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DEVELOPING AUTOMATICITY IN CONNECTED SPEECH: AUDIO-LINGUAL DRILLS FOR UPPER-INTERMEDIATE LEARNERS MASTERING ASSIMILATION AND ELISION

Alisherova Mohina Ganisher qizi
Third year student of Uzbekistan State World Languages University
mohinaalisherova704@gmail.com
Tukhtakhujayeva Madina Ulug'bek qizi
Senior teacher at UZSWLU

Abstract

Upper-intermediate (B2) learners commonly struggle with fluency and listening. This is because they have difficulty adjusting their formal citation forms of speech (Roach) to fast, fluent connected speech (Kelly). As communicative activities are often used in teaching, explicit strategies (Richards & Rodgers) are often needed to overcome their fixed phonological patterns. This article will suggest a combination of approaches to explicitly teach assimilation and elision by adapting traditional Audio-Lingual Methods (ALM). This lesson plan contains three separate stages to help learners move from mechanically correct speech to naturally fluent speech. During the pre-communicative stage learners will be trained with listening activities, drilling exercises and sentence transformation tasks. They will form automatic muscle memory through practice. Learners will then be given an un-scripted communicative task under time pressure to use the automatic strategies they have developed (Brown). During the post-communicative stage learners will reflect on their performance by listening to recording and using checklists. Using a combination of audio-lingual patterning with tasks means teachers can successfully provide B2 learners with automaticity to produce fluent, natural connected speech and improve listening skills.

Key words

assimilation, B2 learners, post-communicative process, listening comprehension, audio-lingual method (ALM), communicative drills, automaticity, connected speech, elision, pre- communicative exercises, pronunciation teaching, upper-intermediate EFL.

Introduction

Connected speech is an essential aspect of spoken English that can often confuse learners. Students will have a good knowledge of vocabulary and grammar at B2 level but may still struggle to fully understand fast speech in native or fast media and will often sound too slow, stiff and robotic when speaking English. This is due to traditional language teaching practices focusing on word-for-word pronunciation and not the phonology of speech (Roach, 2009; Kelly, 2000). Native speakers will constantly change how they pronounce words due to assimilation, where the sounds before and after a word effect each other e.g., “ten boys” becomes “tem boys” and elision, where unnecessary sounds are left out to make speaking easier e.g., “next day” becomes “neks day”.

Although Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is more modern and focuses on real-life situations, learners do not always receive clear bottom-up phonology teaching. Whilst communicative activities promote fluent speech, without any structured activities learners will struggle to physically pronounce these fast features. Therefore, learners need explicit strategies to help them create muscle memory to get around this issue.

This article suggests a blended approach to teaching which looks back to a traditional approach known as the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM). The Audio-Lingual Method focuses on structural linguistics and creating habits (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Due to this, it has traditionally been ignored in a purely communicative setting. However, by updating this method and using it within a communicative lesson (Littlewood, 1981), audio-lingual drilling can provide learners with the exact physical repetition needed to automatically pronounce connected speech.

This article outlines a 3-stage lesson structure. Starting with pre-communicative activities such as mechanical drilling, then moving on to communicative activities such as role-play and finally post-communicative activities to analyze their own work. This sequence helps B2 learners to become automatic and confident with assimilation and elision in spontaneous English speech.

Methodology and results

In order to understand why upper-intermediate learners struggle with oral English we need to understand the inherent issues in traditional teaching methods. Often at lower

and intermediate levels, learners prioritize careful, citation-form pronunciation to ensure structural clarity (Roach, 2009; Kelly, 2000). However, when learners reach B2 level, this process often proves counterproductive, causing a plateau in fluency and listening. At this point, learners may have a large vocabulary and knowledge of grammar, but will sound stiff and robotic due to every word being pronounced with care. As they are used to pronouncing every word they struggle to decode rapid speech in native media.

To bridge this gap, we should aim to teach learners about connected speech features and connected speech focuses on assimilation and elision. Assimilation will occur at different rates depending on how fast or slow a speaker is speaking. It can cause a small change or a large change in pronunciation. This is a common occurrence in connected speech where the boundary between words can be altered, (e.g., 'that side' /ðæs saɪd/, 'good night' /gʊn naɪt/). Elision causes phonemes to be completely omitted or have zero realization primarily in fast and casual speech. Whilst target learners will rarely have to produce an elision, it is important to develop receptive awareness of this phenomenon to recognize elision while listening. This is because native speakers will often omit expected sounds in real speech, such as tonight /tnaɪt/, police /plɪs/ and correct /krekt/ (Roach, 2009, pp. 138–142).

Although Modern Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) encourages authentic communication amongst students, it does not often give explicit bottom-up phonological practice. Learners are often told to communicate naturally but are not given the skills. This article will propose a blended approach to teaching which will reconsider the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM). Classic Audio-Lingual Method is based around structuralism and habit formation (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Brown, 2007). It involves a lot of mechanical drilling to gain fluency. Although ALM has been justifiably criticized for lacking meaning; it has no equal when it comes to creating articulatory habits. So, this article will borrow from Littlewood's (1981) communicative approach and suggest that ALM should be used as a pre-communicative skill.

Three-stage lesson plan

To meet the needs of the learners, a lesson framework with three stages will be proposed within this work.

Stage 1: Pre-Communicative Stage: Listening Discrimination and Mechanical Practice

This step focuses on listening discrimination and practicing the production of sounds. Using techniques from the Audio-Lingual Method, the learner will be presented with listening discrimination exercises. They will be given a set of minimal pairs or contrasting examples, to help them identify the differences in sounds due to assimilation and elision (Roach, 2009). The next part of the lesson will involve practicing pronunciation of the target sounds through mechanical choral and individual repetition exercises. This ensures the target learners will be able to automatically produce the target sounds.

Classroom Example:

(1) Listening exercise

Target learners will listen to a recording of someone saying 'good night'. They will first say it slowly and formally /gʊd naɪt/ and then quickly and informally /gʊn naɪt/. Target learners mark on a response sheet whether the final plosive /d/ is fully realized or assimilated into the nasal /n/.

(2) Mechanical practice

The teacher will give the class flashcards with the following sentences:

Teacher: 'that side'

Target learners: /ðæs saɪd/

Teacher: 'good night'

Target learners: /gʊn naɪt/

Stage 2: Communicative Stage: Meaningful Communication and Controlled Practice

This stage will move onto meaningful communication, which bridges formal accuracy and communicative intent. Target learners will be put into pairs and given a scenario to complete, requiring the natural, implicit deployment of connected speech features. As the tasks are controlled it is significant to use the target phrases that include assimilation and elision to successfully complete the task, accordingly proceeding

learners from focusing on the articulation of the target sounds to meaningful language production.

Example:

Role-play scenario:

Target learners will be put into pairs. One will be a hotel receptionist and the other will be a guest.

A: Hello! Are you checking in to that side of the hotel or the main hall? (/ðæs saɪd/)

B: I will be in the east wing please. Could you just check my reservation for tonight? (/tnaɪt/)

A: Perfect. Have a good night! (/gʊn naɪt/)

Stage 3: Post-Communicative Stage: Listening Analysis and Metacognition

This stage replaces the free practice activity with a more structured and methodologically sound task. Target learners listen to a unscripted and naturally produced conversation by a native speaker (for example: an extract from a podcast or an interview) to analyze the fast speech features operate in authentic discourse. Learners identify any assimilation and elision within the recording, then reflect on how these have affected intelligibility. This task will reinforce their long-term listening skills, receptive competence and bridges classroom learning with real-world language processing.

Example:

Target learners will be given a transcript of a 60 second interview extract. They will then listen to the recording at normal speed and highlight any areas where expected phonemes have been omitted.

Analysis sheet:

Listening: "...the police arrived late..."

Target learner: I can see that there was elision of the first weak vowel. (/plis/ rather than /pəˈliːs/)

Reflection: Did the absence of the vowel cause any issues with understanding? Were you still able to understand due to contextual clues?

Results and Further Issues

The target learner can benefit from this combination of structural audio-lingual method drills and communicative tasks to build up the learner's motor skills and speaking patterns. Repeating these mechanical tasks means that intermediate-level learners will learn the complicated motor skills involved in producing these connected speech features such as assimilation and elision, thereby reducing cognitive load during real-time articulatory execution. Beyond oral fluency, this physical training will improve the target learner's receptive skills. As they become more familiar with producing these phonetic deletions and alterations, their listening skills improve proportionally. They will be able to hear how the speech sounds change at natural speed, which will help them understand fast, unscripted discourse by proficient speakers.

Limitations – Sociolinguistic issues

However, there are certain issues with implementing these phonological connected speech processes into the classroom. As there is a lot of repetition involved with the audio-lingual method drills, the target learners may generalize these connected speech features. The target learners may also use mechanisms of fast informal speech (which tend to be high register) such as heavy elisions in situations where this would not be appropriate such as working in an interview or presentation.

Whilst this study demonstrates that there is an efficient way to introduce and practice connected speech features, it has also shown that there is a limit to how far pronunciation can go. Further research is needed to determine effective pedagogical strategies for teaching stylistic register, specifically guiding target learners on the pragmatic constraints and situational boundaries of connected speech.

Conclusion

It can be difficult to teach pronunciation at the B2 upper-intermediate level. Students at this level often have a high level of vocabulary and grammar, however their speech is often very robotic due to lack of knowledge on assimilation and elision. Connected speech needs to clearly be taught as it is a physical skill.

By using updated Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) exercises within a three-stage communicative model, teachers can provide B2 level students with the best of both worlds. Pre-communicative mechanical exercises will give them the physical

automaticity they need. This will then give them the confidence to speak naturally during free speaking role plays. Post communicative audio exercises will help them to assess how they are progressing. By using mechanical repetition and communicative exercises, B2 level students will gain the physical skills needed to speak fluently and confidently resulting in them being able to understand listening better.

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