

# Some Techniques for Teaching Pronunciation

David F. Dalton

[ddalton \[at\] academ01.chs.itesm.mx](mailto:ddalton@academ01.chs.itesm.mx)

Chiapas, Mexico

## Background

When I did my initial training as an E.F.L. teacher, one of the course tutors always described pronunciation as "the Cinderella of language teaching", i.e. she never got to go to the ball. By this he was referring to the often low level of emphasis placed on this very important language skill. We are comfortable teaching reading, writing, listening and to a degree, general oral skills, but when it comes to pronunciation we often lack the basic knowledge of articulatory phonetics (not difficult to acquire) to offer our students anything more than rudimentary (and often unhelpful) advice such as, "it sounds like this ; uuuh".

There is also a tendency for us to focus on production as the main problem affecting our learners. Most research however, shows clearly that the problem is more likely to be reception - what you don't hear, you can't say. Moreover, if the "English" sound is not clearly received, the brain of the learner converts it into the closest sound in their own language. Thus the dental English fricative / θ / (sorry, phonetic symbols can't easily be displayed) in "those", becomes converted by Spanish speakers into the dentalised Spanish / d /, producing "dose" as this is what the speaker hears. Given this reality, it would seem logical to place a heavy emphasis on listening (reception) as a way into releasing appropriate pronunciation (production).

Apart from using knowledge of our students and our ears in order to be aware of their pronunciation problems, it is also useful to have some prior knowledge of what elements of English phonetics and phonology are likely to cause problems. This is one area of language learning where few people would question the use of contrastive analysis. For instance, to give some simple examples, we can predict that Arabic speakers will have difficulty distinguishing between / p / and / b /, Japanese speakers will not perceive the difference between / l / and / r / and Spanish speakers will have a problem realising consonant clusters like [ sts ]. Having informed him or herself of some of the main areas of contrast between native language and target language and what difficulties students have, it then remains for the teacher to build this information into some meaningful classroom exercises.

## Techniques :

Exercise should be simple, accessible, fun and combine reception and production. Some students (usually adults) do feel embarrassed to pull ridiculous faces when practising vowel sounds (this may be personal or cultural or both) but I have generally found that this soon passes and students enjoy the pronunciation work. Where possible, exercises should be communicative in that they should (and do) generate differences of opinion and disagreement about what was said/heard. Below are two examples.

### Exercise A :

After having taught or exposed the students to long and short vowels through listening and oral work, the teacher can check recognition, retention and ability to discriminate in the following way. This could also be used simply for teaching.

#### Stage 1 :

The teacher writes a variety of words containing the target sounds (long and short vowels) on the board. The following is just one possible set.

PORT	PIT	PAT	PERT	PET	POT	PUTT	PUT	PART	PEAT
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Here, the only difference in sound is that of the vowel - familiar to anyone who has done minimal pair work. As in these examples, the word should begin and end with the same consonant. 0, 3, 8, and 9, are long vowels and the rest are short.

## **Stage 2 :**

The teacher then models each word and individual repetition follows. The vowel sound can be isolated and the procedure repeated until the teacher is reasonably sure that there are no major problems. He or she then tells the students that they are going to hear one of the words and must write the number which corresponds to the word they hear. What the students have written is then checked and compared.

This automatically leads into a discussion of what they heard and what sounds they are confusing. If student X heard 1 when the teacher said 9, they are confusing the short vowel / I / with the long vowel / i: / . The teacher gives feedback and the sounds may then be modelled again and practised.

## **Stage 3:**

Two or three words are then presented together and the procedure repeated. The teacher then tells the class they are going to hear six words and that the numbers correspond to an important telephone number. The teacher delivers the words and asks , "What's my number?". Again there will be differences in what was heard. This allows a focus on which sounds are not being discriminated effectively by which students and where their problems lie. Later discussion may revolve around what strategies students may employ to improve their discrimination skills - songs, minimal pair games with friends, movies, radio, etc.

## **Stage 4:**

Learners are then invited to model the telephone number. This stage usually generates much discussion and disagreement along the lines of - "You said ..... ", "No I didn't ", "Say it again" and so on and is usually very lively. The teacher is, of course, the final arbiter of what was really said. The important thing is that the learners are thinking actively about their pronunciation and how to repair it if necessary. They also begin to hear themselves (often for the first time) and this is of immeasurable importance in the retention of sounds.

## **Exercise B:**

This exercise was designed for a multi-lingual class, but is equally effective with monolingual groups. It is more communicative in nature than Exercise A as it involves giving and carrying out instructions.

## **Stage 1:**

Having identified some problem areas for the class, the teacher makes a list of instructions containing these. Below is such a list.

1. Draw a sheep on the board. (Spanish speakers often draw a ship).
2. Write the letter "P" above the sheep. (Arabic speakers often write " B").
3. Use the "P" as the start of the word "pleasant" and write the word (Japanese speakers often write "present ").
4. Write "light" next to pleasant. (Japanese speakers often write "right").
5. Draw a mouse next to the word "light". (Spanish and Japanese speakers often draw a mouth)
6. Draw a pear next to the mouse. (Arabic speakers often draw a bear)

Other examples can be added.

## **Stage 2:**

After presentation and practice of the problem areas, each student is given a piece of paper with an instruction containing such sounds. The papers are given so that a student will hear an instruction containing a sound which they have a problem hearing. The instruction is then whispered in the ear of the receiving student and they carry out what they hear. They sit down and read their instruction to the next student. This continues until all the instructions have been carried out and there is something resembling a picture on the board. No comments should be made as the work is in process.

## **Stage 3: Feedback**

There will be reactions from laughter to dismay as the students see how their instructions were carried out. The teacher needs to focus the students on what went wrong. Was the problem production or reception? What did Miko say and what did Joel hear? The dilemma pushes the students to correct themselves and hear what they are saying. The discussions are often very animated and again the teacher must arbitrate. The learners also see the real-life consequences of not producing or not hearing appropriate English sounds as well as getting personal and class feedback on their problem areas. As in exercise A, discussion can take place on strategies for pronunciation.

## Some Conclusions

1. The exercise allows clear practice in production and reception and gives concise feedback to individual learners as to where their problems lie in these areas and how to repair them. Often these are very simple physical questions such as not rounding the lips as in / u: / in fool , which the teacher can help them focus on.
2. This, in turn, allows discussion on learning strategies for pronunciation which can be drawn up in the classroom.
3. It is a communicative exercise as it involves disagreement, repair and ( hopefully ! ) agreement among other things.
4. Many language learners feel self-conscious and negative about their pronunciation . To effectively deal with this question in the class and enable learners to see an improvement, is invariably a great psychological boost.
5. I have used these activities with learners from many different cultural and language backgrounds and they have invariably been seen as both very useful and fun.
6. As teachers, we are often not the best judges of the accuracy of our students' pronunciation . We are accustomed to it and usually very tolerant when in general, native speakers are not. Such exercises help us to be more aware of real problems learners have in their oral production and to help to correct them.
7. Such activities should be an integral part of any language teaching programme as they make pronunciation an active element of the learning process and focus learners on the language they are producing.

Thanks to Ray Parker of Sheffield Hallam University; England for the telephone Game. Some useful and very accessible contrastive analysis can be seen in the " Ship or Sheep" and "Three or Tree" series.