Week 3 – Pronunciation Diagnostics

The goal of a pronunciation diagnostic is to try to glean generalized information about the pronunciation of the test taker so that the researcher can identify areas of specific interest. This means that the diagnostic has to provide some information about all the different concerns related to pronunciation. In order to do this, the diagnostic has to get the test-taker produce enough language so that all features are produced. Not only that but h features need to be repeated in different kinds of contexts as well as modes (free speaking versus reading). To conduct a diagnostic properly a researcher also need to be able to evaluate the speech sample(s) produced and with some validity.

So, for a good diagnostic we need tools that work at both ends. We need a tool or tools which get the test taker to produce the right type of speech sample. On the other end we need a tool that we can use to evaluate the generated speech sample with some degree of accuracy and consistency.

Generating Samples

Looking at the problem of how we generate a good sample first, it should be clear that the sample include all elements of pronunciation that we think are relevant or important. Again a diagnostic is a way to get a wide range of basic information. The analysis of the diagnostic will point us in the direction of where we want to focus our attention more specifically. As with any other type of test, to ensure best possible performance we do not want to test to be any longer than it need be. Test takers are easily fatigued. Thus we need to find tools that are as efficient as possible.

Here is an example of a text commonly used to elicit speech samples:

Please call Stella. Ask her to bring these things with her from the store: Six spoons of fresh snow peas, five thick slabs of blue cheese, and maybe a snack for her brother Bob. We also need a small plastic snake and a big toy frog for the kids. She can scoop these things into three red bags, and we will go meet her Wednesday at the train station.

(Weinberger, 2014)

Several others are also used that tend to be longer. The Audio Archive (http://alt-usage-english.org/audio_archive.shtml) uses several different texts, all of which have
been specially constructed to elicit the production of sounds and phonological features of English.
Still another is the approach taken in the Accent Tag. In this simple approach taken from dialectology studies people are asked to pronounce a list of words and produce words from questions. Here are those.

The Words:
Aunt, Roof, Route, Wash, Oil, Theater, Iron, Salmon, Caramel, Fire, Water, Sure, Data, Ruin, Crayon, New Orleans, Pecan, Both, Again, Probably, Spitting image, Alabama, Lawyer, Coupon, Mayonnaise, Syrup, Pajamas, Caught, Naturally, Aluminium, Envelope

The Questions:
1. What is it called when you throw toilet paper on a house?
2. What is the bug that when you touch it, it curls into a ball?
3. What is the bubbly carbonated drink called?
4. What do you call gym shoes?
5. What do you say to address a group of people?
6. What do you call the kind of spider (or spider-like creature) that has an oval-shaped body and extremely long legs?
7. What do you call your grandparents?
8. What do you call the wheeled contraption in which you carry groceries at the supermarket?
9. What do you call it when rain falls while the sun is shining?
10. What is the thing you change the TV channel with?

In addition to reading texts, which are tightly controlled and designed to get the greatest range of sounds produced in the shortest possible space, a diagnostic typically also uses a sample of generated free speech. Typically questions are used to get the test taker to talk about her or himself. This is effective in that it asks the test-taker to talk about a highly familiar topic, which may impel them to produce more normalized patterns of speech. But I am not sure I like this approach because autobiographical information will affect our judgment of what we hear. Instead I ask people to describe a picture. This is a picture I have found that elicits speech samples.
Some diagnostics, those designed for lower level learners also contain listening discrimination tasks. In these the test-taker is asked to listen to a speech sample and distinguish words based on sounds. Often these are done with the idea of minimal pairs. Some are done with a surrounding context while others are decontextualized. The idea of a decontextualized (words only) listening sample is that it is a better measure of how one specifically hears sounds as people can often guess the word from the context. Again, we need to stick to the important distinction between intelligibility and comprehensibility. For younger test-takers pictures can be used instead of words both as the stimulus (in a speaking test) and response (in a phoneme discrimination task).

Evaluating Samples
Once we have speech sample that we feel provide ample information about the test-taker, we need to find ways of evaluating the sample with accuracy and consistency. The best way of doing this is to use a rubric. Rubrics for the analysis of a generalized speech sample come in two basic forms depending on the purpose of the inquiry. The first of these would be a holistic rubric and this provides only a generalized overview of the test-taker's degree of intelligibility. A holistic assessment does not provide specifics, but rather identifies patterns of use in specifics to provide a generalized assessment. An example of this, taken from the IELTS) can be seen on page 317 of our textbook. For us and for our tutor project, we need to not just come up with a generalized overview (although that is also important for test-takers to know), but we should be able to find problem areas to focus on. So we are really using the diagnostic to probe from specific areas that need further development. To do this we need a more complex rubric, such as is found on page 256 of Rogerson-Revell (2011). There is also the diagnostic I have already given you which provides specific categories.
The rubric acts a guide to help the researcher better recognize and evaluate aspects of the test-taker’s speech. To do this all the different aspects need to be included in the rubric with categories suggesting ways of assessment. It should also be noted that while the methods for generating speech samples will vary for age groups the same rubric(s) can be applied universally as they cover aspects of speech that are present in all speech.

When conducting the evaluation it should be clear that one needs to make judgments. These judgments are done based on the researcher’s understanding of a specific norm or even norms. With a language like English, there is no single norm which can be applied universally. And the norm that the researcher aspires to might not match the norm of the test-takers. For example, if the researcher is applying a North American-based norm to a test-taker who is endeavoring to speak standard Australian English, then there will be a problem. In essence, the researcher needs to find out from and counsel the test-taker on the norm to which she or he is aspiring.

References
