

## *Book Review Section*

### **Minimal Pairs and Beyond: Current Pronunciation Textbooks, Part II**

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In this second of a two-part series examining currently popular texts for the teaching of pronunciation, we will look at two textbooks which attempt to follow a recent tendency to teach pronunciation, not as an isolated ability, but rather as part of a wider vision, including, besides traditional pronunciation exercises, grammar review and listening practice, all within a communicative framework.

*Judy B. Gilbert. Clear Speech: Pronunciation and Listening Comprehension in North American English. Second Edition. Cambridge University Press, 1993. 132 pp.*

This intermediate/advanced text is a second, much revised, edition of a book which originally appeared in 1984. It includes a Student's Book, Teacher's Resource Book, and Cassettes.

The first edition combined the teaching of pronunciation and listening comprehension, claiming they were "linked by a unified system within which the individual sounds are systematically related." (Gilbert 1984b, 1) This first edition was divided into thirty six units in which the first twenty-three and final four were dedicated to the teaching of pronunciation with emphasis put on stress, focus and clarity of sounds and including twelve listening discrimination practices and fifteen dictations. Nine units were dedicated solely to listening comprehension, especially practices to improve academic listening abilities.

The revised second edition, while still claiming to teach *listening comprehension* in the title, has no units dedicated to listening comprehension and only eight listening discrimination practices and seven dictations in the entire book. Therefore, the second edition, while better in its presentation of pronunciation (as we will see below) is lacking in listening comprehension and should be considered to be only a pronunciation textbook.

Another difference between the first and second editions is the increased emphasis on the sounds of English in the new edition. Although in the second edition, the

author tells the teacher not to worry about sounds,

Students believe that they will improve their pronunciation if they work hard on individual sounds. However, improving rhythm will do more for clarifying sounds than any amount of practice on the sounds themselves. That is why rhythm is introduced early into the units on sounds. It is recommended that you do not allow the class to be trapped in an effort to perfect individual sounds before moving on. (Gilbert 1993, vi)

intense sound practice appears as early as Unit Two. The idea of emphasizing rhythm, stress and intonation before concentrating on individual sound contrasts, an idea central to the first edition, has been abandoned in the second edition.

The second edition, however, is much improved as to the type of practices provided. Besides using traditional repetitions of isolated words and rejoinders (Bowen 1972), poems, tongue twisters, limericks, games and pair practice activities liven up the units. Pronunciation problems are also related to grammar ([s z əz] related to the singular and plural forms of nouns, the use of contractions, etc.)

Two of the best units are those dedicated to the teaching of focus words. Unit Thirteen, for example, deals with pitch patterns used for emphasis and Unit Fourteen with emphasis on structure words. Unit Thirteen begins with a series of clearly stated rules for the English use of sentence focus and is followed by some pair practices in which students practice the relationship of pronunciation to such functions as disagreeing, guessing what comes next, etc.

## Disagreement

1 Write the answers that disagree with the following statements. Different answers are possible.

2 Underline the word in your answer that disagrees with the statement.

3 Then practice with a partner.

*Example* A: London is far away.

B: *No, it's not.* or *Not very far.* or *Not as far as Rome.*

1. A: Paris and London are countries.

B: \_\_\_\_\_

2. A: Children learn to read before they learn to talk.

B: \_\_\_\_\_

ETC.

(p. 91)

Unit Fourteen practices the differences in meaning and use caused by the stressing of structure words such as *can*, *not*, prepositions and pronouns, which are usually unstressed. The unit includes a lot of pair work which lets the students practice the rules that are presented.

Besides the changes from the first edition which are caused more by a deviation of theoretical framework than a radical loss of quality, the book could perhaps be criticized for its lack of practice with the English vowel system, which is relegated to Appendix A. For teachers in a Spanish-speaking country, the heavy emphasis on consonant problems which are unrelated to our reality: [r/d, v/f, d/l, p/f], and a lack of practice of some other problems typical of the Spanish-speaking student: [j, b/v].

All this is not to say that the book is useless in Mexico. The focus units mentioned above, the increased number of communicative-like practices using pair work as a chosen organizational technique, as well as the many games, poems, limericks and tongue-twisters make this book a valuable supplement in a course in oral production.

*Linda Lane. Focus on Pronunciation: Principles and Practice for Effective Communication. Longman, 1993. 228 pp.*

*Focus on Pronunciation* is a textbook designed for intermediate and advanced students of English. Besides stressing the elements of English pronunciation that are different from other languages, it also "emphasizes the relationship between different elements of pronunciation [... which] often cause more difficulty for students than the elements themselves." (p. viii)

The text includes a Student's Book, Teacher's Manual and cassettes. There are eighty three units: fifty seven basic units and twenty six supplementary ones and three additional appendixes. The Basic Units are divided into eight parts: *Getting an Overview*, *The Vowels*, *The Consonants*, *Putting Words Together*, *Syllable Stress*, *Rhythm and Intonation*. Each unit is in turn divided into an *Introduction*, *Focus Words* (in Parts 1 and 2), *Practice* and *Homework*.

The use of a focus word to help the student remember the lesson being taught is unique to this text. A focus word is a

... single high-frequency word that contains the sound or pattern being taught in the unit. For example, *think* is a focus word for the unit on the pronunciation of *th*. (p. x)

And the student is advised that

the use of focus words is an important feature of this book because it provides you with a specific technique for improving your pronunciation outside of class. Once you are successful pronouncing the focus word given in a unit, you can add new common words with problem sounds and continue your improvement. (p. xi)

Besides pronunciation work, the text includes practice in:

- 1) listening discrimination based on long texts which the student hears on the tape and then either counts the occurrence of focus words without seeing the written text or finds all the occurrences of a certain sound and marks them on the written text.
- 2) practice with idioms and expressions including the focus sound. For example, in Unit Eleven there is an exercise matching idioms that include the [r] sound (i. e., *hard-hearted*, *hurt someone's feeling*) with their definitions. (p. 37)
- 3) grammar reviews based on sounds or other pronunciation problems that are related to the topic of the unit. For example, in Unit Seventeen (*The Sound [wu]*), students working in pairs give their reactions to specific, hypothetical situations:

*Situation 1:* You won the lottery.

A: What would you do if you won the lottery ?

B: I'd buy a racehorse but I wouldn't quit my job. (p. 51)

- 4) Jig-saw work. In Unit Twenty-Seven (*The Consonant [y]*, *The Consonant [y] and [d]*, *Clusters with [y]*) students must complete quotations about television, one student reading a text written in cloze format, while the other gives clues, listed on another page, as to what fits in the blanks: For example, *Quote 1: TV brought the (a) \_\_\_\_\_ of war into the comfort of the living room. (p. 81). Clue on page 215: a synonym for cruelty and inhumanity; the adjective form of this word is brutal.*
- 5) listening comprehension. There are many practices in which students must answer questions about a passage they have heard.

Many of the units are based on specific themes and include vocabulary practice, listening and even homework assignments built around that theme. For example, Unit Forty Two (*Personal Pronouns*) is based on Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* and includes an interview of two eyewitnesses in which the student hears the dialogue, circles the pronouns and then practices it with a partner. Then a description of the first alien is played and students count the number of times *it/its/it's* is heard. The next practice has students filling in the blanks in a description of the invaders' attack on Newark with the correct pronoun and then reading at least one sentence aloud. The homework assignment requires students to record a description of a pair of aliens.

The book also includes a large number of games and other communicative activities which allow the student to go beyond the simple repetition of minimal pair drills.

The *Supplementary Units* (58-83) give students further practice with difficult sound contrasts. These practices are, on the most part, based on the repetition of isolated words and minimal pairs and are supported with the cassettes. At the end of each *Basic Unit* there is reference made to related units, including these supplementary units, where a student can go for further practice.

Although superior in many ways to other pronunciation texts, there are a few things that should be considered before choosing to use this textbook in a class:

- 1) The book is very long and could not be well-covered in a short course. However, many of the practices could be utilized independently and would provide good support for any pronunciation course.
- 2) Many of the homework assignments do not lend themselves to a group of twenty to fifty students. This is the description given in the introduction to the student about these assignments:

Each unit ends with a homework assignment, which you will tape-record on your own blank cassette and turn in to your teacher. Your teacher will listen to your tape and record comments on it, perhaps adding individualized work. You should not erase earlier assignments from your tape, because you can use these to gauge your progress. Your teacher's recorded comments from earlier assignments will also provide useful models that you can use for review. (p. xi)

This system would be very efficient for a small group of students, but unwieldy for a larger group. Perhaps only a few student's practices could be checked randomly each day.

- 3) The intonation practice is left until the end of the text: *Basic Units* 52-57. Teachers who feel this type of practice should be done first, could change the order of the units without affecting student progress.

In spite of these weaknesses, this textbook does seem to offer a practical solution to the problem of finding a text for intermediate/advanced courses emphasizing oral production. Supplemented by some additional conversational activities, it could be used very well to tune-up those oral *details* so often ignored by more traditional texts.

*Reviewed by JoAnn Miller*

## REFERENCES

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