The CEFR and the Production of Spoken English: A Challenge for Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the challenges faced by teachers whose task is to enable their students to become effective speakers of English. The CEFR states clearly what language learners have to be able to do in order to attain the target levels set for school leavers and for students in higher education on graduation, but leaves teachers to work out what their students need to learn in order to demonstrate the necessary abilities. The article draws on brain science to illuminate what is involved in learning a spoken language, and outlines the student-centred kind of teaching that enables students to learn in this context. The article covers the pronunciation of words, particularly with reference to beginning learners, and the role of phonemic awareness in making connections between written and spoken words, and goes on to deal with more advanced matters, such as stress and intonation, and other aspects of phonological competence. A distinction is made between declarative and procedural knowledge, and particular emphasis is placed on the role of procedural knowledge in learning a spoken language, and the fact that learners are not consciously aware of what they have learned to do, and so cannot describe the procedural knowledge they have acquired.

KEYWORDS: spoken English, procedural knowledge, prosody, phonemic awareness, phonological competence.

Introduction

Spoken English presents English teachers in Malaysia with a major challenge. Many school leavers need sufficient English proficiency to get a job serving in a shop, and graduates need to get through an interview in English for a job requiring a high level of English. For teachers, this requires a major shift from concentrating on the written skills, Reading and Writing, and paying more attention to the oral skills, Listening and Speaking. In addition, students need to develop interactive skills, and act as both speaker and hearer in a discussion, or perhaps read an e-mail and explain its contents in a meeting. Although most of the problems teachers face have been dealt with by scholars from around the world and written up in the form of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the teaching of spoken English – and in particular the production of spoken English – is by no means fully covered. This paper deals with problems that teachers face in teaching spoken English to meet the requirements of successive CEFR levels. Attention is paid particularly but not exclusively to the problems facing beginning learners, and some of the difficulties that arise as learners progress to the higher levels.

The CEFR scales specify what learners can do at different stages (Council of Europe, 2001), but it is not concerned with how learners develop the abilities associated with each stage. There are many books explaining how to learn English grammar, and textbooks typically present English grammar in an order that enables learners to develop their grammatical knowledge while introducing new words to enable them to expand their vocabulary. There are also many books that describe the structure of spoken English. If you are an English teacher and you are looking for books or other materials to explain how learners can develop their knowledge of spoken English to get to the next CEFR level, you are likely to be disappointed. This is a major gap that I attempt to fill in this article.

The teaching and learning of spoken English

The importance of listening

Malaysians who go to England to study often come back with greatly improved English. They will have learned some technical terms and perhaps taken a proficiency course, but this does not explain the improvement. It is likely that they will have no idea what they have learned or how they have improved their English. What Malaysians cannot avoid doing in England is to listen to authentic spoken English.

You may be wondering how just listening can improve speaking. A language skill which is extremely important in learning a spoken language and which we take for granted involves repeating what someone else says. If someone says "Good morning" to you, you might well say "Good morning" in reply. We can do this because there is a connection in our brains between understanding speech and speaking. The ability to repeat is one we can lose. If someone has a stroke that damages the connection, they find it difficult to repeat what someone has just said. Repeating in this context is not the same as mimicking. We do not attempt to sound like the other person, and a big man repeating the words of a little girl does not attempt to sound like a little girl. We say the same thing with our own voice.

We also listen to ourselves speaking. When we make a mistake, we stop and repeat what we have just said, this time correctly. Good language learners notice the difference between the way they pronounce words and the way native speakers do, for example between hearing native speakers saying *morning* and hearing themselves saying the same word. Hearing the difference is the essential first step towards modifying one's own pronunciation to get closer to the native speaker model. It is not just pronunciation that is affected in this way. Speaking also involves the patterns known together as prosody, which include varying the pitch and loudness of the voice, and adopting a rhythm characteristic of the target language. Prosody is difficult to describe, but we are very good at recognising it intuitively. When someone comes back from England with improved English, the greatest changes have probably taken place in their use of prosody.

It is of course impossible to recreate English conditions in a Malaysian classroom. What the teacher can do is to create a classroom environment that is conducive to learning spoken English. Students need to hear authentic English spoken by good English speakers, and they need to hear it all the time. If you are the teacher, no matter how good your own English is, you should always get your students to copy authentic models. Some students will improve on their own, just by listening to the models, but others will need coaching. The task for the

teacher is to help students improve their performance by listening closely to the student's performance and comparing it with the authentic performance. Of course, teachers who do this will find their own spoken English improving at the same time. It is sometimes said that the responsibility of the teacher is not to teach, but to enable the students to learn. This is particularly true of spoken language. The aim in teaching spoken English is to create the conditions in which the students are able to learn for themselves.

Knowing about spoken English and using it

There is a big difference between being able to use a spoken language – to say things, to understand what is said, and to take part in a conversation – and knowing about such things as phonemes and prosody. The CEFR blue book (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 101) discusses different kinds of competence, including declarative knowledge, which is concerned with facts, such as the name of the river that flows through London. The section does not mention the kind of knowledge which is usually contrasted with declarative knowledge, namely procedural knowledge, which involves knowing how to do things, such as swimming or driving a car.

Our understanding of spoken language has been greatly extended in recent decades by research into language and the brain (see e.g. Ingram, 2007). Of particular relevance and interest is the investigation of consciousness (for a good general introduction, see Dehaene, 2014). We are consciously aware of our declarative knowledge, and can bring it to our attention, and think about it and talk about it. When you read about the river that flows through London, the name *Thames* probably came into your conscious mind, and you can talk about how the word is spelt and pronounced, and even list the phonemes /temz/. Learning is often thought of as acquiring declarative knowledge, something that students can use to answer questions in a test. Learning a spoken language involves developing procedural knowledge, and we are not consciously aware of what we have learned.

When you are learning to do something, you have to concentrate hard on what you are doing. You have to breathe while swimming, or use the wheel, the brake and the accelerator while making a three point turn. As a beginner, you pay conscious attention to the task, and since you are consciously aware of what you are trying to do, you can explain to someone else what you are doing. As you practise the tasks, they become easier, and eventually they appear to be effortless. You can even plan your day's teaching while you are driving to work. These tasks still require thinking, but no longer need your conscious attention. When we have acquired procedural knowledge, our unconscious brains take over and do the tasks automatically.

Many of the things we learn to do when speaking another language are controlled by our unconscious brains, and we have no way of explaining what we have learned to do. Infants acquire their first language as procedural knowledge. They know how to use the language, but cannot describe the grammar they have learned, or explain what they do when they pronounce words. When children begin to study a new language at school, the aim is for them to learn to use the new language in the same way as their first language. However, they are not starting off with empty minds, and their first language affects the way they learn the new language. Most children will need some declarative knowledge in order to develop procedural knowledge of the new language. For example, if your first language does not distinguish singular and plural, you need to know about the plural form in order to use

English singular and plural forms appropriately. The declarative knowledge is not enough on its own, and it has to be used and practised to develop procedural knowledge. This is where the learning process breaks down owing to insufficient practice. For example, there are many Malaysians who know all about the plural rule but who find it difficult to get singular and plural right when speaking or writing in English.

Procedural knowledge is difficult to change, and for that reason it is essential for beginning learners to get the spoken language right from the very beginning. It might seem that because young children are only little, they will have plenty of time to learn to speak the language properly later on. That is alas false reasoning. Beginning learners who speak the language badly find it almost impossible to unlearn their bad pronunciation and other speech habits, and have no way of improving them. It is important to give the learner the right kind of declarative knowledge at the right time, and too much can be counterproductive. Language learners do not need to study theoretical linguistics or the source-filter theory of speech production. One of the problems of traditional language teaching is that learners are given declarative knowledge which does not help them develop procedural knowledge, with the result that they know all about the language except how to use it.

Learning a new spoken language

It can be difficult to know where to start learning a new spoken language. The reality is that children have to recognise speech long before they start learning to speak themselves. When they start to learn a second language, they already know how to relate hearing and speaking in their first language. When beginners listen to a new language, they match the sounds of the new language, the L2, with the sounds of their first language, their L1. They hear the sounds of L2, and replace them with sounds they know already in their L1. That is why beginners speak the new language with a foreign accent. Although a foreign accent is thought of as a bad thing to have, it is actually a sign of human intelligence. Learners already possess the procedural knowledge to match the sounds of different languages. The teacher's role is to coach them to bring the sounds they make closer to appropriate targets for the new language.

In some cases, the L2 contains sounds that do not occur in the L1. For example, English has the initial consonants of *thin* and *then*, which are new for a large proportion of English learners. Matches may still be made, but inappropriately. Malay does not traditionally have a /f/ sound, and words with /f/ in the L2 may be pronounced with /p/ instead. This is how English *coffee* is borrowed into Malay as *kopi*. This can cause some confusion, because Malay *kopi* is actually much closer in sound to English *copy*. Learners need to hear the difference between *coffee* and *copy* before they can be expected make the difference themselves. When learners have the procedural knowledge to distinguish /f/ and /p/, they will probably find it difficult to explain what they have learned.

Learning to read

When children learn to read, they are given their first declarative knowledge about language, and begin to make important links between the spoken and written languages. This knowledge is obvious to the literate adult, but it may not be obvious at all to the child, for whom acquiring it amounts to a major intellectual advance. Children have to become

consciously aware of the shapes that make up letters, and how shapes form different letters. They have long since learned that objects remain the same when they are turned round or upside down, but discover that this is not true of the letters p, b, d, and q. They also discover that letter shapes correspond to sounds, e.g. the shape "b" corresponds to the sound [b]. This may seem obvious to adults, but it is a major achievement for the child, because it requires the understanding that one thing can be used as a symbol to represent something entirely different. The use of symbols is something that comes naturally only to humans.

When learners move on successfully from individual letters to words, they have two very interesting discoveries to make. The first is that what people say can be divided into words, and that words can be re-used. For example, *good morning* contains the word *good* which is also used in *good girl*. The second is that words can be divided into individual speech sounds or phonemes, which can also be re-used, e.g. the initial consonant of *big* is found also in *boy*. This may seem perfectly obvious to any literate person, but it is not obvious at all. Using modern technology, we can examine the waveform corresponding to speech. It is well known that words are not neatly separated by gaps corresponding to the spaces in writing, and phonemes are not arranged one after the other in the stream of speech like the letters of the spelling. Words and phonemes typically overlap, so that in many cases there are no clearly defined boundaries at all. It is when we understand speech that our brains divide spoken phrases into words, and words into phonemes.

The branch of knowledge that is concerned with the relationship between the letters of the spelling and the sounds of the pronunciation of words is known as phonics. Although phonics is concerned with a vital reading skill, it must be the most unloved, misunderstood and misrepresented branch of knowledge in the whole of the teaching and learning of English. It has a long and respectable history, and can be traced back to the middle of the sixteenth century. Much of what we know about spoken English was first discovered by schoolteachers who developed phonics methods to teach young children to read. Unfortunately, there have been opinions unsupported by knowledge or evidence expressed loudly in opposition to phonics. Some teachers will know about the book *Why Johnny can't read* (Flesch, 1955), and will know that Johnny finally learned to read when taught using phonics. Research into reading in the brain (Dehaene, 2009) has shown beyond any doubt that there is an important stage in reading, especially for beginning readers, when the brain converts representations of writing into representations of speech. If the brain does phonics, then it must be a good idea to take phonics seriously in the classroom.

If children are to succeed in learning to read, they have to learn to associate letters and phonemes in one way or another. It is surely self-evident that the best way is for the teacher to use phonics methods to explain the relationship between letters and phonemes. It is true that some people learn in other ways, but many people also fail. It is also obvious that in order to understand phonics, beginning readers need to know the letters of the alphabet and understand the connection between letters and sounds, e.g. that "b" says [b]. You will sometimes see phonics confused with letter recognition: an exercise described as phonics may actually be concerned with teaching children to recognise the letters of the alphabet.

It is something of an irony that phonics teaching facilitates approaches to reading which have been proposed in opposition to phonics, including the whole word approach. So-called sight words are associated with the work of Edward Dolch (1948), and teachers will be familiar

with Dolch word lists. The idea of sight words is that they can apparently be read immediately as a whole and without effort. Research into reading in the brain has identified different routes for reading, but there is no special route for sight words. Every word has to be analysed as a sequence of letters before the corresponding sounds are identified. When we learn to read new words, we get faster every time we encounter them, and eventually we seem to process them in no time at all. Reading words seems effortless when we no longer need to bring the letters of the word into conscious awareness and try to remember or work out how to pronounce the word. At this stage, our unconscious brain has taken over the reading task, and we think it is effortless because we are unaware of the work being done by our brains. In order to become effective readers, children have to learn to read at least common words automatically, which belongs to a stage which follows elementary phonics, and which is in no way in competition with it.

The oddly-named whole language approach is sometimes treated as the same as whole word, and sometimes as a different approach. In the latter case, there are many conflicting definitions, but a common theme is that the ultimate purpose of reading is to understand texts at a high level. Text understanding involves high level skills including the understanding of words in their context, extracting meaning from grammatical structure, and using cohesion to understand how clauses and sentences fit together to construct meaning at a higher level. There is no conflict between low level skills involving phonics and word recognition and high level skills involving the understanding of text, because in order to get to the higher levels, readers have first to progress through the lower levels.

Phonemic awareness

When children understand the relationship between spellings and speech sounds, they are said to have acquired phonemic awareness, which is known to be a predictor of future success in reading. Since phonemes are units of the spoken language, awareness of them also lays the foundations for learning the spoken language at a more advanced level. (Awareness of phonemes would normally be called *phoneme awareness*, but the term you will usually see in the literature is *phonemic awareness*.) Not all children develop phonemic awareness successfully, and failure to do so has long been associated with dyslexia (see e.g. Shaywitz, 2003). Phonemic awareness is usually included as part of phonological awareness (see e.g. Blachman, 2000), which involves the ability to manipulate phonemes, e.g. to add /s/ to *top* to form *stop*, to subtract /n/ from *bend* to form *bed*, or to change /b/ in *bad* to /m/ to form *mad*. Phonemic awareness is important because it makes possible other skills that learners need to develop as they learn more about the spoken language.

Learners who have phonemic awareness know what phonemes need to be produced in order to pronounce a word appropriately, and repeat what they have heard using their own phonemes (possibly in a foreign accent). When we write words down, the words look different in each person's handwriting, but each person writes the same sequence of letters. Similarly, words sound different when spoken by different people, and in most (but not all) cases they produce the same sequence of phonemes. Someone who lacks phonemic awareness has to copy the sound of the word directly, and in this case the word may be completely unrecognisable. Relics of direct copying are sometimes to be heard in the speech of advanced learners. For example, as this section was being written, a learner of English

whose spoken English is actually very good was heard to mispronounce the word *booth* with what sounded like [v] accompanied by a lot of air instead of the English th-sound. In the context, this was clearly the word *booth*, but out of context it would almost certainly have been unrecognisable.

Phonemic awareness is related to phonics but is not the same thing. Someone who knows phonics knows what phonemes are used in the pronunciation of words, but someone with phonemic awareness can identify phonemes in different words despite differences of spelling. For example, *go*, *low*, *bone* and *throat* all have the same vowel phoneme, whereas *do*, *now*, *gone* and *broad* all have quite different vowel phonemes. Most phonemes can be represented using the letters of the Roman alphabet, but some cannot, including the initial sounds of *thin*, *then*, *chip* and *ship*. For the last 150 years or so, linguists have used additional letters specially designed to represent phonemes, and known as phonetic symbols. If you know about phonemes, these additional letters are immediately useful, and they are easy to learn. If you do not have phonemic awareness, the same new letters must seem strange and confusing, and serve no useful purpose. The point is that phonemic awareness logically precedes the use of phonetic symbols. How individual people learn things is a different matter, and there may well be people who learn the other way round, and acquire phonemic awareness through the use of phonetic symbols.

A skill that learners need to develop after they have passed through the initial stages is to use a dictionary. A dictionary designed for learners will include a phonetic transcription for each word, consisting of phonetic symbols corresponding to the letters of the spelling. The oldest and most successful is probably the Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Hornby, 1948), which is still appearing in new editions and now has associated sound files, so that you can listen to the pronunciation. When students learn to use a pronouncing dictionary, they are able to take off and learn new words on their own, and take an important step towards becoming autonomous learners.

Learning to read words enables children to talk about written language, and those who are aware of the corresponding phonemes can also talk about the spoken language. This creates a bridge between the written language and the spoken language, and enables the learner to progress in both at the same time This leads on to more advanced understanding of the spoken language.

Phonological competence

There is a lot more to learning the spoken language than just pronouncing words. The CEFR makes reference to phonological competence (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 116–117) which "involves a knowledge of, and skill in the perception and production of" a number of phonetic patterns ranging from nasality and plosion to weak forms, assimilation and elision. Speakers are said to develop phonological control (Council of Europe, 2020, pp. 133–135).

Speech sounds belong to the part of the spoken language that is relatively easy to understand. More complex areas of the spoken language such as stress can only be learned as procedural knowledge. The words *billow* and *below* have the same phonemes but the words are quite different. This is because English has a stress system, and BIllow is stressed on the first

syllable while beLOW is stressed on the second syllable. Most of the longer words which beginning learners encounter, such as BIRTHday, FOOTball or YEllow, are stressed on the first syllable, but they may also encounter words like giRAFFE or guiTAR, which are stressed on the second syllable. More advanced learners have to cope with English words that have different stress patterns according to their part of speech. For example, if *project* is a noun it is stressed on the first syllable, thus PROject; and if it is a verb it is stressed on the second syllable, thus proJECT. Relatively few learners of English learn to manage groups of related words with different stress patterns, of which the bestknown example is probably PHOtograph, phoTOgrapher and PHOtoGRAphic. If your L1 does not have a stress system, you may never notice the stress and you may find it difficult to hear it at all. So-called Manglish is a kind of English spoken without a stress system. You can never learn English stress by listening to a lecture or accumulating facts, and you have to start by listening to good examples and copying them.

Perhaps the most basic speaking skill for the language learner is to say simple words in the target language. Saying words requires more than just producing a sequence of phonemes, because the phonemes have to be aligned with a pitch contour that rises to a peak and then falls to low. Learners just need to say words properly by copying good models, and do not need to know anything about either phonemes or pitch contours at this stage. We do not of course normally speak one word at a time, and learners almost immediately move on to phrases such as *fast cars* or *my brother*, which involve fitting two words on to a single contour. We cannot put just any two words together in this way, and it would not make sense to say *the of* and stop. We put words together according to the rules of grammar. *Fast cars* and *my brother* follow the English rule that adjectives and words like *my* come before nouns. It might be thought that when beginning learners produce short phrases as they progress towards CEFR A1, they are doing something simple. They are actually doing something complex with the spoken language and integrating it with grammar. It would take a long time to list and explain all the different things an English learner needs to know and be able to do in order to say *fast cars* or *my brother*.

Fluent speakers need to know not just the grammar but also the way the target language puts words together in speech. Imagine a learner who misses out /t/ when saying *fast cars*. Is this some kind of learner error or is it perhaps a lazy way of speaking? If you listen carefully to native speakers of English, you will find that they do it all the time. When /st/ at the end of one word is followed by a consonant at the beginning of the next word, the /t/ is said to be elided. Good learners find themselves doing this without realising it. The teacher can make students aware of the rule to help them speak more fluently, but the students have to practise it until they do it without thinking consciously. The teacher who does not know about the rule may criticise students for laziness when they are actually speaking fluently. Perhaps a more important rule concerns r-sounds. For example, there is no sound corresponding to the letter r when the word *far* is produced in isolation; but when it is put into the phrase *far away*, the r is pronounced. It is much easier for the learner to learn to pronounce these phrases intuitively by listening than by providing declarative knowledge in the form of a theoretical explanation and expecting the learner to apply the theory in practice when speaking. The time to explain these things is when the learners have learnt to do them intuitively, so that they are made consciously aware of what they have already learned unconsciously.

Reading aloud

Reading aloud has an important place in the language classroom. Teachers are expected to read all sorts of things aloud, and need to develop it as a special skill. Learners reveal through their reading aloud their knowledge of the spoken language and of their understanding of the relationship between the spoken language and the written language. The learner who reads word for word is concentrating on decoding the spelling, and finding the sequence of phonemes that matches the spelling. A more advanced reader is able to scan ahead in the text, and read aloud two or more words at a time. This requires sufficient knowledge of grammar to group words appropriately, and sufficient knowledge of the spoken language to put words together in the right way.

At some stage the reader encounters punctuation, and may be instructed to raise the voice at a comma, and to lower the voice at a full stop. Full stops are not a problem because any English word or phrase spoken out of context automatically ends with a drop in pitch and loudness. The comma rule requires the reader to have progressed sufficiently as speaker to produce long grammatically well-formed sequences of words which require a break somewhere in the middle. Readers who can use the comma rule also insert breaks where there is no comma in the orthography. It is quite impossible to teach learners to do this, but as is generally the case in the advanced teaching of the spoken language, it is possible to make learners consciously aware of the procedural knowledge they have already acquired.

The kind of prosody used when people read aloud is often called “normal intonation”. In fact, it does not sound like natural speech at all, and that is because when we speak naturally, we convey our emotions. Reading aloud removes much of the emotional content. When we read a story, we usually have to read direct speech, in which case we try to simulate natural emotional speech. Someone who is highly skilled in reading aloud is able to switch from the reading aloud style to the simulation of natural speech for the reported speech, and back again to the reading aloud style. Students can be coached to develop this skill, but it is far beyond what can be taught directly.

Discussion

The emphasis in the CEFR is on the ability to do useful things in the target language at different levels of proficiency, rather than knowing things about the target language. Doing useful things requires the prerequisite knowledge, in this case procedural knowledge. This knowledge is typically unconscious in the sense that we cannot easily bring it into conscious awareness and focus our attention on it, so that it is difficult to describe what it is we have learned.

Appendix 3 to the most recent companion to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020, pp. 183–185), especially the phonology column, specifies a very high standard of speaking ability for the higher levels. For B2, that is the target for post-secondary students and the level below the target C1 for teachers, the learner “can generally use appropriate intonation, place stress correctly and articulate individual sounds clearly”. These things are undoubtedly important, because English learners who combine clearly articulated phonemes and correct stress with appropriate intonation come across as effective English speakers in a way that those who

have not yet acquired them do not. However, terms such as "stress" and "intonation" need to be more precisely defined in such a way that teachers can be given more precise targets for their students. The learning of intonation can perhaps start with the comma rule in reading aloud, followed by the intonation patterns associated with statements, questions and commands.

A common approach to teaching and learning is for the teacher to provide input in the form of declarative knowledge, and for the students to carry out some learning activity. For example, in a linguistics course, the teacher might give a lecture on stress as a property of spoken language, and then get the students to examine the stress systems of different languages. Learning to use the stress system of English is completely different, because learners have no means of converting input declarative knowledge directly into procedural knowledge. Learning to pronounce English words with appropriate stress, like learning other spoken language systems, has to begin with intuitive learning by listening to authentic models. The time to provide learners with declarative knowledge is after they have started learning, so that they become consciously aware of what they have been learning. The role of the teacher is to ensure that the students are given good authentic models to learn from, and to provide coaching to bring the learners' efforts close to authentic performance. Teachers cannot be expected to do this without support, and in order to do it effectively, they need the relevant declarative knowledge, ideally acquired in the course of pre-service or in-service teacher education.

Much damage has unfortunately been done to the teaching and learning of spoken English by the Phonics Wars of the last century. Phonics linked to phonemic awareness constructs the essential bridge between learning written English and learning spoken English, and greatly speeds up learning by enabling the learner to think consciously about the target language and learn the spoken and written forms together. The aftermath of the Phonics Wars can be seen in the confused state of materials available on the internet. Teachers who download materials are likely to get confused themselves. Beginners have to recognise letters of the alphabet and perhaps form them and associate sounds with them before moving on to phonics rules; but letter recognition is frequently confused with phonics. Phonics may be left unconnected to phonemic awareness, and examples are not hard to find in published phonics courses in use in Malaysia. Children who can associate sounds with letters and letter groups in English words can take on the challenge of reading words as a whole; but whole word reading is traditionally seen as somehow in conflict with phonics. Those who can read at word level can go on to read texts of increasingly complexity, which is presumably the point of the so-called whole language approach; but whole language is sometimes confused with whole word, and sometimes contrasted with whole word or with phonics, or with both. Given the state of confusion, teachers should take the credit for the fact that so many of their students eventually become competent in speaking, listening to and reading (and perhaps writing) English.

A related problem is that of the opinion often expressed that pronunciation is after all not very important. In a sense this is perfectly true. Our speech perception systems are extremely robust, and we can understand our first language even when it is spoken badly and full of learner errors. Another view is that we express our identity through the way we speak, and we have the right to speak English in any way we like. In a sense, this is also perfectly true. There are no laws which lay down how we have to speak English or any other language.

However, when speaking is assessed on the CEFR scale, do-it-yourself pronunciation and learner errors give a poor impression of what the candidate can do. Employers interviewing potential recruits are unlikely to give preference to interviewees who cannot even pronounce basic words of the language properly, and it may take them only a few seconds to reject an interviewee. In the real world, pronunciation certainly does matter.

Conclusion

Young children learn intuitively whatever language or languages they are exposed to. When they start to learn a new language later in childhood, they are in a different position, because they already have language learning experience which they bring to the learning of the new language. Young children will also learn whatever model of the spoken language they are exposed to, and will learn bad English just as efficiently as authentic English. For this reason, they need to be exposed to authentic spoken models from the beginning. Until relatively recently, this was not a realistic possibility for many English classrooms, but now spoken English is widely available on the internet and elsewhere.

To turn the beginning learner into a school leaver or graduate with the ability to do useful things in English at the appropriate level, teachers can now draw on the indispensable guidance of the CEFR. The CEFR, however, does not tell teachers how to teach spoken English, something it was never intended to do in the first place. Like the teaching of grammar or vocabulary, the teaching of spoken English has to draw on pedagogical knowledge from elsewhere. Here the English teacher is at a disadvantage, because there seems to be a lacuna or empty gap where the teacher might expect to be introduced to a body of knowledge about the teaching and learning of spoken English.

If children now in school are expected to reach the CEFR English language targets, they need to be given access to authentic spoken English models to enable them to use their natural ability to learn spoken language. The role of the teacher is to provide coaching to enable students to modify their English speech production to bring it closer to the English model, and teachers need access to the body of knowledge now available that enables them to do the job they are required to do.

Postscript

Having grown up in a family that at that time did not know English, I understand at first hand the problems faced by many young people in Malaysia who have to reach a target CEFR level in English. And having started my career as an English teacher in a secondary school, I also understand at first hand the day-to-day problems faced by teachers, now compounded by the responsibility to bring their students up to the target CEFR level. Teachers need support to help their students, particularly in the areas of spoken English that I have discussed in this article.

The problems that come under the heading “phonological competence” (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 116–117) are well known, and I have dealt with them in a book (Zuraidah Mohd Don, 2019). This book is written at undergraduate level, and it is intended for introductory courses in spoken English, and for pre-service teacher education. Teachers who have not

covered spoken English in detail in their pre-service education will find the book useful for in-service education. It is impossible to learn spoken English from a printed book, and for that reason the text is complemented by a dedicated website that includes audio recordings produced by a native speaker of English from England of all the words, expressions and indeed everything else that the reader needs to be able to listen to.

The book covers spoken English in general, and I am aware that this article deals with specific matters that need to be covered in more detail. For example, phonemic awareness is generally referred to as a form of knowledge which facilitates later success in reading. But what exactly is it? Do teachers possess it, and if not how do they obtain it? How can teachers enable their students to develop phonemic awareness? These and many other questions cannot be answered by written words, and require the use of modern technologies to give teachers support with the materials they are using in the classroom. Work is already well underway on making support available, and I would be interested to hear whether teachers feel they need support with the teaching of spoken English, and what kind of support they feel they need.

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