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Mirroring: A Top-Down Approach to Pronunciation Instruction

What is mirroring?

Mirroring entails careful study of a video of an original "model" speaker of L2, including both verbal and non-verbal behavior, followed by a video recording of the L2 learner performing the same monologue or dialogue as the original speaker. Mirroring has been studied in a multi-phase "Mirroring Project," conducted at the International Teaching Assistant (ITA) Program at the University of Minnesota, in which graduate students build awareness of L2 identity. One of the most important parts of this project is that each student chooses his or her "model" speaker to mirror. The model can either be a native speaker of English or a highly intelligible non-native speaker (Murphy, 2014). Upon choosing a model, students go through a process in which they analyze a short segment of the model's speech, focusing on stress, rhythm, or intonation, depending on what the individual student's needs are. Students start by focusing on the "big picture;" that is, who the speaker is, what he/she is trying to do (inspire, persuade, teach, etc.) and what speech characteristics he/she is using to accomplish that goal (speed, volume, pausing, etc.) The entire project takes a minimum of 2 – 3 weeks, as students spend time analyzing the speech, practicing it for memorization purposes, and then adding paralinguistics, such as non-verbal gestures, movements, and facial expressions to fully "mirror" the model. After making a video recorded trial version, students analyze their initial performance and with instructor feedback, they prepare to make a final video. Peers are present for the final performance and serve as directors, providing feedback to each student as he/she performs. Feedback may range from comments on the pronunciation features (stress, rhythm, enunciation, etc.) to the use of paralinguistics (non-verbal communication, pausing, rate, volume, etc.) to the ability to achieve the overarching purpose of the speech (to inspire, teach, etc.) Mirroring differs from shadowing (Foote, 2017) in that mirroring is not simultaneous with a brief delay, and involves a model selected by the learner, with a focus on both verbal and non-verbal behavior as communicating the original speaker's emotions and purpose.

What are the benefits of mirroring?

While mirroring has been used as a specific technique since the 1980s (Stern, 1980), research on this technique has only begun in the last few years. Meyers (2014) and Tarone and Meyers (2018) document a learner's improvement in rhythm, intonation, non-verbal communication and overall confidence in speaking a second language.

Mirroring is a good way to synthesize information that students have previously been exposed to in pronunciation textbooks/language classes. They can observe, in a more authentic way, how the various aspects of pronunciation work together to make a speaker more effective when communicating his or her message.

Informal surveys undertaken with students who have used this technique include comments such as ""It help (sic) me a lot in intonation. It stimulate (sic) my interest to learn English again."

(Xuejun, China, Chemistry) "By trying to understand what the person said in the movie, my listening comprehension improves" (Xinjie, China, Physics).

What are some tips for employing the mirroring technique?

It helps to do a mirroring assignment in class so that students are sure they are doing it correctly. After that, they can continue doing other mirroring projects on their own. Here are some tips for student success:

1) It is imperative that students choose their own model. However, be sure to vet student choices as sometimes they choose inappropriate models, e.g., unintelligible, not on camera all of the time, etc.
2) When starting the project, ask students to view the video with the sound off so that they can pay more attention to non-verbal behavior to see how gestures and other movements interact with the emotions expressed.
3) Ted.com videos are good sources for model selection because they have English transcripts. Students can click on the transcript to hear/see each sentence/thought group repeated as many times as they wish.
4) Before recording the trial version, students will benefit from typing the transcript in large font, one thought group per line, with focus words in bold. This helps to bridge the gap between practice and internalizing the rhythmic and intonation patterns of English.
5) As they practice the trial version, be sure that students pause at the end of each line, look up, and actually say the whole thought group to a partner or to the camera. Otherwise, students have the tendency to just look down and read.
6) Time between the trial version and the final version is normally around 1 – 2 weeks, depending on how often the course meets and how much time students have to practice.
7) If students struggle with the emotion expressed, ask them to imagine a time when they experienced this emotion or how they would feel if this happened to them.
8) If students can't remember all of their script, tell them they can improvise or stop recording and begin again. Practicing a few times sometimes helps overcome nerves, stage-fright, or lack of sufficient time practicing at home.
9) For video recorded examples of a graduate student before doing the project (micro-teaching #1), doing the trial version (MP Trial) and then performing the final version (MP Final), see Meyers (2014) below.

References

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