

Introduction to Teaching Pronunciation

There are many things that English teachers need to fit into their limited class time—grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Pronunciation often gets pushed to the bottom of the list. Many teachers say there’s just not enough time to teach pronunciation. Students often think it isn’t that important—after all, it won’t be tested on their college entrance exams!

But if students need or want to speak English understandably, pronunciation *is* important. The days when learners only needed reading and writing skills in English are past. Depending on where you teach, many or all of your students will need to speak and understand English in real life to communicate with both native speakers of English and speakers of other languages. Even if students’ grammar and vocabulary are strong, if their pronunciation isn’t easy to understand, their communication will fail. We owe it to our students to give them the tools they’ll need to be able to communicate successfully in English.

What Are Your Goals?

Most teachers agree that they want their students to be able to speak English with good pronunciation. But what does that mean? What *is* good pronunciation?

One answer might be “sounding like a native speaker.” However, this answer is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, it’s hard to define what “a native speaker” sounds like. There are so many varieties of English and so much variation within each type that it’s almost impossible to define that elusive “ideal” pronunciation. Trying to sound like a native speaker is like throwing a ball at a moving target—difficult, frustrating, and likely to fail.

Another problem is that very few learners will ever be able to sound exactly like their preferred pronunciation model, no matter how hard or how long they try. This is especially true for adult learners and for those who don’t constantly hear English in their daily lives. Whatever the definition, speaking with nativelike pronunciation is not an easy goal to reach.

A more realistic goal, and one that more and more teachers and researchers recommend, is *intelligible* pronunciation—speaking in a way that most listeners, both native and nonnative speakers, can understand without too much effort or confusion. It’s not a bad thing if you can still tell that the speaker comes from a particular country or region, as long as the speaker can be easily understood by others (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010).

Still, while it's not practical to set our goal impossibly high, we also can't afford to set it too low. It's not helpful for students to become too complacent and to believe that their pronunciation is fine when, in fact, it may not be easily understood by anyone other than their own teacher and classmates. To be truly intelligible to a wide range of listeners, and not just to willing listeners of their own language background, speakers need to come fairly close to some kind of a recognized standard, whether it's one of the major native-speaker varieties or a nonnative variety of pronunciation that is easily understood by listeners from many backgrounds. As responsible teachers, we must make sure we don't set the bar too low.

We should also realize that English teachers, both native and nonnative speakers, are often *not* the best judges of whether someone's pronunciation is intelligible. Many **English as a second language** (ESL) or **English as a foreign language** (EFL) teachers can understand their students' speech when people in the wider world can't; in fact, it sometimes seems that we teachers can understand practically anything. We're used to inaccurate pronunciation. We know what students are going through and how hard they're trying. We're on their side and *want* to understand them, while a future employer or a cashier at Starbucks might not try so hard. Nonteachers are a tough audience (Lane, 2010).

Accuracy and Fluency

We often think of pronunciation teaching in terms of helping students achieve accurate pronunciation so that their production of sounds, stress, rhythm, and intonation begins to match an ideal pattern. But **accuracy** is only one part of good pronunciation. **Fluency** in producing sounds and other aspects of pronunciation is equally important. The two don't always go together. For example, many students learn to produce a new sound correctly when they're concentrating carefully and saying it alone or in a single word. When they need to use that same sound in conversation, however, it's much more difficult to keep producing it correctly—they can't pronounce the sound *fluently*. After all, in real-world speaking, pronunciation is just one among many things that students have to think about. Vocabulary, grammar, the ideas they want to express, and the appropriate degree of politeness and formality also occupy their attention.

It's hard to use pronunciation accurately and fluently at the same time. Because of this, when we're practicing pronunciation, we should include some activities that emphasize pronunciation fluency—speaking smoothly and easily, even if not all the sounds are perfect—along with activities that emphasize accuracy—producing sounds correctly. Both accuracy and fluency are important in pronunciation, just as they are in speaking in general, and both deserve attention and practice.

Trends in Teaching Pronunciation: The Pendulum Swings

Over the years, styles of language teaching have changed greatly, and the same is true of teaching pronunciation. In some time periods, teaching pronunciation has been considered extremely important, while at other times it hasn't been given much attention at all. Trends in teaching pronunciation are like a swinging pendulum—the emphasis goes from one extreme to the other.

Until recently, the focus in pronunciation teaching was almost entirely on producing individual sounds and words correctly; not much attention was given to features such as **intonation** and **rhythm**. (You'll read about these things in Chapters 8 to 12.) In the last 20 years or so, however, teachers and researchers have begun to realize the importance of these “musical” aspects of pronunciation and to emphasize them more strongly in teaching (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Goodwin, 2001). Some scholars have gone so far as to claim that teaching

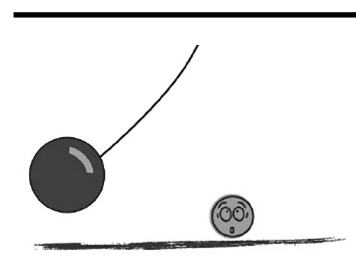


Figure 1.1. Pendulum.

individual sounds is not so important, and intonation, stress, prominence, and rhythm should be emphasized above all (Lane, 2010; Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Gilbert, 2008).

It seems more practical, though, to realize that no single aspect of pronunciation can stand on its own. Our students can benefit from learning about both individual sounds and the musical aspects of pronunciation, and we need to find a balance between these two areas. The pendulum of teaching trends might keep swinging, but we don't have to let it knock us down. Choose methods and activities that combine both aspects of pronunciation so that the combination works best for you and your students. (For a more complete discussion of the history of pronunciation teaching methods, see Celce-Murcia et al., 2010, Chapter 1.)

What Affects Pronunciation Learning?

Many things contribute to learning pronunciation, from students' ages, motivation, and personality—which depend on the learners themselves—to the quality of the teaching and the students' first language—which are outside factors.

The Age of the Learner

We've all observed how easily babies and very young children learn languages. They just seem to absorb the sounds and words they hear around them and, little by little, learn to imitate them accurately. **Linguists** call this time in a child's life, lasting up to the age of about 12 to 14 years, the **critical period for language acquisition**. Children can learn the sounds of language more naturally than adults and can approach native speaker pronunciation, but only if they are surrounded by the language and have many chances to hear its pronunciation. Young children who hear English only a couple of hours a week lose much of their learning advantage.

Effective pronunciation learning is not limited to young children, however. Older children and adults have their own strengths and can also learn pronunciation well, even if they never sound quite like native speakers. Adults are better able to set goals and to practice purposefully. They can understand more abstract explanations and analyze how sounds are produced and how the melody and rhythm of a language sound. Adults should not give up the hope of having easily intelligible pronunciation; they just have to reach their goal in a different way than children.

Motivation

Learners in any subject area tend to make more progress if they *want* to learn. No teacher can force students to learn if they're not motivated. A proverb says, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." This also applies to teaching pronunciation. We can provide information and many chances to practice, but we don't have the power to change our students' pronunciation for them. They have to want to do it and be willing to do the work themselves.

Three general sets of goals or desires have been suggested that can motivate students in language learning (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010, p. 21):

- Learners want to be accepted into a group that uses the language. The group might still recognize the learners as "outsiders," but they can function well in the group. This is sometimes called **integrative motivation**.
- They want to be accepted as real members of the group. They don't want to be thought of as "outsiders." This is called **assimilative motivation**.
- They want to be able to use the language to reach a goal: To get a job, to conduct business, to pass a test, or to travel easily in a foreign country. This is called **instrumental motivation**.

If we recognize our students' goals in learning English, we can help motivate them by showing them how improving their pronunciation will help them reach their goals.

Personality and Aptitude

No two people are alike. We each have our own personality, talents, strengths, and weaknesses. These factors can affect how people learn pronunciation.

Teachers sometimes assume that more outgoing learners will be able to learn pronunciation better than shyer students, and there may be some truth to this. Confident students might speak more and be more willing to try new sounds, and this extra practice could help them improve their pronunciation. However, this improvement is certainly not guaranteed. Some outgoing students may be producing a lot of language, but they may also be jumping ahead without paying attention to the accuracy of their pronunciation. If listeners are impressed by their fluency and accept their imperfect pronunciation, they have no way to know that they need to improve.

Some more introverted students might actually be thinking carefully about sounds and practicing “within themselves,” even if they don’t speak much in class. Don’t underestimate the quiet students. Appreciate the strengths and possibilities of all your students, and encourage everyone. All students can learn and improve in their own way.

Another aspect of personality that can affect pronunciation is the degree to which a person is willing or able to change the way he or she sounds. Most of us have been speaking and listening to language in the same, familiar way since we learned to talk. Our voice and our pronunciation are a central part of the way we see ourselves. It can be uncomfortable, and possibly even frightening, to try out unfamiliar sounds and melodies of language. For some people this process seems like a small bump in the road, but for others, it’s a serious roadblock.

Finally, some people seem to have more of an aptitude or talent for learning language or imitating pronunciation than others. We say that some people “have a good ear” for language. Of course, this is something that is almost impossible to define or measure. What seems like a natural talent may be partly due to special motivation, encouragement from parents or teachers, or growing up in an environment where there are many opportunities to hear and learn other languages. In fact, there’s no magical ability possessed by some people but not others that determines whether someone can be a successful language learner. As teachers, we need to believe that everyone has an ability to learn pronunciation. Then we need to give all our students the help they need to do it well.

Methods and Quality of Teaching

So far I’ve discussed factors that depend on the learners themselves, but there are also outside factors that affect pronunciation learning. The kind of teaching students have experienced, both in amount and quality, has a strong influence on their learning. Have they received a lot of training in pronunciation, only a little, or perhaps almost none at all? How much practice have they had? Was it effective practice using a variety of activities or entirely “repeat after me” without effective feedback from the teacher? Were the teachers interested in pronunciation, or did they consider it to be only unnecessary fluff? Is it even possible that their past teachers have given them false information or provided an extremely inaccurate model? The quality of teaching that students receive certainly affects the quality of their learning.

Exposure to the Target Language

Students’ pronunciation learning is also affected by how much English they have a chance to hear in their daily lives. Learners who live in an English-speaking country where they are constantly surrounded by the language will be more familiar with the sounds and melodies they’re trying to imitate than those who have few chances to hear spoken English—perhaps only during English classes for a few hours each week.

The Influence of the Learner's Language

A learner's first language (often referred to as the **L1**) has a strong influence on the way he or she learns the pronunciation of a second language (referred to as the **L2**). Often this influence is helpful, such as when some sounds are very similar in the two languages. For example, knowing how to pronounce /m/ in one language makes it easy for a learner to pronounce /m/ in another language.

However, learners' pronunciation habits in their first language can also make it more difficult for them to pronounce sounds in the new language that don't exist in their L1 or that are used in a different way. This influence is called **native language interference** or **language transfer**.

Effects of Differences Between First Language and Second Language

What happens when learners hear and try to pronounce strange, new sounds in a new language? These types of problems often occur:

Merging. When learners hear unfamiliar sounds in a new language, they tend to interpret the sounds of the new language in terms of the categories of their original language. The learner's brain may hear two sounds as being the same when they're actually considered separate sounds in the new language. This is called merging and leads to pronunciation errors. When our brains and ears can't tell the difference between two similar sounds, we tend to pronounce both of them in the same way. For example, many languages don't have separate vowel sounds like the ones in *reach* (/iy/) and *rich* (/i/). Speakers of these languages may merge the two sounds and pronounce them both in the same way.

Substitution. When learners hear a new sound that doesn't match any of the sounds they know, they often substitute a familiar sound that is somewhat similar and easier for them to produce. For example, the first sound in *think* and *three* is found in relatively few languages in the world. Speakers of languages that don't have this sound often substitute /s/, /f/, or /t/ so that *think* sounds like *sink*, *fink*, or *tink*.

The effect on intelligibility. The processes of substitution and merging can cause serious problems for learners' intelligibility. When listeners expect to hear one sound but actually hear a different one, communication can break down. Even when teachers make learners aware of what's happening, it's difficult not to fall into one of these traps.

Problems with Individual Words

So far we've been thinking about pronunciation problems that are very general—they affect all the words with a particular sound or combination of sounds. However, sometimes specific words can cause pronunciation problems. Two causes of this are described here.

Spelling. English has many words with irregular or unpredictable spellings, and this can lead students to mispronounce those words. For example, if students learn the words *rain*, *plain*, and *maintain*, they will naturally assume that the letters *ain* must represent /eyn/. Then if they see the written word *mountain*, they may mistakenly pronounce it /mawnteyn/. Since students often meet words first in their written form, this can lead to incorrect pronunciation of many words.

Borrowed words. Many languages have borrowed words from English, adapting their pronunciation to fit the sound system of the borrowing language. (Sometimes the meanings of the words have also changed, but that's a separate issue.) For example, Table 1.1 shows some Japanese words borrowed from English and the sound changes they've undergone in the process.

We might think that knowing words that have been borrowed from English into the student's native language would make it easier to learn those words in English, and this is often true with word meanings. However, familiarity with these borrowed words can actually make it harder for learners to pronounce the words correctly in English if they assume that the pronunciation is the

Table 1.1. Japanese words borrowed from English.

Japanese word	Comes from this English word	Main sound changes
ジュース /dʒuusu/	juice /dʒuws/	Extra vowel is added after final consonant.
ガラス /garasu/	glass (the material) /glæs/	Extra vowel is added to split up consonant cluster. Extra vowel is added after final consonant. /l/ is replaced by /r/. Main vowel sound becomes /a/ instead of /æ/.
ハンバーガー /hambaagaa/	hamburger /'hæmbə:gə/	First vowel becomes /a/ instead of /æ/. In second and third syllables /ə/ becomes /aa/.

same in English as it is in their native language. This can cause misunderstandings. In an ESL class that I observed recently, the teacher asked a Japanese student about his favorite food. The student answered: /karee/. (The last vowel is similar to the vowel in *bed*, not *need*.) The teacher had no idea what the student meant, and it took several tries by the student and his classmates until the teacher recognized the word as *curry*, which in American English sounds like /'kæriy/. Teachers need to take special care to point out and practice words that are pronounced differently in English than their borrowed counterparts.

Fossilization

One of the most stubborn problems that we face in teaching pronunciation is **fossilization**. Fossilization is a process that occurs when a language learner progresses to a certain point but then has a hard time making further progress. For example, a student who has been studying English for many years might still not be able to differentiate /v/ as in *very* and /b/ as in *berry*; this error just seems to have become a permanent part of the person's English.

When students begin to learn a new language, they usually feel like they're making progress fairly quickly. Since they're starting from zero, any new knowledge feels like a great step forward. But after a while, students may find that their teacher and classmates understand them when they say /b/ instead of /v/, and so they lose their incentive for trying to say /v/ accurately. Their habit of saying /b/ for /v/ seems frozen in time, like a fossil of an ancient animal. Their mistake has become fossilized, and at this point, it becomes very hard to change.

Most students who have been learning English for a while have some fossilized pronunciations that are very hard to change or improve. So what can the teacher do to help crack up those fossils?

First, we have to recognize the fossilized forms and help students realize what error they're making and why it's causing a problem in understanding. Next, the learner has to be willing to put lots of effort into changing his or her pronunciation. It won't happen easily, and it won't happen at all if the student doesn't work at it. We need to provide information, opportunities for focused practice, and feedback to the learner on how well his or her pronunciation is reaching the goal. It's difficult to change fossilized pronunciation, but it's not impossible.

A more effective strategy in the long run is to try to prevent fossilization in the first place. Emphasize pronunciation at all levels of teaching, *especially for beginners*. It's easier to get learners started on the right path than to try to change their fossilized pronunciation later.

Hypercorrection

A less common pronunciation problem is **hypercorrection**, which means "too much correction." This happens when a student has learned a rule and tries to apply it, but applies it in too many cases. For example, a common error among Korean learners is to substitute /p/ for /f/, since /f/

doesn't exist in the Korean language. The predictable error is to say *pan* instead of *fan* or *punny* instead of *funny*. But sometimes a learner has been concentrating so hard on not saying /p/—on saying /f/ instead—that he or she sometimes says /f/ even when the correct sound actually should have been /p/. The speaker might say *fan* instead of *pan*.

Hypercorrection is a much less frequent and less serious source of error than fossilization—more like an occasional slip of the tongue than a long-term problem.

Learning to Hear

Being able to hear the difference between sounds in a new language is as important as being able to produce the sounds. However, hearing new sounds is not always easy. How we as adults hear sounds is a result of the way we've become used to hearing and classifying them in our own language. We don't "hear" and pay attention to all the speech sounds that come into our ears—only the ones that we're used to hearing.

When we were babies just learning our first language, our brains were ready to hear and accept the sounds of any language. Babies are talented that way. But as we grew up and became more firmly anchored in our own language, we got used to paying attention only to the sounds we needed to hear—the sounds of our own language that we heard around us every day. We didn't need to understand any other sounds, so our brains never built up the ability to identify and produce them. Our brains developed a **phonological filter** that lets us hear the sounds of our own language very efficiently but "filters out" and ignores unfamiliar, unnecessary sounds. As adults, when we hear new sounds, it's difficult to identify or understand them—we're still hearing through the filter of our first language.

To pronounce a new language well, we need to learn to hear again. We have to remove the filter that's hiding some of those new sounds so that our brains can hear, accept, analyze, and get ready to imitate them. The first step in doing this is to be aware of the filter and deliberately try to get past it. The next, ongoing step is to build up our awareness of new sounds, to pay close attention to what we hear, and to imitate the new sounds until we can do it accurately. We need to practice hearing sounds well, just as we need to practice pronouncing them well.

I sometimes tell students that to learn pronunciation well, they need to hear with their mouths and speak with their ears. That is, when they listen, they think to themselves, "How would I move my mouth to make that same sound? Where would I put my tongue and lips?" According to **phonologist** Peter Ladefoged (2006, p. 110), "It seems as if listeners sometimes perceive an utterance by reference to their own motor activities. When we listen to speech, we may be considering, in some way, what we would have to do in order to make similar sounds" (p. 110). The other side of this idea is that when we speak, we should constantly listen to what we're saying and compare it to what we know it should sound like. We monitor and self-correct our own pronunciation, using our ears to give feedback to our mouths about what we're doing right or wrong and what needs to be changed.

Feelings That Can Stand in the Way

Learners' feelings about language and pronunciation sometimes make it harder for them to develop accurate pronunciation, especially for students who don't have a choice about learning English. For example, junior high or high school students in EFL settings are sometimes reluctant to seem different from their peers by using new, "foreign-sounding" pronunciation. It's easier and more comfortable to pronounce words in a way that fits their own, familiar language patterns. They also may not see the point in concentrating on pronunciation. After all, English is just one school subject among many, and depending on their country and culture, they may not foresee a need to speak English in their future lives. If pronunciation isn't tested and doesn't count for part of their grade, why try?

For all of us, our voice is an important part of ourselves, and our customary pronunciation is a vital part of our voice. Throughout our lives, we've become used to hearing certain sounds come out of our mouths and not others. Our pronunciation has always marked us as members of a certain language or dialect group. Changing our pronunciation can seem threatening, as if it will cause us to lose our identity as a member of our own group. It seems safer and easier not to change (Gilbert, 2008). However, if students can look at their attempts to change pronunciation as a way of adding a new skill or a new, temporary language identity rather than replacing their original selves, it can seem less threatening.

In addition, sometimes learners can feel uncomfortable if they imitate a speaker or other model too exactly. They might have the feeling that the speaker will think they're mocking them if they try to sound *too* similar. (After all, young children sometimes make fun of a friend by imitating his or her way of talking, and they might be scolded for this.) But in pronunciation practice, learners have to get over that feeling and realize that imitating someone exactly helps lead them toward their goal. It's a valuable skill in pronunciation learning.

Learning Pronunciation Takes Time

Pronouncing sounds involves both our minds and our bodies. When you learn new sounds, you need to learn to move the muscles of your mouth in new ways and change the pronunciation habits you've built up all through your life. This isn't easy, and like learning any other muscular activity, it takes a long time. Most people can't learn to dance or to play a musical instrument immediately; they have to start out slowly, practice a lot, and gradually build up speed and skill. Your mouth also needs to build up **muscle memory**—the ability to do something more easily after practicing it many times. Your muscles begin to “remember” how to move in a certain way because they've done it so often.

Teaching pronunciation also takes time. As teachers, we can't just teach something once and expect our students to master it right away. We need to come back to the same point again and again, giving students lots of review and continued practice.

What Do Teachers Need to Know?

To teach pronunciation effectively, you need several types of knowledge:

- You need to know the facts about pronunciation: How speakers' mouths move when they produce the sounds of language, and how word stress, rhythm, connected speech, and intonation work.
- You need to understand and be able to predict the kinds of problems your students might have with pronunciation and why they happen.
- You need to know many ways to teach pronunciation to your students, adapting your methods to fit them and their needs, and helping them practice effectively to overcome any problems they might have (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

You also need to know these basic principles of teaching pronunciation:

- Include more than just “repeat after me.” Having students listen to a recording or to the teacher's voice and then repeat is a useful part of a pronunciation lesson, but by itself it is not enough.
- Encourage students to use more than one of their senses, which is more effective anyway. We can use many different ways of learning—through sight, sound, and movement—to help students understand and remember better.
- Keep lessons practical. For most students, even adults, theory and technical explanations are hard to understand and are easily forgotten. Simple, concrete demonstrations fol-

lowed by lots of practice produce better results. Lessons need to fit our students' level of understanding.

- Include communicative practice whenever possible. Students need to work toward using their new pronunciation in real speech. During class, we can help them practice in activities that are similar to real communication.
- Train students to become independent and autonomous learners. Our students won't be with us forever. Someday they'll be facing pronunciation puzzles on their own. If we can help them build up their own skills in listening, imitating, and monitoring their own pronunciation, it will be a big help to them in their future learning.

In the rest of this book, we'll talk about all of these things and how they can make your teaching of pronunciation more engaging and effective.