

How to teach pronunciation?



The tips in this guide are concerned with the techniques and methods we use in the classroom – the pedagogy. We will deal with such issues as presenting patterns, providing practice and giving feedback and correction.

How to teach pronunciation:

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Teachers and learners often have a mindset which says that pronunciation ability is something fixed – you're either good at it or you aren't. It's more constructive to believe that we're all capable of learning if we make the effort.

When we see successful people, athletes for example, we see the results – the amazing things they can do – but not the process – the huge amount of effort behind their abilities. As a result, we are tempted to suppose that their success is a consequence of innate talent.

The belief that success is attributable to talent can lead to what psychologist Carol Dweck (see below) calls *a fixed mindset*. A person with this mindset believes that abilities are fixed: you either have the ability or you don't. If you fail at something, it simply means you don't have that ability and you might as well give up.

There's no point persisting with something you're no good at because it will always end in failure. Dweck contrasts the fixed mindset with what she calls *a growth mindset*. A person with this mindset thinks you can do just about anything if you put enough effort into it.

For them, ability is not something fixed, but something which you can acquire through hard work. Trial and error are essential, so failures are a natural part of growth.

It's obvious which mindset will be more productive when it comes to pronunciation teaching and learning. Acquiring new articulation habits involves experimentation, and experiments are bound to have mixed results. If our learners try but fail, we want them to learn from this and try again. We don't want them to just give up. So we need to encourage a growth mindset, and here are a few ideas on how to go about this.

1 Focus on the process, not the result

Learners sometimes embark on pronunciation courses in the expectation of an unrealistic result such as sounding like a 'native speaker'. Their expectations are unlikely to be realised, and this can promote a fixed

mindset response such as, ‘I’m no good at this’. Better to focus on growth: the ongoing process of becoming more intelligible. This is something we can all realistically achieve, with a certain amount of effort, and it’s actually more useful than acquiring somebody else’s accent.

2 Focus on effort, not talent

Some learners seem to be able to pick up pronunciation points easily, while others struggle. For us teachers, it’s tempting to think this is a question of talent – some learners have a natural gift for pronunciation, others don’t. However, teachers can’t do anything about ‘natural gifts’. What we *can* do something about is effort. It’s not just a question of encouraging the learners to make *more* effort; it’s also about showing them how to focus their efforts more effectively.

3 Demand high

A fixed mindset encourages the belief that there is a single fixed finishing line, and once you have reached it, job done! This view creates a problem for class dynamics. The learners who’ve already passed the finishing line switch off while the rest struggle to catch up. A growth mindset encourages the belief that any learner can grow and improve, no matter what their starting level. No matter how good your learners’ skills are, there are always ways in which they could develop further. The learners in your class can all be learning at the same time, but just not necessarily the same thing.

4 Give empowering feedback, not hollow praise

We teachers tend to make comments such as ‘Very good!’ almost like a knee-jerk response. The intention is benign, but the effect may not always be. For the learner to be empowered by the feedback, they need to know *why* their performance was good. If you need to give feedback, you could say something like this, depending on the level of the class:

‘That was fine. You exaggerated the length of the **vowel**, but it was very clear.’ This tells the learner that exaggeration was an effective strategy, which is something they can learn from.

Dweck, C.
(2007)

*Mindset: The New Psychology of
Success.*

New York: Random
House.

Build on what learners already know and feel

You can prepare the ground for pronunciation teaching by doing classroom activities which focus not on specific features but on the sound of English (and other languages) as a whole.

It can be interesting to ask learners to speak their **L1** in the way that an English-speaking person would. One time I tried this, my Spanish learner spoke Spanish to hilarious effect, with long, drawled vowels, and a tongue which seemed to be curled back the whole time (as if saying an American-style /r/). This learner clearly knew things about English pronunciation that I had never taught him!

The activity described above demonstrates how learners usually have impressions and feelings about pronunciation before you even begin. They don't come empty-handed. Before you get down to the details of teaching, you can use 'holistic' activities like this to prepare the ground by finding out what the learners already know and feel about pronunciation.

By 'holistic', I mean viewing the topic of pronunciation as a whole rather than focusing on individual details. A holistic approach to pronunciation teaching needs not focus exclusively on the target language but may also compare it to other languages – particularly the learner's L1, of course. It may focus on the general position of the lips and jaw which native speakers of different languages tend to adopt – so-called **voice settings**. It may take into account subjective aspects of pronunciation, such as how different languages 'sound' and 'look' and our feelings and stereotypes about them.

Voice settings: When people mimic foreign **accents**, like my Spanish learner above, they tend to exaggerate the features which they find most salient. They may even 'pull a face', in other words, adopt a facial expression which they associate with that accent. What they are probably doing, by intuition, is attempting to reproduce the voice settings of the language which lies behind the accent, that is, the typical lip, tongue and jaw positions.

You can direct learners' attention to voice settings by, for example, playing videos with the sound off, and asking them to guess which language the people are speaking. Then have a class discussion about what features helped them to guess. Perhaps the key feature of English-speakers' voice settings is the relaxedness of the articulators. There is little effort in the lip movements – a feature which contrasts strongly with French, for example. Clement Laroy (see below) suggests a fun activity to raise awareness of this: getting learners to try being ventriloquists. A ventriloquist is someone who entertains an audience by holding a puppet and speaking without visibly moving his or her mouth, so that the voice seems to come from the puppet. Your learners could just use their hand to 'do the speaking' instead of a puppet, of course.

A less visible characteristic of English voice settings is the amount of work done by the tongue tip in the area of the alveolar ridge. Take the sound /s/ for example, which may be created using the tongue tip in English, but the top surface of the tongue in other languages. I often point this out to learners as a point of interest and background information. We should bear in mind that while non-English voice settings do contribute to a non-English accent, they do not necessarily damage international intelligibility. Voice settings will however be a key focus of instruction if you are in the business of accent-training – working with actors, for instance. Subjective aspects: We can get at learners' subjective feelings about the sound of English and other languages by asking directly. For example, ask them to list five languages which they've heard being spoken and compare them: which do they prefer and why? Alternatively, you can use more indirect and imaginative approaches involving similes. For example, use questions like these: What is the sound of English like to you? Choose the best answer.

- 1 a. It's smooth like a peach. b. It's rough like a pineapple.
- 2 a. It's like eating milk chocolate. b. It's like eating fresh bread.
- 3 a. It's like flying through the clouds. b. It's like swimming in the waves.

You will find imaginative material of this kind in the book by Laroy referenced below. The indirect approach has the advantage of steering the learners away from resorting to ready-made stereotypes.

Laroy, C. (1995) *Pronunciation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

In pronunciation teaching, you need ways of referring to useful concepts. These may be specialist vocabulary items, or simple terms that you or the learners invent. But don't complicate matters with too many technical words.

Being able to name the controls of a car, such as *steering wheel* or *hand brake*, won't help you to drive. However, it *will* help you to communicate with your instructor – and *that* will help you to drive. A similar point can be made for pronunciation teaching – learning words to refer to pronunciation concepts, such as **fricative** or **unvoiced**, will not enable your learners to pronounce the target language better, but it will help in the process of learning.

We need words to refer to pronunciation concepts, but they don't necessarily have to be the 'official' terms. After all, the learners only need these terms as a temporary learning tool; they are not the learning objective in themselves. I usually avoid complex-sounding technical terms such as **alveolar ridge** or **affricate** – using such words seems like an unnecessary distraction, and they aren't very useful outside the learning situation of your pronunciation class. You can often create your own words for such concepts, or invite learners to suggest a word or phrase. For example, for **alveolar ridge**, learners might suggest *tooth hill* or something similar in their first language.

In this tip, I mean by 'vocabulary' something wider than simply lexical items. I mean ways of referring to things specifically developed in and by the class. Take **vowel** sounds for example. When you demonstrate a sound, encourage learners to play with it and make associations. For example, for the /u:/ sound as in *food*, say the vowel by itself. Get learners to say it as if they are reacting to a nice surprise – *oooh!* After that, you can refer to it as the 'surprise vowel'. This mental association between the sound and an image gives it a kind of personality and makes it memorable. Once learners have the idea, encourage them to

suggest images for other vowel sounds, and these can then become a ‘class vocabulary’ which you can use again whenever you refer to those sounds. But more than just points of reference, these associations come to be something like class in-jokes.

Your class vocabulary need not be only verbal; it can include body language and gestures too. I often reinforce the idea of **contrastive stress** using a dramatic rise of my eyebrows to coincide with the stressed word and encourage learners to do the same. Or to talk about what happens to the *t* in *must*, I hold out a pen at arm’s length and open my fingers so that it drops to the floor, explaining that the *t* is dropped. This action eventually becomes a gesture which learners immediately understand to mean **elision**.

Think twice before introducing new metalanguage (vocabulary about language). In the pronunciation class, there is some which is very helpful, and which you will use again and again. However, there is also some metalanguage which I’ve rarely found any need for in my classes – examples include **minimal pair**, **homophone** and **diphthong**. I mentioned above that you may use less technical sounding alternatives, but for some things you may not need any words at all. There’s no need to clutter your toolbox with tools you don’t need.

Finally, beware of false friends from outside the realm of pronunciation. Examples which readily spring to mind are *vowel*, **consonant** and *syllable*. I’ve found that whenever I first use the term *vowel* or even *vowel sound*, learners will assume I mean the five vowel letters of the alphabet rather than the **phonemes**. Make sure you get that clarified before you get too far into the lesson. For example, if you have a phonemic chart on the wall, point at the symbols in the vowel area of the chart – there are many more than five!

Drilling does not enjoy a good reputation in English teaching, because it can seem dull and mindless. However, it's extremely useful in pronunciation teaching, especially if we are mindful in the way we use it.

The **verb drill** has something of the 'mindless' connotation associated with military parade formation. Perhaps for this reason, the technique of drilling in the language classroom developed a bad reputation during the growth of the communicative approach. That's a pity, because it's a very useful activity, especially for pronunciation purposes. What I would like to suggest, in this tip, is that we make full use of drilling in pronunciation teaching, but try to be mindful about it. Let's look at it by way of answering three questions: why, what and how should we drill?

Why should we drill?

Drilling has traditionally been used in language teaching to help learners remember things. However, in the specific case of pronunciation, I think this is more about muscle memory than anything more cognitive. It's about getting the muscles of the articulators familiar with the necessary movements. It's mouth-gym. Equally important are the connections between mouth and ear. While we are adjusting what we do with our mouths, we simultaneously hear the result of our efforts. Muscle memory and auditory memory are mutually reinforcing. Drilling is as important for listening as for speaking. For that reason, I think it's worth drilling features which the learner needs receptively, such as connected speech, even if these are not needed for intelligibility in their production.

What should we drill?

We can drill just about any aspect of pronunciation, and do it mindfully. The main point is that you can vary the size of the chunks that you

drill – it doesn't have to be just words or full sentences. Here are two example activities, one on individual sounds and one on connected speech.

1 Sound-morphing: Produce a sound (for example the *th* sound /θ/), but elongated. Get the class to join in. Then, without stopping, change it to another nearby sound (for example /s/) and get the class to follow.

You may want to point at the sounds on the chart as you do this. Then repeat, but ask the class to focus their minds on how their mouth position changes as they move from one sound to the other.

2 Looping-the-links: Choose a very small linked up fragment which learners are finding tricky (for example, *that'd be good*) and repeat it over and over in a loop, getting the class to join in. Note that it starts to sound weird after a few loops, which is good because it focuses the learners' mind on the sound rather than the meaning. Afterwards, you could ask the learners if they noticed anything strange about the way it sounded. They may for example notice that the *d* of *that'd* sounded like a /b/.

How should we drill it?

You can experiment with different participation formats. Typically, you will model the chunk, or play an audio of the chunk, and the whole class repeats it. Alternatively, selected individuals may repeat it. Don't insist that the learners speak out loud straight away if they feel too self-conscious to do so. It's still good practice even if they only sub-vocalise it to themselves to begin with. It may be possible to get a selected learner to be the model, instead of you or the audio, if someone in the class is particularly good at the phrase you're working on. If you are using a more extended drill text, such as a rap or chant, you could divide the class into two teams. One team models each line of the rap and the other repeats it like an echo. Then the teams swap roles. Whichever format you are using, listen for trouble. If it's clear that some members of the class are having difficulty repeating the chunk, work on it more slowly and, if possible, discuss what the difficulty is.

There is a very physical aspect to pronunciation, so it is appropriate to use classroom techniques which focus on the physical production of speech. Here we will see some examples of these kinds of activities.

Among the various aspects of language we need to focus on in class, pronunciation is unique. Things like grammar and vocabulary are essentially cognitive, but pronunciation is also very physical. This is part of what makes it potentially so appealing: it can offer a change of focus in a class which is becoming a bit too ‘heads down’. As a pronunciation teacher, you will want to start collecting ‘tricks of the trade’. You will find these in many of the resource books which have been written about teaching pronunciation. The kind of tricks I’m referring to are what phonetics expert John Catford describes as ‘experiments’: activities you can do which help to make you more aware of the physical movements of your own articulatory organs. Although Catford’s experiments are for students of phonetics, you can use similar ones with your learners. These will give them a kind of ‘hands on’ experience which can be instructive and memorable. In the list below, you will find a collection of examples of how we can focus on the physical in this way. For each one, the purpose is given first, followed by the kind of instruction you might give to the learner. Be aware though that some learners may be uncomfortable about doing some of these experiments for cultural or personal reasons.

To compare **unvoiced** and **voiced** pairs like /s/ and /z/: Put your fingers in your ears and say the sounds. You’ll hear and feel a loud vibration for the /z/ but not for the /s/.

To compare **aspirated** and unaspirated pairs like /p/ and /b/: Hold a tissue paper in front of your mouth and say the sounds. The paper will blow out for /p/ but not for /b/.

To compare **stop** and **fricative** pairs like /t/ and /s/: Try to extend the sound as long as possible. You can make the /s/ as long as you want, but the /t/ can only be short.

To prove that the sound in **nasal consonants** comes from the nose: Say an extended sound /m/, then pinch your nose. The sound will stop.

To show the tongue position, for example in the sound /k/: Try to say the sound when you're breathing in rather than out. Your tongue will feel cold where it touches the roof of the mouth. To check the teeth, tongue and lip positions in sounds like /θ/: Switch your phone to selfie mode and use it as a mirror. Say /θ/ and check you can see your tongue touching your top teeth.

To show the forward or backward position of the tongue in **vowels** like /i:/ and /u:/: Make an extended eeeee sound and then change it to ooooo. Repeat, but with a pencil touching the end of your tongue. The pencil will go further into your mouth. To compare **tense** (long) vowels like /i:/ and **lax** (short) vowels like /ɪ/: Put an elastic band between finger and thumb. Move the finger and thumb apart as you say the long vowel and together for the short one.

You'll feel the tension and slack in the elastic band. To compare jaw position in closed vowels like /i:/ and open vowels like /a:/: Put your finger on your nose and thumb on your chin. Say the two sounds. Notice how your finger and thumb move apart. To raise awareness of lip position for different sounds: Work with a partner. Say words from a list in random order, but silently. Your partner must identify the word.

To make sure that emphasis is noticeable in **tonic stress**: Raise your eyebrows and/or make expressive hand gestures at the same time as you say the part of the sentence which has stress. To differentiate strong and weak syllables in rhymes and chants: Clap or tap a regular beat and say the rhyme or chant, making sure that the strong syllables happen at the same moment as the clap.

Catford, J. C. (2001) A Practical Introduction to Phonetics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

A key part of teaching is keeping the class mentally engaged with the subject matter. This is just as true for pronunciation teaching as other areas of the curriculum.

Read the (short) conversation below and decide who is speaking and where:

T: How do you pronounce the past of *read*? (Initiation)

L: /red/! (Response)

T: Yes, good. (Feedback)

No prizes for guessing it's an exchange between a teacher and learner in a language class. This is a conversational pattern which is very common in classrooms generally, and it's been called *The IRF pattern*, with the letters standing for *initiation*, *response* and *feedback*. I'm sure most of us teachers will find ourselves talking this way from time to time, but why do we do it? I think the answer is that we're trying to check that the learners are 'with' us, mentally. The basic idea is a good one – we need to encourage cognitive engagement. However, there is a danger in relying solely on the IRF for this purpose: it can feel rather routine and mechanical if overused. Let's have a look at some variations and alternatives.

The titles of the sections below refer to what the learners are doing. **Answering questions:** This is basically what the learners are doing in the IRF pattern above, but I like to break the routine sometimes by modifying the 'moves'. For example, try changing the 'feedback' move: instead of giving your evaluation, keep a straight face and ask, 'Are you sure?' Or ask another learner, 'Do you agree with that?' You can also play with the 'initiation' move. Ask a question with no answer like, 'What's the difference in pronunciation between past tense *read* and the colour *red*?' Or break the rules completely by asking a 'real' question – one that you don't know the answer to, such as 'Has anyone read a good book lately?'

Noticing: The question in the conversation above is essentially a way of directing learners' attention. That's **OK**, but it's slightly coercive. It's better if something grabs learner attention without the explicit 'initiation' move. For example, you could set the learners a puzzle to solve such as this riddle: 'What's black, white and /red/ from beginning to end?' (answer = a book)

Identifying patterns: You can encourage cognitive engagement in the tasks that you give learners. For example, write the words below on the board: *heat, peace, meat, mean, great, eat*

Ask learners to find the pattern and one word which breaks the pattern. (The pattern is that *ea* is pronounced /i:/, and *great* breaks the pattern.) **Finding connections:** Challenge learners to find connections between two things which appear to be very different. For example, ask them what sounds the following pairs of words have in common:

quickly – *wine* (answer = /w/)

holiday – *wash* (answer = /b/)

night – *buying* (answer = /aɪ/)

Finding reasons: Present learners with strange pronunciation facts and ask them to suggest explanations. For example: 'You often see the contractions *she's*, *it's* and *that's*, but never *this's*. What do you think is the reason for this?' (Because it's very difficult to say two /s/ together.)

Solving puzzles: Problems get more complex if the question involves more stages. Here's an example: 'If you have a very bad cold and you say the word *may*, it sounds like *bay*. Why?' (When you say /m/, the lips are closed and the sound comes from the nose. When you have a cold, the nose is blocked. It comes out as /b/ because this sound is also made with the lips closed.)

Being inquisitive: In the IRF pattern above, it's always the teacher who initiates. Try to encourage learners to be inquisitive about language, and initiate questions for themselves instead. A class atmosphere where learners feel inclined to ask questions is something that will take time to achieve. I think the way to get started is to ask more open questions such as 'What do you think is the reason for this spelling?' or 'Why do you think it's pronounced that way?'

Learners can pick up some patterns of pronunciation intuitively. However, there are some which you can present explicitly to speed the learning process along.

We can identify patterns in the pronunciation of English at three different levels – sound-level, word-level and conversation-level, and we will look at each of these in turn below.

Sound-level patterns

Sounds which are too alike do not make easy neighbours. Try saying *an apple* without the *n*: it's hard. We need the *n* to keep the similar **vowels** separate. The same thing happens with **consonants**. Say *Smith's* and *Jones's*. The *s* is happy enough to come straight after the *th* in *Smith's*, but it's not happy after the *s* in *Jones's*, and we have to insert a vowel sound to separate them. Some learners may pick up 'rules' like this intuitively; others may learn them more efficiently with explicit teaching. When two sounds live side by side, one of them may change in order to be more like its neighbour in some way. Compare the final *s* in *wife's* and *wives*, for example. The first is pronounced /s/ so that it's **unvoiced** to match the /f/ before it. The second is pronounced /z/ so that it's **voiced** to match the preceding /v/.

Sounds may also try to match the mouth position of a neighbour. For example, in the combination *np*, the *n* may become /m/ to match the lips-together position of the following *p*. You can hear this in the word *signpost* for instance. Again, many learners will pick up these rules intuitively, but sometimes explicit awareness can help. Some sounds are happy together in one place but can't stand being together in others. For example, in English, *s* is fine after *p* at the end of a syllable (for example, *tops*), but it refuses to come after *p* at the beginning. In words like *psychic* for example, the *p* stays silent. However, other languages don't always play by the same rules – Greek and Polish have no problem with this syllable-initial *ps*. Awareness of such differences

between the rules of their own language and English can be very useful for learners. These kinds of rules are known as **phonotactics**. **Word-level patterns** If the rules in the last section relate to the physical abilities of the mouth, the patterns in this section are set purely by convention. They are spelling patterns and **word stress** patterns. We sometimes point out to learners that English spelling is not **phonetic**. However, it's best not to overstate the case: the idea that spelling is total anarchy is neither helpful nor motivating. In fact, there are lots of patterns, and some of them are easy enough to present explicitly in your lessons, for example. Other patterns are perhaps better left to intuition.

Like spelling patterns, word stress patterns are not categorical. You can't say, for example, that all two-syllable nouns have the stress on the first syllable; you can only say that *most* of them do. However, as long as we make this clear, I think that some patterns are eminently teachable. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that word stress is mostly something that learners need to commit to memory on a word-by-word basis.

Conversation-level rules

The first pattern I would mention here relates to rhythm. I think it's useful to raise our learners' awareness of the distinction between **content words** and **function words**, because the former tend to be pronounced strongly and the latter weakly). This pattern of strong and weak is useful because it forms the baseline for intonation rules and, in particular, **tonic stress** (sometimes known as 'sentence stress'). The basic rule of tonic stress is that you put the stress on the last content word in a sentence or phrase. For example, in *What did you think of it?* the stress would be on *think*. However, this is a very different kind of rule from the ones above: it's made to be broken. You can *choose* to put the stress on any word in the phrase in order to create a specific meaning. But you need to know the rule in order to break it meaningfully.

Chants, rhymes, songs and raps can be very valuable sources of pronunciation practice. Here, we look at what they can be used for, and why.

I think that songs, and other kinds of playful texts like chants and rhymes, have great value in pronunciation teaching, and here are three good reasons why:

1 They're memorable

You'll find that if you've worked with a chant or rhyme or rap thoroughly one week, the learners can often recite much of it from memory the following week. If you did it near the end of the class, some learners will have walked home with it playing in a loop in their heads, doing homework you never asked of them.

2 They're built out of pronunciation

The kind of word play you find in these kinds of texts depends on the sound of the language. Rhyming words for example are words which share the same final **vowel** and **consonant phonemes**. Chants exploit the syllable structure of phrases to create patterns. In other words, such texts are built out of the very material that we're trying to teach. This is a happy coincidence. The fact that these features are so salient in chants and rhymes draws the learners' attention to them.

3 They're repeatable

People normally tire very quickly of something which is too repetitious. You wouldn't want to listen to the same news bulletin five times. However, it seems we're much more tolerant in the case of things like songs, chants and rhymes – we can listen to these repeatedly. This is ideal for pronunciation work, which usually requires quite a lot of repetition. Drilling sentences is work; drilling a rap is fun. Here's an example of a rap which I wrote for *PronPack 4*, followed by the stages of a possible classroom activity for it. The beat falls on the bolded words.

*You **won't** get **fit** just **sitting** on a **seat** If you **wanna** get **fit**, gotta **get** up on your **feet** Don't **fill** that **seat**, gotta **move** a little **bit** Kick your **feet** to the **beat**, feel the **heat**, that's **it!***

1 Give out the text with some gaps. Say the rap and ask learners to complete it.

2 Read out each line fairly slowly and ask the class to repeat it, like an echo of you.

3 Repeat shorter segments that they seem to have difficulty with, such as sitting on a seat, three or four times in quick succession and ask the class to repeat.

4 Get the class to clap a regular beat and lead them in saying the chant together, keeping to that rhythm.

This text has a narrow focus on the minimal pairs: sit – seat, fit – feet and bit – beat. When they recite the rap, learners can practise articulating these words. When the rap goes around in their inner ear, they get to hear them repeatedly.

The text also has a broad focus on rhythm and connected speech: linking, weak forms, elision and so on. Although for intelligibility, learners don't need to import these features into their normal speech, they need to be able to understand them receptively, and the rap format helps to make them noticeable and fix them in the mind. If you're using a course book for young learners, the chances are that the book will already contain plenty of songs, chants and rhymes, which is great. Books for older learners don't usually include such material, in which case you'll need to look outside the book. When searching for 'authentic' songs, chants and rhymes to use, it's difficult to find them with a narrow focus on specific phonemes like the example above. However, the good news is that most will be exploitable for the broad focus. If you're using a song, listen to it a few times before class and identify any features you may want to highlight. If you've found a rhyme you want to use, try saying it over and over to yourself and identify any useful pronunciation tips you could pick up from it.

Hancock, M.
(2017)

PronPack 4: Pronunciation
Poems.

Chester: Hancock McDonald
ELT.

Learners naturally appreciate feedback on their pronunciation. Try to make your feedback useful and informative.

When we put effort into doing something, we like to get feedback. And it's undeniably nice when the feedback is good. But when your teacher just says, 'Good!' after everything you say, you begin to doubt their sincerity. Good how? You begin to thirst for something a little more informative. Let's take a look at what it means to give informative feedback.

Conform versus inform

Some feedback encourages learners to conform:

L: *I don't like pears.* T: *OK, but we say 'pears'.*

L: *'Pears'?*

T: *'Pears'. Yes, good.*

In this exchange, the learner *conforms* to the teacher's way of saying the word. However, the feedback may not have done much to *inform* the learner. What more could have been said?

The importance of diagnosis

We can't hear the conversation above, nor see the exact context, but I'm guessing that the learner pronounced *pears* like *peers*. My first diagnosis would be that the learner has been misled by the spelling. It would be perfectly reasonable to suppose that *pear* would rhyme with words like *ear*, *hear*, *near*, *fear*, *clear*, and so on. It's a case of over-generalising a spelling pattern. In that case, it might be worth mentioning that *pear* is exceptional, otherwise this feedback might cause the learner to doubt the pattern.

Focused feedback

Let's suppose that the teacher in the conversation above has an **accent** in which *r* is not pronounced in words like *pear* – an English accent, for example. When the teacher models *pears*, the learner might think the lack of *r* is an essential part of the correct pronunciation. You might

need to point out that it's only the **vowel** sound that you want the learner to focus on in this instance; the *r* is not a problem either way.

Feedback by result

A good form of feedback on pronunciation is to remain silent and write on the board what you understood the learner to have said. For example, they mispronounce *pear* and you write up *peer*. The learners can keep modifying their pronunciation until you write *pear*, which is the result they intended. Learners can also get this kind of feedback from the speech recognition function on their own mobile phones.

More than one way of being 'correct'

I've had learners ask about the pronunciation of *either*: is the first vowel like the vowel in *bee*, or like *eye*? They find it a little disappointing to discover that both are perfectly correct. I think we feel that 'correct' means there's only *one* valid way of saying something. Let's take a different example: *tomato*. Is the second vowel sound like the vowel in *calm* or in *say*? In this instance, the first is typical in British English and the second in American – and of course, both are 'correct'. In fact, you can say most things in more than one way and yet still be intelligible. Feedback should take account of this fact.

Feedback doesn't have to be evaluative

You can give feedback to learners which is informative but not evaluative. For example: 'You're pronouncing it differently from me, but it's fine, people will understand you.' That leaves it up to the learner whether they would like to sound like you or not. Sometimes, just comparing the way we pronounce things is the only feedback we need: it satisfies the craving without being an insincere 'Good!'

Where 'correct' is correct

There is one area of pronunciation where I think the term 'correct' is entirely appropriate, and this is for the relationship between sound and spelling. Returning to the conversation at the beginning of this tip for example: let's imagine that the learner pronounces *pear* like *peer*, but has no problem with the vowel in *hair*. In that case, we know the learner *can* say the vowel in *pear*. This is not a matter of **accent**; they're simply decoding the spelling incorrectly.

Control your correction reflex

Teachers are hard-wired to respond to learners' errors by correcting them. That's fine, but we should be mindful about whether and how we do this.

Ask someone to sit with one leg crossed over the other. Then tap the person's knee and what happens? You get the well-known knee-jerk reaction: the lower leg kicks forward without the permission of its owner. Sometimes, I think we pronunciation teachers tend to correct learners as a kind of reflex reaction. Perhaps we should be more mindful, by considering questions such as these:

1 Is the 'error' really a problem?

Just because something is non-standard, that doesn't mean it's necessarily a problem for intelligibility. For example, many Australian speakers say *day* like **RP die** but are nevertheless intelligible. Similarly, many of the things your learners say may be non-standard but not unintelligible. It's worth bearing this in mind.

2 Is this just something that irritates me personally?

From time to time, we can easily get annoyed by some aspect of our learners' pronunciation. We say things like, 'My learners always say ... and it sounds really awful!' Whether or not the pronunciation feature is in fact problematic in terms of intelligibility, I don't think it's wise to let our own subjective dislike of it cloud our judgement. Irritation is rarely constructive.

3 Is this the right moment?

It's often good to give your feedback as soon as you notice a problem. However, sometimes it can be an unwelcome distraction. If your learner is trying to concentrate their attention on A, it might be damaging to force their attention on B. Sometimes it's better to let something pass, or make a mental note and return to it later.

4 Is this a slip or a systematic problem?

Sometimes, in the heat of a communicative interaction, a learner will make a pronunciation slip that they are perfectly capable of self-correcting. If you think an error is a slip rather than a systematic problem, you may deal with it lightly or not at all.

5 Is this an awareness or an articulation issue?

If a learner pronounces the w in sword, that's probably because they aren't aware that it should be silent. If a learner says ooman for woman, it's probably because they have difficulty articulating the /w/. Your feedback should be different in either case.

6 Shall I correct explicitly?

If a learner makes an error in the course of a conversation, you may correct explicitly or subtly. For example, let's say the learner talks about a man who found a sword, but pronounces the w. You might say, 'Actually, the w is silent in sword', or you might say, 'Oh, he found a sword, did he?' (pronouncing sword correctly). You have that choice.

7 Should I expand this into a mini-presentation?

You can make a quick correction in passing, or give a more complete explanation. For example, if your learner pronounces walked as walkid, you may just need to make a quick correction, or you may be tempted to go into a full mini-presentation about -ed endings. I used the word 'tempted' because many of us pronunciation fans might have an urge to do this – but it's not always advisable to give in to temptation!

8 Would this be a good opportunity for peer feedback?

One final question that's worth considering is this: might the feedback be better coming from one of the learner's classmates? It's not a good dynamic for you to be the only person in the room with all the answers. It's better for the wisdom to be more evenly distributed. Plus feedback from peers is sometimes expressed in a way that the learner can better understand. And last but not least, the learner who is giving the feedback consolidates their own ability by doing so – and gets a bit of a motivation boost too. What's not to like?

Assessment tests can help you to decide what aspects of pronunciation to focus on, and to identify what progress the learners are making.

Here are some questions to consider when assessing pronunciation.

When should I test?

It can be useful to do a diagnostic test at the beginning of your course to get some idea of 'where the learners are at' in terms of pronunciation. The focus of such a test can be very wide. Later on in the course, you can use achievement tests to find out how the learners are progressing, and then you can focus more narrowly on the specific issues you have covered in class.

How can I get a good sample of the learners' speech?

One possibility is to use a text which contains range of potential pronunciation issues and ask the learners to read it aloud. However, read-aloud texts may elicit unnatural pronunciation and encourage spelling-induced errors. An alternative might be to record learners in pairs doing a simple speaking activity such as talking about their leisure interests. In this case, assessment is a little more difficult because the text is not controlled; you need to find the pronunciation issues where they arise naturally.

How can I assess the sample?

It can be really tricky to untangle the knot of pronunciation issues that you hear in your learners' speech. The key is to choose specific features and focus exclusively on these. For this purpose, you could make a marking sheet. This is basically a list of the features you have chosen, and space to write notes next to them. The features might be, for example, a limited number of **phonemes** and phoneme clusters. Make notes on your marking sheet while you listen to the learners, either in real time or on a recording.

How can I choose what features to focus on?

Tests should be coherent with the pronunciation aims of you and your class. For example, if you're teaching for the purpose of international intelligibility, then your assessment should reflect that fact. Don't mark down learners for not using native-like features such as **weak forms** in their own production, since these aren't essential for intelligibility. Instead, focus on features which are likely to damage intelligibility. Robin Walker (see below) has a good section on assessment including an example of an intelligibility-focused marking sheet.

How should I involve the learners?

I think we should involve the learners to the maximum. Explain exactly what you're doing and why. If you have a marking sheet, why not show it to them before they do the task so they know what to focus on? This awareness is beneficial not only in the test itself, but as a learning experience more generally. The ideal is when learners become so accustomed to marking sheets that they feel able to use one themselves. Once they can do this, they can use it to assess each other in class. Instead of pair work, put the learners in groups of three – two doing a speaking activity and the third assessing. Students can also learn to assess themselves. Ask them to make a recording, and then some time later, listen back to it with a marking sheet in hand.

How can I test other aspects of pronunciation?

The reading aloud and speaking tasks above focus on learners' productive skills. To get an idea of their listening ability and pronunciation awareness, you could use a test such as the one in my book *English Pronunciation in Use* (see below). If you are making your own, you can design test items using the principles presented in Tip 41: 'matching', 'classifying' and so on. Check that your test items test what they're supposed to test. It's all too easy, for example, to create an item intending for it to test a **vowel** phoneme, but which in fact tests awareness of sound-to-spelling correlation. Another common mistake is to create pronunciation test items which test knowledge of **phonemic symbols** rather than actual pronunciation.

Hancock, M. (2007) *English Pronunciation in Use Intermediate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Walker, R. (2010) *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



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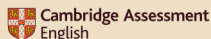
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