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COMMENTARY

## Dodson's classroom experiments in pronunciation

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One of the points to be applauded in Derwing and Munro (2015) is the acknowledgement of past efforts in pronunciation experimentation which have not received due attention by the present generation. Either the research was then simply ahead of its time, or its findings were too much of a challenge to contemporary conventional wisdom. I believe that Dodson (1967) is a case on both accounts. When Derwing and Munro (2015) admitted that “we do not know of any true experimental studies of pronunciation instruction” (p. 49), Dodson's work came to mind again.

In 1967 Carl Dodson published the results of a set of classroom experiments which included the teaching of pronunciation. The settings of the experiments were a primary school class of 26 8 and 9 year old children and five classes of 13 and 14 year old pupils in a secondary school. Dodson's main concern was: What would work best in classes of 30+ children in school? His experiments concentrated on the learning of foreign languages in school, which led to techniques that were tested in schools and found to be not only suitable, but successful too. (A description of the definitive set of 10 interconnected experiments is beyond the scope of this résumé, and can be found in full in Dodson, 1967 and in brief in Tench, 2017.)

Pronunciation was not taught in isolation, but was part of an integrated programme of activities. His aim was:

1. to make the pupil fluent and accurate in the spoken word
2. to make the pupil fluent and accurate in the written word
3. to prepare the pupil in such a manner that he (*sic*) can achieve true bilingualism (p. 66).

His method included a range of activities that promoted an appropriate level of grammar, vocabulary, discourse convention, conversational competence and confidence building.

The results led Dodson to advocate imitation as the basic activity for developing pronunciation proficiency, with pronunciation integrated prominently in a holistic methodology, alongside grammar, vocabulary, discourse conventions and confidence building in speech, listening, reading and writing. He argued that pronunciation was most successfully developed through a rapid imitation procedure, both individually and 'chorally', of narrative material that was understood and meaningful, and reinforced by corresponding printed text as an 'out-of-focus' secondary aid.

Pronunciation activities had to be meaningful, with words and sentences that could be immediately used in the classroom. He recommended that the most efficient way of ensuring understanding was to give a mother tongue equivalent supported if necessary by visual aids, especially for young children. This was the limited, precise, function of the mother tongue; it did not otherwise feature in pronunciation practice, but it was nevertheless important as the means by which learners understood what they were practising and prevented them from being distracted by trying to guess the meaning.

Dodson also advocated imitation of whole sentences as the basic technique. The teacher would give a new L2 sentence, immediately provide the meaning in the mother tongue, then proceed with multiple stimuli of that same sentence, a technique that later became known as 'sandwiching': L2 sentence, mother tongue equivalent, L2 sentence, L2 sentence. Dodson suggested that when children had engaged in, and been exposed to, 15 imitation contacts, they would not only be able to pronounce the sentences accurately and with understanding, but also recall them well three months later.

Dodson did not contemplate special activities based on minimal pairs, or perception and production tasks on individual consonants and vowels; he relied on children's own capacities to perceive differences in L2 articulations. Admittedly, the secondary school pupils were not so adept at such perception and production as the younger children, but since they required at least 8 imitation contacts for both accuracy in articulations and fluency in whole sentences, they were still able to succeed without specific minimal pair type practice.

Dodson strongly advocated the availability of printed versions of the material being practised orally, but only as a secondary focus. He had discovered that print acted as a support to oral work, by providing at least the initial letters of words, and so also word boundaries themselves, which helped learners through a whole sentence. It also provided an initial acquaintance with spellings, which could then be exploited in subsequent activities.

Dodson anticipated a rapid stimulus-response procedure to ensure that learners responded within the 5 to 10 second retention of an accurate mental acoustic image. He envisaged a teacher saying an L2 sentence as primary focus, providing

an immediate mother tongue equivalent and then proceeding with a sequence of repetitions of the L2 sentence, requiring eye contact from the whole class. The teacher would then call on individual learners to imitate the L2 sentence, but without anything being heard between the stimulus and the learner's response – not even the learner's name; the teacher would move around the classroom gesturing to individuals to respond.

However, while one learner was responding, the others were encouraged to look at the printed version (and a picture strip, if available) but as they were doing so, they were still hearing the spoken stimulus and so were able to associate the sentence with the printed words. The printed version had one extra bonus, that if a child suffered a complete breakdown while responding, they would then be allowed to consult it as a cue to help them.

To increase the number of responses per learner, Dodson advocated that the teacher should engage in what is called a 'choral response' by 'conducting' the class into a response by all at the same time. He recommended that this should be done after about ten learner responses, by which time the teacher could be sure that a good proportion of the learners were producing an accurate response.

Dodson envisaged this imitation exercise developing into a rhythmic routine, creating a sense of well-being and contented progress. On the other hand, a teacher must avoid overdoing the exercise, keeping it to ten minutes or so at the most! It should be possible to add new sentences within that time, and then develop a sequence in keeping with a narrative or dialogue.

## **Final comments**

My own experience of teaching pronunciation in this way is wholly positive. But as one trained in general phonetics and the phonologies of different languages, I also supplemented my teaching with specific perception and production tasks (Tench, 1981). What I learnt specifically from Dodson was that pronunciation teaching should be integrated within a holistic programme of language teaching; it should be meaningful; it is enhanced by the availability of corresponding printed material; it is best conducted in an imitation procedure with whole sentences, which themselves can be put to immediate use. I found that these principles produced successful outcomes, and I found that I enjoyed the very procedures themselves, and that the learners did too!

## References

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