

A MODEL FOR TEACHING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

By Paulette Dale, Ph.D. Miami Dade Community College³ and
Lillian Poms, M.Ed. Hearing and Speech Center of Florida

This article is intended to provide EFL instructors with highly practical information regarding the organization and methodology in teaching English pronunciation to non native speakers of English.

Program Goal

The goal is to teach ESL students to improve their American English pronunciation and to reduce error patterns which interfere with intelligibility. Intervention focuses on phonology, stress, rhythm, and intonation.

Contrastive Phonology

In order to achieve success with ESL students, it is helpful for the teacher to be aware of the specific linguistic reasons for their difficulty in learning English phonological rules. A comparison of L1 (native language) and L2 (English) will show the similarities and differences between the two languages. This information is valuable to the student as well as the teacher because it assures the students that their errors are completely logical.

Formal Assessment

Once familiar with the linguistic reasons for a student's English pronunciation problems, error patterns are predictable and formal assessment is not a formidable task. Various accent inventory tools, such as Dale and Poms Accent Analysis, 1985 and 1994, can be utilized to assess phonological competency in sentence contexts.

ORDER OF SOUND PRESENTATION

Consonants: The options for selection of sounds or features are numerous. A practical approach is to teach sounds which interfere with communication most. It may be best to begin with easier sounds such as voiced/voiceless "th", final consonants, or voiceless plosives (t) (k) (p) to establish a feeling of success. More difficult sounds such as "r" might be saved for later.

Vowels: We recommend beginning with high front vowels, progressing to low front vowels ((i) (l) (e) (E) (ae) (a)) before tackling the high back then low back vowels (u) (U) (ou) schwa () (). Diphthongs and stressed/unstressed "er" may follow.

³ Paulette Dale may be reached at Miami Dade Community College at her fax, (305) 237-0534, or at her e-mail address, PWDAL@aol.com

At Miami-Dade Community College, we have a series of three advanced ESL level courses, each exclusively dealing with a component of pronunciation. We deal with Consonants, Vowels, and Stress and Intonation in separate courses.

PHONEME PRODUCTION

Many ESL students produce sounds easily with minimal auditory stimulation and explanation. However, when there is difficulty in achieving correct production, the following methods have been proven effective.

1. Contrastive Phonology:

This technique is used to show students similarities between L1 and L2. For example, we show Spanish speakers that the "a" in "casa" is the same sound as (a) in "hot" and "father" or that the intervocalic (d) in "lado" is interdentalized and produced similarly to the voiced "th" in "these", "them", and "those".

2. Use of International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), Diacritics and Graphemics

Orthography causes errors because of confusing English spelling patterns. Thus the (a) in "watch" is easy for the student to produce, but when spelled with an "o" as in "hot" may be confused with (ou). IPA, diacritical markings, and graphemics ("it's kooool in the poooool") are all visual cues which supplement auditory stimulation.

3. English Pronunciation Rules:

Rules provide tangible information. Because English has so few consistent pronunciation rules, ESL students relish those which exist.

4. Phonetic Placement Methodology.

Phonetic placement and anatomical explanations are used when all other methods fail. Multi-sensory methods are helpful. It is useful for students to feel tension under the chin for (i) and lack of tension for (l), or the presence of vibration of the vocal cords for (z) and its absence for (s). Looking in a small hand mirror and seeing the tongue tip between the teeth for "th" is immensely valuable.

5. Auditory Discrimination Practice:

This phase is an essential part of phoneme acquisition. Minimal pairs are the heart of pronunciation work as students generally confuse their target sound with the replacement error (i.e., sit for seat, share for chair, jet for yet, etc.). There are many effective auditory discrimination drills. The following are examples of the kinds the authors employ in their programs for Spanish speakers, Japanese speakers, and international students in general (Dale and Poms, 1985 and 1994).

Present Minimal Words Pairs

The students must identify the word you say. The target sound will vary. (Students see written words or sentences.)

Teacher says: Listen carefully and circle the word you hear: "I see the mitt/ meat." "I see the cot/cat."

Present 3-Word Series in which two are the same and one differs

The students identify which word is different. (Students don't see written words.)

Teacher says: hot/hat/hot. Students circle number: 1 2 3.

Present Sentences. occasionally mispronouncing a word with the target sound

The students identify whether the target word in the sentence was produced correctly or incorrectly.

Teacher says: Circle C (correct) or I (Incorrect): "I like to-swim in the pull." (Sentences are presented auditorily; students don't see them.)

Teaching Sequence

Once the target sound is produced correctly in isolation, therapy proceeds in the following sequence.

1. Words: Stimulation of sound in words (listen and repeat after instructor); production of sound in initial, medial, and final position.
2. Sentences: Production of sound in phrases and sentences heavily loaded with target phoneme (i.e. "The dean will see Steve at three.").
3. Structured and Spontaneous Conversation: Dialogues, roleplaying activities, vocabulary drills, question and answer drills, casual conversation.
4. Carry-over activities and supplementary exercises for out-of-class practice.

Stress and Intonation

A contrastive phonological analysis will also yield information about the differing supersegmental patterns. For example, English has a stress-timed rhythm where certain syllables are heavily stressed while others are de-stressed or reduced. This concept of reduction is new for most ESL students whose L1 is syllable-timed where all vowels in all syllables are pronounced almost equally, such as Japanese. They will have difficulty producing schwa and may stress all syllables equally. They will frequently avoid contractions, causing their speech to sound stilted and unnatural. Intervention focuses on correct use of stress in words and sentences. Students are taught proper rhythm and encouraged to use contractions and assimilative patterns (i.e. "I'll have ham'n eggs") in spoken language. Intonation patterns may also be deviant when the client uses L2 patterns. Spanish speakers, for example, use upward inflections more than English speakers. This tendency will be exhibited in English and must be replaced with appropriate intonation.

Conclusion

A discussion of English pronunciation improvement methodology would be incomplete without stressing the importance of positive student/instructor interaction. ESL students are proud of their cultural heritage and must be assured that reducing their "accents" or bettering their English pronunciation abilities is not the losing of one's culture, but the improving of a skill. At the same time, ESL students are often self-conscious and frustrated about their accented speech and require continual encouragement. We must provide a supporting, reinforcing environment and exhibit a strong sense of humor. Students will delight in laughing "with" rather than "at" each other when mistakes are made. We will be rewarded with their enthusiasm and appreciation for our efforts and interest in their progress.

References

- Dale, P., and Poms, L. (1985). English Pronunciation for Spanish Speakers. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Dale, P. and Poms L. (1994). English Pronunciation for Japanese Speakers. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Dale, P. and Poms, L. (1994). English Pronunciation for International Students. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Regents.