O CRUZAMENTO DE SABERES NA AULA DE INGLÊS

CONTRIBUTOS PARA UMA PRÁTICA MULTIDISCIPLINAR

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1. Introduction

“The problem is, they don’t know how to say the words.” Sandra, a teacher of 7th grade students, is describing her class. They listen to a song about possible jobs, then answer the teacher’s comprehension questions. Or rather, they don’t answer, or are barely understandable when they do, because they have no confidence in saying even a single item like ‘baker’, let alone putting it into a well-inflected utterance. The problem here seems to be not so much comprehension, or content, as phonology.

Given this situation, the question “Is teaching pronunciation necessary, desirable or even possible?” seems otiose. Nevertheless, the controversy has rumbled on for decades among ELT professionals. Scott Thornbury (2010) has called it “the question that will not go away”, with his avowed scepticism arousing a storm of correspondence, for and against, on his blog. The present article firstly examines some recent views on teaching pronunciation, highlighting the intensely personal nature of the skill. We go on to look at what is happening currently in Portuguese state and private schools, at elementary and secondary level, through the results of a small local survey of teachers in the Central region. The question of the language variety to choose as a model is clearly controversial. The hegemony of ‘first circle’ standard varieties is now seen as an example
of cultural and linguistic imperialism, with both outer circle and ‘global’ Englishes presented as alternatives for international communication. I look at some of the options, including the pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca, and discuss the relative importance of prosodic features such as intonation and stress in this model.

Finally, since coursebooks and syllabuses in use in Portuguese schools largely neglect pronunciation in general and prosodic features in particular, I end with some suggestions for the observation and practice of prosodic features, this being an area which teachers agree is important, which can only gain in importance with the wider use of speaking assessment in schools, and which will obviously repay creative attention and energy devoted to it in the classroom by both teachers and students.

2. ‘Spending the time on more important stuff’: recent controversies on the value of pronunciation teaching

That pronunciation has been a neglected area of English teaching, in native-speaking and non-native speaking countries, is well recognised (Rogerson-Revell 2011:5). Cruttenden (2008:315) blames the neglect on the predominance of grammar in teaching and on the increased use of English for international communication. The neglect seems surprising, however, given the results of Jenkins’ research (2000), which point to the “almost negligible role of incorrect grammar as cause of miscommunication. This is in marked contrast with the importance most coursebooks give to grammar, and the amount of class time most of us as teachers dedicate to this area” (Walker 2010:26).

But is this neglect of pronunciation in any way justifiable? – is it to some extent a natural and inevitable state of affairs, or is it something that needs to be remedied? Recently this ‘question that simply will not go away’ was raised in typically lively style in Scott Thornbury’s blog An A-Z of ELT (posted 1/8/2010). Thornbury is sceptical about the value of pronunciation teaching (“As a teacher, I have to confess that I can’t recall any enduring effects for teaching pronunciation in class”), while admitting