

TEACHING PRONUNCIATION

An article by Gerald Kelly author of *How to Teach Pronunciation*.

Pronunciation is an aspect of language teaching which is often overlooked; the reasons for this are various. Teachers sometimes assume that in working on students' errors in class, pronunciation will sort itself out. There may be some truth in this. However, some teachers may want to deal more overtly with pronunciation, but do not feel confident in doing so, due to a lack of knowledge about basic facts. However, it is worth spending some time becoming familiar with simple ways in which you can help students to enhance their learning experience.

Dealing with pronunciation overtly in class helps students in terms of both their receptive awareness (ability to understand the language they hear), and also their productive skills (ability to make themselves understood). It is best considered *not* as an "optional extra", or something to use as a time filler, but as an integral part of the language being taught, as vital to your students as grammar and vocabulary.

So, what aspects of pronunciation do you need to deal with in class? As with any aspect of language, your decisions here need to be informed by what the students are actually having difficulty in producing or understanding. Starting with the smallest unit, students may need to work on individual sounds (phonemes). Students might use sounds which exist in their first language (L1) which don't have a direct equivalent in English, (for example the German 'ch' as in the word "Ich") or there may be English sounds which are not part of the student's L1 repertoire (for example distinguishing between the vowel sounds in "had" and "hard" can cause difficulties for Spanish or Italian learners). In practice, vowel sounds tend to cause more difficulties than consonants, as many of the latter *do* tend to have similarities. English has five written vowels, but twenty possible spoken vowel sounds (including diphthongs). The potential for discrepancies is therefore larger, and so it is worth concentrating on these sounds in class.

Word stress is another important area, which is best considered as a vital part of teaching vocabulary. It is possible to describe various levels of stress within words (primary, secondary and so on), but for most practical purposes it is useful to consider syllables as either being stressed or unstressed. When you teach your students a new word, most will write it down for future reference. You will be giving them useful extra information if you also show them a way of recording the word stress; many teachers, when writing words on the board, use a box or circle over the stressed syllable, or underline the relevant syllable. Any of these methods of recording will add to the knowledge that students have about that word.

Also, many students will use dictionaries in their private study away from the classroom. Here too, a useful tool can be introduced by making students aware of how word stress is indicated in dictionaries: the entry for the word "window", for example, will be accompanied by the phonemic script /ˈwɪndəʊ/. The small "apostrophe" which you can see here at the beginning of the word, is used to indicate that the next syllable is stressed. By introducing this simple fact to students, you give them another way to increase the efficiency of their private study.

Sentence stress and intonation are other useful areas to investigate, and again these can help your students to understand and to be understood. Sentence stress has, historically, been taught in terms of content words (usually the 'vocabulary' of the sentence) being stressed. For example, in the sentence "He works at the university", one would expect the following (stressed syllables are shown in capitals): he WORKS at the uniVERsity. In practice, many teachers find that asking students to repeat sentences in a rhythmic way can lead to a rather unnatural-sounding utterance. It is useful, however, in sensitizing students to the importance of stress in English, and how listening for stressed syllables can help them to decode the continuous flow of speech.

Sentence stress is closely tied to intonation, often considered a difficult topic to broach in class. However, if you keep the ideas and information simple, both your teaching and students' learning will be enhanced. When teaching sentences or phrases for oral production or listening comprehension, ask students to find the final stressed syllable in that stretch of language. Then ask students to identify whether the voice rises, falls, or falls and then rises on that syllable. Undoubtedly, some students (and teachers, for that matter) will be better able to identify these patterns than others. The patterns are closely tied to the organisation of our speech, and our interaction with those we are talking with. For example, the voice falling at the end of a sentence is often used to indicate the end of what you are trying to say. Falling and rising often indicates to the listener that there is more to come. Rising at the end is often used to let the listener know that we are asking a question. Working on such patterns, and showing how they behave in real speech, can be very useful for those students who will use their English in giving presentations, or participating in meetings and in avoiding interrupting or being interrupted.

With regard to accents, it is useful to help your students to be realistic about their targets. Very few will ever reach the level of accuracy in their pronunciation which would lead to them being mistaken for a native-speaker! Most students will reach a level (this also applies to grammar) where they themselves are happy that they can understand and be understood in the contexts within which they use their English. Helping students to be aware that they are aiming for this (more achievable) target can help take some of the pressure off!

Example activities:

1) Introduce your students to English phonemes and phonemic script. It's usually worth starting simply with those sounds which seem to cause your students difficulty in class, rather than trying to teach the whole inventory

of sounds. If students have problems with a sound, write the phoneme on the board to clarify. Also, students will be able to use the phonemic script in their dictionaries to work out pronunciations for themselves.

2) Use minimal pairs to work on problem sounds. A minimal pair consists of two words, the only difference between them (in pronunciation terms) being the problem sound(s). Examples would be 'had' and 'hard' (see above), or 'ship' and 'sheep'.

3) Use fun games to practise sounds. For example, "phonemic bingo" and "phonemic hangman" both provide good consolidation of sounds you have been working on, and are relatively easy to organise!

4) For word stress, try asking students to group words according to stress patterns. Here's an example using vocabulary relating to professions:

Plumber Electrician Doctor Journalist Musician Shop-Assistant Teacher
 Soldier Novelist Architect Carpenter Actor Policeman Fireman
 Lecturer Florist Businessman Artist Farmer Scientist Researcher
 Gardener Designer Mechanic Metalworker
 Students need to put words into a table according to the number of syllables and where the stress falls:

Oo	Ooo	oOo	Oooo	ooOo
<i>plumber</i>	<i>carpenter</i>	<i>musician</i>	<i>shop-assistant</i>	<i>electrician</i> <i>etc</i>

5) To practise intonation, if circumstances allow, use recorded sentences/conversations, so that they can be replayed, and the "model" therefore remains consistent. As mentioned before, ask students to indicate what happens to the voice on the last stressed syllable. You can write the sentences on the board, and use arrows to indicate what happens to the voice. For example:

- You've got a very good point (voice falls on 'point')
- I support what you say (voice falls and rises here) but I don't agree with everything (voice falls here)

You may find it useful to consider why you are introducing pronunciation into your classes. These three definitions might help:

1) An Integrated lesson. This can be used to describe a lesson in which the work on pronunciation is integral to the language being taught. For example, in dealing with phrases for negotiating, as well as the language itself, an important feature would be the stressed syllables and the intonation pattern. (E.g. i'm aFRAID I can't aGREE with that ... the stressed syllables are in capitals, and there would be falling intonation on the syllable "gree".

2) A Practice lesson. These are used to practise features of pronunciation that you have recently dealt with in class. The previous example of word stress on different job-types provides a good example of this type of lesson.

3) Remedial work. This is used “on the spot”, when student’s pronunciation difficulties become evident in class. For example, in a communication activity, a student pronounces a word in a way that impedes understanding. A quick teacher-led repetition of the word with the whole class can serve to remind the students of how that word should be realised.

Occasionally teachers avoid teaching pronunciation due to a lack of resources. While the amount of available published and internet resources is growing, it’s important to recognise that you do not really need anything beyond somebody speaking in order to work on pronunciation. Your own voice can provide a model, and usually your students’ spoken language will provide you with knowledge of the areas that they need to work on. The more factual knowledge you have, the better, and having a range of activity types at your disposal will also be useful, but it need not be a daunting prospect. The entry for the word “window”, for example, will be accompanied by the phonemic script /ˈwɪndəʊ/. The small “apostrophe” which you can see here at the beginning of the word, is used to indicate that the next syllable is stressed. By introducing this simple fact to students, you give them another way to increase the efficiency of their private study.