

Delivering training in ‘Sounds of English’: An Ongoing Action Research Project

Kate Miller

Abstract

This paper started as a narrative about ELT training in Far West, Nepal but is now taking its place as an Action Research project. I removed ‘Far West’ from the title because I will argue that this approach is appropriate to all levels of ELT in all areas. I will state my arguments for justification of the structured teaching of sounds, pronunciation, to teachers. I will then go on to share how I planned and delivered the content of my programme, followed by reflection on my/our input as trainers, what we learned from the experience, and what we need to improve to take this training forward.

Key words: Action research, pronunciation, phonemics, phonics, IPA

Introduction

My grandson who is 16 months old, recently saw some ducks for the first time. He was very excited, running up and down and waving his arms. His father told him, “They are ducks, d – d – d – d ducks”. My grandson now knows the sound /d/. He will not know the letter name ‘d’ for another couple of years and will not write ‘d’ for a further couple of years. But he can already say the sound /d – d – d – d/. As he learns further sounds he will blend them together to become words and sentences. In other words – **speech**.

“Sounds and words are the building blocks for connected speech” (Underhill, 1994 p. vii). “Phonetics is, in fact, the very practical end of language study” (Ball, 2009 p. 3). who goes on to say, “those wishing to teach (or indeed learn) a foreign language will find phonetics invaluable in their attempts to introduce target pronunciation.” In this paper I will argue for the practical, structured teaching of sounds in ELT.

Terminology

I have already used the terms ‘sounds’ ‘phonetics’ and ‘pronunciation’. The following terms which probably are familiar to all students of linguistics, will be used in this essay.

<p>Phonology (which is mostly to do with grammar): Sound system of a specific language How sounds pattern together to make units How many consonants and vowels Order of words in sentence - Prosody (being the supra-segmental aspects of language, eg. intonation, stress, rhythm, etc.):</p>	<p>Phonetics: Study of speech in general Range of possible human sounds Production (articulation) and reception (acoustics) of sounds</p>
<p>Phonemics: Study of content and sounds of a particular language</p>	<p>Phonics: Knowledge of alphabetic code and how it is used in reading and spelling Knowledge of skills of blending and segmenting</p>

Pronunciation:

The general term, 'pronunciation, which is often used for all of the above, means how to articulate a chosen model accent. Discussion of which model accent is primarily a political discussion and will only be briefly mentioned later.

Table 1: Terminology (Collated from various sources, especially Ball 1999, Roach 2009, Roach¹ 2009)

My focus is going to be on phonemics, namely the spoken sounds of standard English, "the accent normally chosen as the standard for people learning the English spoken in England" (Roach, 2009 p. 1) to enhance production and reception of sounds: and phonics, the ability to manipulate sounds to enhance all the skills of listening and speaking and reading and writing.

My position

First I will state my position in relation to this topic. I have always considered myself to be an experienced, but practical, teacher, not an academic or a researcher and certainly not an expert. I have never liked the term 'expert' as I think it is on the negative side of the 'binary position' discussed by Sharma (2009) in NELTA Chautari, but I do connect to his description of an expert as 'knowledgeable and passionate'. I also belong to the group of educators whose focus is on the teacher (Woods, 1996) and my primary concern is to enhance the knowledge and confidence of the teacher first. If I can teach one teacher, then they can teach many students. My work is guided by Action Research theory, "the cyclic process of planning, action, observation and reflection" (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). Regardless of whether the researcher is a teacher or trainer, the goals are the same, through this cyclic process to arrive at improvement or change, not just of practice but also of systems.

Action Research

I have worked for many years with children and adults with speech, language and learning difficulties, and with children and adults who have English as a second or third language. All of this work has involved understanding communication;

how our listening develops, how our speech is articulated, how we can become better readers, how we become good spellers, how we can become skilled second (and more) language users. I have carefully monitored my own strengths and difficulties as a language learner, particularly in my attempts to learn Nepali, and am continuously developing my own knowledge, skills and understanding in order to share with others.

Action research which involves cycles of discussion, experimentation and reflection is therefore appropriate because I know that I will actively continue to learn and develop as our team of trainers and participants together get to grips with this topic. While there are many excellent theoretical materials on phonology, my paper is on how I and others are developing the practical application of this particular body of knowledge specifically for Nepalese teachers. In the wider context, NELTA itself is on a continuing mission to establish the best practice/s for English Language Teaching (ELT), and my work is a very small part of this ongoing cycle.

Stage I: Information gathering (*Needs analysis*)

During the last few years while I have had the privilege of working with teachers in many diverse locations in Nepal, I have been attempting to understand what learning they want and whether I can help. In some cases I have been asked to present some training which has proved to be not appropriate for some of the participants, and it became clear that we had to understand local variations in order to deliver appropriate training at an appropriate level. Teachers have different personal education and training experiences and clearly it is impossible to provide a 'one size fits all' programme. However, informal observation and discussion over this period of time has often brought up the topic of pronunciation, and a formal needs analysis carried out in May 2009 in Baitadi and which included classroom observation, tape recordings and discussions with teachers, focussed very clearly on their desire for pronunciation training. After a meeting with teachers and NELTA

committee, the following list of training needs was constructed:

- Training for head-teachers, guardians and stakeholders on reasons in favour of change in methodology.
- Pronunciation
- Sounds of letters and order of introduction
- Class activities
- Listening, speaking, vocabulary
- Materials construction and use
- Poetry and stories
- Grammar in context
- International Phonetic Alphabet - IPA

I was particularly interested in the request for International Phonetic Alphabets (IPA) training. At one time it was included in the Government English textbooks, (I am not aware if this is still the case) and I have seen it used both very well and very badly. I had not personally considered including IPA, but was intrigued as to how it might fit. I will discuss this further below. After further discussion we agreed that in the training, we would focus on pronunciation and include other topics depending on time available. At this stage I did not have a programme, that would have to be developed, and realised that I needed to build in maximum flexibility as come the time I did not know who would be attending, neither did I know how much formal training the participants would have. My focus was on working with primary teachers, and with NELTA teachers at any level who would take responsibility for follow-up support.

Support for pronunciation

A small scale research carried out by our NELTA colleague, Lekh Nath Baral, and presented at the Cardiff (UK) IATEFL conference in 2009, (included here with permission) made the issue of pronunciation clear. Lekh Nath surveyed 35 secondary students who wrote 150 words on 'My expectations from my English Teacher':

Some relevant students' comments were:

- He should teach us actual pronunciation of

new and different words.

- He should speak every word correctly.
- Grade teacher should have good English to develop the language of small children so that it helps them in upper grades.
- Teachers should make their own language better before teaching to the students.
- Our English can't communicate with other people in this world. We have to write our dialogue to make other people understand us.
- Desire to learn 'British English' (feeling that it has 'high status').

It would be interesting to follow this research up with more surveys of students' own perceptions of English language teaching and learning.

Government Curriculum

The Nepalese Government's curriculum for primary English quite clearly requires a focus on sounds. The general objectives of Grades 1-5 includes:

- To give the pupils ample exposure to the English language so that they can understand and respond in simple English with acceptable pronunciation and intonation'.
- The English classroom should have a happy atmosphere where the children hear and speak English in a natural way through a variety of activities.
- All four skills will develop together but new material will be learnt orally and aurally before being read. (The point of good 'sounds' knowledge, is that it enhances reading and spelling as well as listening and speaking.)
- Time allocation in grade 1 lessons is 40% listening and 40% speaking.

There is no doubt that the knowledge, proficiency and confidence of the teacher will make a marked difference in the acquisition of students' skills in all four areas of language learning.

Controversial Issues: *Should pronunciation be taught?*

Ur (1991) says, "The experience of many learners is that pronunciation can be, and often is, acquired adequately by intuitive imitation" (p.55). The

implication here is that students will have a good enough model to imitate. Students will imitate what they hear, but in order for their pronunciation to be good they must be exposed to good modelling. She continues “however, there is also evidence that deliberate correction and training does improve pronunciation and if this is so it seems a pity to neglect it.” Roach (2009) encourages us to think about pronunciation in terms of phonemes (sounds) rather than letters because of the confusing nature of English spelling, and Ur (1996) urges “if the alphabet is a totally new one, then there is lot to learn, but it is clear that every new symbol needs to be taught with its pronunciation” (p.56). Morales (2009) though, is more forceful and states that “... teachers who are reluctant or ignorant about Standard English will have a difficult time teaching it effectively”.

When to teach?

The age of starting to learn English for young children is another hotly contested topic: early or late?. My argument here is that age of learning is less significant than the richness of the learning environment. In the past small children have been thought of as ‘empty vessels’ waiting to be filled, but psychology can now explain that not only children, but babies and the unborn can respond in certain ways to a variety of stimuli. Babies in the womb respond to sound, they know the sound of their mother’s voice, her heartbeat, and will often be soothed by other sounds they will have encountered in the womb. Babies up to six months old have the wired capacity to imitate any sound of any language, but after six months they begin to specialise in the sounds that surround them. This ability tends to last, but weaken, up to the age of about 13. This supports the argument for earlier is better, but only if the environment is linguistically rich, and this requires a minimum of a highly proficient and creative teacher.

Graddol (2006,) points out the controversy:

One rationale for teaching languages to young children is the idea that they find it easier to learn languages. In practice young learners face problems that older learners do not, they are still developing

physically and intellectually, they may not yet be proficient in their L1, their emotional needs may be higher and they are not intrinsically motivated (p.89).

He goes on to say:

There are many hazards attached to Early Years Learning, not least of which is that it requires teachers who are proficient in English, have wider training in child development and who are able to motivate young children. Such teachers are in short supply in most countries, but failure at this stage may be difficult to remedy later.

This is precisely what Lekh Nath’s student understood when he/she commented, ‘Grade teacher should have good English to develop the language of small children so that it helps them in upper grades.’

Which English?

The third discussion is ‘Which English?’ It is my belief that an understanding of standard English pronunciation as defined below, is an adequate starting point and can be developed and added to as needs arise by awareness raising, teaching and practical exposure to other accents. (Knowledge of phonemic transcription is valuable in developing phonological knowledge.) The fact that there are various branches of English Language Teaching, for example, English as a Second Language, English as a Foreign Language, English for Special Purposes, for health, commerce, politics, as well as Hinglish, Nenglish, etc. I contest and indicate the need for a basic model with advanced and adaptive levels as required. I would like to share the following quotes:

To the question, ‘Which English?’, Ur (1991) states: “In general it does not matter very much, provided that the model chosen is a standard accent that is easily understood by other speakers of the language” (p.55). There has been a criticism levelled against British English that it is redolent of colonialism. It has been referred to by various names, best known as RP (Received Pronunciation) or BBC English. I have to confess that even as a British English speaker, the term RP has connotations of aspects of

my own society that I am uncomfortable with. But in defence, Roach (2009), states that:

No pronunciation course that I know has ever said that learners must try to speak with a perfect RP accent. To claim this muddles up **models** with **goals**: the **model** chosen is (British/American/Nenglish [my addition], etc) but the **goal** is normally to develop the learner's pronunciation sufficiently to permit effective communication with native speakers." (p:6)

Of course, this term 'native speaker' will not suit everyone's perception of English language speakers, as English is often the common language between non-native speaker and non-native speaker (Crystal, 2003) but the point is that the language should be comprehensible to diverse other speakers. The issues surrounding perception of accents are often not dealt with pedagogically but come within the sphere of the sociolinguists and politics. In my own country (UK) there is continuous discussion about the value of regional accents as well as a booming business in RP speech coaching.

I want to convince teachers that adequate coverage of the sounds of standard English at the beginning of language learning, will enhance proficiency in all four language skills and give a firm foundation for subsequent learning. That subsequent learning can then be a matter of choice, not dogma, for each individual learner influenced by location and need.

Stage 2 – Planning the training

Principles

So – in order to develop a course in *Practical Sounds of English*, I had to have some underlying principles, and my decisions to develop a course were guided by the following:

my belief that teachers and students do want to learn clear pronunciation (as evidenced in Lekh Nath's survey.)

ensure that participants understand that while I can theoretically discuss other accents, my own pronunciation is standard British English

this training would be part of an ongoing,

collaborative Action Research project

I would encourage constructive criticism and with investigation and discussion be prepared to adapt content

Focus

The course was going to focus on phonemics (sounds of standard English), phonics (blending and segmenting), and some aspects of phonology, namely stress, rhythm and rhyme leading to understanding of syllables. The content would be directed at teacher development.

As this topic is so vast, and so interesting, it is a major task to identify the features that are going to be directly useful and practical in the classroom, especially what can be done in a short course. Although the focus was on primary teachers, the knowledge, with appropriate activations, is the same for teachers of learners of all ages.

Materials consulted

I wanted the programme to be pedagogically and contextually relevant. Many sources informed my practice, in particular materials that might already be familiar to Nepalese teachers, or at least, materials that had been used or introduced in the Nepalese context (except *). These consisted of:

- Nepalese Government's English Language Curriculum
- Government Grade text books
- 'Better English', authored by Christine Stone
- Materials developed by authors who have all presented at NELTA events, namely Penny Ur, Adrian Underhill, Mark Fletcher and Nicholas Horsburgh.
- Teacher Knowledge Test (Cambridge ESOL)
- * - Letters and Sounds: Principles and Practice of High Quality Phonics: Primary National Strategies, UK
- * - Laubach Way to English. Jeanette Macero and Martha Lane

* - A word about the last two items above. '*Letters and Sounds*' is a programme of structured phonics used in UK in Nursery-Class 2. It is a programme

of adult-led structured, multi-sensory activities, to teach children sounds and letters, blending and segmenting. The first phase focuses on listening and speaking skills, which feed into next phase of relating oral/aural to reading and writing.

Laubach Way to English and *Laubach Way to Reading* are also structured phonics based programmes developed in the USA over 40 years ago. Again the focus is on structured input of sounds with a visual component. These materials were developed both for adult native speakers needing literacy skills, and for non-native speakers needing English language skills.

The focus of many effective sounds programmes, (especially 'Better English' by Christine Stone), is the structured introduction of sounds, with pleasing visual materials and with plenty of opportunity for repetition and practice.

Decisions regarding what to teach

The programme was designed to teach the 44 sounds of standard English.

1. *Which order to teach consonants and vowels?* I intended to teach first consonants in alphabetical order then short vowels. My reasoning was that alphabetical order is familiar (although not relevant), and the short vowel letter names, 'a', 'e', 'i', 'o', 'u', are also familiar. With some exceptions consonant sounds are easier to articulate and discriminate than vowels, the associated Roman graphemes are mostly familiar, short vowel letters (generally) have a one sound/one symbol relationship (familiar in the Nepalese context), and knowledge of short vowels plus consonants can offer lots of practice in phonics, blending and segmenting cvc (consonant/vowel/consonant) sound/written words. (There are, of course, exceptions to most of these rules, but they did not seem insurmountable.)
2. Second decision, related to the first. *Should sounds be taught in order according to articulatory positions?* This would be more familiar in the Nepalese context, but contrasts with the focus teachers have on alphabetical order. If the training is only on producing

sound, then articulatory order is appropriate. My initial focus was on the idea that as soon as a small number of sounds have been learned they can be blended into 'proper words' to develop real vocabulary. (In UK the first sounds to be formally taught are /s/, /a/, /t/, /i/, /n/, /p/. With only six sounds, four consonants and two short vowels, there can be many 'proper' cvc words constructed (eg. cat, dog, mat, big, etc., and with early practice on minimal pairs, eg. nat/mat, mat/met etc..). We have to be very clear on what is the goal of a particular segment of training. My approach always is that teaching sounds should not be done in isolation but linked to blending to make meaningful words to extend vocabulary and longer speech segments.

3. I had been requested to teach IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet). The IPA shows all possible sounds of human language, and each language has its own phonemic symbols. At first I was reluctant because I thought it might cause confusion by introducing a further set of symbols. I prepared the input, and decided that I could be flexible regarding if, when and how to introduce it. However, because English has different spellings for the same sound and different sounds for the same spelling, I realised how very useful it is to have visual support for auditory discrimination between sounds. To see the difference between /th/ θ (think) and /th/ ð (that), or /s/ (sun) and /ʃ/ (ship) makes sense, and to be able to visually relate all 44 phonemic symbols to the 44 acknowledged sounds of English (used in most learner dictionaries) simplifies the auditory discrimination process. So, phonemic transcription proved to be a very useful tool.

Planned Content

The programme therefore would introduce the 24 consonant sounds and 20 vowel sounds in a logical and structured way, and in Roman script, with plenty of practice of sounds using drilling, pair and group work, practice activities and participant teaching. If appropriate I would then introduce the practical use of phonemic transcription, how to read and write the symbols, and their use in personal dictionary learning.

A more detailed breakdown of this plan is as follows:

- We would observe and discuss differences in the alphabet chart currently used and taught by letter names, with a chart showing letter sounds.
- The sounds of 24 consonants. We would focus on 'sounds' as opposed to 'letter names', and work on the pure sound of a consonant, e.g. /l/, not /la/.
- The five short vowel sounds, /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/. It is important to discriminate between these sounds, and to practice this we will make cvc (consonant, vowel, consonant) words, using only the short vowel sounds. There are hundreds of words that can be made and practised in this way, and the concepts of blending and segmenting would be introduced and practiced. Blending means identifying separate sounds, then 'bringing them together' to make words, eg. /d/ - /o/ - /g/, /do/ - /g/, dog. Segmenting is the reverse process, to hear a whole word and identify each sound within it.
- Next, six long single sound vowel sounds: /ar/ (farm), /or/ caught, /ee/ bead, /ur/ turn, /oo/ food, /oo/ good. (The sound /oo/ in 'good' (/u/) can be taught with short vowel sounds, but I prefer at this stage to only use the short vowel sounds relating to letter names in the alphabet. [There will be many teaching points up for discussion!]) Focus is on sounds, not spellings. I had prepared example words from grade books, and exercises to listen to how many sounds (phonemes), and look at how

many letters (graphemes). (There would be reference materials available showing alternate spellings for each sound. Example words were taken from Grade 1-3 text book and other materials.)

- The very important *schwa* sound 'uh' /ə/, not a normally written sound (except in IPA), but an important component of spoken English, as in 'the', 'about'.
- Lastly, the eight vowel diphthong sounds: 'ear' year, 'ai' rain, 'ure' pure, 'oy' boy, 'oa' boat, 'air' hair, 'igh' high, 'ow' cow.

Table 2 illustrates the structure: (See Table 2)

When all these sounds had been introduced, practiced and activated, I would introduce the practical use of the phonemic transcription.. Once sounds are understood, knowledge of the symbols help to visually recognise distinct sounds which can then be practised auditorily and which in turn can aid development of good pronunciation of words in a dictionary, thereby enabling self-study. Also once individual vowel sounds are understood, it makes the notion of rhythm, rhyme and syllables so much easier to understand and use: for example

Each syllable has one vowel sound (sound, not letter), eg. each (1), vow el (2), syll a ble (3), par ti ci pants (4)

Rhyme is a pair of word endings that consist of the same one vowel sound usually plus the same consonant sound, eg. moon, June

Table 2: Forty four sounds of Standard English (Note: P/T = Phonemic Transcription)

Sound, IPA symbol and example word for 24 consonant sounds												
sound	'b'	'k'	'd'	'f'	'g'	'h'	'j'	'l'	'm'	'n'	'p'	'r'
P/T	/b/	/k/	/d/	/f/	/g/	/h/	/tʃ/	/l/	/m/	/n/	/p/	/r/
word	bat	cat	dog	fat	get	Hat	jet	leg	man	net	pot	rob
sound	's'	't'	'v'	'w'	'y'	'z'	'sh'	'ch'	'th'	'th'	'ng'	'zh'
P/T	/s/	/t/	/v/	/w/	/j/	/z/	/ʃ/	/tʃ/	/θ/	/ð/	/ŋ/	/ʒ/
word	sun	tip	vat	wet	yes	Zip	ship	chip	thin	this	sing	vision
Short vowel sounds						Long vowel sounds						Schwa
sound	'a'	'e'	'i'	'o'	'u'	'oo'	'oo'	'ar'	'or'	'er'	'ee'	'uh'
P/T	/æ/	/e/	/ɪ/	/ɒ/	/ʌ/	/o/	/u/	/ɑ/	/ɔ/	/ɜ/	/i/	/ə/
word	ant	egg	in	on	up	Look	food	farm	for	her	meet	the
Diphthongs (two vowel sounds glide together)												
sound	'ear'	'ai'	'ure'	'oy'	'oa'	'air'	'igh'	'ow'				
P/T	/ɪə/	/eɪ/	/ʊə/	/ɔɪ/	/ɔʊ/	/eɔ/	/aɪ/	/aʊ/				
word	year	rain	pure	boy	boat	Hair	high	cow				

Rhythm relates to regular recurrences of stress patterns, eg. Jack and Jill went up the hill. (This is a simple view of rhythm, but useful for teaching chants. For a fuller discussion see Roach, 2009¹)

Stage 3 - Presentation

A very welcome addition

After visiting Baitadi to do the needs analysis, I started to develop the programme thinking that I would be delivering it alone. I was very happy to hear that I would be accompanied by a NELTA colleague from Dhangadi, and I was even more happy that I was accompanied by two colleagues, Ms Sunita Swar and Mr K D Bhatta. (Names included with permission). Both Sunita and KD are very experienced in multi-sensory activation of primary materials, having worked with the British Council ETTE programme and having developed and delivered multiple trainings in Far West. So prior to my return we started to discuss how we could jointly deliver the programme. This is a crucial aspect of Action Research; the process now becomes collaborative with the benefit of including expert local knowledge. Such discussions however are at the mercy of technology, communication with Far West is fragmented, so we only had a chance to generalise our plans. We each prepared our own input and when we met developed how the overall approach would work. The decision was taken that out of three sessions per day, I would take the first two for a fairly rigorous input on sounds (as detailed above) and Sunita and KD would take the last session to do active, multi-sensory input and materials development. If we sensed that participants needed a change of pace, we were flexible enough to re-arrange this programme. Our daily sessions always included reflective practice – reflection on content, process or activation, for which we used English, and reflection on feelings or opinions, for which we used Nepali, a bi-lingual approach we found completely authentic. We discovered that our combined expertise made for a very full and lively training event, and more importantly a full and lively discussion and reflection between ourselves and participants.

Our flexibility was quite extremely tested by weather conditions in Baitadi. We had unseasonal torrential rain and on day four I could not give any sounds training as the noise of rain on the tin roof far outweighed my ability to compete. My most profound admiration goes to participants in Baitadi who braved terrible weather conditions to come to the training. Their hunger for knowledge and willingness to participate gave us as trainers the urgency to give as much as we had.

Stage 4 – Reflection and forward planning

We completed a five-day training in Baitadi and a six day training in Dhangadi. We all learnt many things, from each other as trainers, but more especially from the participant teachers, their hopes and dreams and constraints. I am happy to hear that five of the participants have had the confidence already to cascade the training to other teachers in their schools, despite their concern that they need more training themselves.

We are now in the process of reflecting on what we learned from the training, critiquing ourselves and preparing for future events. Some of the issues are:

- How to properly respond to the specific needs of any particular group.
- What do we need to teach first? How best to structure the various approaches.
- Can we fully train teachers in pronunciation and phonics? Is that a good goal? How much is good enough?
- What goals should we set for a single workshop, lecture or short (i.e. 3-day) training?
- Should we have separate input for articulation? (This was not something I had given much thought to, but quite clearly it is a vital part of phonemic training. It was interesting that teachers who had studied at B.Ed and M.Ed levels had more theoretical knowledge than I did, and I had a more practical approach than they did. It made for interesting discussion and much thought. As a priority I have since developed my own knowledge of theory which will enrich my practical approach and illustrates the action research cycle.
- How can we support newly trained teachers

to continue their learning and activate their teaching?

- What materials do we need to acquire or develop to support training, post-training, or even self-training? (I am currently working on a one page per sound handbook, but finding that the practicalities of such an undertaking are bigger than expected.) Can we provide audio support materials? (There are audio programmes available on CD and internet, but cost is a factor.)
- Both head teachers and guardians may have to be persuaded that what teachers are being trained to do in the classrooms is, in fact, VERY GOOD PRACTICE, and should be supported and encouraged. There is always resistance to change, but good outcomes are the best argument.
- What support do we need from District Education Officers?. The DEOs, in Baitadi and Dhangadi, were very supportive and interested to hear what participants had to say, and participants were willing and able to share their thoughts with the DEOs in a very open, confident and direct way.
- What else? This is not a flippant question, but an indication of the many issues that we must continue to explore.

A sensible link

I am keen to link this training to the content of the Cambridge Teacher Knowledge Test (TKT) referred to previously on *neltamail*, and to this end I tried to include as much of the recommended phonology knowledge from this package as I could. This package gives both structure and credibility to the training. While awareness raising is always positive, teachers want to seriously address how to upgrade their knowledge and practice and to work towards a recognised qualification.

Conclusion

Adrian Underhill (1994) said

. . . sounds and words are the building blocks for connected speech, and specific and detailed work can be done at these levels without losing touch with the fluent speech from which the parts have been

extracted. (p.vii)

I would add that sounds are the building blocks for all language skills.

I have seen great enthusiasm from teachers for learning, but also experienced resistance to teaching sounds, but sounds of a language are like the foundations of a building, or the roots of a tree. It should not just be B.Ed or M.Ed students who are learning phonology, it is an injustice to teachers who are expected to teach language if they are not given this practical knowledge and an injustice to the children who are struggling to learn.

Thousands of primary teachers urgently deserve a systematic and structured upgrade to their knowledge. If it is considered important enough to have English on the curriculum from grade 1, then it should be important enough to give teachers the training they need to deliver every aspect of the curriculum. Of course, the implications of this in relation to time and money are huge, and solutions need to be multi-dimensional and collaborative among diverse agencies.

Unfortunately there are no quick fixes, and collaboration between statutory and volunteer agencies should be strengthened:

- Systematically and urgently find out what teachers and students want and need and develop appropriate training
- Develop common guidelines for training ELT that all NGO and INGO volunteers subscribe to – the NELTA model?
- Reconsider goals. Why exactly is English being taught. Are goals realistic, outcomes being properly assessed and the means of attaining both within the capability of practitioners
- At least one teacher per school, or cluster of schools, qualified to at least B.Ed. in a training and advisory capacity
- Head teachers with an ELT qualification
- Make English optional in primary until sufficient teachers are appropriately trained

And finally, a plea to telecommunication providers to make mobile and online communications readily accessible to everyone to make available the massive

amount of knowledge online and to cascade the excellent work being done by NELTA.

Kate Miller has been visiting Nepal for ten years and volunteering as a teacher trainer for the last five years. She has visited more than a dozen NELTA branches to understand the needs of teachers and share her knowledge. Kate has a degree in Psychology from the USA and postgraduate educational qualifications from UK, currently completing an M.Ed at Oxford Brookes University. She was a teacher of psychology and a school counsellor, and has worked in UK and USA with L1 and L2 children and adults needing both native literacy and English language skills. In UK Kate is currently a volunteer in a primary school, working with non-native Nursery – Class 2 children.

References

- Ball, M.J. and Rahilly, J. (1999). *Phonetics: The science of speech*. London: Hodder Education.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language* (2nd edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Department for Education and Skills. (2007). *Letters and sounds: Principles and practice of high quality phonics*. London: DFES.
- Graddol, D. (2006). *English next*. London: British Council.
- Kemmis, S and R. McTaggart. (eds.). (1988). *The action research planner* (3rd edition). Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press.
- Krashen, S. (1995). *Principles and practice of second language acquisition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Morales, E. (2009). Improvement of Standard English. *Educational Action Research*, 17, 311-325.
- Roach, P. (2009). *English phonetics and phonology: A practical course*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Roach, P. (2009¹). <http://www.cambridge.org/elt/peterroach/resources.htm#glossary>. Retrieved 12/11/09.
- Sharma, G. (2009). <http://neltachoutari.wordpress.com/2009/11/14/birgunj-and-the-busting-of-the-myth-of-experts-versus-teachers/>
- TKT – Teacher Knowledge Test www.cambridgeESOL.org/TKT Retrieved 9/8/09
- Underhill, A. (1994). *Sound foundations: Living phonology. The teacher development series*. Oxford: Macmillan Education.
- Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching: Practice and theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Woods, D. (1996). *Teacher cognition in language teaching: Beliefs, decision-making, and classroom practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.