Introduction

Despite the fact that researchers have found correlations between phonetics instruction and the development of phonemic awareness and English literacy (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), phonetics instruction has had a somewhat mixed reputation in English language teaching (ELT). Furthermore, the relative importance of teaching segmental and suprasegmental features of pronunciation is often debated in the field. Teachers’ opinions about these matters will certainly affect how they judge the usefulness of a phonetics application. However, most would agree that learning more about articulatory anatomy and the production of sounds is generally beneficial. To this end, the University of Iowa's Sounds of American English tool can be useful to both teachers and students alike.

Product Description

The main function of this application is to explain and demonstrate how the articulatory anatomy works to produce the individual sounds of English (Spanish and German applications are also available).

From the “Sounds of Speech” homepage (see Figure 1), users of the web-based application start by selecting which language they want to explore from the “Free Web Apps Here” drop-down menu at the top of the screen (English, Spanish, or German). It is worth noting that, while this review focuses solely on the web application, mobile versions are available for both Android and iOS devices.
Figure 1. University of Iowa phonetics homepage.

Having selected the appropriate language, users are taken to a screen (seen in Figure 2) where they can access the various features and functions of the application.
The basic functions and features of the *Sounds of American English* include the following:

- Explanations and visual representations of the articulatory anatomy (accessed by clicking “anatomy” in the upper-right corner of the entry screen; see Figure 3)
- Explanations and animated depictions of how the articulatory anatomy works to produce the individual sounds (see Figure 4)
- Video clips of an actual person producing the individual sounds (see Figure 4)
Figure 3. Animated diagram of the articulatory anatomy.

From the entry screen, users select the sound they wish to explore by choosing from one of the consonant (manner, place, or voice) or vowel (monophthongs or diphthongs) options at the top of the screen. The user will then need to make appropriate selections to narrow down and find the sound they are looking for. For example, a user looking for /s/ needs to click “manner,” then “fricative,” and then /s/ (see Figure 4).
While the target users of the website are not explicitly described by the creators, one obvious audience is ESOL teachers and their students. The animated demonstrations of how the various sounds of English are produced are valuable for learners looking to improve their pronunciation of segmentals. Pronunciation textbooks are often limited to static diagrams, but this application can be used to offer dynamic representations of how sounds are produced. Furthermore, while teaching pronunciation often involves the teacher modeling the production of various sounds, this is limited in that teachers are unable to show learners what is happening inside their mouths. This application helps to ameliorate this issue in pronunciation instruction. These representations are likely to be particularly useful in helping learners to produce sounds that are not present in their native languages. In addition to the in-class possibilities, learners can use this application
independently to practice producing sounds that are challenging for them. Finally, it is easy to imagine teacher trainers using this application to help teachers-in-training gain a basic understanding of English sounds and basic phonetics.

Evaluation

Although, this program can be very useful, it is not without limitations.

First, while the video demonstrations are accessible to learners at all levels of proficiency, efficient use of the resources found on the website requires an understanding of rather advanced vocabulary; in order to quickly find the sound they are looking for, learners (and teachers!) need to know terms such as “consonant,” “vowel,” “fricative,” “glide,” and so on in order to locate the desired sound. Knowledge of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is also necessary for efficient use as the sounds are represented by IPA symbols. Learners who lack this vocabulary and knowledge can still benefit from the website, but unless they are guided by a teacher, they may have to spend a lot of time browsing various sounds until they find the one they are looking for.

Another limitation of the program is that it focuses solely on segmental features of speech. A comprehensive course of pronunciation instruction will need to look elsewhere for work on suprasegmental features such as stress and intonation.

Summary

In sum, Phonetics: The sounds of American English provides very high quality visual representations of the production of various sounds. These representations and the accompanying explanations are very well done, but it will be up to teachers to figure out how to use them in their pronunciation work with learners. Teachers will also need to guide learners carefully in using the program. Finally, teachers will need to supplement this material with instruction related to suprasegmental features in order to have a well-rounded pronunciation component in their language classes. Although the scope of the program is limited in these ways, what it does, it does very well.

References


About the Reviewer

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