

TEACHING PRACTICAL PHONOLOGY ON-LINE: PROS AND CONS

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Abstract. In our digital era the necessity of developing distance (on-line) learning courses both in Russia and in the whole world is not viewed any longer as a challenge but rather as an issue of practicality. Both state budgeted educational institutions and private sector companies are involved in producing relevant programs to answer the demand in the market. Pronunciation is the area which stays beyond the main focus of material writers' attention. Although the speaker's pronunciation culture is the first signal that influences the listener's perception of the utterance itself and of the speaker's personality, consciously or subconsciously. In the latest projects of the Council of Europe which provide detailed descriptors for assessing phonological skills, general phonological control is measured according to the intelligibility, that is how much effort interlocutor has to make to understand the speaker. The interlocutor should not necessarily be a native speaker. This ruins the idea of native pronunciation and traditional phonetic standards. The role of the teacher becomes more complicated, because he/she has to identify the level of intelligibility of a student according to his/her inner criteria. In this respect digital technologies can save the situation providing speech models with acceptable range of variability. In the article the possibilities of teaching and learning the phonology of foreign languages distantly are discussed. The following methodological factors are considered: focus groups, content, format, technologies, methods and techniques of training, duration of training sessions. Electronic resources for teaching phonetic perception and production of the English Language at both segmental and supersegmental levels are presented. Each resource's characteristics are discussed in a short review. The preferable options are identified. This material might be useful for English teachers planning distance classes with remedial type of phonetic training in various educational contexts.

Keywords: culture of speaking, distance learning, pronunciation, phonology, teaching methodology, internet resources, foreign languages, phonological control, focus group, speech perception, speech production.

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Introduction

The culture of speech is primarily related to how a person sounds, in what sound form he/she puts the meaning that he/she wants to transmit. On the other end of the communication channel the listener identifies the sound signal and makes decision about whether it matches his/her own criteria of natural adequate utterance or not. It happens very quickly, in a fraction of a second, earlier than the meaning of the words uttered are extracted. The listener makes the judgement probably basing on the following criteria:

1) is it delivered by a native speaker of the language (then the speaker is accepted as “one of us”), or by a non-native one, in which case the speaker would rather be perceived as an alien; 2) do the listener likes how the speaker sounds or dislikes it. The second criterion may be applied to both native and non-native speech. The earliest samples of language tests in history were introduced according to the first criterion. Those were the so called "Shibboleth tests". Let's consider the two criteria mentioned above.

2) As a marker of belongingness to a certain group pronunciation reveals the social status of the speaker, his/her educational level, cultural background, geographic origin (local dialect and/or accent). The speakers' message will also be judged according to the norm of the language. Although, norm has such a dynamic character that it is perhaps more realistic to speak about attitudes to norm at particular time and place of the speaking event. Thus, American speech might be considered as strongly accented from the point of view of British Received Pronunciation in the middle of the 20th century, but today, when RP is spoken by less than 2% of the population of the British Isles, it may be considered as an accent itself. Broadly speaking, the norm in the pronunciation of the English language can hardly be discussed whatsoever taking into consideration the increasing number of local varieties of English. According to the

paradigm of World Englishes which started to be prevailing in the end of the XX century (Kachru, 1986), the linguistic norm can only be set in the countries of the inner circle (UK and USA mainly). In the countries of the outer circle (India, Malaysia and other former colonies) norm can be modified, but not set for others, and in the countries of the expander circle (China, Russia, Brazil, etc.) the norm can only be followed. This idea developed further in the XXI century under the influence of massive migration. It is often very difficult to identify to-day which language is native for a person. Children born in a country to which their parents had moved may speak a second language better than the mother tongue. As a consequence of that the concept of a native speaker is eliminated from the professional lexicon of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR Companion Volume 2020) and from the criteria of the evaluation of "normal" pronunciation.

The second criteria (whether the listener likes or dislikes how the speaker sounds) deals with the aesthetic and ethical attitude towards the way people speak. Concerning this there is still a big difference between Europe and Russia. We have always valued the Russian language as a national treasure in spite of all innovations, borrowings and lowering standards. In spite of the fact that the Russian language has lost its position as a lingua franca on the most territories of the former Soviet Union (or, perhaps, thanks to this fact) the idea of Cultured Russian is still strong for many people and especially for linguists (Вербицкая, Богданова, Склярёвская, 2002). There is less diversity in the norm of the Russian language, hence Russian teachers and examiners tend to be stricter about pronunciation mistakes in foreign speech.

Options for teaching pronunciation distantly

Applying the theory and practice of distance education to phonology we agree with E. S. Polat, who understands distance learning as one of the possible

types of education or pedagogical technologies, on the one hand, and the type of interaction of a teacher and students with each other at a distance by means of electronic technologies, on the other. He claims: “Distance learning is considered by us as one of the varieties of the system of continuing education. In addition, one of the most promising models of learning in the future, as it is already obvious, will be the model of integration of distance and full-time forms of education. Therefore, it is very important not to lose sight of this connection” (Полат, 2006: 7). The notion of distance learning is perhaps wider than e-learning/on-line teaching. To make things more confusing, Russian way of using the terms “on-line” and “off-line” tend to be treated as synonyms to “internet-based” and “classroom-based”, to say nothing of the mixed/hybrid types of education. For the sake of uniformity, I will use the terms on-line and distance learning here as synonyms, classroom learning being the opposite.

To teach pronunciation at a distance is more difficult than to teach any other skill. First of all because it is a specific motor activity. Learners need immediate teacher's feedback perceived through at least three sensory channels - visual, audial, motor (kinaesthetic). Such multisensory images it is most difficult to relate by digital means on a small screen without physical contact.

Although, relying on the cognitive styles theory (Fleming, Mills, 1992), one channel of perception (kinesthetic, for instance) may be compensated by the others – visual, auditory, textual.

With the above mentioned ideas in mind, we will further consider factors of the learning environment while identifying models of teaching pronunciation by means of electronic distant communication:

1. A practically-oriented course of foreign phonology can be taught distantly to all possible groups of learners (children or adults in additional education, secondary school and university level students, in-service and pre-

service teachers) but with different degree of success. To put them hierarchically (from most perceptively successful to less teachable) let's consider the following order. Teaching groups of teachers will be most effective due to the fact that there will be no need to introduce general phonetics and basic classification of phonemes and terminological information. The trainer can proceed immediately to practical skills. Second will come groups of adult learners in additional education who are usually very well motivated and treasure their time. As to tertiary level students they will need and expect a more profound approach, a thorough classroom-based training, so a distance course may serve only as an addition to the main off-line course. Children are perhaps the riskiest focus group because with them it is extremely difficult to keep the aim of the activities and control their behaviour.

2. The training format may combine different options - lectures, webinars, on-line practical training sessions, hybrid sessions. Audio-visual presentation will provide the most effective substitute for direct contact with the audience. Unvoiced text inclusions are not excluded, for example, in tests. The proportion will be different according to the focus group.

3. The same with the content of the course. Some small portions of theory will be useful (but not for small children). The main focus is on remedial practical sessions.

4. The timing of the course will be built around 30 academic hours, every session lasting not longer than 4 academic hours for adults and 30-45 minutes for children, depending on their age.

5. Methods of teaching will include both traditional (starting with classical minimal pairs, phonetic dictations, transcription of texts) and technologically advanced techniques (using interactive International Phonetic

Alphabet Chart, articulatory animation, computer acoustic analysis of intonation, etc.)

Having settled the outline of syllabus design we may consider the methods and techniques of distant teaching in more details. The overview of but a few of them is listed further.

Articulation training:

- Animated demonstrations of articulation of isolated English phonemes and their pronunciation in words with training opportunities is provided by the program *Soundz (Soundz.American English Pronunciation)*. It is based on American phonological system and uses American speakers as models. Video animation of the movement of vocal organs and muscles give accurate dynamic images (see Fig.1). It is a good substitute for traditional charts of sagittal.



Fig. 1. Animation of speech sounds in the program *Soundz*. profiles of articulation.

The program is equipped with a virtual assistant, which gives step-by-step instructions fulfilling the function of a teacher. It is possible to record your own voice and compare several working attempts with the standard one spoken by a native speaker. The resource may be recommended for all age groups and various educational levels.

Acoustic aspect:

- At segmental level voiced classification tables of all possible speech sounds in different languages (*International Phonetic Alphabet*) may be used for applying the perceptual approach to teaching phonology. By pressing the IPA symbol of a phoneme in the phonetic chart the student may hear the corresponding sound. This resource may be used in connection with the previous one or independently. There are no training materials, so it may be used for learning terminology in an introductory phonetic course.

- Acoustic analysis and comparison of waveforms and sound spectra in contact languages (*PRAAT; Speech Analyzer*) can help to visualize the features that differ the languages, such as sound quality and duration. By modifying sound wave into tone curve the program may teach intonation as well.

The method of intonography is the automatic registration and visual demonstration of the pitch frequency and intensity of a speech signal. For instance, *Speech Analyzer* is the program which task is to show various graphic images of speech and sound recordings, as well as to perform phonetic analysis of human voice recordings and ethnological studies of sound recordings.

There are complex programs which can help to train all phonological features, segmental and suprasegmental, receptive and productive, together:

- The *Sky Pronunciation* is a multimedia interactive English language program that develops the pronunciation side of speech in students by practicing pronunciation from videos and testing phonemes, homophones, mastering word stress and sentence stress, improving rhythm and intonation, as well as the practice of listening and reproducing dialogues, stories and poems (see Fig. 2).

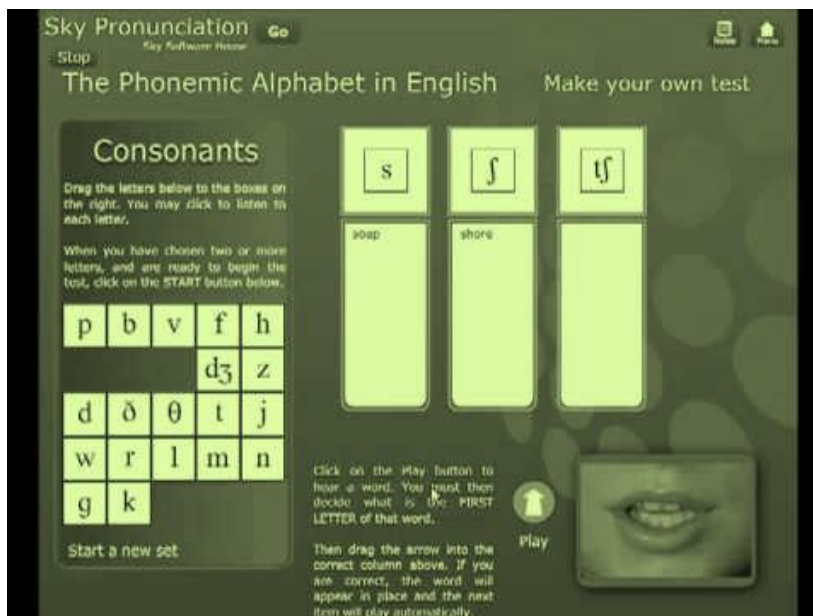


Fig. 2. Sky Pronunciation program

- *Sanako Media Assistance* program was developed in Finland. Suitable for teaching listening and speaking, this program allows students to undergo multiple oral repetition of the material being studied by using the RECALL button; it is possible to record their own speech after repeating words or phrases after the speaker. In this program, you can choose a convenient mode for listening to audio material, for example, the voice of the speaker or your own, or both options. The latter option is useful because the student can compare his/her pronunciation with the standard, as well as self-correct the pronunciation errors.

- *Tell Me More* interactive course is designed for self-study of the language (British English). The *Tell Me More* program is aimed at mastering all types of speech activities that are necessary for oral and written communication. It helps to overcome the language barrier, as well as learn a lot of interesting things about the people and culture of Great Britain. The program uses the most modern technological and methodological tools that can improve the efficiency of language acquisition and allow one to learn a language in accordance with individual preferences and tasks. It is equipped with interactive dialogues, videos,

audio materials, sound recognition technology, etc. A special feature of this program is a virtual film studio in which students can work with authentic video clips, subtitles and voice any characters. With this function, students can learn spoken language faster, understand the language, and also learn to speak fluently like native speakers (see Fig. 3).

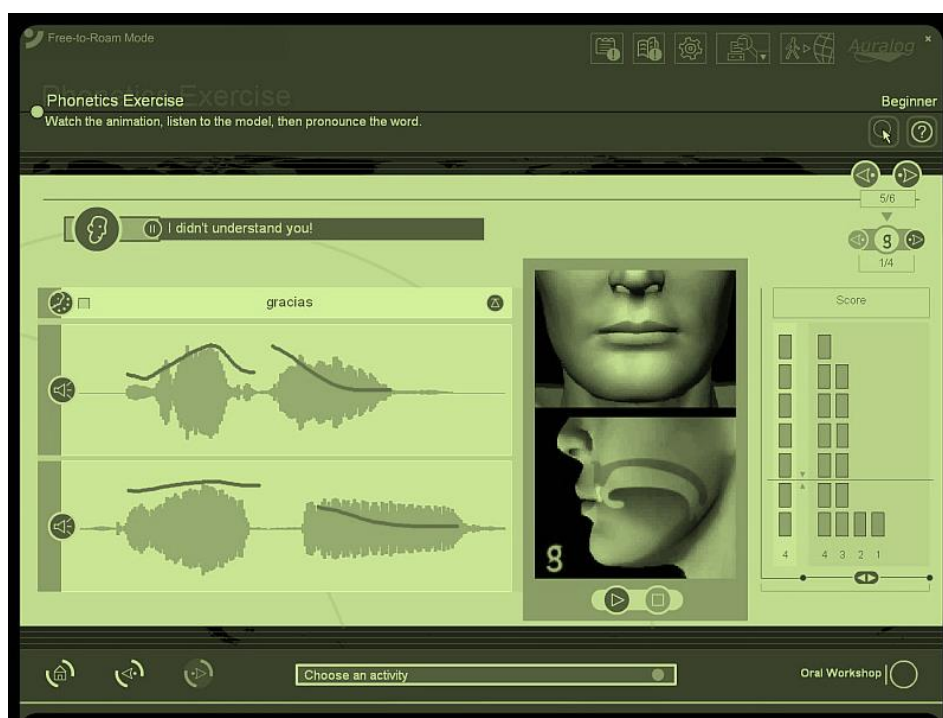


Fig. 3. Tell Me More program

The program has three modes: controlled, where the program itself creates a training plan and guides the student step by step; free – the student chooses topics or exercises at will; and dynamic, when the program selects exercises in accordance with the results of tasks already completed.

The teacher can adapt the *Tell Me More* program for specific learning purposes. It contains a flexible system of settings where you can independently create a selection of audio recordings from the program, then record it on an audio disc and study without using a computer outside the house. It also provides a pronunciation improvement function. For example, with the help of a speech recognition system, a student can self-assess his/her own pronunciation.

The program is designed for three levels: Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced. All of them comply with the standards of the CEFR levels A1/A2, B1 and B2.

- *REWARD InterN@tive* program is a complete multimedia textbook of the English language. REWARD course consists of 4 levels: Elementary, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, Upper-Intermediate. Each of the levels contains audio and video applications. The course is designed for adults and teenagers, and can also be freely used for self-study.

REWARD InterN@tive covers all types of speech activities: listening (listening comprehension), reading, oral and written speech, grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Apart from other functions, it contains:

- speech recognition. The ViaVoice speech recognition technology enables the learner to communicate with the program in a natural language for humans;
- visualization of pronunciation. The program has four ways of visual display of sound (see Fig. 4);
- video tutorials. The program contains educational videos with a special game plot of five hours.



Fig. 4. REWARD InterN@tive, visual representation of pronunciation by sound waves.

Users of electronic teaching resources should consider that most of them are not free. Software products sometimes are rather expensive for individual

purchases, but affordable for educational institutions. The access to some programmes nowadays is limited, but we all hope for the best and wait when it will be recovered.

As it was already mentioned, in a distance phonology course besides technologically-advanced programmes described above teachers can successfully apply methods that are not specifically designed for digital version, but are ideologically innovative (techniques based on sound-colour associations, articulatory gymnastics or kinaesthetic exercises combining micro-motoric and macro-motoric movements) (Pavlovskaya, Timofeeva, 2009). This method can potentially be applied via internet platforms, although it will need serious work of computer programmers and material writers.

To test the technology in a distance course we have designed a pilot experimental training course with the use of programmes Tell Me More, Sky Pronunciation, SaundZ Pronunciation Software, Sanako Media Assistance for a multilingual group of adults (8) at B2-C1 proficiency level. The course lasted for 1 month, 30 academic hours. Materials for distance learning were developed on a specialized platform for corporate learning iSpring, which works in the Microsoft PowerPoint interface. The results are shown on Fig. 5.

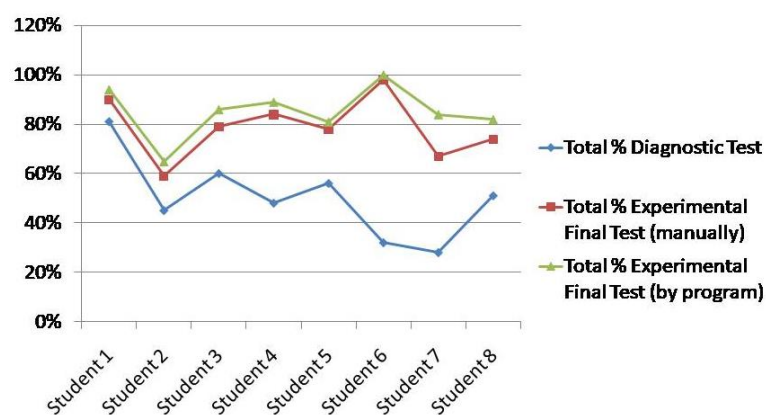


Fig.5. Results of diagnostic and final testing

Fig.5 shows that all students demonstrated very good dynamics of their phonetic skills. On average their results increased by 1,7 times. The calculations were done by Vladislava Belousova, a Ph.D. student at St.Petersburg state university (Белюсова 2022).

Conclusion

Thus, multimedia and digital technologies have significant methodological potential. To unlock this potential, when planning an English phonetic distance course a teacher should be well-trained in using digital technologies himself/herself as well as consider certain requirements of the educational context (level of education, place in the curriculum, number of academic hours, place of teaching, equipment).

We suggest that the optimal model for a distance learning phonology course can be a) a refresher course for teachers or b) a short introductory course for adults. The course should include webinars and on-line sessions containing both theoretical and training material, supplemented by internet resources, using traditional and innovative teaching techniques. The approximate duration of the phonetic course is 30 academic hours.

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ПРЕПОДАВАНИЕ ПРАКТИЧЕСКОЙ ФОНЕТИКИ ОНЛАЙН: ПЛЮСЫ И МИНУСЫ

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Аннотация. В нашу цифровую эпоху необходимость развития дистанционных (онлайн-овых) учебных курсов в Российской Федерации, как и во всем мире, рассматривается уже не как вызов, а как практическая необходимость. Как государственные образовательные учреждения, так и компании частного сектора участвуют в разработке соответствующих программ, отвечающих спросу на рынке. Произношение — это та область, которая чаще всего остается вне поля зрения авторов учебников и образовательных программ. Тем не менее, культура произношения говорящего является первым сигналом, который влияет на восприятие слушателем самого высказывания и личности говорящего, сознательно или подсознательно. В последних проектах Совета Европы, содержащих подробные дескрипторы для оценки фонетических навыков, фонетико-фонологические умения измеряются с точки зрения разборчивости речи говорящего, то есть с точки зрения того, сколько усилий должен приложить собеседник, чтобы понять говорящего. Собеседник при этом не обязательно должен быть носителем языка. Это разрушает идею носителя языка как эталона произношения и традиционных фонетических стандартов. Роль учителя усложняется, потому что он /она должны определять уровень разборчивости речи ученика по собственным внутренним критериям. В этом отношении цифровые технологии могут спасти ситуацию, предоставляя речевые модели с приемлемым диапазоном вариативности. В статье рассматриваются возможности дистанционного изучения фонологии иностранных языков. Учитываются следующие методологические факторы: фокус-группы, содержание обучения, формат, средства, технологии, методы и приемы обучения, продолжительность учебных занятий. Представлены онлайн-ресурсы для обучения фонетическому восприятию и продуцированию английского языка как на сегментном, так и на суперсегментном уровнях. Характеристики каждого ресурса обсуждаются в кратком обзоре. Определены предпочтительные варианты работы. Этот

материал может быть полезен учителям средней школы или языковых школ дополнительного образования, планирующим дистанционные занятия с коррекционным типом фонетического обучения, а также методистам вузов, разрабатывающим академические курсы фонетики и фонологии для студентов, аспирантов, будущих учителей, а также курсы повышения квалификации действующих учителей.

Ключевые слова: *культура говорения, дистанционное обучение, произношение, фонология, методика преподавания, интернет-ресурсы, иностранные языки, фонологический контроль, фокус-группа, восприятие речи, производство речи.*

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