From the authors

The story of foreign language teaching in British schools (which I'm not going to write about here, you'll be pleased to know) has had its ups and downs – more downs than ups, probably – but what I want to write here concerns one of the ups.

I went to primary school in a suburb of Leeds in the 1960s, and the school I attended happened to be one of those that took part in a national experiment to introduce French at primary level.

My recollections of this are somewhat vague, as I hope you'll understand: it was, after all, half a century ago. I don't even know whether I did two years of French at primary school, or just one. It certainly wasn't more than two.

Nor do I remember very much about what we did in our French lessons, or how many we had per week. I do remember that we used pictures a lot, and that the lessons were primarily (entirely? did we do any writing at all?) oral.

Why am I telling you this? Well, the thing is …

Our French lessons were taught by our regular class teacher. I don't know how much French she knew. Was she perhaps just one jump ahead of us? Some of the teachers involved in the scheme were, apparently, just one step ahead of the pupils.

But I seem to recall very clearly that she had a good French accent. Of course, this is impossible to verify, and I suppose that at the age of nine or so I didn't really have much idea of what a French accent was supposed to sound like, anyway.

I can still hear a distant but distinct echo of her voice speaking the unfamiliar language. It still sounds good, even now.

And it was simply the sound of it that appealed to me first. Not the prospect of venturing across the Channel and using the language – that came later.

It was the sound of that familiar teacher's voice making those unfamiliar sounds, and the discovery that I could hear myself somehow managing to at least approximate to the same sounds myself.

So now, half a century later, I think that primary school classroom was probably the beginning of my enduring interest in pronunciation – the latest manifestation of which takes the shape of these pages.

Part of my university course was a weekly lecture on Russian phonetics. I found the whole business totally unfathomable. Like many academic subjects, it was couched in what was, for me at least, impenetrable jargon. I had no idea what a 'voiceless fricative' was, for example, and no amount of reading and re-reading seemed to shed any light on the matter. Perhaps most importantly of all, I simply failed to see the relevance of this strand to the process of learning the language and studying its literature and history.

A mystery.

Some years later, having drifted into English teaching while a postgraduate student in Czechoslovakia, I decided to get a formal teaching qualification and, to this end, took a PGCE course specialising in TEFL. Again, there was a phonetics element on this course and again, at first at least, I found it complicated and uninspiring.

I recall having to describe in minute detail in an assignment what happened to the speech organs during the pronunciation of the word 'anglepoise' (a kind of table lamp) and wondering why anyone should imagine that was useful. To my amazement, I managed to pass this assignment. Looking back, I suppose this may have been the first turning point. The words *fricative*, *plosive*, *affricate* and so on were beginning to make sense, and even my younger, sceptical self could see some relevance in the field of general phonetics.

The seeds were sown.

After a five-year stint in the Balkans, I got a job teaching EFL at a language school on the south coast of England. Each classroom was equipped with a phonemic chart that, to my relatively untrained eye, seemed to have an intriguing design. The more I looked at it, the more it made sense. I could also see immediately that it had a clear practical purpose – the symbols were identical to those used in learners' dictionaries.

Students in the classes I observed (and subsequently taught) were not asked to analyse the activity of the speech organs in the production of the word *anglepoise*; but they could identify and use the symbols accurately as part and parcel of every lesson, focusing on those sounds that were particularly problematic for speakers of their own mother tongue and self-correcting in a particularly impressive way.

Gradually the fog lifted.

The mystery was solved – and I was hooked.

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