

# Materials Evaluation and Adaptation: A case study of pronunciation teaching

## The treatment of pronunciation in *The New Cambridge English Course*, vol. 1 \*

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### A FRAME OF REFERENCE

Before attempting to evaluate the treatment of English pronunciation in the *New Cambridge English Course* (NCEC) and making any adaptations we need to consider relevant points regarding the nature of the element to be taught and to outline the methodological principles on which the evaluation and adaptation will be based (McDonough & Shaw, 1993: 63-98).

#### Characteristics of spoken English

Even in their citation form, words are not realised/perceived as clear-cut sequences of phonemes, since their phonetic properties interact as a result of coarticulation. The same phoneme will be realised differently according to its environment (Brown, 1990: 19; Giegerich, 1992: 280; Lass, 1984: 295-298; Moore, 1984: 256 & 260-261). The same applies to connected speech, which is "not merely a sequence of citation forms" (Giegerich, 1992: 284). Word boundaries tend to become muddled as a result of such phenomena as *assimilation*, *elision*, *liaison* and *junction* (Gimson, 1989: 297-306). English can be regarded as having a stress-timed rhythm in the sense that the stressed parts of an utterance "occur at fairly equal intervals of time" (Gimson, 1989: 263). Speakers only stress those words in an utterance which are important for the meaning they wish to convey (Brown, 1990: 151). As a result, a stressed vowel in the citation form of a word may be unstressed if this word is unstressed in connected speech (Giegerich, 1992: 285). It is important to note that the same vowel is significantly shorter when unstressed (Taylor, 1981: 236), and that it may be reduced to schwa (*/ə/*).

#### Methodological issues

The main issues which concern the teaching of pronunciation (or the whole of language teaching for that matter) are the goal of instruction, the selection (and grading in terms of importance) of the features to be taught, the relative importance of production and perception, the materials and teaching techniques to be employed. The above will, in turn, be determined by the level and age of the students, their purpose in learning the language, their first language(s), the learning context, and the time available.

Language learners tend to perceive the sounds of a foreign language "in terms of categories in [their] native language" (Brown, 1975: 98), and to segment the stream of speech according to their L1 habits. Consequently, what the teaching of pronunciation entails is, first, helping the learner to perceive and decode the stream of speech the same way a native speaker of the language would (Brown, 1990: 59-60; Lass, 1984: 296-298) and, second, guiding the learner to produce speech as close to the pronunciation 'model' as is desirable (both model and target performance should be dictated by the context of the learning situation). The methodology used should take into account the clues and strategies native listeners use when decoding rapid speech: they "watch for ... stress placement ...

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\* This is an essay I submitted during the MPhil in English & Applied Linguistics, University of Cambridge, 1994. The essay title was: "Evaluate the treatment of English Pronunciation in one course book (or equivalent material) and show how you would adapt the presentations and exercises in order for your students to benefit from the course. Draw on your reading for the phonology course and the lectures in practical phonetics". Here I have incorporated the appendices and made slight changes to the layout.

pauses ... the tonic syllable ... [they] try to identify the lexical items by grouping the unstressed syllables round the stressed syllables ... [they] consider the vowel qualities in the stressed syllables and what the movement of the edges of these vowels tells [them] about the consonants in the vicinity" (Brown, 1990: 161). I did not mention the role of context since learners (particularly beginners) are much less able to use "top-down" processing when 'decoding' rapid speech and rely more on "phonetic cues" (op. cit.: 59-60). Therefore, teaching the pronunciation of isolated sounds or citation forms of words does not seem enough to ensure effective production and (particularly) comprehension of natural speech.

## AIMS AND METHODOLOGICAL CLAIMS

The treatment of pronunciation will not be evaluated only as a means in itself but also within the overall context of foreign language learning. In addition to the effectiveness of materials and methodology, the evaluation will also be concerned with the degree of integration of pronunciation teaching in the learning programme. I will also keep in mind the claims NCEC makes regarding the target group of students, its aims and methodology. Below is a summary of those claims.

<b>Level of learners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beginners or false beginners.</li> </ul>
<b>Age of learners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although it is common practice for course-books to indicate the target age group, NCEC does not specify this. Nevertheless, the topics presented in NCEC and the statement that "beginners' course material should not be childish" lead us to infer that it is not intended for children, more likely for adults.</li> </ul>
<b>Learners' culture and L1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "European-type educational background, but with some adaptation it can be used successfully with learners from other cultural environments'."</li> </ul>
<b>Reason for learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "For general, practical or cultural purposes."</li> </ul>
<b>Language model</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "British English, but illustrates other varieties as well."</li> </ul>
<b>Target performance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Learners need to speak comprehensibly, and understand people with different accents speaking in natural conditions (not just actors speaking standard English in recording studios)."</li> </ul>
<b>Methodology: claims and assumptions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopts the distinction between 'learning' and 'acquisition' and states that "both should be catered for". It claims to employ "the occasional use" of "authentic", "unsimplified" and "too difficult" material.</li> <li>• It offers "wide variety of presentation methodology".</li> <li>• It offers "active and varied communicative practice".</li> <li>• "Students generally learn what they use and forget what they don't use".</li> </ul>

A first impression is that NCEC attempts to cater for a number of diverse combinations of audience/purpose/learning situation. I will examine to what extent this lack of focus has a negative impact on the materials/techniques used, as well as on the effectiveness of instruction.

Pronunciation is tackled in almost every other lesson, a fact which shows that it is given due prominence in the teaching programme. Below, I evaluate the treatment of pronunciation, looking at its various aspects.

## A QUANTITATIVE OUTLINE

### Breakdown of lessons according to content

Total number of Lessons : 96. Number of lessons in which pronunciation instruction could potentially take place : 87.

- Presentation of structure, function, or lexis, listening skills : 71
- Reading and/or writing skills lessons : 3
- Revision/consolidation lessons on structures and/or lexis: 11
- Collection of optional exercises for learners to choose from : 5
- Test : 6

### Breakdown of lessons in which pronunciation is tackled

Total number of lessons in which pronunciation is tackled in some way : 41. This is 47% of the 87 lessons in which pronunciation could have been tackled (see 1). The percentages below have been calculated out of the 41 lessons in which pronunciation is actually tackled.

- Number of lessons in which pronunciation exercises appear : 28 (68%)
- Number of lessons in which the teacher's book advises teachers to tackle elements of pronunciation regarding the lexis/structures presented (no exercises in student's book) : 8 (19.5%)
- Number of lessons with optional exercises (students' decision) : 5 (12%)

### Breakdown of exercises according to type

Total number of exercises (including oral drills by teacher) : 56. Exercises focusing on production : 38 (68%). Exercises focusing on perception : 18 (32%).

- Look & say / listen & repeat / read aloud : 38 (68%)
- Mark the stress in words/sentences : 3 (5.5%)
- Listen and indicate how many words you hear : 5 (9%)
- Group/match words/phrases according to sound/stress/intonation pattern: 8 (14%)
- Listen and check (after types C2 and C4) : 2 (3.5%)

### Breakdown of exercises according to the pronunciation element they tackle

Percentages are calculated on the number of exercises (56). Number of exercises dealing with individual sounds: 21 (37.5%), of which vowels: 16 (28.5%), consonants: 4 (7%). Exercises focusing on contrasts between individual sounds : 3 (5%)

- Pronunciation of individual 'phonemes' (sounds) : 9 (16%)
- Different pronunciations of the same letter : 11 (19.5%)
- Effect of final 'e' on pronunciation of vowels in a word : 1 (2%)
- Pronunciation of new lexis : 4 (7%)
- Pronunciation of contracted/weak forms : 5 (9%)
- Stress/rhythm/linking : 18 (32%)
- Perception of 'rapid' speech : 5 (9%)
- Intonation : 3 (5%)

## Breakdown of optional exercises

Number of optional exercises : 17 (32.5%)

### According to the guidelines for each lesson

- Teacher's decision (from B1 and B2) : 7 (41%)
- Students' decision (from B3) : 10 (59%)

### According to type

- Exercises focusing on production : 7 (18% of 'production' exercises)
- Exercises focusing on perception : 10 (55.5% of 'perception' exercises)

### According to pronunciation element

- Individual sounds : 7 (35% of exercises on individual sounds)
- Stress/rhythm/linking : 5 (28% of exercises on stress/rhythm/linking)
- Rapid speech : 2 (40% of exercises on perception of rapid speech)
- Intonation : 2 (67% of exercises on intonation)

## Breakdown of exercises according to medium of presentation

- Presented/modelled by teacher : 21 (37.5%).
- Presented/modelled through taped material : 35 (62.5%).
- It is interesting to note that in 9 of the exercises for which there is taped material (that is, 25% of the exercises based on taped material, or 16% of all exercises) the tape is deemed optional according to the teacher's book.

## Breakdown of taped materials for pronunciation exercises according to type

Number of recordings for pronunciation exercises : 35

- Dialogue or mini pseudo-dialogues (of question-answer type) : 3 (9%)
- Narrative text read aloud : 1 (3%)
- Phrases/sentences from dialogue/text : 6 (18%)
- Phrases/sentences related to topic/function/structure : 6 (18%)
- Phrases/sentences not related to topic/function/structure : 2 (6%)
- Words in isolation : 15 (45.5%)

## DISCUSSION

### Context and integration

New structures and certain word groups (e.g. 'months') are exploited effectively to demonstrate and practice matters of stress/rhythm (and weak forms), linking and intonation. Unfortunately, after the modelling and isolated practice (usually a drill) only half of the lessons (47%) are learners given the opportunity to try out the element taught in context (be it a speaking or listening activity) where they would have to focus on the meaning rather than the pronunciation.

### Production vs. perception

NCEC clearly regards production as being much more important than perception (68% of exercises focus on production). This becomes even more obvious when we consider that although the introduction to the book (p. vii) states clearly that all the exercises should be regarded as optional, 55% of the perception exercises (as opposed to only 18% of the production ones) are stressed as optional

in the teacher's guide. Since NCEC has no particular learner-group in mind it should provide a more balanced set of exercises.

## Elements of pronunciation and priorities

There is a balanced treatment of individual sounds (37.5%) and stress/rhythm (32%). Regarding individual sounds, the majority of exercises are concerned with either the pronunciation of a particular phoneme or the different pronunciations of a particular letter with no attention paid to their phonological environment. It seems that the decision to tackle the different pronunciations of the same letter rises from the (legitimate) intention to provide learners with 'clues' to the pronunciation of new words (or even as a memory aid during production). It is doubtful, though, whether such clues will facilitate the learners' comprehension of (natural) speech. Matters of contrast between phonemes that may be perceived as identical by some learners are minimally treated. Intonation (5%) and perception of rapid speech (9%) are paid the least of attention. The case of rapid speech contradicts one of the claims of NCEC (p. VI), particularly as almost half of such exercises are deemed optional.

## Taped material

Against the claims of NCEC, most recordings for pronunciation exercises (87.5%) consist of words in isolation (45.5%) and phrases/sentences out of context (42%). What is more, the few dialogues used are far from being examples of natural speech. Even in those which may not have been recorded by actors the speakers are definitely aware that they are recording for learners, a fact that seems to have affected the 'naturalness' of their production (see Brown, 1990: 159). NCEC mostly fails to distinguish between taped models to be employed in teaching of production ("slow clear pronunciation") and perception ("language as normally spoken by native speakers to each other") (Brown, 1975: 103).

## Types of exercises and techniques

All of the 'production' exercises are drills. Understandably, imitation of a model is central to pronunciation teaching. On the other hand, a variety of techniques would be more effective (and would help maintain learner interest). The 'perception' exercises are rather more varied (but only of three main types). Nevertheless, they tackle the elements most learners need to be familiarised with if they are to be able to understand natural speech (see Gimson, 1989: 288). My only reservations have to do with the nature of the taped material, and the fact that vowel sounds are tackled as if they retain the same qualities regardless of the immediate context or speed of delivery.

# ADAPTATIONS

## The teaching situation

**Teaching/learning context:** Language school in Greece.

**L1:** Greek (monolingual class).

**Age:** Adults; beginners in Greece fall into two categories: children of 9-11 and adults.

**Level:** It is very rare to find an adult Greek true beginner. Learners at beginner level have already been exposed to English through television (about 50% of films and series are in English, though with subtitles) and pop songs. What is more, a great number of English words/expressions have been incorporated in the Greek lexicon (sometimes to the extent of accepting Greek affixation). A drawback regarding the teaching of pronunciation is that these words/expressions have also been made to conform to Greek pronunciation. It makes it more difficult for the teacher to change already established 'habits'/generalisations.

**Reasons for learning:** Adult learners are of diverse backgrounds and start learning English for a wide variety of reasons. The most typical 'groups' are: students intending to pursue graduate studies in English speaking countries, employees who want to enhance their status by obtaining a proficiency certificate, people who decided to learn English for their own personal development or because of they feel that in the context of the European Union it is something they need.

**Aims and target performance:** My experience has shown that pronunciation performance is one of the last priorities of adult learners. Although some of them are sensitive regarding their pronunciation,

the majority is indifferent or even hostile to an 'English-sounding' pronunciation. The area that presents the greatest difficulty for them is understanding natural spoken English. Therefore, the focus of pronunciation instruction will be towards perception rather than production, the aim for the latter being "comfortable intelligibility" (Kenworthy, 1987: 16).

## Elements of pronunciation to be tackled

### Individual sounds and clusters

The sounds and clusters Greek learners find difficult to perceive, and, therefore, to produce (something that can affect their intelligibility) are mainly (a) the ones they perceive as similar to Greek sounds, and (b) English minimal pairs which they perceive as the same Greek phoneme. Therefore, these sounds and pairs need to be contrasted and not merely tackled on their own (sources: Householder, 1964: 18-24; Kenworthy, 1987: 139-141; Koutsoudas & Koutsoudas, 1962; as well as my own observations).

### Spelling and pronunciation

In Greek, the spelling-pronunciation correspondence is quite straightforward; that is, apart from a few exceptions there is a one-to-one correspondence (Koutsoudas & Koutsoudas, 1962: 230). Since learners will encounter both the written and spoken language from the beginning of the course they may impose a Greek reading/pronunciation on English words.

Any regularities of spelling-pronunciation correspondence will be pointed out and discussed, since the two languages are quite different in that respect. The table below shows the problematic vowel and consonant phonemes of each language, paired as the average Greek speaker would perceive (and consequently produce) them. English phonemes are presented as in Brown (1990: 35), Greek phonemes are presented as in Mackridge (1985: 15).

English	Greek
/æ/, /ɑ:/, /ʌ/	/a/
/e/, /ɜ:/	/ɛ/
/ɪ/, /i:/	/i/
/ɒ/, /ɔ:/	/o/
/ʊ/, /u:/	/u/
/ə/	<i>Any of the above</i>
/w/	/ɣ/, /u/
/h/	/x/
/n/, /ŋ/	/n/
/s/, /ʃ/,	/s/
/z/, /ʒ/	/z/

Also, note that in Greek the clusters /m/+/p/ and /n/+/t/ can be realised (in free variation) as [b], [mp], [mb] and [d], [nt], [nd] respectively. So Greek speakers may pronounce: *able* as [ˈɛɪmbɪ], *amplify* as [ˈɛɪmbɪfai] or [ˈɛɪblɪfai], *antennae* as [adˈɛna], *enterprise* as [ˈɛdɛɾpraɪz] or [ˈɛndɛɾpraɪz]. Finally, Greek /t/ and /p/ are unaspirated and may be perceived by English-speaking listeners as /d/ and /b/ respectively.

### Stress and rhythm

Greek is syllable-timed. Greek learners tend, therefore, to allocate equal time to each syllable (or, more accurately, to what they perceive as a syllable) and produce full vowels in unstressed positions. They use the same strategy when they decode rapid speech. In my experience, this is by far the main reason for their problems in the comprehension of connected speech. To remedy this, high priority will

be given to familiarising learners with English rhythm and the weakening of unstressed vowels. Production of elements of connected speech will also be treated, but with high priority given mainly to the weak forms of vowels (Abbot, 1986; Brown, 1990: 158; Gimson, 1989: 306-307; Kenworthy, 1987: 79).

## **Materials and Techniques**

### **Presentation materials**

A dual approach will be taken. To provide a model for production, words, phrases and short dialogues/texts in slow colloquial speech are to be used. Tapes in which English speakers speak Greek with distinct English pronunciation are also helpful [see '*Production*' below]. When perception is the aim, taped material of spoken language as used by native speakers to a native-speaker audience will be used. In both cases alternation of audio and video tapes will ensure familiarity of and practice in situations when visual clues are (not) present.

### **Types of exercises**

#### ***Perception/Awareness***

Learners will be asked to identify the number of words they hear, certain (groups of) words, the actual utterance heard among written alternatives given to them before listening (Brown, 1975: 112), mark stress on a transcript (before and after listening to the tape) or identify unstressed vowels and features of connected speech, infer the speaker's intended meaning based on prosodic and paralinguistic features. A common principle underlying rapid speech exercises is that since we do not want to grade the input we should pitch the difficulty of the task at the learners' level, and be ready to re-play the tape as many times as needed (Brown, 1974: 56). The pronunciation of Greek words incorporated into the English lexicon can facilitate awareness regarding word stress and pronunciation.

#### ***Production***

Some use of drilling seems inevitable, but it does not have to be mechanical. Controlled pseudo-communicative situations (with no real focus on meaning) can be created in which the learners will have the opportunity to get their tongue around the element practised. Mimicry (speaking Greek with an English pronunciation) can be utilised to help learners get an overall feel for the pronunciation. Mimicry can also help lower learner inhibitions, particularly of those adult learners who would like to 'drop' their Greek accent but feel embarrassed to do so. When an individual sound causes intelligibility problems, learners can be made aware of particular articulatory settings by watching the mouth movements of a speaker, and guided to reproduce (or approximate) the setting themselves (Brown, 1974: 57).

### **Context**

Lessons presenting new structures or expressions (i.e. exponents of functions) through taped material, as well as listening-skills lessons will provide a context (and a 'model') for practice/awareness of relevant issues of pronunciation.

### **Integration**

Pronunciation teaching is not an end in itself but a means of facilitating communication. It seems logical, then, to give learners the chance to incorporate the elements practised in their own productive/receptive use of the language (Cook, 1989: 82-83, Littlewood, 1981: 87-88). Listening and speaking skills development tasks seem the natural environment.

### **Feedback**

After the listening tasks (where the focus is on meaning), the learners can turn their attention to pronunciation features that posed comprehension problems. Speaking tasks can be taped and used for self-awareness regarding elements of pronunciation that cause intelligibility problems. The tasks devised can also be customised to meet individual learners' needs and done as homework.

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