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THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

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Annotation: Mastering proper pronunciation is not just a matter of learning individual sounds. Many students can hear and make the different sounds for all the vowels and consonants in English. Unfortunately, they also have to contend with the sound changes that occur with different letter combinations resulting from linking or reduction of vowels and consonants, not to mention stress, pitch, and intonation differences between their native tongue and English.

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Contributing this particular gift can occasionally be a bit tricky, for several reasons. First, your students have already studied English for years and their pronunciation habits are not easy to change. A second problem for those of you who are native speakers of English is that you produce sounds so naturally that you may not be aware of how you do it, so even when you know that your students' pronunciation is wrong, you may not know what the problem is or how to correct it.

The good news, however, is that through dint of hard effort it is possible for students to make some improvement in their pronunciation, particularly when they are attending to their pronunciation. (In other words, even future teachers with fairly heavy accents can learn to pronounce words accurately enough when paying attention that they provide an acceptable model for their

own students.) If you pay attention to your own pronunciation, and spend a little time browsing through typical English textbooks, you should also be able to learn enough about the mechanics of pronunciation to be able to help students. Finally, as long as you are aware of the differences between your own accent and RP, you can provide a useful pronunciation model for your students.

In class, speak naturally using your own accent, although if there are marked regional features to your speech you might lean as far in the direction of a more broadly accepted standard as is comfortable for you.

When teaching pronunciation, in places where your accent differs from RP, don't insist that students follow you rather than the standard. (Future teachers will need to teach the standard in textbooks.) Rather, point out the difference between your accent and the standard so that students are aware of it.

Many of the pronunciation problems you encounter in students will have less to do with the fine tuning of a particular English accent than with simply getting them to pronounce words in a way that is more or less acceptable in any variety of English, so focus your efforts on the many areas where you can help students in their pronunciation. [1, 52]

Unless you are fortunate enough to have very small classes, it will be difficult to give much individual attention to students' pronunciation. Students must therefore learn to rely on their ears to tell them whether their pronunciation approximates that of native speaker models. However, many students are not in the habit of listening carefully before attempting to repeat. In fact, they have often been trained for years to immediately repeat whatever the teacher says, no matter how vague their impression is of the jumble of sounds they are trying to reproduce. Another problem is that while students are listening to the teacher's spoken model, their attention is often focused more on preparing to repeat than on listening. The teacher's sentence consequently serves less as a model for

pronunciation than as a starting shot announcing that students should try to speak.

The first approach to pronunciation is thus helping students develop the habit of listening carefully before they speak. To do this, the first time you say a word or sentence, ask students to listen just listen. They should not murmur the utterance quietly after you; instead they should concentrate on fixing the sound in their memories. It is helpful if you repeat the model utterance several times before asking students to repeat; this not only allows them more chances to listen but also helps students break the habit of blurting out a response as soon as you finish.

Exercises which require listening but no oral response may also help sharpen student listening skills. Minimal pair drills are particularly good for helping students learn to hear the difference between similar sounds. Minimal pairs are words that are pronounced exactly the same with the exception of one sound (Ex: pin--pen, bid--bit). Sample exercise: To help students learn to hear the difference between the short “i” and “e” sounds, ask students to raise their pen when you say the word “pen” and a pin when you say “pin”.

Training students’ ability to hear sound distinctions will not necessarily result in good pronunciation. However, students who have not clearly heard a sound obviously have less chance to produce it correctly than those who listen carefully. [3, 47]

Most native speakers of English have not formally studied the mechanics of English pronunciation, so this is an area in which it would be helpful to do some homework so that you are prepared to explain how sounds are made if called on to do so. However, you will almost certainly be expected to serve as a model for pronunciation, and for this purpose a limited amount of choral drill can be useful. Steps for such a drill would be as follows:

- A. Choose a text that represents normal spoken English (as opposed to more bookish language). A dialog from your textbook would be a good choice.
- B. Read sentences aloud, clearly but at a fairly normal speed. Have students listen to each sentence once or twice before attempting to repeat it. Remind them that they should be listening to and trying to mimic the rhythm, stress, and intonation patterns of your speech as well as your pronunciation.
- C. Build up longer sentences from the end, starting with the last few words, and then adding the previous ones. Ex: "...give you money?" "...expect me to give you money?" "Do you really expect me to give you money?" (This approach tends to preserve sentence intonation better than working from the beginning.)

One fun way to practice the rhythm of English sentences is by taking a dialog from a book, preferably one with short sentences, and turning it into a "jazz chant." In essence, this means finding the natural rhythm of each sentence and then chanting it with emphasis on the key words, something like a group cheer at a football game or a chant at a protest rally ("Hell no, we won't go" and so forth). Clapping or pounding desks adds to the festive nature of the activity. This exercise is particularly good for driving home the point that not all words in English sentences get equal stress.

If you want students to prepare choral drill of a dialog before class, it is best if they have a taped model to work with. Without having heard a dialog before they repeat it, they may wind up polishing an incorrect performance.

Speaking is so important in my opinion, in acquiring and using a language, and language-competence covers so many aspects. Phonetics, both theory and practice constitute the basis of speaking above all other aspects of

language in my opinion. Speaking is a tool of communication. Many teachers, especially if they are new to teaching ESL classes, may be a little intimidated by the prospect of having to teach pronunciation.

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