

Some Tips on Teaching Pronunciation

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Abstract: *We have decided to tackle pronunciation issues, even though, it is not a major problem for Romanian learners such as grammar seems to be. We sometimes find it challenging to teach pronunciation, though. Some of our students who might even be Intermediate or Upper Intermediate are still struggling with placing the stress upon the right syllable, with using intonation to convey meaning or with pronouncing longer words like adverbs or more formal structures or less used nouns. These students often ask us to help them pronounce better. Considering it essential to offer support to all our ESL students, we have dug into the matter of teaching pronunciation only to discover that other teachers are facing the same difficulties as us. Should we teach pronunciation separately or integrated? Should we explain students the technicalities behind producing sounds or should we just ask them to repeat what they hear and to consistently practice in order to improve? What kind of exercises should we choose? We have attempted to answer all these questions and, possibly, others alike throughout this paper.*

Keywords: *pronunciation; stress; intonation; exercises; teaching; ESL students;*

General aspects of pronunciation

This paper does not aim at solving all the problems that are related to teaching pronunciation, but it fosters raising awareness in this respect. In order to deal with a problem, awareness has to be drawn upon. This rule applies to teachers, educators, even researchers who are interested in offering their learners a full experience which includes expanding all four skills, mandatory to master a language (speaking, listening, reading and writing).

Considering our expertise in the field of ESL teaching, we have to admit that pronunciation has always been disregarded in textbooks or in training courses for teachers, like a sort of Cinderella of the teaching-learning process. Neglect has not been done on purpose, but because teachers did not realize its importance or they did not have the right tools to handle it. Students sometimes ask us to repeat the words that they hear or to read other utterances that they think are difficult so that they can catch the pronunciation. Or learners simply ask us how to pronounce correctly. We do struggle with correcting unclear pronunciation which can affect communication.

A legitimate starting point for our research would be looking at some definitions and features of pronunciation given that one has to know what a

“demon” is, in order to fight it. According to the authors of Encyclopedia Britannica, pronunciation is:

the form in which the elementary symbols of language, the segmental phonemes or speech sounds, appear and are arranged in patterns of pitch, loudness, and duration. In the simplest model of the communication process in language—encoding, message, decoding—pronunciation is an activity. (Britannica)

A well-known researcher in the field of phonology, Adrian Underhill, defines pronunciation as follows: “the physical side of language involving the body, the breath, the muscles, the acoustic vibration and harmonies” (Underhill XII). The author also states that studying pronunciation can be enjoyable and fun for all parties involved in such activities.

As it is clearly connected to acts of speech, pronunciation enables speakers to communicate, thus when it is not done properly, it can trigger misunderstanding and drastic consequences like losing a contract, being considered rude by a business partner or not showing interest or sympathy for a particular matter. The activity of pronouncing a word or a phrase comes with certain aspects. These are the most important when communicating: pitch, intonation, stress. As a long-established authority in language teaching, Jeremy Harmer, puts it, producing sounds can reflect our feelings and attitudes:

high pitch and using large pitch leaps, it shows that we are really surprised or frightened. But if we say the same question in a low pitch with a fairly flat intonation it suggests that we are not very concerned at the answer we will get. (Harmer 28)

Intonation can, consequently, be interpreted in a wrong fashion and this is why being aware of it improves communication prospects. Second language speakers of English might not get their message across if they do not pay attention to these often disregarded traits.

Should then ESL students strive to have a native-like pronunciation? Language researchers would say “no” and we totally support this perspective. The way learners pronounce, retaining their foreign language accent adds charm to their speech, being an essential part of their identity. People notice your pronunciation when you speak, but, above all, the purpose of producing language is to make yourself understood: “A speaker has acceptable pronunciation when other people can understand him/her and the speaker’s English is of great value to listen to” (Gilakjani 2). In the case of Romanian speakers, they are more inclined towards American English rather than

British English due to their exposure to different communication channels, through music, films. Still, their accent remains noticeable and when participating in a social context, Romanian speakers of English can identify each other by spotting the accent. Another example would be that of Ukrainian speakers who cannot eliminate their Slavic accent when speaking English, regardless of their proficiency level. We have worked with such students who were A2 and they would often request to be corrected when pronouncing certain words or structures, being aware of their innate shortcomings.

But the retention of one's native accent is not a problem as long as it does not impact negatively on communication. Stress is more important than accent because it conveys meaning and it can be confusing when changing the part of speech (for example, from a verb to a noun like “apologize” /ə'pɒl.ə.dʒaɪz/ and “apology” /ə'pɒl.ə.dʒi/ as noted in <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/apologize>): “stressing words and phrases correctly is vital if emphasis is to be given to the important parts of messages” (Harmer 184).

Pronunciation is strongly connected to listening. Learners first “receive” sounds when they listen to a dialogue or to a presentation and then, they produce similar sounds in words and sentences. Listening comprehension can be affected by bad pronunciation as reception is linked to production and the other way around. There is always an impact on the process of communication which can lead to being afraid to exchange ideas because you are not confident with your pronunciation, as another scholar has yet remarked: “Good pronunciation brings about speakers' confidence to communicate and also improves their listening comprehension skill” (Gilakjani, Narjes 195). We always encourage our learners to pronounce words or utterances in their own manner, not worrying about their accent or mistakes. Still, some psychological factors such as fear of embarrassment require more persistent practice. These negative agents that make people stumble when enunciating sounds, are also connected to students' educational background, to their own experience of learning when they were probably required to be “perfect” in all aspects. Nevertheless, good pronunciation increases learners' communicative competence, but it should be regarded as a tool, not as a means in itself.

Along the same lines as previously, we have to mention that not only students are, occasionally, reluctant to practicing pronunciation to increase their communicative chances of success, but teachers have to cope with the same difficulties. Most English teachers are second language learners themselves so they might have some problems with pronouncing certain sounds or they might think they are expected to pronounce in a native-like fashion. So, avoidance might be the choice when faced with such situations,

avoiding articulating problematic words, avoiding working on someone's defective pronunciation, avoiding pointing at it.

On the other hand, teachers of English could argue that there are not so many available materials to teach pronunciation or that students often get bored with repeating words or they do not pay attention to explanations regarding the physical production of sounds. A lot of educators claim that pronunciation is acquired unconsciously through imitation and practice because it has been proved that

even without a formal pronunciation syllabus and without specific pronunciation teaching, many students seem to acquire serviceable pronunciation in the course of their studies. (Harmer 183)

Another researcher, Abbas Pourhosein Gikaljani, tried to answer the question why teaching pronunciation is ignored by, in his case, Iranian teachers. 100 educators were presented with a questionnaire and the findings were quite predictable because many respondents said they lack equipment which, nowadays, might seem like an excuse even for people living in less developed countries. As a matter of consequence, we assume the real reason was not having confidence in their own abilities to provide proper training. Still, many other educators do possess the means to provide what is necessary and they also have access to devices. So, we strongly support the idea that pronunciation should be taught, included in class through practice that it has to be entertaining, useful, well-placed in the lesson scenario.

Pronunciation challenges

One core detail that teachers have to cogitate about when employing pronunciation practice in their lessons represents age groups, alongside methods. It is common knowledge that adults are more likely to understand and follow theoretical explanations compared to children who prefer learning by playing instead of listening or writing down abstract information. Young learners are more likely to acquire native-like pronunciation while their parents would retain their mother-tongue accent. This is obvious with migrant families whose children, not necessarily born in an English-speaking country, have a better command of English (including pronunciation) than their parents. Exposure to native-like pronunciation is another key component to bear in mind in the process of developing productive skills in learners of different ages and diverse experiences.

As Martin Hewings points out: “for the vast majority of learners, a native-speaker pronunciation is neither necessary nor even desirable” (Hewings 13) and “a native-speaker pronunciation is probably an unrealistic and not particularly desirable target” (Hewings 14).

Nevertheless, there are advantages, when adults are taught pronunciation considering their motivation levels, their ability to fight boredom, their capacity to concentrate on one thing and to reach a goal:

Adults are often more disciplined and create pattern to their learning. They are able to struggle with learning even when it is boring and they can focus even when something is not interesting. A crucial factor in foreign language learning is motivation and adult learners usually have high motivation, know what they want to achieve and they follow their goals. (Reid 22)

Another plus when teaching pronunciation to adults would be that they can go through technicalities and even find them appealing:

Adults can follow detailed instructions and can intellectualize their learning. They can explicitly learn about speech organs and production of speech sounds, phonemic alphabet, apply rules to pronunciation. (Reid 23)

On the other hand, when we look at disadvantages, a major drawback when teaching adults pronunciation would be their critical and reluctant attitude towards the teacher's methods (many times because they compare the present experience with past learning experiences). Furthermore, when potentially asked to use mimicry in order to acknowledge what is happening in their mouth in the action of producing sounds, adults might not step in, considering it childish or even ridiculous. Playing theater-like situations could not work with such learners and it can be explained by lack of confidence or a very serious nature that is “complementary” (in their perception) to adulthood: “Adults prefer writing to speaking and are afraid to make errors in speaking, especially in public” (Reid 23). Nevertheless, we have seen a growing number of requests from adult learners (students at International House Bucharest language school, where employees from various companies are delivered language courses) for speaking activities which implies pronunciation practice.

As far as instructing learners on deciphering the English phonemic alphabet is concerned, there are different opinions to consider and particular guidelines, to, eventually, follow. For an expert in teaching English such as Harmer, educators should overtly teach students phonology because: “Pronunciation teaching not only makes students more aware of different sounds and sound factors (and what these mean), but it can also improve their speaking immeasurably” (Harmer 153). Moreover, the above-mentioned researcher states that teachers have to explain the production of sounds

“showing them where they are made in the mouth” (Harmer 183). This procedure has not been very successful with our students as they find it too playful and we have been avoiding it, replacing technical explanations with pronouncing different words for contrast or identifying the correct words in specific contexts.

Of a similar opinion as Harmer’s is Adrian Underhill, a specialist who also provides pronunciation tips on his website (www.adrianunderhill.com). In his book, “Sound Foundation”, the author discusses three levels of awareness when teaching pronunciation: 1. sounds - to make learners aware of the way they manipulate and produce sounds, 2. individual words - neighboring sounds and word stress, 3. connected speech - words put together “to make a stream of speech” (Underhill XI), where sounds are simplified, reduced or “swallowed” as many second language learners say happens with native speakers. He pleads for the instruction of students on all these physiological matters so that they can better comprehend the operation while expanding on their communicative skills.

Regardless of his preference for teaching pronunciation with the phonemic chart (which makes things more complicated, in our opinion), Underhill notices other summons for teachers of English, especially, second language speakers: “If English is not your first language, it may be that you are uncertain of your own pronunciation” (Underhill 143). On the other hand, the researcher argues that not being a native speaker can create an advantage over a native one because the former might be more aware of pronunciation challenges and as a result, treat them with more consideration. This statement is partially true, but it comes with fear of embarrassment, of being ridiculed, of being misunderstood that some English teachers cannot escape from. Still, higher level students of C1 or C2 might prefer native teachers for the fact that they can help learners with a “perfect” pronunciation, which is not always the case given the L1 “footprint” meant to stick with second language speakers forever.

Coming back to the question of using the phonemic chart or not, considering our personal experience with learners of different nationalities and diverse cultural backgrounds, we are not in favor of employing such an instrument. Most students react negatively to it thus it is preferable to take that pressure off them. In this respect, we do agree with what Jerry Harmer writes about it, being the educator and the learners’ choice: “It is perfectly possible to work on the sounds of English without ever using any phonemic symbols” (Harmer 185).

Moreover, amongst the most frequent challenges that ESL students face when practicing pronunciation is placing the stress upon a syllable which sometimes goes wrong because of the stress-pattern of the student’s native language: “Learners whose first language belongs to a syllable-timed

language such as Czech, Italian, Hungarian, where the stress is on all syllables have a lot of problems in adopting the English stress-pattern” (Gilakjani, Narjes 195). We would not embrace the phrase “a lot of problems” due to the fact that our Romanian students are good enough at pronouncing in English, but, occasionally, they have to overcome some difficulties. Progress is always achieved by practice, by incorporating a variety of listening comprehension and speaking exercises into the English classes which is supportive of pronunciation, in particular.

When it comes to versatile pronunciation, it is worth mentioning that the way words and phrases are pronounced can vary in American and British English, which may create confusion and frustration amongst learners. For instance, with the verb “dance”;”-, one can opt for the British pronunciation (/dɑ:ns/) or for the American one (/dæns/ as provided by <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dance>). We, as instructors, should tell our students that no pronunciation is identical, in terms of varieties of English (Australian, Canadian, British). Absolute identical pronunciation never happens with the same learner, either. On top of that, our goal is to reach intelligibility, not perfection.

Additionally, English is not a phonetic language so it can be really difficult for learners that come from a phonetic language (where there is almost 100% correspondence between the spoken sounds and the way they are written). The same obstacle which was mentioned above was discussed by another researcher, as teachers know what challenges they face, but they might not know how to tackle those challenges: “It is quite common to assimilate English sounds to the mother tongue sounds and to apply other supra segmental features of the native language to pronunciation of English” (Reid 21).

Other challenging situations for foreign learners as observed by Harmer are elision, when “sounds disappear into each other” (Harmer 32), especially in spoken English and students often panic as they find it hard to digest the matter, and assimilation, when “the sound of the end of one word changes to be more like the sound at the beginning of the next” (Harmer 32), and inserting linking sounds because, otherwise, some words or word forms could not be pronounced.

Besides those analyzed above, in order to achieve good results as a teacher, you must know your students and by that we mean being aware of particular native features which cannot be ignored if successful pronunciation is at stake. Looking at categories of learners based on their ethnicity and, implicitly, on their mother tongues, some authors made valid observations about Italian speakers. May we note that there is no such a category as “Romanian speakers” in this particular book we cite, but we believe that Romanians fit well into the previously mentioned group. Romanian, like

Italian, is an Indo-European language, descending from Latin. Italian, the same as Romanian, is one of the most important compulsory subjects in school so many students know grammar which is a great advantage to learning foreign languages, in general: “They usually have a high level of grammatical awareness, which can be exploited in foreign language situations” (Swan, Smith 73). Apart from the advantage of knowing grammar and being able to identify parts of speech and seeing, for example, the connection between a noun and a verb or between an adjective and an adverb and the way their pronunciation changes, one difficulty arises when ESL students have to filter in their minds spoken English. Italian students complain about connected speech (the same as Romanian students or French or Ukrainian ones): “Italian learners often claim that English people eat their words” (Swan, Smith 73). Fortunately, there are methods to be employed in order to solve almost all complaints: to raise awareness and to boost confidence in learners regardless of their ethnicity or cultural upbringing, to constantly tell students that the purpose of learning English is not flawless pronunciation, but communicating fluently, with different speakers, in different contexts.

Practicalities in pronunciation practice

There is no further need to advocate the importance of pronunciation for communicative aims. What educators might still be debating on is choosing between teaching pronunciation integrated into the process of learning, together with listening comprehension and speaking or teaching it separately, turning pronunciation practice into a full lesson. Experience has taught us that the first alternative is preferable, but we believe that the teacher in the classroom is the right authority to decide what path to take, be it integrative or not.

What we can further investigate in this paper are some methods of teaching pronunciation, parallel with a certain amount of sample exercises and several ideas on whom to teach it to and when exactly the teaching should happen. We, for instance, find listening and repeating more advisable to use with lower levels (A1, A2) as more advanced learners (from B1 upwards) could consider it useless or even offensive. Still, if it is done not overtly (to avoid embarrassment), by, for example, asking the learner to answer a question which would oblige him/her to repeat a word in front of everybody, it would be a functional way to improve pronunciation in some learners.

As to exemplify, the method of practicing pronunciation through acting can be quite demotivating for adults, but fun for children if we add a little bit of drama to it, providing a model in songs or in short dialogues that learners need to role-play. Recording the repetition and comparing it to a

standard model could also work, but with older students it might be problematic as they fear exposure, together with being afraid of becoming ridiculous in front of their colleagues.

Drilling (which is basically repeating after a model pronunciation, most of the times, the teacher's pronunciation model), known as a traditional method, is suitable for lower levels. It can also be employed with adults, but we suggest using it when playing songs that they like (they might sing along, eventually) or investigating proverbs or ideas that they might embrace.

Additionally, minimal pair drills imply providing students words that are almost identical except for one phoneme like “bride/ bright”, “beer/ bear”, “bold/bald”. Such practice “helps learners recognize differences between sounds and it helps them articulate individual sounds” (Reid 24). This method has been tested by us and it turned out that students with a musical ear seem competent while others can get frustrated when asked to differentiate between different similar sounds so we encourage a limited and wise usage of it. Yet, many interesting and rewarding exercises are provided by Cambridge, available by accessing the link <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/learning-english/activities-for-learners/?skill=pronunciation&rows=12>.

An afore cited researcher argues that minimal pair drills are “more suitable for young learners who have the elasticity of brain to recognize and imitate sounds they hear” (Reid 24). We would say that this is not always the case as many adult learners find such exercises quite entertaining and useful. They would often request being challenged, eager to get engaged into a competition, trying to see who is more capable to identify the right pronunciation.

Ear training is another activity to consider. This method consists of perception and then production, as these actions are strongly connected. The same scholar mentioned above puts this method in correlation with age groups, stating that it is recommended for younger learners because older ones might get frustrated (may we add that frustration can, sometimes, push you to further progress which is an excellent motivator):

Ear training should be used with all age groups, but it is more efficient with young learners, who have the ability to hear different or new sounds, rhythm of the speech and intonation. Adults lose this ability and it can be frustrating for them not to be able to hear the difference in speech. (Reid 24)

Tongue twisters is a technique that all age groups enjoy. Because it looks like a small poetry (e.g. *I wish to wish the wish you wish to wish*) or a word of wisdom, it can be associated with a particular topic to debate on at

the beginning of a lesson. One piece of advice offered by an author on such a practice is “to avoid frustration, they should be practiced once the required sound has been learnt” (Reid 25).

Reading aloud comes about as an efficient way to improve pronunciation. We use it to its fullest, when we have reading comprehension practice. Our learners find it necessary to hear themselves reading in a loud voice. When asked to choose between reading aloud and reading silently, students often prefer the first option as it offers them a rare opportunity to listen to themselves and to others articulating sounds.

If reading audibly crops up as popular with our students as part of a comprehension activity (the second reading, for specific information is to be done silently), recording learners’ pronunciation might not be that popular due to the fact it implies a higher degree of awareness, responsibility, commitment, being able to deal with criticism: “suitable for older students who can hear and analyze their own mistakes” (Reid 26).

Even more burdensome than recording your performance and analyzing it, seems to be utilizing phonetic training. As stated earlier, we are not in favor of using the phonemic alphabet because it is an extra task that students need to complete. We have learned that our opinion is not singular in this respect:

This technique is quite demanding as it includes phonetically transcribed words and texts. Learners need to be acquainted with phonemic symbols for consonants and vowels and need to be able to connect them to individual sounds. (Reid 27)

This method might discourage learners from practicing pronunciation. We would not recommend it unless required by learners themselves or when they are old enough to understand technicalities and not to consider theoretical explanations a waste of time or an extra effort.

Apart from online dictionaries or sites that present learners with pronunciation opportunities for words or idioms, there are a handful of exercises available, too. Our advice would be not to use all sites, but to focus on two or three that you can use effectively. Besides www.cambridgeenglish.org which we have already given as an example, one site that we often use with our university students or our company students and which is well-structured according to CERF levels and skills is www.britishcouncil.learnenglish.com., displaying, free of charge, a multitude of listening tracks, podcasts or videos to watch and with a generous collection of dialogues that learners can role-play afterwards to improve communication and, implicitly, pronunciation.

There are a lot of textbooks that can supply us, educators, with interactive and modern materials to use in class. One such a textbook that we have tested and for which we received good feedback from our learners is *Market Leader*, published by Longman Pearson ELT, all levels, especially the second half of Practice File, titled, *Talk Business*. The authors of *Market Leader. Intermediate* 3rd edition stress the importance of listening, which implies pronunciation, for future managers or people working in business contexts: “The authentic listening texts are based on interviews with businesspeople and experts in their field. Students develop listening skills such as prediction, listening for specific information and note-taking” (Mascull 4). In addition to that, *Talk Business* focuses exclusively on listening materials that help a great deal of progress to happen for students. The section is divided in accordance with the units comprised in the textbook, discussing topics such as travel, organization, money, change, employment, trade, quality, cultures.

Some of the tasks in *Talk Business* are as follows: “Listen to how these contracted forms are spoken” (Rogers 78), “Listen and complete the sentences with a contracted form” (Rogers 78), “Listen to the pronunciation of *was* and *were* in these conversations” (Rogers 82), “Listen to the way certain words are linked in these sentences” (Rogers 82).

Apart from that, the author of the book quoted offers great tips in this section, which are meant for business students that are interested in developing their skills and, obviously, in communicating efficiently: “When a preposition occurs in the middle of a sentence, the weak form is usually used” (Rogers 70) or “To show interest in, or surprise at what someone says, you can use a short question in reply. Using the right intonation encourages your partner to continue the conversation” (Rogers 76) or “You can use a question tag to involve the person you are talking to in the conversation. If you simply expect the person to agree with you, your voice goes down on the tag” (Rogers 83).

At a more general level of English, Ann Baker is an author to remember. Her book “Tree or three? An Elementary Pronunciation Course” can be used with a wide range of learners. The author states that the book is targeted at students to work on their own, but it can be employed in the classroom, too. She stresses the utility of minimal pairs because they “help students to hear and to pronounce sounds” (Baker IV). Learners need to listen to model sounds repeatedly and to practice which can be done as follows: “You can use a mirror to compare the shape of your mouth with the mouth pictures in each unit” (Baker IV).

Climbing the proficiency ladder of a student’s development in language acquisition, the same author proposes a book for intermediate learners, “Ship or Sheep”. When addressing teachers in a short introduction,

Ann Baker contends that “pronunciation materials should be meaningful and easily understood”, which translates to being put into the right context or, in other words, integrating pronunciation into a lesson where different skills are targeted. For this reason, Baker offers forty-nine units, one for each different sound, containing practice material (especially for stress and intonation) linked to general topics, common in everyday situations.

So, needless to argue that there is a huge variety of resources that educators to ESL students can employ to elevate learners’ trust in dealing with pronunciation, consequently, their speaking competency. The only thing to consider is when, in what quantity and to whom should all these be presented.

Conclusions

To conclude, pronunciation is a delicate issue in the process of learning English that, unfortunately, many teachers do not take into account. They do this either because of a lack of time, or because of a lack of confidence in their own abilities to pronounce correctly, or because they do not consider that special attention is needed for pronunciation. Beyond this fact, the problem arises whether pronunciation exercises require integration in the lesson or special, separate treatment. Our investigation went in the direction of offering some examples of practice that teachers could embrace in class, in an integrative approach as we see it as necessary and useful for students. Our investigation stands neither exhaustive nor completely new given that the concern for pronunciation appears in the list of other researchers, also.

Above all the variations of the approach or the functionality of the exercises proposed in the class, the most important aspect that any teacher must consider and that he can communicate to ESL students is that pronunciation helps with intelligibility, with the act of communication, this being the ultimate goal of any effort to learn a foreign language.

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Web Resources

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