

9 Teaching pronunciation to adult learners of English

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This chapter is to a great extent based on the author's decades of experience teaching at the university level in Taiwan; however, most suggestions have wide application and can be easily tailored to individual situations and needs elsewhere. For example, first language (L1) influenced substitutions for certain vowels and consonants of English will differ according to the home country or region, but the principle of phoneme substitution remains the same. Teachers may find that this chapter challenges some of their personal notions about the role of pronunciation in language learning, or that it goes against the current of some recent schools of thought in pronunciation teaching. We can only respond that it is perhaps time to let some new voices be heard and to focus more on the exigencies of survival and success in a competitive world outside of sheltered and idealistic academia.

Teaching adult learners

Unlike children, adult students will in almost all cases have received previous instruction in English. This training will not only have helped shape the current state of their English but also will often determine *how* they go about learning a language. Rather than just 'teaching pronunciation,' you will benefit your students most by showing them *a new way to learn English*. This will be the hardest part of what you do, especially since it involves identifying and offering replacements for deeply ingrained *habits*, but it also has the potential for turning your students' English learning entirely around.

Children have certain advantages in learning their L1 – for example, virtually unlimited exposure to the target language as spoken (in most cases) by competent native speakers. They have the chance and are motivated to use what they learn immediately and usually get instant feedback. They benefit from lower expectations and a much higher tolerance for their errors on the part of their listeners. They have boundless curiosity and energy. Since the filters of a child's brain are at this point not yet fully formed, they will let just about anything in. Adults, on the other hand, often have many preconceived notions about how language should work and how it sounds; less exposure to the speech of native

speakers; a tendency to experience fear, embarrassment, or even shame over making mistakes; and often a belief that they are just ‘not good’ at learning languages.

The ideal would be for the adult student to be exposed to as much native-like spoken input as possible, with persistent repetitions, ample opportunity for speaking practice, and patience on the part of their listeners. This is often not what happens, due to many factors. However, in a healthy human, the brain maintains its plasticity one’s entire life (Doidge, 2007). In addition, adults bring many strengths to the table such as sharper analytical skills, greater knowledge and experience of the world, and high proficiency in at least one language already. The question becomes not whether adults can learn languages well, but how to harness the brain’s robust plasticity, together with its other more developed skills, for the most efficient and effective results.

Thinking, fast and slow

The following is by far the most important point as regards our understanding of how we learn languages well and how we can do a better job of teaching them.

In his bestselling book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, author Daniel Kahneman describes the two main modes of thinking used by the human brain. The first, called *System One* by Kahneman, is our unconscious brain, which is responsible for *automated responses* and *habitual behavior*. Its reactions are almost instantaneous. *System Two* is what we use for *linear, analytic, conscious thinking*, and *problem solving*. It works much more slowly than *System One* (Kahneman, 2011).

Students in East Asia are typically trained to rely heavily on *System Two* in their English learning, when what is required for successful oral communication is management of the task by their intuitive, habit-executing *System One*. Lightning-fast mental processing is required in order to listen to and decode linguistic input and then come up with a reasonable response before the rhythm of the exchange breaks down and the other party becomes impatient – and *System Two* is simply *too slow* to handle this. So it is absolutely necessary that language learning be *automated* to the point where *System One* can do most of the legwork. This can be achieved by loading *System One* with commonly used stock phrases and related vocabulary items to which *System Two* will make quick, minor alterations to meet the needs of each specific situation when the learner is engaged in real-life conversation.

Lack of understanding of these two complementary modes of brain function and their respective roles in language learning lies at the heart of why English education in much of East Asia so often comes up wanting. Under current practices, it is common for students to be taught English mostly from a paper textbook. After a minimum of audio input from the teacher and recordings, students learn the spellings and meanings of individual vocabulary items, which they must memorize in order to pass tests. They mostly rely on murky impressions when deciding how to pronounce the words, and in many cases, the teacher’s pronunciation is not very accurate, measured by any standard. They also learn rules of grammar, often in excruciating detail. To compose a sentence, they will attempt

to analytically put together the two data sets they have on hand – i.e., isolated vocabulary words + mechanical rules of grammar. Aside from a number of shorter model sentences they may happen to get right – such as “Sorry!” and “How are you?” – these self-composed sentences tend to end up quite garbled or awkward.

Many learners take the “think directly in English” exhortation often given them very seriously *before* they have enough automated audio material in their head to think directly *with*. They will produce sentences such as **“Where are you come from?”* for “Where are you from?” or **“I am very like traveling”* for “I really like traveling.” Here is a longer example from a recorded corpus: “I meet some students in the Beijing University or other college. I interact of them is very happy, but I think they are more interesting in politic issue than our student in Taiwan.” Intended meaning: “I met some students from Beijing University and other colleges. Our interactions were very enjoyable, but I think they were more interested in political issues than most Taiwan students are.” The English they produce in this way sounds like panicked stabs in the dark with whatever raw data they can grab onto as quickly as possible. In the heat of a conversational exchange, their slow System Two, which they are relying on heavily, has no time for further grammatical processing. What they end up with can only be called an ad hoc variety of Pidgin English. It is certainly not because of an inherent lack of aptitude for language learning; there is abundant anecdotal evidence of Japanese, for example, who have learned to a high level of proficiency any number of languages – *other than English*.

Not just pronunciation

At this point, it may seem that we have digressed from our topic and are talking about grammar and overall conversational ability rather than just pronunciation. But, in fact, problems with both of these core issues, along with poor listening skills, can be traced back to the same cause – *insufficient audio input and practice*. These problems can also be *fixed* by the same solution: *intensive listening and repetition practice*.

A little ‘listen and repeat’ now and then is *not* sufficient to create the kind of phonetic awareness and stored mental audio files needed for learners to really *hear* what is being modeled and to self-correct when they get it wrong. In the limited listen and repeat that is done, students often ‘repeat’ mechanically *even before the model has finished playing* – clear evidence that they are simply *reading* and hardly listening at all beyond cues to ‘start’ and ‘stop.’ Once stuck in habits such as these, students’ ears will have effectively *shut down*.

If you give such a student (Taiwanese, in this case) a correct spoken model such as “the other one” (ðì ‘lðə wən), he or she will typically register and retain it as (li ‘lə wən), and if asked to listen and repeat, that is likely what he or she will say. The original pronunciation is initially received correctly – this is evidenced by the student’s ability to distinguish a native from a non-native speaker of English. However, in the process of matching incoming audio input with mentally stored forms, the input is re-processed into the *student’s own version* of the words, and

that is how it stays, in fossilized L2 form. The reason for this is the *default spoken model* that the student has more or less unconsciously adopted and *identifies with*. It is based not on a native-speaker model but on how the student is used to hearing his or her compatriots speak English and how the student has come to believe English *should sound when he or she speaks it*.

Students may assert that they are (x nationality), and so of course they speak with an (x L1) accent. They may point out a person speaking English with a French, German, or Danish accent is fairly easily accepted and accommodated (though they may at the same time complain how difficult Indian English is to understand). There does indeed seem to be a wide consensus that a ‘light’ accent is OK; in fact, a ‘light’ accent is often *attractive* or may add authoritativeness to a voice (van Hoek, n.d.). A casual look around the Internet will quickly reveal that in the popular mind, the accents most commonly considered ‘attractive’ are first various regional native English accents, with Standard Southern British English (BE) usually at the top of the list. Others, such as Australian, Irish, and Scottish, follow and then come a number of European non-native English accents, often led by French or Italian (Dahlgreen, 2014; The Telegraph, 2009). There is considerable disagreement from here on.

So a ‘light accent’ is one thing. However, pronunciation that is too different relative to the expected standard – e.g., with off-target vowels, wrong or missing consonants, misplaced stress, or odd intonation – is another. If you do a search on ‘Asian accents’ or ‘Chinese accents,’ you most often find these described in popular discussion forums as ‘not very attractive’ (Giant Bomb Forum, 2014). And if the *grammar* of someone speaking with an East Asian accent is incorrect as well, the two together deliver a double whammy that often discourages a listener from wanting to initiate or continue communication when not absolutely necessary. One online note to a woman who complained about negative reactions to her Chinese accent delicately suggests, “Lastly but by all means not least ensure that you use *the correct form of the third person singular of the verb* [emphasis added] so that you don’t immediately identify yourself as a foreign speaker, e.g., *he walks, she walks, it walks* [not walk without the s]” (Yahoo Answers, 2008).

Beyond being judged as less attractive, a foreign accent can affect assessments of one’s overall abilities. People who speak with a heavy foreign accent may be viewed as less intelligent, and their style of speaking as “comical,” “cute,” “incompetent,” “not serious,” or “childish” Beebe (1988). *Credibility* is also at stake. Experiments by researchers Shari Lev-Ari and Boaz Keysar found that speakers with a heavy foreign accent are *perceived as less credible* (Levi-Ari & Keysar, 2010). This makes pronunciation actually a pretty serious matter.

Assessments of foreign accents can be a politically sensitive issue and will often set off academic partisanship and debate, sometimes even international furor (*The Guardian*, 2015). However, some, such as entrepreneur Paul Graham, have had the candor to come out and say what they think on this point:

The empirical evidence about very strong accents is striking. And I am talking about failure to communicate here. I don’t mean strong accents in the

sense that it's clear that someone comes from another country. I'm talking about accents so strong that you have to interrupt the conversation to ask what they just said.

(Tiku, 2013)

We will make some brief comments here on the popular notion of *English for International Communication*, or *English as a Lingua Franca* (ELF), in which 'intelligibility' is emphasized over attainment of native-like pronunciation as measured against one of the standard dialects of English such as General American (GA) or BE (Jenkins, 2002). This approach stresses that some features of spoken English are more important to intelligibility than others and that these should be given the highest priority in English teaching and learning. There is really nothing here to disagree with so far. While it would certainly be better to try and cover everything we can to give our students the best preparation possible, we do need to set priorities when teaching time and other resources are limited. Jenkins proposes that certain features can be left as "optional," to be acquired and refined at the learner's own discretion; for example, L2-influenced substitutions such as /s/ and /d/ would be allowed for the "th" sounds /θ/ and /ð/ (Jenkins, 2002).

In addition, however, proponents of this approach suggest that it is not reasonable for the entire burden of successful communication in a foreign language to fall on the speaker; the *listener* should do what he or she can to facilitate the process and make it easier on the speaker (Jenkins, 2002). While this is undeniably an admirable ideal, we need to be aware that we have at this point strayed beyond the bounds of what we are here to do.

Let us take a minute to discuss the notion of 'intelligibility.' Intelligibility is *not* just about what the listener can with effort correctly decipher from what the speaker is saying. It is about *cognitive load* on the *listener*. With every little difference in pronunciation and grammar that diverges from the standard the listener is most accustomed to and expects, the listener must *make up for the deficit through his or her own mental processing*, just like our brain needs to supply the missing information when listening over a bad phone connection – think back on how long it took you to give up on a mobile phone conversation in such a situation. Depending on how degraded the signal is, the brain may be able to partially salvage and reconstitute it to what it was *supposed* to be. The problem is that this mental processing burns up a lot of brain energy on the part of the listener – energy they could use to do other important tasks – and causes what is called "listening fatigue" (NPR, 2009). Speakers who cause listening fatigue in others have a big strike against them when it comes to competing for social and other resources. Who wouldn't rather just deal with someone who doesn't run down his or her battery of finite available energy for the day so quickly?

As teachers, we must always remember *who* our paying customers are, who we have been hired to serve – namely, our *students*. It is our job to give our *students* the best preparation we can to help them compete as successfully as possible in an often harsh professional and social environment. If you wish to help the general

public overcome their tendency to shy away from people with speech that tires them out, more power to you – just make sure you do it *on your own time* and *not* on the time your students have paid for. The students are in your class to learn, not to be indulged or falsely told they're wonderful just as they are when they aren't there yet. You don't see lowering of standards in this way in such subjects as math, history, science, or music. Why are we so ready to acquiesce to flabby standards for language? We are doing our students no favor if we wave them through with weak skills, thinking that it is enough. When students finally get accurate information on what points they should fix in their speech, a frequent reaction is *anger* – *not* at the correction, but rather that no previous instructor pointed these things out to them before so they could have fixed them much sooner. Students who have seldom been corrected will be in for some rude awakenings when they begin a new semester in a university program in an English-speaking country, when they try to socialize and joke around with classmates, or when they compete with hundreds of other applicants for a job requiring good English and are simply not up to the task, and don't even know how to improve. The problem in these cases is not so much deficiencies in the students, but in us *teachers*, in our ability and willingness to help and inspire our students to aim high and do better, and in not giving our students enough informed *feedback* in order to better guide them. This does not require that a teacher's own spoken English be perfect, but that he or she show students effective methods for learning English well, beginning with intensive *listening* practice.

The value of mistakes

We conclude this section with one final and crucial point: *there is no learning without errors*, or as Kathryn Schulz puts it, “wrongness is a vital part of how we learn and change. Thanks to error, we can revise our understanding of ourselves and amend our ideas about the world.” (2010, p. 5). East Asians tend to have an especially strong aversion to making any kind of error in public – they would rather just keep quiet than risk being ridiculed for getting something wrong. In fact, questions and other class participation are *discouraged* in many East Asian classrooms. Teachers have the same abhorrence of being caught in a mistake and shamed since they believe it would threaten or diminish their authority. Many would rather rationalize an assertion that is later proved to be wrong, insist that *they are right*, or even reprimand the student. This never fools students, though they may be intimidated to where they no longer venture to ask questions or express a viewpoint and then end up passive and mechanical in their learning. What the students learn from this playacting and capitulation is that they also must always be right, or pretend to be right, regardless of how convincing evidence to the contrary might be, and that this is how they should teach their own future students and children. Mistakes = shame, which must be hidden, denied, and avoided at all costs in the future.

We need to revise our view of errors as a source of embarrassment and shame. Education is only meaningful in so far as it provides learners with what they actually

need, and teachers can hardly know what their students need without observing their errors. Teach students that mistakes are *treasures* that can lead them to what they need most – that is, *when* the errors are identified and addressed. Of course, learners should try to avoid mistakes once they have been identified – but they have to first *make* the mistakes in order for them to be pinpointed. Always give kind, patient, *constructive* feedback in response to student errors. Ask your students to compile the corrections that both they and their classmates receive and to work actively on fixing them. Only by *embracing* error (Schulz, 2010) will they see progress. And be open and honest about your *own* mistakes, and correct them publicly so students can do as you do and not just what you say. Which brings us to the next section on practical suggestions for the teacher.

Practical guidance and suggestions for teachers

Your own preparation: learn phonetics

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) programs typically do not include rigorous training in phonetics; however, a mastery of phonetics is the one best way, whether English is your L1 or an L2, to prepare yourself to help students with their pronunciation issues. It will give you valuable tools to analyze what you hear, identify what the issues are, and then propose ways for the student to improve. If you do not have a strong background in phonetics, do consider enrolling in or auditing a course at a local university or taking a course online.

The first and most important step is to learn the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). You do not necessarily have to teach it to your students or otherwise use it in your teaching, though students generally do just fine with it. Those teaching in North America tend to rely on spelling and phonics since that is what most grew up with and are comfortable with, but this really is no replacement for solid competence in IPA transliteration in which each sound is represented unambiguously by a single symbol rather than by a number of possible spellings. It is in fact not that difficult and is easily mastered with practice if you prioritize it in your learning. Dismissing it as ‘too hard’ for TESOL students to master reflects a patronizing and even insulting attitude toward the students’ abilities. Usually it reflects insecurities in the teacher rather than any lack on the part of the students.

Language is constantly changing, but set a clear, stable target for your students to imitate

All languages are in a state of constant change – for example, /ɑ/ (as in *father*) and /ɔ/ (as in *law*) have merged into a single phoneme for many North Americans, and the ‘t’ in ‘often’ is now being pronounced more frequently than previously. Standard Southern BE, previously called ‘RP’ (Received Pronunciation), is no longer spoken in its textbook form by many people. In addition to the United

Kingdom's numerous regional dialects, features of Estuary English, such as substituting /f/ for /θ/ (making *three* sound like *free*) and /v/ for /ð/ (making *other* sound like [ʌvə]), originally Cockney features, are now commonly heard.

However, not sticking to some kind of a consistent standard when teaching *spoken* English will lead to all kinds of sloppiness and an attitude of 'anything goes.' Lack of consistency in speech is one way you increase the burden on your listener. By choosing one of the established standard varieties of English as the goal for your students to emulate, you will end up with at least something close to a variety most easily understood by the largest number of English speakers in the world. *Listening*, however, is another matter. English learners should be exposed to as many varieties of spoken English, both native and non-native, in their *listening* as possible so they can quickly adjust when speaking with someone who has an unfamiliar accent.

Be comfortable with – and honest about – your own English

For L1 English speakers: We *all* have an accent. If the variety of English you speak is close to one of the more standard varieties, then fine. If it has relatively strong regional features, go ahead and use it in class, though some teachers may choose to adopt more standard versions of certain features, and that's fine too. Whatever you do, be *comfortable* with how you speak and use English in class, and try to be *consistent*. Point out which features of your speech are more regional, and encourage students to notice and get used to them, just as they should learn to adapt to many varieties of spoken English in their *listening*. You may, however, choose for them to model their *speech* after recorded materials in a more standard target variety.

For L2 English speakers: Many teachers may have a vague or not-so-vague sense of their own strengths and shortcomings in speaking English. However, in order to teach your students effectively, you will need to have a clear idea of what you do well and what you still need to work on. You may want to get an experienced and kind-but-honest native speaker to help you assess yourself. Once you have greater self-awareness, you can capitalize on your strengths and work around your weaknesses. It is a big step to try to overcome a clinging to cultural notions and norms of Confucian patriarchy and authoritarianism, but your students will *respect you* for it. You are not only teaching them English but also modeling behaviors and attitudes for them to internalize and, above all, to embrace *honesty* about your inevitable human limitations. Your goal is not to fool students into thinking you speak perfect English – not even native speakers can claim this – and most certainly not that you are right all the time. If you try to fool them, you will miss an opportunity to break the dishonest, negative cycle of trying to make others think you are more than you are and covering up for your shortfalls.

Most East Asian teachers tend to be fairly good at grammar; they may be less proficient in listening, speaking, and, specifically, pronunciation. But this does not have to hold you back from being a good teacher and helping your students learn good listening and oral skills. Be up front about your limitations and

provide lots of opportunities for your students to work with audio and video recordings, while constantly working to improve your own skills.

Learn a bit or a lot about the language(s) of your learners

The following is mainly directed toward L1 English speakers who are teaching in Asia or elsewhere abroad, but it can also apply to local teachers who are learning a new L2, or are working to further improve their English.

There are two highly compelling reasons why you should make a concerted effort to learn your students' L1 for classes in which most share the same L1. First is for your own convenience, independence, and self-respect in all your dealings in your host country. It will help enormously in enabling clear, ungarbled communications with your students, colleagues, and everyone else, and it will win you much additional respect and social and professional standing. We all learn more from *example* than from explicit teaching. Any effort you put into learning the local L1, however large or small, will bring you great benefits.

The second reason affects your effectiveness as a language teacher. It is easy to hear the flaws in our students' English and to jump in to correct them. However, it is hard to empathize with their struggle to learn a language very different from their own when we haven't been through or aren't currently going through a similar struggle ourselves. The importance of close and repeated listening, and in particular the power of the Echo Method (described next), for example, may not be brought home to you until you are floundering yourself and have trouble 'hearing' certain crucial distinctions in the target language.

In addition, when you know the students' L1, you will have a whole repertoire of handy references and comparisons to the target language. The benefits of having students relate sounds in the target language to similar ones in their native language far outweigh any possible drawbacks (Abercrombie, 1991). Many sounds will tend to be nearly identical in any two languages and thus present a zero-learning load (Stevens, 1991). When two sounds are not exactly the same, the small details that distinguish the two can be worked on once the student is close. Instead of struggling over something that seems exotic and insurmountable, the students will produce a form immediately and with *naturalness*.

If you succeed in learning the students' L1 well, you will probably also end up with higher standards for your students. No one will be able to accuse you of asking things of your students that you cannot do equivalents of yourself in their L1. You will know firsthand the satisfaction, pleasure, and positive feedback that go with getting a language right.

The classroom and beyond: methods that work

Choosing a personal internal model to emulate

A lot of what goes on when we are learning a language happens because of choices we have ourselves made early in the process, often without even being aware that

we *had* choices and made them. One of the first such choices involves our own *internal model* that we strive to match when speaking a new language.

We receive constant feedback from our own ears and brain on how we sound to ourselves when we speak. If our internal checking system thinks what we said is OK, it is allowed to pass. If we make a slip, our checking system alerts us, and we either go back and correct it if we can, or we may just let it pass. People speaking a foreign language *get used to their own version of that language*, which is often based on the way many other L2 speakers in their environment sound, and they come to identify with it. In the process, they essentially *shut out* native-speaker models in which things are done differently. If they were at this point to consciously stop and *listen attentively* to the native-speaker model, they could probably imitate it quite well. However, upon producing a good imitation, they might laugh, because it is so different from what they believe is the ‘correct’ way for them personally to speak – i.e., what they are *used to*. Getting past this is one of the biggest hurdles in learning a more authentic and easily intelligible accent.

The cycle can be broken by making the learner aware of his or her self-selected internal model and guiding the learner to open his or her ears to a new model. If the student is motivated and makes the effort, he or she will begin to see a big difference in how he or she both listens and speaks in the L2. Here is the procedure:

- 1 The student needs to find his or her own personal native-speaker model, usually someone in the media, a celebrity, or a personal acquaintance.
- 2 The student needs to frequently listen attentively to this person speak. Eventually, the student’s brain will be able to synthesize an auditory model from this input and call it up on demand.
- 3 The next step is for the student, before speaking, to mentally ‘hear’ what he or she is about to read or say *just as the student imagines his or her chosen internal L1 model would say it*. Typical L2 errors will sound out of place on the model.
- 4 The student will start to identify with a native-speaker model rather than his or her original L2 model, and the student will improve. However, additional tools are needed.

***Fixing pronunciation and grammar at the same time:
the echo method***

The interminable search in East Asia for a nostrum to learn English well is much like the quest for a miracle diet – both more often than not lead to disappointment. In both cases, there is often an unwillingness to invest the needed effort, willpower, and persistence. But then again, a lot of effort applied with the *wrong* method will not succeed, and doing more of what brought poor results in the past is not likely to bring better results in the future. The listen-and-repeat model is a deeply ingrained default method in our approach to language learning that we do not even question because it does not occur to us to question it. However, conventional listen and repeat, together with ‘free conversation,’ will usually not

produce good results; in fact, the many repetitions of defective forms may *further entrench* them and make them even harder to fix. Practice doesn't make perfect – it makes *permanent*.

There *is*, however, an alternative to listen and repeat, and it involves the use of *echoic memory*. Though echoic memory is usually not something we are consciously aware of, most of us have had the experience of not hearing clearly something that someone else has said, asking them to repeat it, but then suddenly figuring it out on our own before the speaker is even finished repeating it. What was said has just been 'played back' in your head, so you got the whole message on the second go yourself – through *echoic memory*. Some works call it the 'phonological loop.' Echoic memory lasts only for a few seconds and then vaporizes – certainly one reason why we do not notice it more. However, it is strange that it has not been exploited in language learning until very recently.

a **The Echo Method:** The *Echo Method* works first by disrupting mindless repetition or extemporizing with one's entrenched L1 patterns and by opening up the ears and brain to actual audio input. It lets the brain relax in quiet for a few seconds so it can play back and absorb the 'echo' of a spoken phrase, enabling the learner to attend to it closely and fully internalize it before imitating the phrase; for this reason, it is much more effective than shadowing. Here is how it works:

- 1 Choose a suitable, interesting audio file in the target language with a written transcription. Listen to the audio a few times and then look up all the unfamiliar words and expressions. Focus first on a small portion of the file, maybe about two minutes long.
- 2 Listen to the first four or five words of the audio file; intonational phrases are best if not too long; if they are, divide them up.
- 3 Press the PAUSE button, and listen attentively to the *internal echo* in your head.
- 4 Imitate the 'echo' you hear in your head; do not automatically use the pronunciation you are accustomed to.
- 5 Follow this routine of listen-internal echo-repeat with the same phrase over and over until it is thoroughly imprinted on your brain.
- 6 Move on to the next phrase and repeat the process in the same way. Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. Do this daily and keep a record of time spent on practice, noting milestones.
- 7 When possible, get feedback on how you are doing; at first, it may be uncomfortable, but it is what helps us improve and grow.

When learners repeat after their own internal echo, their pronunciation is generally much more accurate than with simple listen and repeat, since their brains have already fully and correctly *internalized* the utterance, much like a retinal afterimage. This method has radically improved the pronunciation of many students who started off with seemingly 'hopeless' problems. Successful learners

often unconsciously use this method themselves without identifying it by a name, or realizing exactly what it is they are doing that works so well.

With the right preparation, students will catch on to the Echo Method in their very first repetition in the first class of the term, without ‘jumping the gun’ and repeating right after the model. From that point on, they are really *hearing*, not just *what* is said, but exactly *how* it is said, and faithfully reproducing it themselves. This will get them started on *mindful listening* without the automatic filtering and substitutions that usually take place. What you are really training, beyond just the correct pronunciation of English sounds, is a high overall sensitivity to sounds, which will eventually spread to all areas of the learner’s life, in both concrete and abstract applications.

Watch that the students *do not move their lips when listening to the model*. This may seem counterintuitive, but anything you do yourself while listening will distract the brain with *proprioception* – receiving and interpreting events generated from the learner’s own thoughts and actions. This will blur the sharp focus that is needed to hear the input clearly, with no distortions added in.

It is good to do as much echo practice in class as possible, but it will never be enough. Students need to move from a default of learning only when pushed for the sake of exams to wanting to learn better English for the sake of their own future plans and for its own sake. This mindset may be the most important thing your students take away from your teaching.

At the beginning of the semester, you can have the students record a written passage in English, then play it back, and write a page of feedback on what they hear. You can then have them replay this same recording at the end of the course, and write a new page of feedback describing what they now hear with their ‘new ears.’ This is useful in helping the students and you to see how much progress they have made over the course of the semester or school year.

Students can be required to keep daily listening logs in which they write down from what time to what time they did their 10 or 20 minutes of echo practice, and a description of the material they listened to. It’s best at the beginning to offer very short, simple conversations – ones they will think are too easy for them, but which in fact they couldn’t produce correctly or colloquially on their own without help. They need to listen-echo-repeat over and over and over until the conversation is finally engraved in their *unconscious brains*, at which point it will emerge from their mouths when needed *automatically*, managed by their speedy, reactive System One, and with perfect grammar and pronunciation. You can have the students perform the dialogues in pairs in class every week and correct them where their output strays from the recording. Having the students give feedback on their peers’ performance can also help sharpen their ears and attentiveness to detail.

Ten or 20 minutes a day of echo practice is a big commitment, and not everybody will follow through. However, as a teacher, you can do your best to assign and check their listening logs and offer encouragement. As a convenience to the students, the teacher can use a recording program such as Audacity to produce pre-paused audio files for a., b., and c.-type practice and make them available to the students.

In their echo practice at home, the following steps can be added as the student is ready, for further reinforcement and to fully automate the audio content:

- b **Listen and repeat:** Once the learner has practiced the Echo Method on a chosen passage (say, a one-minute scene of an episode of a television series), having captured as much phonetic detail as possible, the next step is to practice with conventional listen and repeat. This should be done until the material is even more solidly mastered and can be produced without hesitation or a single mistake.
- c **Synchronous reading:** The next step is synchronous reading, or reading along with the model, at the same pace. By this point, the material should be so familiar that the learner can produce it without much conscious thought. Synchronous reading can help the learner get the *rhythm* right – if there is any deviation from the original, they will fall behind or (less often) surge ahead. The goal is not speed per se but to be able to produce the sentences with the same stress, intonation, and pauses as the L1 model.

Even with good listening, fine-tuning will be required. Phonetic categories and allophonic processes in particular are often carried over unconsciously from the native language, as are errors from previous learning. Therefore, a list and description of common learner errors for each L1 learner group can be highly useful to both teacher and student.

For more help in getting the rhythm right, the following method is useful:

- d **Arm circles:** Some students have a tendency to read each syllable with equal length. It is often not so much a problem of making stressed syllables long enough, but of making unstressed ones short enough (Chela-Flores, 2001). A whole-body aid in helping students get the stress-timed rhythm of English right is to have them stand up near their desks and make large circles with their dominant arm, making muscular effort to push the arm *down* on the stressed syllables. Since the stress timing of English is not perfectly regular, the circles sometimes have to be made more quickly or slowly depending on the length and prosodic structure of the phrase, but the continuous motion can help redistribute varying syllable lengths more in accord with native-speaker rhythmic patterns. This falls under what Acton (1991) describes as a “connection between certain non-verbal behaviours (such as speech-rhythm-related upper-body movement) and suprasegmentals,” or *haptic* pronunciation practice (see h.).
- e **Cultivate sensitivity to feedback:** The importance of feedback cannot be overemphasized. McClelland et al. (2002; reported in Wyner, 2014) found that Japanese adults were able to distinguish /r/ and /l/ – notoriously difficult for Japanese L1 speakers – after one hour of practice with automatic *feedback*. Often speakers of an L2 are given explicit feedback outside of class on how they do; for example, the person they’re speaking with may repeat the same phrase with the correct pronunciation and grammar. Sometimes,

the feedback is more subtle – the listener may briefly knit his or her brow when a wrong pronunciation or form is used. Teachers can help students become sensitive to and avail themselves of both kinds of free training when they come by and not just forge ahead down their own panicked path with sensors shut down.

- f **Shadowing:** Shadowing is mentioned here, not as part of the formal steps of the Echo Method, but as an alternate form of listening and oral practice, borrowed from oral interpretation training. In shadowing, the learner repeats what he or she hears in an audio recording almost the second that he or she hears it. This trains the student in listening, attention, quick reactions, rhythm, and pronunciation. One reason it is often recommended is because few teachers know about the Echo Method, and it is the best method they have encountered thus far. However, if you have a continuous audio stream coming in (as with a radio broadcast), you are constantly being exposed to new material without a chance to master the old. It also causes fatigue fairly quickly. The method is more viable if you have only a relatively short loop and you repeat it over and over.
- g **Repeated choral readings:** Phonetician Olle Kjellin has developed a highly effective method of repeated synchronous reading with the volume progressively lowered on copies of the target practice form prepared with Audacity (see the resources at the end of this chapter).
- h **Haptic pronunciation practice:** Arm circles are in fact only one example of using physical touch and body movements to learn and reinforce accurate pronunciation. This approach is sometimes called Haptic Pronunciation Practice (see the resources at the end of this chapter).

Conclusion: materials and tools

With the Internet and other kinds of digital media, it is now easier than ever for students to be independent and self-directed in their learning. Here are some resources you can encourage your students to use in their English improvement plans.

- a **Online English dictionaries with sound files:** Pronunciation keys in American-published dictionaries are mostly ad hoc, differing from dictionary to dictionary, and they can be quite confusing. A better way to check or learn the pronunciation of a word is with an audio dictionary. The following audio dictionaries are available online for free, and all are excellent: Merriam-Webster Online (GA), Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (BE and GA), Oxford Learner's Dictionaries (BE and GA), the Macmillan Dictionary (BE), and the Free Dictionary (GA and some BE). A Google search will turn up more, but these are really more than adequate.
- b **TV series:** In fact, *good* TV series are the very best way to practice English listening and pronunciation skills, and they are the best materials to use for Echo Method practice. Nearly *all* students with the best English in the

author's experience, regardless of L1 and country of origin, learned it from *repeated* watching, with active listening and practice, of good TV series or movies. Encourage your students to choose a series, watch it first for entertainment and to become familiar with it and then use it for their daily Echo Method practice, starting with the pilot episode. It may take a semester or even a year to work through a single episode with the thoroughness required to automate what they learn. Some suggested series, new and old include *Gilmore Girls*, *Seinfeld*, *The Good Wife*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *ER*, *Mad Men*, *Six Feet Under*, *Modern Family*, *West Wing*, *The Office*, *Ugly Betty*, *Roseanne*, *Ally McBeal*, *MacGyver*, *The Wonder Years*, *M*A*S*H*, *Cheers*. You can add your favorites to the list. Try to choose shows with relevance to the students' lives – *Gilmore Girls* is especially good – and avoid shows (of which there are plenty) with too much emphasis on sex, drugs, crime, violence, and slapstick or silliness. Encourage your students to watch legally obtained versions; watching programs from pirate sites may cause harm to the user's computer.

- c **Movies:** Movies can be good for learning and pronunciation practice, but are not usually as good as TV series since often more extreme things happen in movies, and you do not have the chance to get to know the same set of characters from episode to episode and season to season. However, they are another option. It's best to choose a movie that is as close to real everyday life as possible, avoiding adventure, science-fiction, horror, fantasy, cartoons, and overly sexy or violent films, as well as other genres less suitable for language learning.
- d **YouTube:** Learners must be selective, but YouTube offers a virtually limitless selection of free videos that can be used for English learning.
- e **Audacity:** This is a free recording program with many features. Students can use it to record themselves and self-assess, or for class assignments, or to record online audio streams for practice, among many other things. See Olle Kjellin's tutorial on how to use it for pronunciation practice on p. 148.
- f **Language exchanges:** Students can set up language exchanges locally or online, for pronunciation, speaking, and writing practice. One good one is italki.com; a Google search with the keywords "language exchange sites" will turn up many others. There are also many English and pronunciation learning pages on Facebook and other social media to explore. Students should be reminded to exercise care and good judgment on any social media website to avoid scams and other dangers.
- g **Websites, software programs, commercial apps:** There are simply too many of these to list; you can do an online search and see what you come up with, or check in mobile-device app stores. But be selective – quality varies greatly. Automatic feedback on pronunciation of recorded speech is not yet completely reliable, but it is getting better and can be a useful reference, opportunity for practice, and motivator. One good site is EnglishCentral.com; there are many others.

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Recommended pronunciation textbooks and references

For teachers wondering where to start, it's here:

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The rest:

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Journal

Journal of Second Language Pronunciation edited by John M. Levis, John Benjamins.
Retrieved from <https://benjamins.com/#catalog/journals/jslp>

Pronunciation conferences

- 1 **Phonetics Teaching and Learning Conference** <http://10times.com/phonetics-teaching-conference>
- 2 **Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching** <http://jlevis.public.iastate.edu/pslltconference/>

Online dictionaries with audio files

- 1 **Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary** (GA) www.merriam-webster.com/
- 2 **Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary** (BE and GA) <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/>
- 3 **Oxford Learner's Dictionaries** (BE and GA) www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com
- 4 **Macmillan Dictionary** (BE) www.macmillandictionary.com/
- 5 **The Free Dictionary** (GA and BE) www.thefreedictionary.com/

Easy online input of IPA symbols

- 1 **i2Spi:k Smart IPA Phonetics Keyboard** www.i2speak.com/
- 2 **Online IPA Character Input:** <http://westonruter.github.io/ipa-chart/keyboard/>

Recording and phonetics software and tutorial

- 1 **Audacity** <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>
- 2 **Olle Kjellin. Quality practise pronunciation with audacity – the best method! a tutorial** <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/51074116/Kjellin-Practise-Pronunciation-w-Audacity.pdf>

- 3 **WASP** (Waveforms, Annotations, Spectrograms & Pitch) www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/resource/sfs/wasp.htm
- 4 **Praat: Doing Phonetics by Computer** www.praat.org/

Video resources

- 1 **Karen Steffen Chung: Online Introduction to Phonetics Course** Open Course Ware, National Taiwan University (taught in English and Mandarin) <http://ocw.aca.ntu.edu.tw/ntu-ocw/index.php/ocw/cou/101S102>
- 2 **English Central** Listening/speaking practice site with feedback www.englishcentral.com/videos#
- 3 **Gabriel Wyner: The Pronunciation Video Series**
<http://fluent-forever.com/chapter3/#.VBKHM1Ps02Y>
- 4 **Adrian Underhill: Introduction to Teaching Pronunciation Workshop**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kAPHyHd7Lo>

Online language exchange sites

- 1 **italki.com** www.italki.com/