



ON

SPEAKING

TERMS

A Practical Guide to Pronunciation for ABLE/ESL Teachers

Introduction

The purpose of this section of the book is to introduce key concepts and terms to ABLE/ESL teachers.

Teaching ESL is, first and foremost, foreign-language instruction. We are not English teachers, we are foreign-language teachers--a critical distinction. As English teachers we tend to focus on the structure of the language. As foreign-language teachers we focus on communication. In other words, if our students can't be understood when they speak, all the irregular verb practice and non-count noun discussions in the world won't help.

Many of us have a limited foreign-language background. This section is an overview of the study of language, what elements of language are important, and a list of key terms.

Overview

Linguistics is the study of language as a system of communication. Phonetics is the study of sounds. Linguists agree on this much (usually). They don't, however, agree on much more (or so it seems). There is great disagreement over how languages are learned or how they should be taught. There is even disagreement over how many sounds exist in the English language and what symbols should be used to represent them. Teaching pronunciation is complicated by students' native languages, their age and their ability to learn a language. As with math, some students have more difficulty than others; even their personality can affect their outcome. (For example, an outgoing person may take more risks and speak with strangers more easily.) Finally, practice is critical. Too often, students are surrounded by their families and friends and don't have opportunities to practice English.

****** Spend time explaining the difference between long and short vowels. This helps their pronunciation and does wonders for their spelling. Explain in simple terms that a long vowel says the name of the letter (ex. eat). It usually takes two letters to make a long vowel sound. "The first (vowel) does the talking, the second does the walking" - i.e. the second vowel is silent. Short vowel sounds are usually spelled with only one letter. Short vowel sounds are hard for most students to hear and produce. They are the "ugly" sounds of English, the grunting sounds that sound so unfamiliar to many students.

Sounds and Production

Vowels are sounds made with unrestricted flow (from teeth, lips etc.). All vowels are voiced (use vocal chords). There are front, middle and back vowels.

Consonants are sounds which are interrupted by teeth, lips, tongue or soft palate (top of the mouth). They may be voiced (use of vocal chords) or unvoiced (no use of vocal chords). They may stop (as in p , b , a , k , g , t) or they may continue, or flow (as in m , n , f , v etc.)

Voiced vs. unvoiced - "B" and "P" are produced in exactly the same way. The difference is that one is voiced and one is unvoiced. Have students place their hands on their Adam's apple (or over their ears) to feel the difference. Voiced sounds use vocal chords, unvoiced do not.

Nasals (m, n, ng) - Some sounds are made with air pressing through the nose, not the mouth. (Have students hold their noses shut to hear the differences.)

Use the descriptions of productions of sounds in Section II to help students use the right parts of their mouth to produce a sound. **Aural skills** (learning to hear a sound) and **oral skills** (learning to produce a sound) are an essential and significant, but small part, of communication.

Technical terms such as fricatives, glides and the precise pictures are available in any good pronunciation manual. Some teachers find them useful; many do not. A bibliography is attached if more information is needed.

Production in Context

Phonology (the study of sound patterns) is the next step in pronunciation. Sounds are sometimes pronounced differently according to their position in a word or sentence. Students should be aware of these patterns. The "t" in toe is pronounced differently from the "t" in little.

Aspiration is the burst of air from some sounds (p, t, k). However, when (for example) an "s" comes before a "p," the air stops and the sound is not aspirated. Try these words:

pot	spot
to	stew
pier	spear

Some sounds are aspirated more in other languages and students may need to practice this.

Flapping - when a "t" sound is placed between an accented and unaccented vowel, it often becomes a "d" sound. Examples are :

butter ("budder")	putting ("pudding")
patio ("padio")	
got to go ("godda go")	

R-Coloring - The consonant R following a vowel can affect the pronunciation of that vowel. The vowel sound becomes obscured and is changed by the "r" influence. Examples are:

ear
beer
bear

Digraphs are two or more letters that join together to make a new sound.

Digraphs include:

ch	choice
ng	ring
sh	shoe
th	thing
th	this

These may be new sounds for students and may require extra practice.

Consonant Clusters (blends) are common letter combinations such as spr, st, spl (initial) or nk, lk, nd (final). For a variety of reasons, these can cause great difficulty for students. Students may add a vowel ("street" becomes "estreet" to a native Spanish speaker) or they may delete a consonant ("green" becomes "geen" or "fast" becomes "fat"). These are language-specific problems.

Stress (more commonly known as accent) occurs in syllables, words and sentences. Each is important for pronunciation.

- Stressed vowels are longer and louder in English. (In many languages they are only louder.)
- Almost all unstressed vowels become the same reduced vowel sound.
- **[schwa (uh)]**. This causes a great deal of trouble for students, as many languages do not have reduced (or neutral) vowels. The unaccented vowel (whether it's a, e, i, o or u) becomes an "uh" (reduced) sound in contextual spoken English. In other words, the word turnip when pronounced alone may be "turn-ip," but in a sentence or phrase becomes "turn-up" as in "The turnip is large."

Some examples are:

<u>a</u> ppeal	(uh-peal)	se <u>co</u> nd (sec-uhnd)
col <u>l</u> ege	(coll-uhge)	tul <u>i</u> p (tul-uhp)

- syllable - stress on two syllable words is generally:
noun - first syllable
verb - second syllable

English as a Stress-Timed Language

English is a stress-timed language, in which we stress content words not syllables. Many other languages such as French are syllable-timed in which speech forms a regular rhythms according to syllables. Content words include:

nouns	adjectives
main verbs	interrogatives
adverbs	interrogatives

Function words which are not usually stressed include:

articles
auxiliaries
pronouns
prepositions
conjunctions

This difference in stress pattern is very important. Speakers of Hindi, for example, may be very difficult to understand more because of the differences in their stress pattern than their "accent."

Intonation is the music of the language, or the rise and fall of the pitch. Generally in English, pitch falls at the end of a sentence and rises at the end of a question. Example:

I'm going home.
Am I going home?

Linking is the connecting of words or word groups together. Classic examples include:

wanna (want to)
gonna (going to)

Often in English we connect the last sound of a word to the beginning sound of the next word. So in this sentence, "The boy walks fast" becomes "The boy walk-sfast." We don't carefully pronounce every word or syllable in English. This makes it difficult for students to understand us and to reproduce our pronunciation patterns. Teaching some of the common production "tips" such as linking (wanna, whaddya etc.) can make a significant difference in students' ability to understand and be understood. Besides, they love practicing them. Whaddya Say? by Weinstein is a good source.

Other Linguistic Terms

Syntax is word order. The usual pattern in English is:

Noun Verb Object

This is not necessarily true of all languages. Understanding the basic English word patterns helps all facets of students language skills (i.e. reading writing, speaking, and listening).

In a **declined language** the form (and spelling) of the word changes as its grammatical function changes. For example, in Russian the word book as a subject is **kniga**, but book as a direct object is **knigu**. Students need to know English is not a declined (inflected) language.

Phoneme means sound.

Grapheme means letter.

Morpheme means word.

One of the difficulties in linguistics is that while it is a science, it is also an art. Language is fluid and constantly changing and technical terms become overused and confused with laymen's terms. Accent, for example, has taken on many meanings other than stress; phonics and phonetics are often interchanged and then there is the poetry of a language. How do you "explain" the beauty of Shakespeare or the genius of Dr. Seuss?

This section presents the science of the language. However, also keep in mind in that you are teaching the art of language. Help your students understand that a language is more than a collection of words. Help them understand the art as well as the science.

PRONUNCIATION TIPS

English has roughly 44 sounds (depending on their classification). All languages combined have roughly 100 sounds. Children through the age of about adolescence maintain the ability to natively produce most sounds. Among all the other things that go haywire at puberty, the ability to distinguish non-native sounds diminishes. **If you can't distinguish a sound, you can't duplicate it.** Here are some basic tips

- Step #1 Teach your students to hear the sounds of English (Section II).
Students must hear the sounds before they can repeat them.
Although some of the sounds exist in their language, some do not.
- Step #2 Teach your students to produce the sound.
Physically explain how the sound is made (put your teeth on your bottom lip, etc.). Use a mirror, exaggerate, compare and contrast.
The production of each sound is explained in Section III. Practice the sound in all three positions (initial is easiest, medial the most difficult specific to learn).
- Step #3 Identify difficult sounds for the student.
Read through Section III on linguistic interference. Identify which sounds a Japanese student, for example, has trouble producing and explain those problem areas to the student. Highlight them, exaggerate them, make the student aware of them.
- Step #4 Practice, Practice, Practice
Once a student can physically hear and produce the sound, have him/her practice in context. Language, after all, does not come in isolated sounds. Use section IV (Language-specific sentences) over and over again. Tape-record the students if possible so they can hear themselves improving. Tape-record yourself so they can model stress and intonation. It's important, though, that students develop a sensitivity and awareness to the sounds and patterns they need to correct.

Step #5 Make pronunciation practice an integral part of your class. Section V of the book offers a variety of ways to practice pronunciation. Make a conscious effort in each class to devote time to the practice of pronunciation.

Elements of Pronunciation

Age, language ability and desire will affect the students' progress. Few adults will completely reduce their accents. **(The goal should not be to eliminate the accent, but to help the student be more easily understood.)** Concentrate on the sounds and/or patterns of speech which interfere with them being understood.

More importantly, get your students to speak. Encourage discussion in your class where they feel "safe" making mistakes. Give them speaking assignments. Gently correct them in the course of discussion. Give them topics for discussion (next Tuesday we'll talk about favorite foods) so they can prepare and learn the vocabulary.

(Be aware of ESL teachers' greatest hazard - Don't talk too much.)

A Final Note . . .

Humor is one of the highest levels of language, one of our most basic needs and one of the most neglected areas of study. Do what you can to integrate humor into your classroom. Tell jokes. Teach your students how to tell a joke. Share funny stories. Laugh out loud and encourage your students to do so. Humor can bridge a lot of oceans and make us all feel more comfortable and more easily understood.

A Very Final Note . . .

May my oversimplifications and/or deletions not disturb the eternal rest of my late, great linguistics professor, Dr. Bob Phillips.

. . . And may the "schwa" be with you.