

Glasgow PCE: Pronunciation masterclass

Piers Messum and Roslyn Young

The PronSIG pre-conference event (PCE) at the 2012 IATEFL conference was based around a demonstration of teaching pronunciation to real students. The class was taught by Roslyn Young, using Silent Way principles and new materials and techniques developed by her and Piers Messum.

Before you've experienced it, it can be difficult to imagine how pronunciation, of all language skills, might be taught by a 'silent' teacher. This full-day event was designed to show (1) that there are ways for a teacher to present pronunciation as primarily a motor skill, rather than an imitative task, and (2) that students thrive in an environment where they do all the talking.

The students are not asked to imitate the teacher because mimicry puts their awareness into their ears rather than their mouths. The result is that they respond with an approximation to the new sound that is drawn from the repertoire of sounds that they already have available. Nothing new has been learnt. In contrast, when the teacher is silent, the students cannot avoid the basic truth that they have to DO something different – make a conscious, willed, novel gesture - if they are going to sound different. So they have to experiment with new sounds, new prosody, etc. The teacher's job is to keep setting the next challenge and then to give precise, individual feedback to each student about what he should do with himself next to sound more English.

In articles in SpeakOut! and elsewhere (all available at www.pronsci.com), we've written about these and other reasons why it's better for a teacher not to speak when teaching pronunciation. What quickly became clear in this real class, is just how natural this feels for everyone. After a few minutes, the students took it for granted that this is how it should be, and this is always the case.

There were about 25 students from a local language school in the class, ranging in age from their early twenties to about fifty years old. This group was soon joined by several of the non-native speakers among the

PCE participants. The class ran from 10.15 am to around 1 pm, with the participants' discussion following the lunch break.

Future conference masterclasses

It would surely be valuable for there to be more demonstration teaching at IATEFL conferences. Here are some of the things we learnt about what it involves.

There were two concurrent classes: the students and the PCE participants. We became aware that this is not the same as having observers in one's usual class. In this case, the teacher did not know **either** group. So we think it would be best for the students to arrive after the teacher has had an hour working with the participants rather than at the beginning of the day.

Language learning always takes time. Because the students were only invited for the morning, there was only time to do either a very few things well, or to demonstrate a range of techniques to the participants in a way that would not be natural in a class. Roslyn chose to begin slowly, making sure that the students had something of value that they would be able to take away, but towards the end, she aimed what she did more at the participants' needs than those of the students. This worked all right, but with hindsight, it would have been better to teach for the students alone in the morning, and then to take some of the participants as an 'advanced' class in the afternoon, when she could have demonstrated and explained more.

We should have limited the number of students to about 18, and grouped them in the middle of the room. Then there would have been space for all the participants to be in front and to the sides of the students. It makes a huge difference if participants can see the students' faces, and we shouldn't have had anyone sitting at the back.

The teacher must be able to distinguish the students from the observers, so a clear visual break in the seating is needed. Participants adding themselves to the class were welcome, but should have had to physically move into it.

Finally, we were particularly happy to be doing this PCE in 2012. It is exactly 50 years since Gattegno published 'Teaching Foreign Languages in Schools: the Silent Way', in which he first wrote about the 'silent' language teacher.

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See a picture of the event at <http://tinyurl.com/ctm9o7v>