

## DO WE NEED TO TEACH PRONUNCIATION?

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Pronunciation teaching is often focused on the production of sounds. While this may be very important, there is another aspect of pronunciation teaching which needs to be considered. Learners have to understand the pronunciation used by others. They need to recognize and interpret intonation patterns, subtleties of stress patterns and so on. Teaching learners to recognize and understand the pronunciation of others will help enormously with their ability to listen effectively, and the models may later feed into their own production of language.

It is possible to make an argument that learners will simply pick up ability to pronounce words and phrases accurately without having to be taught. In some cases, particularly where a learner is exposed to a lot of natural language, this may indeed be the case. However, the same argument could be made for almost all aspects of language and if learners choose to attend a language course it seems reasonable to assume that they expect to be taught rather than left to pick things up for themselves. A communicative approach to teaching places communicative competence at the centre of what needs to be achieved, and poor pronunciation can impede communication very quickly. This need to develop communication ability is a strong argument for teaching both receptive and productive aspects of pronunciation. Also, a learner who is aware that their pronunciation is quite poor may grow in confidence and then perform better in other aspects of speaking, such as maintaining fluency. The converse may be true for learners who perceive their own pronunciation to be poor.

We need to remember, however, that communicative competence does not imply a native speaker-like competence. The majority of learners will never sound like native speakers and there is no reason why they should. Many learners rarely speak to native speakers but need to use English to speak to other non-native speakers, using English as a common language. Learners should aim to become easily intelligible and to speak with a reasonably natural rhythm so that no undue burden is placed on the person they are speaking to. There are few obvious benefits in them sounding exactly like a native speaker.

Some teachers (both native and non-native speakers) worry about teaching pronunciation because they perceive themselves as having a strong accent. This idea tends to be based on the idea that there is a prestige form of English (usually considered to be something akin to the pronunciation of a traditional BBC presenter) which is in some way better than other forms of English. However, there is nothing about a particular variety of English which makes it intrinsically better than any other and therefore teachers should concern themselves with providing a natural model of English, rather than worrying about which model that is.

Assuming that a teacher decides that s/he needs to teach pronunciation, there is another question that then needs to be addressed. Should teachers plan separate pronunciation lessons or should pronunciation be incorporated into other lessons – those dealing with vocabulary, grammar, speaking, and other skills?

Part of the answers to this will depend on the degree of priority that the teacher gives to pronunciation teaching, and this in turn will be dependent on the needs of the learners. Pronunciation teaching should almost certainly be included in other types of lesson, but in many cases separate lessons may be useful as well.

There are different aspects of pronunciation and we will look at each in turn in the following sections. However, first we will briefly look at some principles in teaching pronunciation, which will be useful whatever aspect is being dealt with.

Learners will probably end up copying what they hear. It is therefore important that they hear lots of natural sounding English. Teachers who slow their delivery down too much sometimes deprive their learners of this [1].

Before trying to get learners to produce the correct sounds, it can be useful to help them to hear the differences between sounds. For example, help learners to recognize the difference between /p/ and /b/, intonation rises and falls and also to recognize where stress is placed.

When people speak quite quickly and produce a stream of words, there is often an effect on how individual words sound. Small changes can occur in how words are pronounced when compared to how they may be pronounced in isolation. It is important that learners are not distracted by these changes when listening. Some teachers feel that learners should be taught to produce these features of speech, as well as understand them, because this can lead to learners speaking with a more natural rhythm. On the other hand, some teachers feel that learners do not need to concern themselves with such details and will pick up many of the features automatically. However, it is important that teachers at least produce natural models of speech which include these features, so that learners become familiar with them

Below is a very brief summary of some of the main features of connected speech. Some of this may seem complicated but remember, teachers may not wish to overtly teach all these features. If teachers do want to introduce some of this to learners, then weak forms may be the most straightforward and useful for students to work on first.

#### Linking sounds

When two vowel sounds occur together there is often a linking sound which comes between them. For example, “My”, said in isolation, would probably be produced as /mai/ and “old” as /eold/.

However, when they are said together a /j/ sound typically comes between them – mai(j)eold/..

#### Assimilation

Those consonants formed using the alveolar ridge (the bony ridge) just behind the top front teeth – feel where your tongue touches when you produce a /t/ sound sometimes change in connected speech. For example, “whiteboard” may be produced as something more like “wipeboard”, because the /b/ sound which follows changes what would have been an alveolar sound.

#### Vowels and consonants

The sounds of a language can be analyzed in great detail but for our purpose we will look at three broad categories of sounds. A pure vowel sound is created when the air stream remains relatively unobstructed. The pronunciation of the /i/ sound in “sit” or the /i:/ sound in “seat” are examples. A diphthong is created when there is a movement (or “glide”) from one vowel sound to another. The /ei/ sound in “eight” is an example. Consonant sounds are produced when the teeth, lips, tongue and so on are used to restrict air flow in various ways. The /p/ and /b/ sounds in “pub” are examples – the lips restrict the airflow before it is released.

It should be noted that the words “vowel” and “consonant” here are used to refer to sounds, not letters. There are only five vowel letters in English but twenty pure vowel and diphthong sounds.

*1. Peter Watkins. Learning to teach English, Delta Publishing, 2005.*