

Incorporate pronunciation teaching in listening, comprehension and conversation lessons

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1. Introduction

Pronunciation teaching belongs with listening comprehension and conversation training because the skills are interrelated. It is well known that a learner with fairly good pronunciation, even if only at the word level, can be quite comprehensible to English speakers even with many grammatical errors, while someone with excellent grammar can be incomprehensible if key words are pronounced incorrectly.

It is true that there are some sounds in each language that are physically difficult for learners who have never practised them, eg. the two English “th” sounds, some of the fricatives of Chinese, the guttural sounds in Arabic. But mostly the problem is not that the person can’t physically make the individual sounds, but that the learner does not conceptualise the sounds appropriately. For example, most English speakers find learning the tones of a tonal language like Chinese or Vietnamese extremely difficult. The problem however is not one of producing the tones. The problem is that in English, tone serves a completely different function from the one it serves in a tonal language: It is used for intonation and sentence-level meaning, rather than to distinguish words meanings, and therefore conceptualised in a completely different way.

Traditional pronunciation teaching concentrates on drilling difficult sound distinctions, but pronunciation teaching works better if the focus is on larger chunks of speech such as words, phrases and sentences and if the student is involved in actually speaking instead of just learning facts or rules of pronunciation. This provides the rationale for incorporating pronunciation teaching in listening comprehension and conversation lessons.

2. Possible “Recipe” for teaching pronunciation

- Individual sounds

If a student consistently has difficulty with the pronunciation of a certain sound or sounds, call their attention to it and help them form a concept for that sound. It would be helpful to provide the student with an exercise on a set of words or contrasts instead of focusing on the phoneme itself. eg. to teach sound /v/, ask the student to listen and repeat the pair of words: vet/wet, vine/wine, veil/whale, and then have the student listen to the words in context.

- Stress within a word

If a student has failed to learn the stress pattern, it is very likely that they will fail to recognize the word in spoken form and fails to make themselves understood properly, eg. elementary/a lemon tree, history/his story. Teaching word stress is particularly important to low-level students as this gets them off to a good start in their general language acquisition.

- 1) Start with two syllable words with simple phonemes. Ask the student to identify the stressed syllable from your pronunciation of the word.
- 2) Write the words on the board/paper, repeat the words several times and ask the student to underline the stressed syllables.
- 3) Check the answers, discuss errors if any, then ask the student to repeat the words.
- 4) Give follow-up exercises such as practising with more words, pronouncing some words with stress on the wrong syllable and asking the student to judge whether it's correct or not.
- 5) When the student has done well with two syllable words, move on to words of three syllables or more. When the student has done well with these, ask them to group words into stress pattern families: words with stress at the beginning, the middle or the end.

- Stress at sentence level and rhythm

Key/content words that carry information are stressed in a sentence. Considered in the context of utterances, stress of a word is really just a potential; the stress will only be actualized when that word has prominence in a sentence. The Student needs to practice saying the sentences with emphasis on all the content words first. When you find he/she does it well, other aspects of English rhythm can be introduced such as intonation and linking. The following procedure could be followed:

- 1) Write the sentence on the board/paper so that you can refer to the parts of the sentence later. Use the sentence that the student will use for later conversation or listening.
- 2) Elicit the words which should be stressed and underline the stressed syllables on the paper
- 3) Read the sentence several times and ask the student to repeat it back
- 4) After considerable practice, ask the student to repeat the sentence on his/her own, indicating whether there are any mistakes.
- 5) Repeat the procedure with several sentences that relate to the topic of listening or conversation. When the student is up to it, get a new sentence and ask the student to identify the stressed words, underline the stressed syllables. Ask the student to read the sentence before telling whether the underlined stress is correct or not, to give the student the chance to feel the rhythm. If the stressed syllable is not correct, allow the student several more times to repeat reading the sentence and then correct it.
- 6) When the student does it well, introduce intonation and linking. Try the same procedure as above.

Linking is most difficult for second language learners even for advanced learners. It involves joining the last sound in a word to the first sound in the following word in an utterance. Please note that teaching linking is only for high-level students. Learners do need to learn basic linking in early lessons, so as to be able to produce sentences like “what’s the matter?” “Can I come” in a natural way. They also need to be taught to distinguish the contexts in which this type of linking should and should not be used.

3. Tips

- a) Learners may revert to old habits of pronunciation several times before improvement becomes more permanent. It is important to address learners’ pronunciation difficulties constantly in listening comprehension and speaking lessons. Once it is incorporated in the lessons, teaching and learning will come more naturally and learners tend to be more comfortable with it.
- b) Pronunciation teaching works better if it is focused on practice and theory is brought in only when needed to improve practice. It is particularly relevant for beginners who have limited language skills. Teaching materials that are too dense or abstract may be de-motivating. Instead, aspects of English pronunciation should be introduced bit by bit by discussing a range of examples rather than giving a lecture on the topic, eg. you might simply engage the student in conversation and work on whatever pronunciation issues that come up there and then.
- c) An effective strategy to teach pronunciation is to involve the student in critical listening. Critical listening refers to learners listening to recordings of their own voices, as opposed to native speakers and learning to judge whether they have picked the correct pronunciation. Especially if he/she can be recorded saying similar things several times and then listen back, the student will be aware of the differences between their version and a native speaker’s version. Otherwise, the student might be literally unaware why people cannot understand them properly or they cannot understand the utterances.

4. Pronunciation resources at our Burwood Office

- a) Tree or Three: An Elementary Pronunciation Course
- b) Ship or Sheep: An Intermediate Pronunciation Course
- c) In Tempo: An English Pronunciation Course