METHODS OF TESTING COMMON PHONOLITICAL COMPETENCE

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What is common phonological competence?
The title may look perhaps too advanced: can we really start to discuss some common ability for pronunciation of speech sounds shared by people of all (or some) language groups? Are we polilingual enough? The classical definition rooting back to Veinreich and Scherba reads: Multilingualism (bilingualism, poliglotism, polilingualism) is the existence in the head of an individual speaker/writer or a language community and use in their verbal behaviour of two or more languages.

It could be of several types, according to:
- language competence – receptive, reproductive, productive;
- learning or acquisition of the language – natural (acquired from environment) or artificial (learnt at school);
- relationship between the contact languages – coordinative (pure), or equipollent (mixed).

A more recent definition from CEFR gives a different picture, being very enthusiastic at the end: Multilingualism: “…the plurilingual approach emphasizes the fact that as an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact.”

Since 1992, Vivian Cook has argued that most multilingual speakers fall somewhere between minimal and maximal definitions. Cook calls these people multi-competent. However, common competencies may vary in different areas of the language – grammar, functions, lexis, discourse, phonology. People invent grammars and words, sounds are mainly biologically based. So phonologically, we are more multi-competent by virtue of our nature.

In the table of Common pronunciation difficulties by Gerald Kelly (2011) which takes into consideration 13 languages (English, Russian and Chinese included) it may be seen, that the area of difficulties is no bigger than the area of non-difficulties (there are 67% of empty boxes in the table). (Fig.1 shows one page out of three in the table).
Therefore, what is the consequence of all that to pronunciation? Shall it tend to be a kind of mixture of different features of contact languages and phonetic teachers will never more bother about perfection of pronunciation? Alternatively, shall we return to the sensor-motoric stage of a baby, who can pronounce all sounds of all languages of the world, without knowing that they are pronouncing “phonemes”? The first is unwanted; the second is unlikable.

What can we realistically discuss is a common phonological competence, shared by certain groups of people speaking the same number of languages in certain language areas, and what we should do now, is to work out definite criteria how to assess their phonological competence. Multi-linguals’ strategies in speech are different from those of monolinguals and traditional bilinguals, their brain works differently (according to evidence from neuroscience), and our methods of dealing with the situation should also change.

Evidence from research

In St. Petersburg State University we have some experience of designing a trilingual curriculum for International Department at the Philosophical Faculty. The aim of the research is to investigate the domain of phonetic interference between the three languages (Chinese-Russian-English) and to find adequate methods of testing pronunciation in such a challenging pedagogical context.

1. The top priority for a Chinese learner is to train the pronunciation of sonorant sounds at the end of a word (team, animal, onion). Not all sounds of the Chinese language can combine with each other freely. In the final position sonorants are impossible for a native speaker of Chinese. For a teacher working in a Russian-speaking audience, such problems are unusual. Russian students can easily pronounce final sonorants. Their attention should only be paid to the fact that they must be longer after lax vowels.

2. The second problem for Chinese speakers is to pronounce combinations of plosive consonants+sonorants at the beginnings of words or syllables (blind, play, little). Such syllabic structures do not exist in Chinese and learners insert an intervocalic /ə/. In Russian, this combination is not ruled out, but consonants assimilate not as much as in English.

3. For Chinese it is problematic to articulate English diphthongs correctly. The vowel part of a syllable, or final, in the Chinese language can be expressed with a monophthong, a diphthong, or a triphthong. In spite of a big number of diphthongs and triphongs in Chinese, it does not help, because the connection of vowel elements (nuclei and glides) in diphthongs occurs according to certain rules. In Russian, there are no diphthongs, but usually no such problems arise, because vowel elements in Russian follow each other in a non-restricted way. Although the teacher has to emphasize the rising character of an English diphthong (glides are non-syllabic).

4. At the beginning of words, Chinese speakers do not differentiate voiced and voiceless consonants, which never happens in Russian.

5. In Chinese, as well as in Russian, there are no such consonants as (/w/, /h/, /θ/ / ð/) and learners have to get accustomed to them.


7. There is much in common in the intonation system, Chinese tones have very similar counterparts among English intonation contours. To add more difficulties to the work of a Russian teacher, there are mistakes which occur as a result of interference with the first foreign language of the learner, the language of the environment (Russian): diphthongization of some monophthongs (/o/ is /“o/ in Russian); all noised consonants become voiceless at the end of the words: bag / bæk/; consonants are palatalized before front vowels: meal / mēl/; underdifferentiation of long and short vowels: /u:-t/, A:-ɒ, e-æ, i:-i, ɒ:-o, ɜ:-ə/.

Methodology

I believe that such pedagogical challenges can be dealt with by phonosemantic approach, which helps both to find a medium of communication in a trilingual situation and to turn to linguo-cultural peculiarities of the target audience (Cross 2006).

The ideas behind methodology are the following (Pavlovskaya 2002):

1. There is a direct link between sound and meaning which is pre-linguistic and not attached to phonological or other linguistic units (morphemes, lexemes, syntax structures)
2. In the process of perception sensory channels can overlap and produce double or triple memory traces (synesthesia).
3. Sound iconicism is universal and teachers can
use it in teaching and testing languages of different origin and structure (colour-sound correspondences included).

**Phonological Testing: Task Types**

Phonological tasks types may be divided into articulatory tasks and perceptive tasks, tasks with visual representation and tasks with aural representation, tasks of linguistic knowledge and tasks of communicative skills.

1. An articulatory test task with visual representation in traditional mode most commonly will be: “read and say”.

   Less traditional: “say it with colour”.

   We have measured the sound-colour associations of our subjects in psycho-linguistic experiments and the results are shown on Fig. 2.

So when we want Chinese students to say the English sound /u:/ we ask them to make this sound blue. The pages of the teaching or testing material are colour-coded accordingly.

An articulatory test with visual representation may look like this (pictures are borrowed from Ann Baker’s popular book “Ship or Sheep?” (2008): Fig. 3.

In this kind of test students perceive an ideographic image of a word and then say it. For Chinese students it is preferable because of the pictorial, ideographic nature of their native language.

2. A receptive skills test task with audio representation in traditional mode will be:

   “Listen to the recordings of phonemes, words or sentences, identify the difference in minimal pairs” (the Listening part in Dave Alan’s Oxford Placement Test is a very good example).

   Less traditional: Recordings have sound track (background music), the rhythm of which requires certain syllabification and provides memory trace for learning (Pavlovskaya, Radievskaya 2001).

**Multilingual testing: Tasks samples**

Methodologically the problem of multilingual phonological testing may be solved in three ways:

1) by implementing top-down approach (from whole text to sound segment), prosodic
features (intonation, rhythm, pauses) playing the most important role;
2) by training receptive skills (listening) long before productive skills (pronunciation);
3) by using sound-iconic scaffolding for better understanding and better pronunciation.

Testing of polilingual pronunciation can be divided into three sequential steps.

**Step 1. Language identification at suprasegmental level, communicative type** (expressed by intonation) identification, segmentation of speech flow.
- **Listen to the utterance. What language is spoken? Is it a question, a statement or an exclamation?**
- **Listen to the utterance. How many stressed syllables do you hear?**
- **What is the total number of syllables in the utterance?**
- **How many words are there in the utterance?**

**STEP 2. Language identification at the level of a word**
- **Listen to several words. Which of them are English?**
  ma – mā (mother)
- **Listen to the word. In what language is it spoken?**
  1) chat   2) чат   3) chá (tea)
- **Listen to the three words. Which is English? Which is Russian and which is Chinese?**
  ю (Russian letter) – you – yǔ (Chinese “rain”)
- **Listen to the word. Is it pronounced by a native speaker or not? If it is pronounced incorrectly, say it as it should sound and write it down in phonetic script.**
  1) я (me in Russian)  2) yá (tooth in Chinese)  1) yard  2) я́рд (Yard in Russian)

**STEP 3. Identification of phonemes and their differences in the three languages.**
- **Students hear the sound /ж/ (Russian). Question: To what language does this sound belong?**
- **Students hear the English sound /ng/. Question: To what language does this sound belong? Can you say it in your own language (Chinese)? Can you pronounce it in Russian?**
- **Listen to the words: wabbit, tisl, borx, read. What do they mean? Which words were pronounced incorrectly? Say them correctly and write them down in spelling and in phonetic script. Write down in phonetic script the way they sounded originally.**

The final issue is to decide in what language to give the instruction to the tasks. It depends upon the level of student’s multilingual skills. The test tasks presented above are intended for A-1 level.

**References**
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