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TEACHING ENGLISH TH SOUNDS TO A1–A2 LEARNERS: A DRILLING-BASED APPROACH

Askarov Zafar Zayniddin o‘g‘li

Supervisor: Tuxtaxujayeva Madina Ulug‘bek qizi

Uzbekistan State World Languages University, English Philology faculty

zafaraskarov354@gmail.com

Abstract. This article proposes a classroom technique for teaching the English th sounds (/θ/ as in think and /ð/ as in this) to A1–A2 EFL learners. The technique is based on the communicative framework for teaching pronunciation (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010) and on drilling as a controlled-practice technique (Harmer, 2007; Underhill, 2005). The aim is to help beginners notice, produce and recognise the two sounds in common words within a 10-minute lesson. The proposed technique combines listening, a demonstration of articulation, choral and individual drilling, minimal-pair practice and short feedback.

Keywords: pronunciation, th sounds, /θ/ and /ð/, drilling, minimal pairs, EFL, A1–A2 level.

The English th sounds, the voiceless /θ/ in think and three and the voiced /ð/ in this and mother, are among the most difficult sounds for beginners. Both are produced with the tongue tip between or just behind the teeth, and many languages, including Uzbek and Russian, have no such sounds. As a result, learners often replace /θ/ with /s/ or /t/ and /ð/ with /z/ or /d/, so that think sounds like sink or tink, and this sounds like zis or dis. These are not rare sounds: the, this, that, they, thank and three belong to the first words that A1 learners meet, so a mistake in them is repeated many times in every lesson. Underhill (2005) argues that learners need to hear and feel a sound before they can produce it, and that the teacher must make the invisible movements of the mouth visible. This article therefore

proposes a short, structured technique for teaching the th sounds. It combines the communicative framework for teaching pronunciation, which moves learners from listening and noticing to controlled and then freer practice (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010), with drilling, a simple and efficient form of controlled practice for beginners who cannot yet speak freely (Harmer, 2007; Kelly, 2000).

The technique is designed for A1–A2 learners according to the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001), for example school pupils, university students or adults in a general English course. At this level learners know basic words and phrases, but their pronunciation is still strongly influenced by their first language. Typical problems with the th sounds include the replacement of /θ/ with /s/ or /t/ and of /ð/ with /z/ or /d/, a reluctance to show the tongue because it feels strange, and an inability to hear the difference between /θ/ and /s/ in minimal pairs such as think and sink. The main aim of the lesson is therefore to help learners produce and recognise /θ/ and /ð/ in common words. This aim is divided into four smaller skills: to notice the difference between the th sounds and /s/, /z/, /t/ and /d/ when listening; to place the tongue between the teeth; to distinguish the voiceless /θ/ from the voiced /ð/ by feeling the throat vibrate; and to say eight to ten high-frequency words and short phrases, such as Thank you and This is my brother, clearly. The aim is intelligibility and confidence, not a perfect accent. Jenkins (2000) notes that the th sounds are not essential for international intelligibility, but for A1–A2 learners they remain frequent in the first words they learn.

The technique follows the sequence of the communicative framework: description and analysis, listening discrimination, controlled practice and guided practice (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010). Drilling is the main tool of the controlled-practice stage. It has its roots in audiolingual teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2014) and is often criticised when it is mechanical, but for pronunciation at A1–A2 it has a clear purpose: learners need many repetitions of a new movement of the mouth in a safe, supported situation before they can use it in speech (Harmer, 2007). To avoid boredom, the drill must be short, fast, varied and connected to real words.

The technique consists of five stages. In the first stage, learners listen and notice: the teacher says pairs such as think and sink or this and zis, and learners say which sound is new, so that they become aware that the sound exists and differs from the sounds of their first language. In the second stage, the teacher shows the sound by placing the tongue tip lightly between the teeth, using a mirror, a picture or his or her own face, and learners put a hand on the throat to feel that /θ/ in think has no vibration while /ð/ in this has vibration, which follows Underhill’s (2005) emphasis on hearing and feeling a sound before producing it. The third stage is drilling, which has three steps. First, in choral drilling the whole class repeats the sound and then the word after the teacher, for example three, three, three. Second, groups or rows repeat in turn, which lowers the pressure for shy learners. Third, in individual drilling several learners repeat alone, and the teacher corrects with a gesture or a one-word comment such as “tongue”. Longer phrases are drilled from the end, so that you becomes thank you, which keeps the stress and rhythm natural. In the fourth stage, learners distinguish the sounds: they listen to a word and show a card or a gesture for th or s (think and sink), th or t (three and tree), or th or d (then and den), because learners who cannot hear a difference usually cannot make it. In the fifth stage, learners use the sounds with a partner in short phrases and sentences such as Thank you, This is my brother and Thursday, the third, and the teacher gives short feedback on two or three important errors instead of correcting every sound.

The whole technique can be compressed into a ten-minute mini-lesson that focuses on /θ/ and briefly introduces /ð/. The lesson needs only a board, markers and two paper cards for each learner, one with th and one with s. In the first one and a half minutes the teacher says think and sink and three and tree, and learners say which sound is new. During the next two minutes the teacher shows the tongue between the teeth, and learners copy it and feel the throat for both sounds. The following three minutes are given to the first exercise, Tongue Out: the teacher says a word and shows the tongue, the class repeats it as one voice, then each row repeats it, and finally three or four learners repeat it alone, using the words think, thank, three, Thursday, this, that and the. Next, in the second exercise, Think or Sink?, which takes two minutes, the teacher says a word without showing the mouth and learners

raise the th card or the s card; after a few items, learners say a word for their partner to identify. The last minute and a half is used for pair work with Thank you and This is my brother and for short feedback. The mini-lesson can also become a four-lesson unit: the first lesson teaches /θ/, the second teaches /ð/, the third contrasts the two sounds and moves from words to sentences, and the fourth is a review with a pair game and a short recording.

At A1–A2 level, assessment should be simple, quick and encouraging. During the drill and the pair work the teacher can use an observation checklist: whether the tongue tip is visible between the teeth, whether the learner can feel or show the difference between the voiceless /θ/ and the voiced /ð/, whether the learner chooses the correct card in at least eight of ten minimal-pair items, and whether the teacher and a partner understand the target words and phrases without repetition. Progress can also be shown by a before-and-after recording. At the start of the unit each learner reads ten words (think, thank, three, Thursday, this, that, the, mother, brother, with), and at the end of the unit the same list is recorded again, so that learners can listen to both versions. Hearing their own improvement can be more motivating than a mark.

In conclusion, teaching the th sounds to A1–A2 learners needs more than telling them to put the tongue between the teeth. Beginners need to hear the new sound, see and feel how it is made, repeat it many times in a supported way, and then use it in real words and short phrases. The five-stage cycle of listening and noticing, showing the sound, drilling, distinguishing and using the sound with feedback gives this sequence in a form that fits even a ten-minute lesson. The technique is simple and needs almost no materials, so it can be used in large classes and in schools with limited resources. Its main limitation is that drilling alone does not guarantee transfer to free speech, so the target words must return regularly. Further research could test the technique with a group of learners and compare their recordings before and after a short unit.

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