

## Helping students with pronunciation

When people say 'you speak good English', very often they are reacting to your pronunciation – it is very important in creating a confident first impression as a speaker of a foreign language. Although most students today are learning English for communication in an international context (so the perfect reproduction of British vowels, for example is not essential), a high frequency of pronunciation errors can make students hard to understand, and listeners, whether native speakers or not, may just switch off. Setting high standards for pronunciation (even if you are not aiming for native-speaker-like production) is probably the best practical way to achieve the right kind of comprehensibility. And the ideal time to lay the right foundations for this is at low levels.

### 1 Give priority to pronunciation ... but be realistic

Don't wait for a *Pronunciation* box to come along in the *Students' Book*. Integrate pronunciation work whenever students have a problem. 'Little and often' is a particularly good principle with pronunciation.

On the other hand, think about what you want to achieve: clarity and confidence are what most students need, rather than perfection in every detail. Individuals vary widely in what they can achieve, so don't push too much when a particular student is getting frustrated or embarrassed. Leave it and come back to it again another day. A humorous, light-hearted approach also helps to alleviate stress!

### 2 Drill ...

Choral and/or individual repetition is the simplest pronunciation activity to set up and possibly the most effective. It can help to build confidence, and is often popular with low-level students as long as you don't overdo it (see above). There are models on the cassette that students can copy for most key language in *Cutting Edge Elementary*.

### 3 ... but make sure students can hear the correct pronunciation before you ask them to reproduce it

Even if students cannot yet produce the target pronunciation, it will improve their listening skills if they can at least hear it; and it goes without saying that you cannot reproduce something that you haven't heard clearly!

There are various ways of doing this. At low levels it is often helpful to repeat the word or phrase two or three times yourself, before you ask students to say it. Sometimes you need to isolate and repeat individual syllables or sounds,

and exaggeration of features like stress and intonation is helpful. Or you can contrast the correct pronunciation with what the students are producing: either with the way that that word or syllable is pronounced in their own language, or with a similar sound in English.

### 4 Pay particular attention to words with problematic spelling

One of the biggest problems for learners of English is the relationship between sounds and spelling. Highlight and drill problem words on a consistent basis. Think about teaching students the phonemic alphabet – this gives them a valuable tool for finding out problematic pronunciation themselves, and for recording it. You can use the list of sounds on the inside front cover of the *Mini-dictionary* to teach it – but only teach a few symbols at a time, and make constant use of them, otherwise students will soon forget them again.

### 5 Focus on the sounds which most affect students' comprehensibility and provide practical guidance about how to produce them

Consonants (particularly at the beginning and ends of words) are probably more important than vowels here. Use any tips you know for helping students to reproduce them. You might focus them on a similar sound in their own language then help them to adapt it, or use a trick like starting with /u:/ to get students to produce the /w/ sound. Anything that works is valid here! Sometimes it is useful to contrast the problem sound with the one that students are mistakenly producing, via a 'minimal pair' (*tree* and *three*, etc.). Say the pair of words several times, then ask students to say which they can hear, before asking them to produce the words themselves.

### 6 Pay attention to schwa /ə/

This is one vowel sound that you shouldn't ignore. It is by far the most common vowel sound in English, occurring in a very high percentage of multi-syllable words. Using it correctly will help students to speak faster, and will greatly increase their comprehensibility. At the beginning of the course, make sure that students can produce this sound, and focus on it whenever it occurs in new words. Be careful not to stress it accidentally though – syllables with schwa in them are not normally stressed. To avoid this, drill new words starting with the stressed syllable, then add the schwa sounds either before or afterwards, for example:

/ə/                      /ə/  
ten ... atten ... attention

Consistently marking schwa sounds when you write words on the board will also help:

/ə/    /ə/  
attention

### 7 Focus consistently on word stress ...

This is an easy area in which to correct students effectively. Get into the habit of focusing on word stress whenever you teach a new word with potential problems. If students have problems, try one of the following ideas when you drill:

- exaggerate the stress.
- clap, click your fingers, etc. on the stressed syllable.
- mumble the stress pattern, before saying the word: mm-MM-mm > attention.
- isolate the stressed syllable first then add the other syllables.

Don't forget to mark stressed syllables when you write new words on the board, by underlining or writing a blob over them, and encourage students to do the same when they write in their notebooks. Make sure that students know how word stress is marked in the *Mini-dictionary*.

### 8 ... and sentence stress

Sentence stress is one of the most important elements in helping students to be easy to understand when they speak, just as punctuation makes their written work more comprehensible. Try to focus on it little and often, for example when you teach a new structure or phrase. You can use the same methods as for word stress to help students to hear and reproduce the sentence stress.

### 9 Make students aware of weak forms and word linking

As students become more advanced these features will also contribute to comprehensibility and fluency, and at any level they are important for the purposes of listening. As you teach new phrases and structures, draw students' attention to weak forms and linking as appropriate, and give students the opportunity to practise them. You can use the same method as for schwa sounds if they have problems. However, do not worry too much if students do not produce these weak forms, etc. spontaneously – this is more likely to come naturally when students are more fluent. All you can do at this stage is to sow the seeds for the future.

### 10 Make students aware of intonation

Intonation is a source of worry to many teachers and consequently students. Teachers worry that their students (or they themselves) cannot hear it and that whatever they do, their students don't seem to 'learn' it. In reality, there are few situations in which wrong intonation leads to serious misunderstanding. Where problems do occasionally occur is in the area of politeness, and sounding sufficiently enthusiastic (although even here, in real life many other factors – such as facial expression – can counteract 'wrong' intonation!).

In *Cutting Edge Elementary* we focus on these limited areas for intonation work. Again the key idea is 'awareness': you

probably won't 'teach' students the right intonation overnight, but by focusing on this problem you can help them to see the importance of it. They are more likely to improve their overall intonation via plenty of exposure to natural-sounding English, and this is something that will take time. If students have problems hearing and reproducing the intonation patterns that you choose to focus on, try some of the following ideas:

- exaggerate the intonation pattern, before returning to a more normal model.
  - hum the intonation pattern before repeating the words (incidentally this is very useful for hearing intonation patterns yourself, if you have difficulty).
  - use gestures to show the intonation pattern (rather like a conductor).
  - Mark the intonation on the board using arrows.
- Remember though, that if students are getting frustrated, or cannot 'get' the correct intonation, it is probably best to leave it and come back to it another time!