

Using Movie Dubbing to Improve Natural English Pronunciation Skills

Many people who acquire a second language have an accent, which is a normal development. Although accents in general are not problematic, in some cases the sounds of English may be mispronounced to such a degree that the output is not comprehensible to the listener. When the message is not comprehensible, communication is hampered. That is why pronunciation is one of the important “building blocks of the language” (Morley 1991, 484) and necessary for comprehensible communication. Despite its importance, pronunciation is often deemphasized in the classroom. In my university, most first-year students have poor English pronunciation skills because at the K–12 levels, their tests focus on grammar competence.

Although my university offers a course on English pronunciation, the effectiveness is questionable due to limited time and students’ ability. In my class, I can focus only on traditional techniques such as minimal-pair drills and reading out loud, and my students practice isolated sounds slowly with a monotone voice. These traditional techniques are common practice in many classrooms of all levels. In real life, however, native speakers utter speech faster and with various intonation patterns.

This article describes a project to overcome such limitations by requiring learners to dub a short movie excerpt in English. It uses the most successful techniques from previous studies (Chiu 2012; He and Wasuntarasophit 2015; Florente 2016; Talaván and Costal 2017). When dubbing a movie excerpt, learners realize gaps in their pronunciation skills by comparing their speech with the actor’s speech. They then practice reading the script multiple times, imitating the actor’s

voice while maintaining the original speed. This repeated practice over time is beneficial for improving speaking speed and intonation.

MOVIE-DUBBING TASKS IN SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNING

Movie dubbing is one of the most well-studied foreign-language-learning techniques among the various audiovisual translation modes (Lertola 2019). It requires learners to replace the original spoken soundtrack of a movie excerpt—typically with a maximum length of three minutes—with their own voice. To complete this task, learners listen to the voices of the actors. They then mute the video and record their voice directly onto it while maintaining the speed and imitating the actors’ voices.

While there are many movies that teachers and students can choose from, my project requires students to choose characters and work with a script in pairs to dub a two-minute excerpt

Final 8 Weeks	Activities
1	Instructor introduces the project to students: guidelines, technology tools, the script, and requirements.
2	Students work on the project.
3	Students work on the project.
4	Project Q&A session: Students, in pairs, report briefly (about five minutes) to the instructor on their progress and ask any questions that they have.
5	Students work on the project.
6	Final project Q&A session: Optional chance for student pairs to meet with the instructor
7	Students work on the project.
8	Students submit the project report and their movie-dubbing product online.

Table 1. A sample eight-week project timeline

from *The Lion King* (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBvuqc9WALo>). Most of my students have beginning to lower-intermediate English skills; however, teachers can adapt this procedure according to their students' level and time considerations.

Project timeline

In my class, the movie-dubbing project takes place during the final eight weeks of the English pronunciation course (see Table 1 for a sample project timeline). Before the project, students have learned to produce a number of challenging sounds, mostly in isolation.

In the first week, I explain the project requirements, technology tools, and the script. During the remaining seven weeks, students practice reading the script inside and outside the classroom. This process can be flexible, depending on each student pair's progress. To begin, students typically work individually to learn the part of their own movie character. Then, partners practice together. In the eighth week, students submit their final project with their voices dubbed for both characters.

There are two activities I find especially useful in the procedure:

1. In the first week, I let students listen to the original movie excerpt while they read the script, and I briefly elicit their thoughts on relevant features of the

language (intonation, vocabulary, etc.). Indeed, for students to have a foundation for effective dubbing skills, it is essential that they understand the context, the personality of each character, and the reasons why a character speaks using a certain tone.

2. For this kind of project, it is helpful to provide students with personalized support because the progress of each pair varies. I therefore organize two question-and-answer (Q&A) sessions, in weeks 4 and 6. In these sessions, instead of actively working on the dubbing project, each pair reports on its progress and has a chance to ask me questions and discuss the project. This is the time I can help students troubleshoot their problems (e.g., a part with challenging intonation). Moreover, it ensures that students do not wait until the last minute to complete the task. With feedback from the teacher, they can continue to work on the project with more confidence in the later weeks.

Teachers are especially encouraged to incorporate these two activities if they use movie dubbing for long-term project-based learning.

Alternative options: Teachers can use several short scenes, less than 30 seconds long, throughout the semester (e.g., every two or three weeks) instead of one longer scene.

PROJECT REPORT

This project report helps you understand each character’s personality and the vocabulary in the script. Each question is worth 1 point, with a total of 10 points possible. Please answer all the questions below in English. You can answer the questions in two or three sentences each (*longer responses are optional*).

A. Understanding characters

1. Write at least three adjectives in the table to describe the personality of [Character A] and [Character B].

Character A	
Character B	

2. Does [Character A] want to trick [Character B] about _____? Why or why not? How can you tell that from the intonation and/or facial expressions of [Character A]?
3. Does [Character B] believe what [Character A] says? Why or why not? How can you tell that from the intonation and/or facial expressions of [Character B]?

B. Vocabulary

Choose the words in the script that have the following meaning:

4. [Definition of word 1] (noun): _____
5. [Definition of word 2] (verb): _____
6. [Definition of word 3] (adjective): _____
7. Based on the context of the story, think about the meaning of the words [word 4], [word 5], and [word 6]. In your opinion, what do they mean? (Be as specific as you can.)
8. Besides these words, write at least three other words you learned from the script. Write the new words and their definitions, as in questions 4, 5, and 6. (Do not copy from dictionaries. Write the meaning in your own words even if it is simpler than in the dictionaries.)

C. Project reflection

9. What are the challenges you faced when you worked on this project, and how did you overcome them? You can describe (1) language challenges—how to pronounce a difficult word, how to express the complex emotion of a character, etc.—and (2) other challenges, such as how to work together effectively and how to use the software.
10. What skills did you learn from this project? You can mention (1) language skills—English pronunciation and speaking, new vocabulary, etc.—and (2) soft skills, such as communication, technology, and teamwork.

Table 2. A sample project report

This approach lets students get used to the revoicing software and the requirements of the task, and it allows them to practice a variety of scenes with different language scenarios. For stronger students, teachers can even use this as a classroom activity to work on the script in class and dub on-site.

Regardless of which approach teachers choose, it is crucial that before students begin the task, they are provided with thorough guidelines. Teachers need to (1) demonstrate how to properly use the software or a tool for the task, (2) briefly discuss the script with the students in terms of the characters and language, and (3) clearly explain project expectations and the scoring rubric, if a rubric will be used. Students should not be expected to perform the script as well as professional actors would, but their speaking should be comprehensible and should effectively convey the characters' emotions.

The project report

The project report is optional but is particularly helpful when students are working with a challenging script. Completing the report is an important step for students to gain in-depth knowledge about the language and to dub more effectively. Usually, the characters' personality and the scenario determine the tone of the language. Teachers should elicit students' understanding on parts that result in interesting language production (e.g., fake happiness, sarcasm, irony). This allows teachers to focus students' attention on the connection between these interesting language aspects and the story context.

In my class, I ask students to write two or three sentences in response to open-ended questions in the project report. However, students at a higher level can write a paragraph for each question. Teachers can adapt the sample project report in Table 2 for different scripts. Note that questions 4, 5, and 6 ask students to select the words in the script that have the meaning of the given definitions, while question 7 is the opposite: it asks students to provide definitions of three other given words.

Scoring the final product

Developing an appropriate scoring rubric is essential (see Table 3 for a sample rubric). Teachers need to clarify this rubric for students before they complete the task. In my classroom, I score students based on the following:

1. *Synchronization*—the co-occurrence of the character's mouth movements and the student's voice. The score for this feature should be weighted lower than other features because students, not being professional voice actors, sometimes struggle with this.
2. *Intonation*—the ability to use variation in pitch to express emotions and sentence functions
3. *Pronunciation*—the ability to produce English sounds clearly and correctly
4. *Overall intelligibility*—the degree to which students' production can be comprehended and understood

Depending on the focus of the lesson, teachers can add components to the rubric (word stress, sentence stress, sentence functions, etc.).

PRACTICAL PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Following are suggestions to help you consider two essential components for this project, an appropriate scene and a revoicing software/tool:

- Choosing an appropriate scene for the task can be challenging. Teachers need to consider three things: students' level, the language focus, and movie availability. A movie excerpt should not be longer than three minutes. Long excerpts will cause frustration rather than a fun experience. As mentioned above, teachers may prefer to use several short scenes because they maintain students' interest better and are more available than a long scene.
- Two-character scenes typically provide sufficient space for interaction. Teachers

SCORING RUBRIC			
Name: _____		Pair: _____	
Synchronization	Limited synchronization (0.5)	Some synchronization (0.75)	Synchronization most of the time (1)
Intonation	Very unnatural intonation (1)	Some unnatural intonation (2)	Natural intonation most of the time (3)
Pronunciation	Incorrect pronunciation most of the time (1)	Some incorrect pronunciation (2)	Correct pronunciation most of the time (3)
Overall intelligibility	Incomprehensible voice (1)	Incomprehensible voice sometimes (2)	Clear and comprehensible voice most of the time (3)
			Total: ___/10

Table 3. Sample scoring rubric for the movie-dubbing product (adapted from Talaván and Costal [2017]; Florente [2016])

- can also use a three-character or one-character scene. However, scenes with more than three characters are not recommended.
- Teachers can choose scenes with more-diverse spoken interactions rather than a simple daily-life conversation; this allows students to practice more-complex emotional intonations, although these scenes will be more challenging than simple scenes.
- When choosing a scene, teachers should ensure that the speaking duration and the difficulty of the characters' speech are similar. That way, it will be easier to compare and assess students' performance.
- I recommend that teachers use ClipFlair (2020b), a free, all-in-one platform that allows learners to revoice a movie excerpt directly. It works on both computers and mobile devices. With ClipFlair, teachers can choose a scene from the available movie collection, and no software is needed. ClipFlair (2020a) contains a quick tutorial on how to use the platform. Movie scripts of any genre (if needed) can be downloaded at the Internet Movie Script Database (2020).
- Teachers need at least one revoicing tool for students if they do not use a platform like ClipFlair. Movie Maker is basic, easy to use, and free. It is available at Win Movie Maker (2020). In addition to self-help materials available on the site, Timmer

(2015) contains a tutorial on how to use Movie Maker for revoicing. The software works on computers; if students do not have computers, teachers can provide the muted clip so students can dub using movie-editor applications on their mobile devices. Teachers can also ask students to dub directly in the classroom if technology tools are inaccessible elsewhere.

- The procedure for this project can be modified. My project requires all students to dub the same animation excerpt. This makes it easier to compare students' performance; however, not all students will be happy with this choice. Allowing students to select scenes from different genres (animation, romance, action, etc.) gives them more autonomy, but extra work will be required. Teachers will need to ensure that all movie excerpts have roughly equal language difficulty and duration, and that the scripts meet the other requirements of the project.
- The procedure can be adapted for the online learning environment. Teachers can use one-character scenes for students to work individually if pair/group work cannot be implemented. Working outside class is possible for this project, so students can also devote most of their practice time at home after the initial assignment. Live dubbing, on the other hand, may not be appropriate for online learning.

CONCLUSION

This movie-dubbing project brings the real world into the classroom and helps students speak English more naturally. After completing the project, my students unanimously agreed that it should be continued in future courses because it was useful in developing their fluency and intonation. Students also felt that working on the project was a great amusement, compared with traditional classroom activities. I believe that the technique, with some adaptation, can be applied successfully with learners in many contexts. Even if teachers prefer to teach pronunciation by

using traditional techniques, I recommend a movie-dubbing project to supplement those techniques and to give students an enjoyable and memorable learning experience.

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Tran Thi Hai Yen was an English lecturer at Thai Nguyen University, Vietnam. She completed her MA in linguistics at the University of Kansas. She specializes in teaching English oral proficiency, pronunciation, and project-based courses.