

Ten core themes in pronunciation teaching

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At least one specific theme has emerged in each of my past fifteen years of teaching pronunciation and phonetics at Taiwan University, based on observations of the skills – and weaknesses – the students bring to class. This paper provides an overview of ten of these core themes and how they can be incorporated into pronunciation teaching. Student improvement in each of the areas is also reviewed, along with student feedback on the learning process and effectiveness of the training.

(1) Understandable or nativelike? There are two main approaches in pronunciation teaching: one is to try to get the students to develop a pronunciation style that is clear and understandable to both native and non-native speakers, but not necessarily nativelike. This approach does not aim for perfection, considering it too ambitious and perhaps even unattainable a goal for most learners. It also is open to incorporating features from different dialects of the language, e.g. General American (GA) and Standard Southern British (SSB).

The second approach is the “100%” approach. The teacher offers a model of one dialectal variety of the target language as a model and expects perfection or near perfection from the students; and also that they learn one variety consistently and not mix in features from other dialects as they please, nor that they use personally convenient substitutions for certain sounds, e.g. [l] for initial [ð], in the case of Taiwan students.

My personal choice is the second approach, regardless of the initial level of the students. The first reason for this is expressed in this quote from Arnold Toynbee: "It is a paradoxical but profoundly true and important principle of life that the most likely way to reach a goal is to be aiming not at that goal itself but at some more ambitious goal beyond it." Even if perfection is not attained, you at least have a chance at it if you set your goals high; If you aim lower, students often end up not only with poorer results, but also with an attitude of “it’s close enough – don’t bug me”, leading to an overall sloppiness that will affect everything in their learning.

Many students start out not being motivated to learn pronunciation really well. I’ve found that discussing the following three points with them helps:

(1) You tire out others needlessly when your pronunciation isn’t clear; and next time they will be less likely to want to speak with you; thus poor pronunciation inconveniences others and affects your social life. As a comparison, the teacher can invite the students to imagine speaking with an older speaker of their native language who speaks with a very strong regional accent and is difficult to understand. A tape of such speech can be played, if available, to further drive home the point.

(2) Others are likely to consider you less *intelligent* if your pronunciation is not very accurate. Some students have said they thought they would just be considered lazy, and didn’t mind this; the idea of being considered less intelligent, however, has shocked many into wanting their spoken English to sound better.

(3) People will vest more *trust* in others who speak more like them, including in word and sentence pattern choice and in pronunciation. I personally have tended to end up with students quite highly motivated to sound as nativelike as possible; some have

continued to work hard and improve on their own long after completing the course.

(2) How to listen. In my observation, the average speaker of English in Taiwan uses stereotyped and fossilized pronunciations based on what they hear from their teachers and peers. While they are certainly aware that this peer version of English is different from that of a native speaker, they are not equipped to analyze how the two varieties may be different, and how to use what they hear in the native model to improve their own pronunciation. They tend to be so occupied with just understanding the meaning of an utterance, that they have little attention left over to hear *how* something is said.

This can however be improved through training. The method I use is the “echo method”, in which students listen to a short model utterance being spoken, then they “listen” to it play again in their head. This mental repetition of what was heard forms the model for what they finally repeat out loud. In this way, their pronunciation is generally much more accurate, since their brain has already fully and correctly internalized the utterance, much like a retinal afterimage. This method has radically improved the pronunciation of several students who started off with seemingly “hopeless” problems.

Often students unconsciously choose former (non-native) teachers or their own peers as their internal model, against which they match their own pronunciation. The teacher can suggest that they instead imagine a native speaker of English, for example, a teacher, a newscaster they are familiar with, or a movie or TV actor. Students themselves may pronounce a word like *water* and think it sounds “normal”, but if a native US speaker pronounces it just like they do, e.g. with an aspirated /t/ instead of a voiced “tap”, the student will usually laugh because it sounds out of place. This is clear proof that they can distinguish native and non-native pronunciations quite well in others, and that the internal voice they model their own pronunciation after is not that of a native speaker. By consciously choosing a specific native speaker for this internal model, they can more easily correct common local pronunciation quirks.

(3) Using matches or near-matches from the phonetic inventory of the native language(s) to correct problem segments. There is some debate on this point; some teachers and textbooks may warn against using a sound or intonation pattern from the native language to stand in for one in the target language. I come unhesitatingly down on the side of pointing out any similar segments I know of in the students’ native language(s) to help them master a segment they are rendering incorrectly in the target language. Even if the two sounds are not exactly the same, the borrowed native one is generally much closer to the target sound than what they would produce without such a point of reference. Further fine-tuning can be done once the sound is *close*.

One major problem I’ve encountered is incorrect *mapping* of sound correspondences from the native to the target language. An example in the case of Taiwan English is that /ʌ/ is mapped to the Chinese sound /ɑ/ by many books, apparently due to the previous use of SSB as the standard for English teaching in Taiwan. This mapping was not changed after GA became the new standard in the early 60s. This has resulted in confusion between words like *cup* and *cop*, *color* and *collar*. Correct mapping of correspondences is essential for good pronunciation.

(4) Stops vs. continuants; syllable and word linking; and unconscious allophonic processes incorrectly carried over from the native language into the target language. A notable feature of Taiwan English is that its linking rules are just

the opposite of standard English: students tend to pronounce a word-initial vowel that is not utterance-initial with a glottal stop instead of linking the preceding sound to it (ex. *is-it*, *am-I*). At the same time, they tend to elide consonant final syllables into the next sound when it is consonantal, so *basketball* is pronounced [ˈbæskəbɔl], *notebook* as [nəʊbʊk], with no period of silence for the “hold” phase of the stop. Students are often surprised that this pause is expected, first, since they think they are imitating movie actors by speaking fast and smoothly and taking clever shortcuts; and second, since this is the model they have received from their teachers. The slogan we use to point this out is “Stop at stops!” – and it has become a sort of inside joke among pronunciation students. (I quote here some lines from a poem written by NTU student Alcyone Hu: “Starting...now, ladies and gentlemen,/I’m going to recite wonderfully,/Rising and falling,/stopping at stops.”).

Another common problem is carryover of the Mandarin allophonic rule in which the /n/ is dropped in V + /n/ rhymes, especially when they occur before approximants like /j/ and /w/, leaving a bare nasalized vowel. So the English *nine years* is typically pronounced [nã̃ jɪrɜz]. Demonstrations and reminders of what to do with the tongue tip seem to help, but this habit is so deeply ingrained from the students’ native language – though almost nobody is in the least aware of it – that it is difficult to get them to remember it every time an English postvocalic /n/ goes by.

(5) Word stress, compound stress, phrase stress. In Taiwan, students are often taught incorrect word stress, or no heed is paid to whether they get the word stress right or not, and bad habits are formed. Students need to be made aware of the importance of stress – it can be compared to the importance of using the correct tone in a Chinese word. This can be combined with teaching compound and phrase stress: in Adjective + Noun expressions, all elements retain their dictionary stress: BEAUTiful *DAY (the * indicates tonic stress), RED ba*LOON; in Noun + Noun compounds, the modified noun is destressed: *BOOKcase, *WHEAT field; unless the modifying noun is a key material or ingredient: BEEF *STEW, CLAY *POT. I give quizzes in which students must circle the stressed syllables (and recently, also mark the tonic syllable; otherwise they tend to forget to begin this syllable on a higher pitch). In this process, they must also develop a concept of the “syllable”, something many start out having problems with. They may divide syllables according to how they sound rather than morphological divisions or dictionary syllabification conventions, e.g. a TTRACT rather than at TRACT is acceptable for this purpose. This also gives us opportunity to note words with fewer syllables (in US English) than expected due to schwa elision, such as *family*, *conference* (2, not 3 syllables), and *vegetable* (3, not 4 syllables).

Teaching a few rules regarding stress shift in related words belonging to different parts of speech can help solve some recurring problems. One example is: do *not* stress the final *-ate* syllable in verbs, even though *-a-* is stressed in nouns ending with *-ation*, e.g. *graduate-graduation*; *vibrate-vibration*.

(6) Information structure and intonation: Though Mandarin is a tone language, and doesn’t use intonation to express concepts like new information and contrast exactly like English does, it still *does* use emphatic intonations to express contrast. Students in Taiwan have generally not been trained to destress old information; or to stress contrasting elements (I want the *blue* one, not the *red* one.) while *distressing* everything else and talking like a robot in the other parts of the sentence. Pointing out

that this is actually done in their native language, and showing *how* it is done, seems to justify its importance, and helps motivate the students to incorporate it in their reading and speech.

(7) Using punctuation for clues to intonation. Though stress and intonation are generally not explicitly marked as such in English orthography, punctuation and occasionally italics and boldface type in fact give many clues as to how to read a sentence with the correct intonation. A useful rule of thumb is to rise (actually, it is not a simple rise, but a rapid high-low-rise melody) just before punctuation marks such as commas and dashes, and to fall at periods and semi-colons. Additionally, when no punctuation is marked, students should be aware of phrasing, and remember to rise and pause for an appropriate length of time at the end of each phrase or constituent, e.g.: *At last* (pause), *he became frightened* (short pause) *and desperately floundered* (short pause) *in all directions*. Watching for upcoming *conjunctions* can help mark some intonation groups. Many students are also not aware of the rise on parenthetical phrases meaning 'he/she said' and benefit from having it pointed out to them.

(8) Pre-reading and text mark-up. This is a technique borrowed from broadcasting (Utterback:127-9). Though in my experience students tend not to prepare in-class reading beforehand, it is useful to introduce the concept of pre-reading and text mark-up. This includes marking the stressed syllables of content words, noun compounds and phrasal verbs, remembering to start higher on the tonic stress, taking care *not* to stress repeated information, pausing in the right places, and so on.

(9) Length, timing, and rhythm, from the segmental to sentence level. Once the vowels and consonants have pretty much been fixed, student reading or speaking may still sound stilted and not quite right. On the segmental level, I find it helpful to introduce the rule of vowel lengthening before voicing and ask them to note examples of this beforehand in a passage to be read aloud, and to remind them again when they don't get it right. Taiwan students have a tendency to read each syllable with equal length. To help them achieve something like English stress-timing, they can make circles with one arm such that the arm goes down to the lowest point for each stressed syllable. The circles sometimes have to be made more quickly or slowly depending on each phrase; but the continuous motion can help redistribute varying syllable lengths more in accord with native speaker rhythmic patterns.

(10) Interpretation: Reading and speaking expressively. Once the above features are adjusted, a reading may still sound very flat and uninteresting. At this point students need to draw on their acting skills and express emotions appropriate to the passage they are reading. This is something they probably do quite well in their own language, so it may help to have them imagine how they would express a similar passage in their native language, then apply something similar to the way they read English. Exposure and *active* listening to lots of good models of spoken English can help. Students often are carrying a lot more of these models around in their heads than they realize. Once they're aware of this personal resource, they can call on it and put it to good use.

While the specific skills discussed here are all useful and important ones in themselves, the ultimate goal of this approach to pronunciation training is in fact to help students develop the sensitivity necessary to continue to learn and improve on their own.

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