

A Cacophony of Words

By Fitch O'Connell

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Here in Portugal, teachers of English have been scratching our heads a bit recently over what words should sound like. We found it to be quite a conundrum.

You might think that it shouldn't be so, but there we were, working with state school teachers who had been told that, for the first time ever, they had to include the oral utterances of their students as part of the annual assessment figures and, well, this raised rather a lot of questions.

There had been a directive to teachers of English working in Portugal's state schools to count the oral skills of students (30% of the total annual assessment figure) but this wasn't accompanied by any helpful information on how it might be achieved, and there is little history of speaking skills playing any kind of role in the language classroom. Like in so many schools around the world, up until now language learning was carried out with little or no attempt to get the little darlings to actually talk. In the language being supposedly learned, anyway.

However, there is a lot of experience in developing oral skills, and in ways of assessing it, outside of the state sector, which is how I became involved. Earlier this year we started devising ways of sharing these nuggets amongst the teachers, and we made sure that our suggestions were in line with measures that have become *de rigueur* in Europe these days — CEFR, or the Common European Framework of Reference for languages. These are eminently sensible guidelines, and designed so that we can measure progress in learning one language fairly against learning any other language. It's all to do with language production skills. On paper it looks great, and even in practice it clears away a lot of doubt and opens up level playing fields. There is, of course, a big "but."

Actually, we quickly found two "buts." One involved some deeply rooted prejudices about "proper" English and the other was in regard to standardization of assessment processes. Let's take the latter first. At first I thought we'd done a thorough job of collecting a fine range of examples of students (and others) talking and exhibiting a wide variety of abilities in spoken English, together with carefully graded assessments of each example. The idea was to show the teachers who had come to some intensive training courses how to match what they heard against a usable, classroom-friendly checklist, which paid due attention to the guidelines set out by CEFR.

I was immeasurably pleased with myself at first, and so couldn't understand their sullen silences and why they kept shooting troubled glances at each other. Eventually one of them broke ranks and explained to me that as none of the examples I was giving showed any Portuguese speakers speaking English, they felt not much wiser. How could they use assessments of Italian or Spanish or Greek kids to guide them when listening to their own students. It was a perception of spoken language that I hadn't even considered, not only because I am an experienced assessor of international English exams and thus used to a wide variety of speech patterns and sounds under exam conditions, but also because as a native English language speaker I am so used to hearing English being spoken in such a variety of guises and accents every day that it is hardly an problem any longer. The teachers sitting glumly in front of me, though, were mainly used to hearing only either Portuguese or native speakers — British, American or South African on the whole — speaking English and they had great difficulty in tuning into speakers from other countries.

This brings up the issue of "listener competence" amongst the teachers (which is closely related to the belief that if you shout at foreigners who don't speak your language then they will somehow understand you), and is a particular bugbear of mine. I say this because I am a victim of those who, on hearing their own language being spoken with a foreign accent, instantly conclude that they cannot understand a word and consequently don't even bother to listen. (I once had difficulty in ordering a banana in a cafe, even though it is the same word in Portuguese as in English, simply because the girl behind the counter had switched off, much to the amusement of

her colleagues). However, lack of experience in hearing a variety of accents is a real problem and, as was pointed out to me, most teachers of English in Portuguese schools will only hear Portuguese accents. (This is becoming less true, incidentally, as the slow mix due to immigration takes effect). The conclusion was that to make the standardization process workable, or at least easier, then we needed a library of examples of spoken English representing the whole range of CEFR from A1 (beginners) to C2 (proficient speakers), all collected from Portuguese speakers.

We checked with the Ministry of Education and the Universities, and there isn't such a library in existence, which means we'll have to make one ourselves; it's a project I'm looking forward to starting. However, I am left with the uncomfortable feeling that we ought to be widening our teachers' experiences of spoken English, not narrowing them down. I suspect that that process will be the second part of a bigger project.

The other concern I mentioned earlier — rooted prejudices — is distantly related to the above, and it is quite a pernicious devil to deal with, as most prejudices are. It concerns what is the acceptable sound — or accent — that is "permitted" for each and every word, phrase or sentence. Those who subscribe to this prejudice seem to believe that there is a correct and an incorrect way to speak and that this is determined by a very narrow range of acceptable accents. The most extreme version of this would determine that "correct" English is spoken by a native speaker and that all non-native speakers should try to emulate native speakers speech patterns. This is a highly pervasive view, and it is quite ludicrous, of course, but nevertheless very corrosive.

There is the cautionary tale of the Frenchman who, having spent a great deal of time and effort in perfecting the kind of accent he heard from his cousins in perfidious Albion, discovered he was confounded time and time again because it was assumed he also knew the cricket score, enjoyed roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, and was happy to talk about the weather all evening. Had he spoken with even a slight French accent he would have been spared this cultural torture. You have to ask yourself what drove him to do this. What is wrong with English spoken with a French accent? Personally I love the sound of Gallic-hued English and, as with any other accent, all I would ask is that it is intelligible. This may require a little effort on the part of the listener (referring back to my bugbear) but that is a normal part of discourse. The listener, too, needs to become more culturally aware.

This leads us directly to my final point: if a "native speaker accent" is demanded, then which one or ones of the many do we choose? Not only are there the broad categories of British, American, Australian and the other "native speaker" Englishes to deal with, but the divisions within each one are remarkable too. Why did our putative Frenchman choose the particular English accent that he did? There are over a dozen main groups of accent within England alone (let alone Scotland, Wales or Ireland) and each of those is divided into sub-classes of often very distinctive variants of their own, leading to dozens of accents to choose from. Some accents in England are not easily understood by inexperienced listeners from other parts of the country, with some seemingly unintelligible to others. I used to hate going to Newcastle, Glasgow and Belfast when I was giving training lectures to teachers there, not because I didn't like the places (far from it) but because I nearly always got embarrassed by not understanding some of the questions asked at the end of my talk.

On the other hand, the accent that many people regard as quintessentially English — known as Received Pronunciation, or RP English (as spoken by the Royal family, for example) — is in fact spoken by less than 5% of the population, so that can hardly be considered representative, even if many people still regard it as "proper" English. Actually, I could understand it if the English that was taught used some of the stronger, wilder accents, especially those which avoid the infamous "th" sounds, [ð] and [θ], and which substitute "t" or "d" or glottal stops instead (e.g. "Take t'kids wid ya'). Much easier to deal with. Of course, all that is just on one small island off the north coast of Europe; I haven't even thought about the challenges faced on the other side of the Atlantic.

Standardization in developing speaking skills is thus full of pitfalls and requires some serious rethinking of what people think sounds "right" and what sounds "wrong." Even trying to talk about "standard" and "non-standard" English is a problem because what, after all, is standard? No wonder our teachers on the training course were having a hard time of it. However, what it does point a wobbly finger at, though, is that area of growing interest, the field of "Englishes," and the concept of a world English that is not American nor British nor any of the others. Ee by 'eck it fair makes me 'ead spin.

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