given from the beginning, the student has more of a chance to fix the pattern with the correct rhythm and intonation than if it is introduced at a later stage in a pronunciation course, detached from the program as a whole.” She also mentions that if the instruction of pronunciation of immediate needs is integrated in every unit of the program, as she herself suggests, “the phonological aspects will be recycled over and over again, giving time to adjust to the new sound system.” (Chela-Flores, 2001, p.97)

In the end of her article, Bertha Chela-Flores (2001) states the importance of validating this integral teaching with more support from empirical research, and she also mentions that her proposal should be tried out with students from other language backgrounds, a contrast between EFL and ESL environments should be made, and also between children and adults.

Therefore, the main question that supports this research is to find out what are the effects of the Integrative Approach (Chela-Flores, 2001) in the learning process of EFL Brazilian students. It is in trying out the classroom activities proposed by Chela-Flores in a Brazilian environment that this question might be answered. Moreover, and consequently, what are the effects of this approach in the Brazilian EFL teaching environment?

Since this study took place in a Brazilian EFL environment, course books designed for Brazilian learners were used, and because of the use of these specific materials it is possible to come up with another question, which is if these course books contemplate the Integrative Approach. Furthermore, in case they do not contemplate some aspects of Chela-Flores's Integrative Approach, it is important to find out a way to adapt the books to the Integrative Proposal.

The research

The next topics aim at describing and discussing the research carried out in the months of June and July, 2007, trying out the Integrative Approach by Chela-Flores (2001) in a Brazilian EFL environment.

The Course Books and the Participants

Two English course books for Brazilian students were analyzed regarding their pronunciation activities and whether they fit into Chela-Flores's proposal (2001).

As mentioned before, a group of children in the elementary level and two private students in the elementary level as well are the subjects of this study. The children's group was already working with the course book series ³*Dream Team Starter – Oxford*. The other adult students were working with the book series *New English File Elementary – Oxford*. These two series were analyzed with the purpose of verifying their adequacy to Chela-Flores Approach.

³ The references for the books used in this study are presented in the References section.



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The children's ages vary from 9 to 14, all of them making part of the same elementary group in a private language school. The adults, as mentioned earlier, were private students, one at the age of 30 and the other at the age of 40.

The classes

The classes were recorded in mp3 format and analyzed when the recording procedure was finished. All classes were held once a week and five meetings were recorded in each group, from June the 14th to July the 12th in 2007. The children's group totaled a 115-minute recording, while the adults' classes had a total recording of 150 minutes each.

Since the books were different, and each of the private students started studying English in different periods of the first semester, the lessons given during the five meetings were different in content, which shows that pronunciation activities can be adapted into any type of lesson.

Following Chela-Flores (2001) suggestions on integrating pronunciation when teaching new structures, the classes were recorded at the time that some structure was being presented or revised.

It was necessary to adapt some of the activities performed by Chela-Flores (2001) in her research due to lack of time and the materials used in the present study.

Making that clear, a typical class integrating rhythm for this experiment can be described as follows:



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1- First, the structure of the lesson is presented by the teacher, following the book. It is very important to write some *target sentences* on the board. For example, if students are learning the Present Simple Tense in the Affirmative form, the teacher can pick out one or two sentences from the book and write them on the board while explaining the structure to the students;

2 – After having explained the new structure, the teacher asks the students what words in each sentence may be the “most important ones” to understand the sentence. For instance, if the sentence on the board is “*I live in Brazil.*”, the answer may be the verb (live) and the place (Brazil). Therefore, these are the key words of the sentence, and consequently, they have a stronger pitch and length.

3- The next step is to show the strong and weak sounds in the sentence through visual aids, as Chela-Flores (2001) suggests (see Figures 2 and 3). In the case of this study, large and smaller circles (Oo) were used above the sentences as visual aids, instead of the lines used by Chela-Flores (2001).

Another helpful tool is to use body movements to show the strong and weak words in the sentence, for example, going up and down in front of the class, or using hand gestures that suggest “big, small and long”. And it is crucial, according to Chela-Flores (2001), to present the rhythm in a musical way. She suggested using non-sense words such as *ti, Ta, Taa*. For this experiment, the non-sense words used were *ni,*



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Na, Naa. At this point of the lesson on rhythm, it is amazing to notice how the learners react, in fact, they really have fun.

4- When students understand that some words have a stronger pitch and length than others in a sentence, it is time for a drilling activity, and it is important to make the students repeat the sentences as a group and individually (if it is the case of a group, not a one-to-one class). At this point, the teacher is supposed to give more examples of sentences on the board to make students retain the rhythm.

5- If the lesson given is on Present Simple Affirmative, it is also a good idea to show students that the letter 's' added in the third person singular can be pronounced /s/ or /z/. One suggestion on how to present this difference is to make students listen to some sentences and ask them what sound they hear in the end of the verb. Then, make them repeat some sentences in the third person singular, never forgetting the rhythm of each sentence.

Class analysis

After recording all five meetings in a period of five weeks, the recordings were all analyzed and many aspects were observed, regarding the classes, the duration of time of the present study, the students' improvement as well as their reactions and comments during the experiment.

The children showed a great and immediate response to the activities, since some adaptations were made to make them more fun for them. Different from what was expected, they followed the rhythm of



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sentences more accurately than the adults, and with lots of enthusiasm. It was noticed that one specific student in the children's group profited a lot from the activities, changing her attitude towards the class and towards English in a fast way. It was also noticed a slightly improvement of their listening comprehension.

The adults had a different response to the activities because they wanted a wider explanation on how rhythm in English "works". Because of this, they may have taken a little longer to understand and to assimilate the activities.

One important point, maybe the most important one, is the awareness rising noticed throughout the experiment. Students may not have acquired the whole idea of rhythm, but they could participate and follow all activities proposed, becoming aware of the differences between Portuguese and English and the importance of comprehending English better in order to communicate better. No frustration seemed to appear, and this may be due to the way activities were held in the classroom. No one had to be perfect, they could make mistakes, they forgot and had to be remembered, but it was all part of the class, so there was no pressure.

Another aspect was also observed with the weaker adult student. He wasn't able to follow the rhythm every time we approached the subject, probably because he has several pronunciation difficulties, which include the fossilization of many mispronounced words. However, he improved his learning of grammar points, and this may



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have happened due to the pronunciation activities integrated with the content of the lesson.

After being asked whether the class was in a slow motion for his needs, one of the adults stated that he preferred to go more slowly if this meant the understanding and the complete acquisition of the aspects being studied, including, of course, the pronunciation aspects. He also mentioned that he felt that the way pronunciation was being taught was really clear and helpful. It is possible to conclude that he was becoming aware of the many different aspects of English he didn't know before, and his English has improved a lot, as well as his motivation.

To conclude this analysis, it can be stated that the outcome of the classes and reactions shows that the Integrative Approach was successful when applied in a Brazilian environment.

Final Remarks

Although the exercises and activities followed Chela-Flores's (2001) model, the identity of the Brazilian students was taken into consideration. When teaching any aspect of a foreign and/or second language, it is always important to consider the learners' attitudes and motivation. Here the teacher has a special role that is to deal with these affective factors to "determine to some extent how much emphasis an instructor will place on accurate pronunciation". (Firth 1992, p.174) Firth (1992) also mentions that the students' attitudes towards pronunciation might be affected by their level of proficiency in



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the target language. Thus, it is crucial to remember that the main goal of pronunciation teaching in EFL and ESL classrooms is to make students feel more confident and comfortable in their attempts to communicate in English (Firth 1992).

To be more effective, a pronunciation syllabus should be planned after a careful needs analysis is done, followed by a diagnosis of students' pronunciation main problems. This study provided a pronunciation Pre-test as an attempt to diagnose the pronunciation problems with the objective to analyze their improvement later. As Chela-Flores (2001) activities were being introduced in the classroom, some changes and adaptations had to be made, especially for the children. Some specific and more detailed explanation was necessary with one of the adults. Those changes and explanations have certainly influenced the results of the present study.

There is also a need to remember that what teachers need to know is not necessarily what learners need to learn. This research aims at helping teachers in adjusting their classroom activities so as to integrate pronunciation activities in agreement with their students needs. According to Dalton & Seidlhofer (1994, p.ix), teacher education might require an "understanding of pronunciation as an aspect of the language system", yet, when teaching is concerned, it is often more profitable to "proceed according to priorities determined by how pronunciation functions in language use" (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994, p.ix). And that is why the integration of pronunciation activities with the contents of the lessons makes sense.



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Although the results of the tests were not as conclusive as expected they would be, it is possible to observe that this experiment had some good outcomes. One example of the good results is observed in the application of the activities in all the groups. Another example is how some of the children improved and got motivated. It became clear that the Integrative Approach (Chela-Flores, 2001) is feasible in a Brazilian EFL environment, according to the participants' reactions during the experiment, as well as some of their comments stating how good it was to become aware of such aspects of English. Awareness rising is the key for the good outcome in this study.

Concerning the lessons using the Integrative Approach (Chela-Flores, 2001), it was mentioned before that the results would be much better if there was more time for this study. However, it can be said that the students profited a lot with the activities, not only in pronunciation matters, but in structures instruction as well. That is why it is important to mention that the activities will continue to be presented throughout the year to these students, as well as to other students who may start English classes after this study was finished. As in every aspect regarding language learning and teaching, time is precious, and the more time you have to practice, the better learners acquire the language and communicate.

After considering all the theoretical aspects presented in this study, as well as all the analyses done during the period of the experiment, it can be concluded, in short, that pronunciation is an important and decisive aspect when dealing with oral communication in class. And



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when it is taught as part of the lesson contents, it makes more sense to the learners. When the learners put knowledge together, and are given support to understand and become aware of the differences between their mother-tongue and the target language, they profit and improve their learning in all its aspects. That is why the prosodic aspects (suprasegmentals) are important when integrating pronunciation into the classroom. They appear “inside” the contents, and are not taught in isolated classes, making the learning more meaningful and contextualized.

As for suggestions on further studies, it is important to try to investigate those proposed activities with more groups, both of children and adults, as well as it can be tried out with teenagers. The time issue also opens a space for another experiment to be carried out in a semester period, when the results will probably be different and more accurate.

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