Why is pronunciation important?

The way we speak immediately conveys something about ourselves to the people around us. Learners with good pronunciation in English are more likely to be understood even if they make errors in other areas, whereas learners whose pronunciation is difficult to understand will not be understood, even if their grammar is perfect! Such learners may avoid speaking in English, and thus experience social isolation, employment difficulties and limited opportunities for further study, which may affect their settlement in Australia. We also often judge people by the way they speak, and so learners with poor pronunciation may be judged as incompetent, uneducated or lacking in knowledge, even though listeners are only reacting to their pronunciation. Yet many adult learners find pronunciation one of the most difficult aspects of English to acquire, and need explicit help from the teacher (Morley 1994; Fraser 2000). Surveys of student needs consistently show that our learners feel the need for pronunciation work in class (eg Willing 1989). Thus some sort of pronunciation work in class is essential.

What is pronunciation?

Pronunciation refers to the production of sounds that we use to make meaning. It includes attention to the particular sounds of a language (segments), aspects of speech beyond the level of the individual sound, such as intonation, phrasing, stress, timing, rhythm (suprasegmental aspects), how the voice is projected (voice quality) and, in its broadest definition, attention to gestures and expressions that are closely related to the way we speak a language. Each of these aspects of pronunciation is briefly outlined below, and references for further study are suggested.

The elements of pronunciation

A broad definition of pronunciation includes both suprasegmental and segmental features. Although these different aspects of pronunciation are treated in isolation here, it is important to remember that they all work in combination when we speak, and are therefore usually best learned as an integral part of spoken language. The theory outlined below is essential for teachers so that they understand how these different aspects work, but learners do not necessarily need to cover the theory in depth. It is the practice that concerns them most!

Traditional approaches to pronunciation have often focused on segmental aspects, largely because these relate in some way to letters in writing, and are therefore the easiest to notice and work on. More recent approaches to pronunciation, however, have suggested that the suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation may have the most effect on intelligibility for some speakers. Usually learners benefit from attention to both aspects, and some learners may need help in some areas more than in others. This overview starts with suprasegmental features. One considerable practical advantage of focusing on suprasegmentals is that learners from mixed L1 backgrounds in the same class will benefit, and will often find that their segmental difficulties improve at the same time.

Suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation

Stress

Many teachers advocate starting with stress as the basic building block of pronunciation teaching. Stress refers to the prominence given to certain syllables within words, and to certain syllables or words within utterances. It is signalled by volume, force, pitch change and syllable length, and is often the place where we notice hand movements and other gestures when we are watching someone...
talking. One noticeable feature of English is the reduced nature of unstressed syllables. Thus, not only are stressed syllables longer, louder, more forceful and at a different pitch, but unstressed ones are often different in quality.

Stress is important at three different levels:

- **word level** – multisyllabic words have one or more syllables that are stressed
- **sentence level** – the most important words tend to be stressed
- **contrastive stress** – the most important words carry greater stress.

Consider the example below:

**LYn**da shouldn’t **TAKE** the **STUDeNts** to the **PA**rty

The stressed syllables are marked with capital letters. Each two-syllable word in this utterance must have one syllable that is stressed. This is word-level stress, and it is fixed for any word, although there are some variations between different varieties of English. Those words which are more important for communicating the speaker’s meaning, usually the content words, tend to be stressed (these are underlined in the example), while those which are less important, usually the grammatical words, are unstressed. In addition, one of these stressed syllables or words is usually more important than the others, and this is called the ‘tonic’. When we speak, we tend to group words together in chunks that make sense, called ‘sense groups’ or ‘tone groups’. Thus the example above would normally be said as one sense group. Sense groups are often bounded by short pauses, and are said under a single intonation contour or tune. Within each of these, there is usually one tonic, although there may be a second tonic syllable at the end which also carries significant pitch change (see Clennell 1997).

The tonic is important because it carries not only the major stress, but also the major pitch change (see next section), and it changes according to the speaker’s intended meaning. So if the speaker wanted to emphasise that fact that it is Lynda rather than some other person who should not take the students, then the LYN of Lynda would be more strongly stressed than other stressed syllables in the utterance. If, however, the speaker wanted to emphasise that Lynda should not take them but could perhaps **bring them back**, then **take** would be the most strongly stressed syllable in the utterance. This is sometimes called **contrastive stress**, and is marked with italics in the example.

As noted above, however, an important aspect of teaching stress is its converse – an absence of stress. It is often failure to unstress syllables appropriately that makes learners’ pronunciation difficult to understand because, unlike other languages, English tends to maintain a rhythm from stressed syllable to stressed syllable by unstressing and therefore reducing the syllables in between. This rhythm gives English its characteristic pattern. The reduced vowel ‘schwa’ /ə/ is very common in English and deserves special attention. The ‘a’ at the end of ‘LYNda’, the ‘ents’ at the end of ‘STUDeNts’ and the words ‘to’ and ‘the’ in the above example would all be pronounced with a schwa.

Although the rhythm of English cannot be called strictly stress-timed, it nevertheless presents real problems for learners, particularly if they speak an L1 which is syllable-timed – that is, where each syllable has stress, or where the stress patterns of words are predictable. Work on stress and unstress at each of the three levels is therefore essential for many learners, and the stress pattern should be taught along with every new multisyllabic word. Teachers may find Rogerson and Gilbert (1990) and Zawadzki (1994) helpful for both the theory and practice in this area.

**Intonation**

Intonation, or change of pitch, is crucial in signalling speaker meaning, particularly interpersonal attitudes. As we saw in the previous section, pitch changes are crucially linked with stress. Since intonation patterns are language-specific, learners will need to acquire new ones for English in order to avoid inappropriate transfer from their first language, and thus perhaps inadvertently causing offence.

There have been three major approaches to intonation theory: the grammatical approach (which relates intonation to grammatical functions), an approach that focuses on the link between intonation and attitude, and the discourse approach (which emphasises speakers and their intentions in longer stretches of discourse).

Clennell (1997) identifies some major functions that are important for learners:

- **information marking** (prominent stress)
- **discourse marking** (given/new)
- **conversational management** (turn-taking/collaborating)
- **attitudinal or affect marking** (mood/feeling)
- **grammatical/syntactic marking** (clause boundaries/word classes)
- **pragmatic marking** (illocutionary force/intention of the speaker).

The way in which intonation works is highly complex, and teachers will not have the time to explore the theory in depth with learners. However, there are some simple patterns that can be identified and practised even for beginner learners.
The major changes of pitch take place on stressed syllables, particularly on the tonic syllable. Five major patterns of tones can be identified: fall, rise, fall-rise, rise-fall and level:

- A **falling pattern** usually indicates that the speaker has finished, at least temporarily.

- A **rising intonation** signals a question or continuation. This difference can signal meaning even in short exchanges. Thus, if someone calls me and I answer ‘Yes’ with a rising tone, I signal that I am opening interaction with them, but if I say ‘Yes’ with a falling tone, this may indicate that I do not wish to speak to them, and may even be interpreted as rude. Thus questions to which the speaker knows the answer will be said with a falling tone, while questions in which new information is sought are usually said with a rising tone (Clennell 1997). Often, ‘Yes-No’ questions will have a rising tone, and ‘wh’ questions will have a falling tone, but this is only true some of the time, since the way speakers make these questions depends crucially on their intention and how the question fits into the rest of what they are saying. In Australia, many speakers use what is called a ‘high rising terminal’ – that is, their intonation rises, even where they may be expected to signal finality at the end of an utterance. This seems to be associated with the signal of solidarity, and is more often found among less powerful speakers.

- A **fall-rise** tone signals definiteness combined with some qualification; what Yallop (1995) calls a ‘No, but…’ interpretation. Thus, if someone asks if I am busy, and I am suspicious that this is a prelude to asking me to do a job, I may answer ‘No’ but with a fall-rise tone to indicate my mixed feelings.

- A **rise-fall** is usually used to signal strong feelings of surprise or approval or disapproval. In general, larger movements in pitch signal higher emotion and more interest.

- A **level tone** signals boredom, routine or triviality, and thus is the tone that teachers use for routines such as the class roll. Yet this is the tone that many learners may use if they do not pay attention to their intonation. It is therefore particularly important to help learners to overcome any tendency they may have to use this tone inadvertently.

Also important in intonation is the notion of ‘key’ or the relative pitch chosen by a speaker. Contrasts in intonation are usually perceived in relation to the key. Thus, the first stressed syllable of new information may be said at a higher pitch, criticism may be offered at a lower pitch and so on. Indeed, one relatively simple way of approaching intonation in the classroom is through the identification and practice of stressed syllables and their relative pitch.

More details on tones and how they are used in speech can be found in Yallop (1995), and some practice activities can be found in Gilbert (1994) and Hancock (1995). Clennell (1997) provides a useful description of how intonation is used to signal what is important in what is said, the force or attitude with which something is said, how we use intonation to distinguish between new and old information, and how we use pitch change to signal turn-taking and other conversational management strategies. He also suggests some teaching ideas appropriate for more advanced learners, which could be adapted for use with lower levels.

**Features of connected speech**

In English we link and blend sounds between words in a way which is quite distinctive from that of other languages, and these features help us to manage the patterns of stress, unstress and pitch change discussed above. Crucially, learners in whose first language final consonant sounds are rare or not fully pronounced (eg many Asian languages) may find it very difficult to say word-final consonants and therefore to link words in the way that is characteristic of English. These linking devices are not trivial, as they help learners to avoid the breathy, choppy delivery that can impede communication. This is true not only for speakers of Asian languages, but also for speakers of languages where some vowels cannot be linked in this way – for example, Arabic speakers.

The example below illustrates these features:

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It's important to analyse your own English
1 2 3 4 5 6
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There is an example of a consonant-vowel link at no 1 and no 6, a consonant-consonant link at no 2, the intrusion of a ‘w’ glide at no 3 and an ‘r’ glide at no 5, and either a consonant-vowel link or a sound change from /z/ to /s/ between the two words at no 4.

A fuller account of these phenomena and some practice activities can be found in Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (1996). For some excellent ideas on practising the features of connected speech see Hancock (1995).

**Voice quality**

Voice quality has received little attention in L2 learning, although actors may be quite familiar with the concept. The term refers to the more general, longer-term articulatory settings shared by many sounds within a language, and these affect accent and the quality of voice in a global way. Pennington (1996) notes that voice quality is the aspect of prosody that ‘spans the longest stretches of speech and underlies all other aspects’, and argues that all
other aspects of pronunciation (suprasegmental and segmental) are ‘produced within the limits of the voice quality set by the articulators and the breath stream coming up from the lungs’.

Basically, the argument is that areas of the mouth may be held ready in particular long-term settings which affect the overall quality of the accent. Since different languages have different long-term settings, getting learners to focus on the settings relevant to English may help the learner with individual sounds as well as their overall voice quality, particularly for L1 speakers with settings that differ considerably from English. Thus, for example, Vietnamese and Cantonese are pronounced primarily in the back of the mouth, whereas English is pronounced primarily in the front of the mouth, so that activities to train the learner to be more aware of bringing sounds forward may impact on a number of different sounds. An example of how this has been done can be found in Kerr (2000), while more background theory of this area can be found in Esling (1994).

**Segmental aspects of pronunciation**

Learning to pronounce the sounds of English in natural speech is a crucial part of learning pronunciation in English. Many learners may have difficulty with particular sounds, sound combinations or with putting particular sounds in particular positions (word-final /z/ for some Vietnamese background speakers, for example). Since there are many good reference works which cover the detail of the phonology of English in some detail (see ‘Annotated bibliography’ at the end of this fact sheet), here we will only give a brief overview.

What these publications do not always emphasise is that the theory of how sounds are made in English is just that – theory. Each individual sound will, in fact, be made in a slightly different way according to what is next to it in spoken discourse. So a consonant in a cluster or in a particular position, or next to a word so that it forms a cluster, will be made differently or even completely omitted. Similarly, the quality of vowels can change dramatically depending on how much they are stressed. So remember that linguistic descriptions of perfectly formed sounds often describe the citation form of a word – that is, the form that we say in isolation when we are on our ‘best behaviour’, rather than the way we say it in normal conversation. This can be confusing for students who are trying to make sense of everyday life! Fraser’s (2001) handbook for teachers provides some useful background about the difficulty learners have in conceptualising sounds in spoken English.

The sound system of English is made up of phonemes, or individual sounds which carry the potential to make meaning, and these may be vowels, diphthongs (combinations of two vowel sounds), triphthongs (combinations of three vowel sounds) or consonants. These sounds are made using our tongue in different parts of the mouth. Underhill (1994) gives a teacher-friendly description of the sounds of English, and provides a phonemic chart arranged according to how they are made in the mouth. These sounds are represented using a phonemic script, like that used in the front of dictionaries. It is very useful for teachers to become familiar with this script, and more details and examples of how it is used can be found in reference works such as Underhill (1994) and Roach (1991).

Consonants are made by causing a blockage or partial blockage in the mouth, and these are usually described in terms of:

- where the sound is made in the mouth, or *place of articulation*
- how the sound is made, or the *manner of articulation*
- whether or not the vocal cords vibrate, or *voicing*.

Consonants, therefore, all differ from each other in at least one of these ways. The consonants of English are shown in Table 1, according to where and how they are made.

It is important for teachers to know where and how a sound is made, and many learners also find this knowledge helpful, although they will only come to say sounds intelligibly through careful listening and practice. The distinction between voiced and unvoiced sounds is often more clearly heard in the amount of aspiration or force heard (greater for unvoiced sounds) and the length of the vowel before the sound (longer before voiced sounds) rather than in the presence or absence of voicing. Consonant sounds may occur together in English to form clusters, which can pose particular difficulties for learners.
Vowels are usually described in terms of:

- length, although remember that length depends on stress, and that even short vowels in English may seem rather long when stressed;
- the position in the mouth in which they are made (in terms of their position from high to low and front to back);
- the degree to which the lips are rounded, spread or neutral.

(Vowels are also often described as either lax or tense, but this information is not always helpful for learners.)

The vowels in the phonemic chart are ordered according to where they are made in the mouth. Thus the top row of vowels are made high in the mouth, the middle row are made in the centre, and the bottom row are made low in the mouth. Similarly, the vowels on the left side of the chart are made in the front of the mouth, the right-hand rows of the vowel section are made in the back of the mouth, and those in between are made in between. Thus the chart can serve as a useful reminder for both teacher and learner! A fuller description of the vowels in English can be found in Roach (1991), Underhill (1994) and Yallop (1995).

English may have many more vowel sounds or longer vowels than learners are used to in their first language, and so learners may need a lot of careful listening to vowel sounds, and to think about how to distinguish them, as well as where in the mouth they should make them.

An important issue which is not always treated in the reference texts is that adult learners will already have 'drawn the boundary' of what counts as a particular sound in a slightly different place or manner in their first language. An example of this would be the characteristic French /r/ compared with the English sound. Sometimes there are two separate sounds capable of distinguishing differences in meaning in English, but not in the learner's first language. An example would be the distinction that is made in English between /l/ and /r/, which is not made in the same way in Chinese. The converse may also be true – that is, English may only have one sound, where their first language has two, as in the so-called light /l/ (as in 'leaf') and dark /l/ (as in 'feet') in English. Russian distinguishes these as two separate phonemes. Another difficulty may arise when learners do not have the English phoneme at all in their first language and they need to learn it from scratch, although this seems to present less of a problem for learners in the long term.

Gestures

There has been quite a lot of interest in how the movements that our body makes as we are speaking may be closely related to how we speak, and some approaches to the teaching of pronunciation heavily emphasise training in gestures associated with speaking habits in English. As we speak, we synchronise many of our movements with the rhythm of what we are saying, so that focusing on the movements may help learners develop an awareness of stress and rhythm. See Gassin (1992) for an account of the importance of gesture. Some practical ideas in the form of 'conversational shadowing' and some theory background can be found in Murphey (2002).

Note

1 Different authors distinguish a different number of tones and disagree about how reliably identifiable they are in actual spoken discourse. Nevertheless, a basic appreciation of the notion of tone seems useful as a starting point for learners.
Annotated bibliography


This text describes the sounds and prosody of American English for teachers and provides some good teaching activities. It is useful as it does not take a purely theoretical perspective, but may be more useful for prosodic features and connected speech than for individual sounds (particularly vowels), although there is an Appendix which summarises the differences between American and British English.


A brief overview of the importance of intonation, together with activity suggestions.


This book gives an accessible and sensible overview of English phonology and approaches to teaching it. While it does not cover the phonological detail of some other reference works, it is very teaching-focused in what is included and tackles issues relevant to teachers such as intelligibility and factors that influence what an individual can learn. It is also refreshing in its inclusion of non-native teachers and its attention to how we can approach pronunciation teaching in the classroom. There are also many useful professional development activities on a wide range of topics throughout.


This chapter provides useful ideas for the teaching of this much-neglected area of pronunciation.

Fraser, H 2001. Teaching pronunciation: A handbook for teachers and trainers. Canberra: Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs:

This is a handy, free resource which is downloadable from the DETYA website and provides some useful background for teachers new to the area. There are particularly useful sections on how the adult learner needs to reconceptualise sounds and prosody in terms of English, and encouragement for teachers to actively teach in a learner-centred, integrated way, focusing on chunks of discourse rather than isolated sounds. A very readable resource which tackles some of the detail of pronunciation teaching in the classroom at the level of teaching philosophy and techniques, as well as suggesting activities.

Fraser, H 2000. Coordinating improvements in pronunciation teaching for adult learners of English as a second language. Canberra: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (Australian National Training Authority Adult Literacy National Project)


This article argues for the importance of appropriate body language when we are learning and using another language since verbal, kinesic and prosodic language behaviour are all linked. Examples from other languages are given.


This chapter provides useful ideas for the teaching of this much-neglected area of pronunciation.


This is an immensely useful book which provides a multitude of ideas for practising a wide variety of segmental and suprasegmental features. It provides a host of game-like activities with serious learning points through photocopiable game pages or game boards which can be distributed to the class. Instructions and – crucially – answers are also provided, so that the teacher does not need to spend a long time in preparation, although care should be taken to allow enough time to set up the activity in class. Although many of these activities are designed for more advanced learners, they can be easily adapted so that the content reflects whatever the teacher is currently focusing on in class, and they therefore provide an ideal way of integrating focused pronunciation practice into a lesson.

Herbert, J 1993. ‘It’s not what you say but how you say it’. TESOL in Context, 3, 1

This article provides a useful overview and checklist of the kinds of issues that learners have in pronunciation.


A well-researched and forcefully argued case for focusing on a core of phonological features which are important for intelligibility when English is used as a lingua franca between speakers from other backgrounds. Although English as an international language is not necessarily the focus of the AMEP, this book stirs a few possums and sets out a rationale for a teaching program in a way that few other books in the area do. A fascinating, demanding read for those who want to explore the theory behind the teaching of pronunciation in depth.


This is still an excellent source of both background for teachers and activities for approaching pronunciation in the classroom. It provides sensible discussion of some of the issues, background theory on the basics of phonology, useful activities for teaching and also summarises...
some of the issues for learners from particular language backgrounds. It is readable and practical as well as informative.


A very useful reference book which brings together a number of different writers who have been very influential in recent thinking about approaches to teaching pronunciation.


Pennington, M C 1996. Phonology in English language teaching: An international approach. London: Longman
This provides a useful overview of the sound system of English. While it is not easy reading, it cover the essentials of what teachers need to know about phonological theory thoroughly, and takes a refreshingly open-minded approach to our models and goals in teaching pronunciation.

This has been a standard reference text in the area for many years and provides a solid, detailed overview of English. Although it is designed for students, these are obviously of a very high level, as the book is informative but not always readable. Designed to be used as a course book from the beginning to the end, it is nevertheless an extremely useful reference to dip into for those elusive facts or to brush up on phonological theory. It is uncomplicated about which accent it focuses on, and unreconstructed in its assumptions about ‘foreigners’ and the models they may wish to emulate. Otherwise, an excellent source.

This resource consists of a teacher’s book and a student book and two cassettes. The student’s book offers a range of exercises suitable for intermediate to advanced learners, which are actually very useful to use as awareness-raising exercises with teachers! Many of the activities can be easily adapted for use with different levels. It concentrates on those areas of pronunciation that are often forgotten – such as the link between stress patterns and whether information is ‘new’ or ‘given’ – and thought groups.

A useful source of the kinds of difficulties that learners from different language backgrounds may have, although some of the difficulties reported seem to relate particularly to the sound-symbol relationship as much as to first language phonology. This is a good place to start if you are wondering about why your learners have the problems they do.

As the title implies, this text focuses more on the sounds of English than on suprasegmentals. It is aimed at giving an awareness of the elements of pronunciation to native-speaking teachers who can speak the language but do not know about how sounds are made. As such, it is a good source of short activities to help native-speakers become more aware of what is happening in their mouths so that they can help learners. It has a wealth of practical ideas, although some of these are more suitable for higher level classes, and many focus on the use of the phonemic chart in class, which, Underhill argues, is no bad thing.

Willing, K 1989. Teaching how to learn. Sydney: NCELTR

This book is designed to introduce readers to the nature of spoken language. Among its strong points is the fact that it is an Australian text, and that it takes a more expansive view than some on different varieties of English and on the rather arbitrary nature of the constructs we use to describe phonology. It is not, however, particularly oriented towards teachers, and, while readable, is nevertheless quite technical in places, and the treatment of individual sounds is more geared to those with a theoretical interest in the subject. The suprasegmental chapters are particularly useful.


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