English Phonetics and Phonology: the contributions of the website *BBC Learning English* to the teaching of pronunciation[1]

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Resumo: Este artigo tem como objetivo apresentar uma análise da página eletrônica *BBC Learning English*, mais especificamente, uma seção da página, chamada *Pronunciation tips*, cujo foco é o ensino de pronúncia. Nossa análise foi realizada a partir de observações da página, transcrição de alguns vídeos e análise das atividades, a fim de descrever tanto os aspectos estéticos e de visualização da página, quanto o conteúdo referente à fonética e à fonologia da língua inglesa. Os principais autores adotados para a fundamentação da pesquisa foram Roach (2009), Nunan (1991), Ur (1991), e Kartal e Uzun (2010). A partir das análises feitas concluímos que apesar de haver conteúdo fonológico relacionado aos aspectos suprassegmentais, *há maior foco na fonética do inglês priorizando as características segmentais da líng*ua.

Palavras-chave: BBC; Aprendizagem de línguas *online*; Pronúncia.

Abstract: This article aims at presenting an analysis of the website *BBC Learning English*, especially, a section of the page, called *Pronunciation tips*, whose focus is on the teaching of pronunciation. This analysis was carried out through observations and analyses of the activities as well as transcription of some videos, in order to describe both aesthetic and visualization aspects of the website and the content related to the English phonetics and phonology. The main studies used to ground this research were Roach (2009), Nunan (1991), Ur (1991), and Kartal and Uzun (2010). Our study leads us to consider that although there is phonological content related to the supra-segmental aspects, there is a larger focus on English phonetics, prioritizing the segmental features of the language.

Keywords: BBC; Online language learning; Pronunciation.

Introduction

This research, whose theme is English phonetics and phonology, aims to investigate and analyze the contributions of the website BBC Learning English to the teaching of pronunciation. As well as this, we intend to analyze the contributions of the website as a source of materials to be used in the classroom.

So, for the purpose of this research it is important to keep in mind that the concept of pronunciation may include:

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- the sounds of the language, or phonology
- stress and rhythm
- intonation. (UR, 1991, p. 47)

So, it must be clear the difference between phonetics and phonology. In general, phonetics is the study of human speech as a physical phenomenon and phonology is the study of how sounds interact.

In teaching and learning the sound system of a second or foreign language, a basic distinction is drawn between the study of individual sound differences and the study of rhythm, stress and intonation. So, while the study of the different sounds is related to segmental features, the study of rhythm, stress and intonation is related to the supra-segmental features of the language.

"In any language we can identify a small number of regularly used sounds (vowel and consonants) that we call phonemes" (ROACH, 2009, p. 2). These smaller units of the language are the object of the phonetics studies. On the other hand, the larger units of speech are the object of the phonological studies. These units are comprised of syllables and aspects of speech such as stress (which could be roughly described as the relative strength of a syllable) and intonation (the use of the pitch of the voice to convey meaning) (ROACH, 2009).

Some researchers claim that the supra-segmental features are much more important for intelligible pronunciation than producing native-like vowels and consonants. This is because native speakers vary their stress, rhythm and intonation to signal attitudinal differences, degrees of politeness and other interpersonal aspects of communication and it is difficult to teach (NUNAN, 1991).

Therefore, lots of studies have been done in the pronunciation realm. Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (1996) present many theories and studies about many factors that can influence pronunciation such as age, exposure to the target language, amount and type of prior pronunciation instruction, aptitude, attitude and motivation and many theories like the interlanguage hypothesis, the markedness theory, the contrastive analysis hypothesis among others.

Poedjosoedarmo (2004) claims that technology has been used in education in a wide range of manners and that it could also be used

in the teaching of pronunciation, although there are some constraints in its use. Then she gives some examples of computer applications used to teach pronunciation such as *Pronunciation Power* from English Computerized Learning, Inc., Blackstone Multimedia Corporation. She highlights the use of animations showing the tongue and mouth movements while pronouncing the sounds of the English language. She mentions some other sites that provide information about English pronunciation, as well as exercises to practice listening to the different sounds of the language. She also states that there are lots of tools for English students that can help them develop a better comprehension of the differences between pairs of sounds, but there is not yet a thorough program that is useful to the speech practice.

As stated by Nunan (1991, p. 100) "the teaching of pronunciation has always been dealt with from a rather different perspective from other language skills", mainly due to the greater influence of the first language. And as the use of computer has shown an increasing growth and it has become closer to learners, it is necessary to analyze from the perspective of a website how pronunciation is dealt with in materials provided by it, as well as its characteristics, usefulness and relevance for both teachers and learners.

The first reason for this research to be done is the widespread of the English language. According to Crystal (1997, p.16) "There has never been a language so widely spread or spoken by so many people as English".

> English is spoken as a first language by more than 300 million people throughout the world, and used as a second language by as many, if not more. One in five of the world's population speaks English with some degree of competence. It is an official language in over 70 countries, and it plays a significant role in many more (HORNSBY, 2005, p. R91).

Undoubtedly, English has become an international language due to the economic, social, cultural and political power of the English speaking countries, mainly the United States. All this turned out to be the outcome of historic events such as the Cold War.

> At the beginning of the 21st century, as a result of the unprecedented global spread of English, roughly only one out of every four users of the language in the world is a native speaker of it. This means that most interactions in English take place among non-native speakers of the language who

> share neither a common first language nor a common culture, and who use English as a lingua franca (ELF) as their chosen language of communication (SEIDLHOFER, 2005, p. R92).

For all this, nowadays, there are many varieties of English as it is spoken not only in the UK or in the US. As it is spoken in countries whose cultural background is different, as well as their mother tongue, many varieties come up with specific characteristics in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. That is what is called World Englishes (cf. Ferit Kilickaya, 2009). Then, the forms that English as a lingua franca takes are usually influenced by various factors, including the linguistic and cultural background of its speakers. For this reason many people from very different cultures speak English according to their own accent.

This implies directly in the teaching of English. As an international language which variety should be taught? Which accent should be focused? For all this, this research is justified. The need of studying the role of the new technologies in the classroom, as well as knowing what a website aimed at the teaching of English stands for can help teachers consider the possibility of using this kind of material in the classroom beyond the coursebook.

According to the considerations above, the following aims were proposed: analyze and identify the contributions of the website *BBC Learning English* to the teaching of pronunciation; identify the features of pronunciation on the website; analyze the aspects that makes a good website whose purpose is teaching English; identify if the website provides a range of activities related to pronunciation; analyze how useful the content, the material and activities are for both teachers and learners.

Before we look at the methodological steps taken to carry out this study we shall bring up some information about the object we are going to investigate, which is the *BBC Learning English* website.

BBC stands for British Broadcasting Corporation[3]. It is an organization that broadcasts television and radio programs and is owned by the British government. It is the largest broadcaster in the world, with about 23,000 staff. It was founded on October 18, 1922

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3 BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION. In: WIKIPÉDIA, the free encyclopedia. Flórida: Wikimedia Foundation, 2011. Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBC>. Access on: 14 Jun. 2011.

by Sir John Reith and the headquarter of this corporation is in the City of Westminster, London, United Kingdom. Its aim is to provide public service not only to the United Kingdom, but to many other countries as well, through television, radio and online service.

One of its online services is the website *BBC Learning English*. The purpose of the website is to bring information in general about the English language comprising vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and cultural information. In this research we intend to focus on issues related to pronunciation and how the pronunciation features are presented on this website.

In order to develop this research some methodological steps were followed. First, there was some bibliographical research about what has been done in the field of pronunciation research, as well as some of the theoretical background about the characteristics of a website intended to teach pronunciation.

Furthermore, the materials available on the website were downloaded, including worksheets and videos so that a description, as well as an analysis of the website could be done. Some of the videos were transcribed as well. Then, each section of the website shall be described in terms of the features of English and its contribution as a source of materials to teachers and learners.

The Internet Service as a learning tool

Undoubtedly, the Internet has been used for a wide range of purposes such as business and commerce, communication, research and education. The contribution of the Internet and computers to education cannot be ignored, and the potential of online websites should be utilized more efficiently. The importance of the Internet is very significant, once you can use it from long distances. It also increases the possibilities that foster autonomous learning by enabling and enhancing many educational applications. As a result, online language learning sites have the potential to help boost the proficiency level of learners. For this reason, an online language learning website should have some specific characteristics regarding the appearance as well as the content.

Kartal and Uzun (2010) propose a set of three characteristics

for a good website as follows:

> **1. Physical Characteristic:** The physical characteristics of a website can be defined as the features that form the general structure of the site. These features such as color, parts and sections, links and buttons, etc. would be mostly related to the design of the website. […]
> **2. Contextual Characteristics:** The contextual characteristics of a website can be defined as the features of the content that is in the site. These features such as testing tools, software, lesson plans, exercise, etc. would be mostly related to the material used in the site. Explanation guidance throughout the pages should be clear to enable users to benefit from the content without the need for any exterior tutor. […]
> **3. Pedagogical Characteristics:** The pedagogical characteristics of a website can be defined as features that contribute to the learning and teaching process regarding the use of methods, approaches, feedback, and everything related specifically to education (KARTAL, UZUN, 2010, p. 92-94).

Due to the importance of each one of the topics mentioned above we intend to analyze in the following sections if the website BBC Learning English follows or presents any of these characteristics and the effects that it has on the teaching and learning of pronunciation.

Results and Discussion

On the main page of the website[4] there are many sections on the left-hand side of the page. One of them is *Grammar, Vocabulary and Pronunciation*. In this section some items can be found, such as *Words in the News, Grammar Challenge* and some others. The one we are interested in this research is the one called *Pronunciation tips*.

This section is divided into four other sections: *Introduction, The sounds of English, Features of English, Quizzes and Programmes.* As each of these sections brings lots of activities, it is out of our scope to describe and analyze all of them in detail in this present research. Therefore, we are going to analyze the ones we think are the most relevant.

In the introduction section there is a video that introduces what *Pronunciation tips* is about and then the teacher that speaks in the video introduces herself as well as some of the contents of the website.

Below the video there is a table with the following content:

4 Available at: <ttp://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/>. Access on: 23 Apr. 2011.

In Pronunciation tips
The sounds of English
There is a system of symbols for writing the sounds of English. We have a guide to these symbols and also videos to show how to pronounce each of the sounds.
There are also activities to practise identifying the difference between certain sounds which may sound similar.
Features of English
Information about different elements of English pronunciation.
There are also interactive and downloadable exercises to help you build your understanding of these areas.
Quizzes
Interactive quizzes to test your knowledge of and help you learn about English pronunciation.
Programmes
Three radio programmes from 2005 on the topic of pronunciation. You can download the full programmes along with the script and audio examples. (BBC Learning English page, Pronunciation tips)

So, this table is an overview of the sections that will be described in more detail afterwards.

In order to analyze what was presented in the video, there can be seen below a transcription of what is said by Professor Alex Bellem[5].

Good pronunciation is very important for good spoken communication. But what do we mean by good pronunciation? Well, you don't have to speak English like a native speaker. It's fine to have a different accent. But what is important is that you're able to speak clearly and that you don't prevent other people from understanding what you're trying to say. There are many different English accents in Britain and in around the world. These are all good models. Now, my accent is Standard Southern British English and that's what I will be showing you on this site.

From this extract it is clear that the importance given to pronunciation lies in the need for comprehension in communicative situations. That is, in order to communicate and to be understood you must have good pronunciation. Then, she says what she means by good pronunciation. Therefore, good pronunciation means speaking

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5 The videos in the Pronunciation Tips section of the site are presented by Alex Bellem. Alex has an undergraduate degree in Arabic and Turkish. She followed this with an MA in (Theoretical) Linguistics at University College London (UCL) and a PhD in Linguistics at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) where she focused on Arabic phonology and phonetics. She's also a CELTA-qualified English language teacher and spent a few years teaching English as a Foreign Language. At the time these videos were made in early 2008 Alex was lecturing part-time in the Linguistics Department at SOAS and was working as a Pronunciation Linguist in the BBC's Pronunciation Unit. (taken from the following link: < http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/grammar/pron/sounds/>. Access on: 23 Apr. 2011)

clearly so that people can understand what is being said.

Although she says that different accents are not a problem and that all of them are good models, she is going to show the Standard Southern British English. In this respect, we can perceive that the website is aimed at those who want to develop a British accent. There is no comparison of accents along the videos and programmes on the website.

This term Standard Southern British has been used instead of RP, or Received Pronunciation. This pronunciation was the accent of high social classes in England (POEDJOSOEDARMO, 2004). This name is now old-fashioned and misleading according to Roach (2009):

> [...] the use of the word "received" to mean "accepted" or "approved" is nowadays very rare, and the word if used in that sense seems to imply that other accents would *not* be acceptable or approved of. Since it is most familiar as the accent used by most announcers and newsreaders on BBC and British independent television broadcasting channels, a preferable name is **BBC pronunciation.** (ROACH, 2009, p. 3)

As can be seen above this does not mean that the BBC itself imposes an "official" accent. There is an increasing number of broadcasters with Scottish, Welsh and Irish accents (ROACH, 2009).

> The BBC has an excellent Pronunciation Research Unit to advise broadcasters on the pronunciation of difficult words and names, but most people are not aware that it has no power to make broadcasters use particular pronunciations: BBC broadcasters only use it on a voluntary basis. (ROACH, 2009, p. 5)

Therefore, it is possible to say that the learner is not required to speak with a perfect RP accent. What has to be kept in mind is that the model chosen by the website is BBC (RP), but the goal is to develop the learner's pronunciation sufficiently to permit effective communication. Another point highlighted by Peter Roach that matches the speech of Alex Bellem is about "Good" speech and "Bad" speech:

> Jones (1956, first published 1909), [...], writes "'Good' speech may be defined as a way of speaking which is clearly intelligible to all ordinary people. 'Bad' speech is a way of talking which is difficult for most people to understand... A person may speak with sounds very different from those of his hearers and yet be clearly intelligible to all of them, as for instance when a Scotsman or an American addresses an English audience with clear articulation. Their speech cannot be described as other

than 'good'" (JONES, 1956, apud ROACH, 2009, p. 6).

A piece of advice given by Roach is that learners of English are recommended to concentrate on BBC pronunciation initially, but after sometime it is interesting to listen to other accents of English in order to identify the ways in which they differ from BBC and even learn to pronounce some different accents.

On the next section *The sounds of English,* before looking at the videos of each particular sound there is an introductory video presented by Alex. Below, there is a transcription of the video:

> *[…]What is the best way to improve my pronunciation? Well, my first piece of advice is to try to learn each different sound of English. And in order to learn each different sound of English it is very helpful to learn each different symbol that represents these sounds of English.[…] Why do we need different symbols?[…] Well, in English we use 26 letters of the alphabet but there are more than 26 sounds in English. In fact, there are over 40 sounds in English and it's not very easy to show these using only the letters of the English alphabet. So, there is a system which uses a group of symbols. Now, some of these symbols are the same as letters and some of them are different. You can use the symbols to write out the pronunciation of words and in many dictionaries for English learners you will see the pronunciations written out using these special symbols. To show that it's the sounds which have been written and not normal letters the transcriptions are written between slashes […]. You can't always match the letters of a word to the sounds of that word. So, if you want to improve your English pronunciation you should learn the different sounds and if you want to learn the different sounds you should learn the symbols. And hear some good news. If you know the symbols and the sounds you'll be able to use many dictionaries to find the pronunciation of any word in English and you won't even need a teacher […].*

From this video, it is possible to find many concepts about teaching pronunciation. One of them is that to improve pronunciation you have to learn the different sounds of the language. Besides this, you should learn the symbols that represent these sounds. And then, she goes on with some information about the English alphabet and the English sounds. It is important to highlight that one of the difficulties for learning English pronunciation is the wide range of sounds. The spelling of the words does not match the sounds and it can cause great difficulties.

From this speech it is quite clear that in this part, the focus is on

segmental features of English as its main concern is on learning each different sound and the way they are pronounced. Another aspect that is worth mentioning is the fact that the videos are presented in a funny way. In the same section there is a table with all the symbols of the English sounds. By clicking in each symbol the user is led to a video about that symbol.

All the videos follow the same pattern. They start showing the symbol. Then, Alex pronounces the symbol twice and gives sometime so that it can be repeated by the users and then she gives some examples. It is important to mention that in the videos it is possible to have a clear vision of Alex's mouth when she pronounces the sounds and the words. In a separate screen it is possible to see her mouth in a different position. This technique helps the learner to have a clear image of the mouth movements when pronouncing the words and then the learners can improve on how they articulate each word and sound. After that, she says some words that contain the sound that is being focused and allows sometime so that the users can practice repeating. In some videos there is also a comparison made between similar sounds that can cause confusion, for example /tʃ/ and /dʒ/.

In this section there are also some other sections with exercises. They are separated into five units. Each unit focuses on different pairs of similar sounds. These are called *Similar sounds exercises.* Their purpose is to contrast the sounds in order to show the difference between similar sounds that can cause difficulties, such as: /ɪ/ /iː/, /ʊ/ /uː/, /ɔː/ /əʊ/, /e/ /æ/ /ʌ/, /ɒ/ /əʊ/.

These exercises are done basically by listening to the sounds and identifying them in different words so that the sounds can be contrasted. This reflects the concept that making a contrastive analysis between sounds can improve the recognition of each different sound and therefore enhancing its comprehension and pronunciation.

In the section *Features of English* some features of English are presented in terms of sounds and spelling, the schwa sound, connected speech and voiced and voiceless sounds. As it would take too much time, maybe in another research this can be described in more detail but, for now suffice it to say that in this section it is possible to notice an attempt to focus on supra-segmental features as it deals with how sounds are pronounced together in connected speech, although the

majority of the features dealt here are related to segmental features such as sounds and spelling, voiced and voiceless sounds.

In another section called *Quizzes* there are some more practical activities. There are five quizzes in this section. They have exercises about pronunciation. As it could be perceived the focus is on phonetic transcriptions. Learners are supposed to write the proper word according to the phonetic transcription, to identify the number of the words they hear, to associate the phonetic transcriptions with pictures.

In the last section there are three radio programs. These programs were produced in 2005 by *BBC Learning English* as part of the *Talk about English* series. The programs were made with guest Alan Stanton, a materials' writer and pronunciation expert. Each program deals with a specific supra-segmental feature of English. The first program is about the schwa sound, consonant to vowel linking and vowel to vowel linking. The second one is about sounds and letters, linking "r", connected speech, sounds twinning (gemination) and sounds disappearance (elision). The third one is only about sound changes (assimilation). As these programs bring lots of information they are not going to be analyzed thoroughly. For our purpose it is just better to notice that the focus is on supra-segmental features.

After the descriptions and the analysis made it is possible to come up with some answers to the questions that were proposed in the introduction.

In terms of the website itself, according to the principles stated by Kartal and Uzun (2010) of the physical characteristics, it was possible to identify that the website *BBC Learning English* has a good, user-friendly design in which each part and section is clearly seen and easy to use; the site allows easy transition between sections without bothering the user by opening a lot of windows, or leading him/her to unintended places; the color(most blue and green) of the site does not tire the eyes of the users; the users can find rich written, audio and visual contents in the site about pronunciation.

According to the contextual characteristics the level of the activities on the website does not apply to all of them. Basic learners would have more difficulty with the content of the website in terms of vocabulary, audio input and the kind of exercises. It would appeal most for intermediate/advanced students who are really interested in

developing a British accent and improve their knowledge about the features of English pronunciation. In fact, there is no evidence of authentic material as all the activities are designed with the purpose of teaching. The materials on the website are carefully arranged under specific titles; there are materials of every type: written, visual and audio materials, although they do not apply for every level; the exercises are flexible to use, the users can download both the worksheet and the audio files as well as the transcriptions and there is also interactive exercises in which they can go back and forward while doing them; the users receive feedback of the exercises, but it is not possible to choose the type of feedback needed; there is a gradation of the level of difficulty in some exercises that goes from easy to medium.

According to the pedagogical characteristics of the website there are short and comprehensible explanation and guidance about the exercises; the feedback provided is reinforcing, constructive and informative, it always explains and gives further information if you get a wrong answer; the content is well designed regarding the use of the Internet as a pedagogical learning tool; the materials are appropriate to a specific level, although they are not authentic. In general, the content and the materials used are applicable according to the goal of the website.

To sum up the aforementioned results, we can say that in order to teach pronunciation, a website should have plenty of interactive exercises, as well as video presentation and visualization of how words and sounds as produced. The benefits of a website is that it is easy to use, it is possible to practice and to do the exercises whenever the users want to and it increases the learner's autonomy as they will be responsible for how they will learn and how they will use the material available. They will be their own teacher. They can follow the whole content step by step, or they can try just the content they have more difficulties in.

Final Remarks

For teachers a website can be useful as a source of materials. All the worksheets and the audio recordings, as well as the videos can be used in the classroom. For learners, it is helpful as the website can

be used as a complement for their English studies. It is important to highlight that the website itself will not suffice. It has to be regarded just as a source of material for further practice and theoretical knowledge, as well as a tool to complement the work of the teachers in the classroom and not replace them.

It is interesting to notice that *BBC Learning English* can be followed as a course in English pronunciation. Mainly for teachers it is very useful to broaden their theoretical knowledge and the use of technical terms as it is well exploited on the website.

What is more, the website *BBC Learning English* focuses on the Standard Southern English. So, there is not a wide range of accents. Therefore the focus is on developing native-like pronunciation and the focus is on the bottom-up approach as its main concern is if the learners know the smaller units, the phonetic symbols, they will be able to understand larger passages of discourse. In this respect, the website should exploit better the supra-segmental features, as there is not room enough to practice this on the website. Besides, these characteristics are more important to develop communicative effectiveness.

After all these considerations, it is possible to say that we accomplished our objectives in that we could analyze the website *BBC Learning English* according to what was proposed. Therefore we come to the conclusion that a website can be useful to teach pronunciation and that studies in this field should be fostered, so that we can have a better understanding of its features and practical applicability to be used in the classroom by teachers and out of it by learners.

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