

Module 6 – How to Teach Pronunciation

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I. The aims of teaching pronunciation and some key terms

1. Why teach pronunciation

When we introduce new grammar or vocabulary, it is important to teach our students how to pronounce the word or grammatical structure. Teaching pronunciation is an ongoing process at any level, but in beginner and elementary stages we can devote whole lessons to training specific sounds or intonation patterns.

Why teach pronunciation? By concentrating on pronunciation, we make our students aware of how sounds are formed, how words are stressed and what intonation patterns exist.

This has a double benefit:

- It helps them become intelligible speakers of English
- It improves their own comprehension of spoken English.

2. Some important terms

Here is a list of key terms you will come across in the course of this module:

Intonation

The ability to vary the pitch and tune of speech; the way our voice goes up and down when we speak.

Syllables

The units into which a word is divided, containing a vowel and one or more consonants.

Sentence stress

Emphasising words to give particular meaning to a sentence.

Vowels

Sounds pronounced with an open mouth and the tongue not touching the teeth, top of the mouth, etc, for example a, o, u.

Consonants

Sounds formed when your tongue, lips, etc. partly or completely stop the air current, for example m, t, r.

Phonemic script (also called phonetic script; phonemic/phonetic alphabet)

This contains symbols which represent sounds in a language. In most bilingual dictionaries next to a word's spelling, you can find its pronunciation drawn up as a series of symbols. For example, /'ɪŋɡlɪʃ/. This helps foreigners to pronounce new words.

The phonemic alphabet is used internationally, and we will use these symbols throughout the module.

3. The phonemic script

Whether or not students should be taught the phonemic alphabet is open to debate. Some teachers claim that learning these symbols places an unnecessary burden on students. However, since English spelling and English pronunciation often do not correspond to each other, knowing the phonemic script helps students to work out the pronunciation of the new words which they find in a text without the assistance of a teacher or another English speaker.

Your students don't need to know how to write in phonetic script, it's enough that they know how to read it.

There are 44 sounds in the phonetic alphabet: 20 vowels and 24 consonants (note that some words contain the same sound, but have different spelling):

Vowels

Single vowel sounds are as follows (note ' : ' represents the long sound) :

- /i:/ sleep, clean
- /ɪ/ click, written
- /ʊ/ put, book
- /u:/ shoe, tooth
- /e/ bed, end
- /ə/ suppose, item
- /ɜ:/ bird, earn
- /ɔ/ ball, saw
- /æ/ hat, man
- /ʌ/ truck, love
- /ɑ:/ calm, father
- /ɒ/ (in some dictionaries /ɔ/) box, watch

Diphthongs

Here is a list of the phonemic diphthongs (double vowel sounds):

- /ɪə/ fear, beer

/eɪ/ day, prey
/ʊə/ tour, poor
/ɔɪ/ joy, boy
/əʊ/ grow, rose
/eə/ fair, wear
/aɪ/ ride, eye
/aʊ/ now, sound

Consonants

Here is a list of the phonetic consonants:

/p/ pen
/b/ book
/t/ table
/d/ desk
/tʃ/ chair
/dʒ/ jet
/k/ cat
/g/ goal
/f/ fine
/v/ very
/θ/ think
/ð/ father
/s/ house
/z/ rose
/ʃ/ ship
/ʒ/ pleasure
/m/ milk
/n/ name
/ŋ/ sing
/h/ hello
/l/ love
/r/ right
/w/ well
/j/ yes

Let's look at some examples of words and sentences written in phonemic script:

1. /ɪ'nʌf/ - enough
2. /kræʃ/ - crash
3. /'fɜ:nɪtʃə/ - furniture
4. /haʊ'a:ju:/ - How are you?
5. /'wɒdʒjə'θɪŋkjə'du:ɪŋ/ - What do you think you're doing?

As you have seen, some sounds disappear or change their quality in connected speech. It's important to teach natural pronunciation of English sentences and phrases to our students.

For example, demonstrating and drilling the natural way of pronouncing the third conditional structure will spare them the frustration of trying to pronounce 'he would have had' as it is written. Saying /'hi:dəv'hæd/ is easier and makes our students sound similar to native speakers.

4. Intelligibility or perfection?

Trying to imitate native pronunciation is a challenging task for any learner of English as a foreign language. Some students are better at imitating sounds and speech patterns than others, but most non-native speakers struggle. Therefore, we should not expect our students to pick up sounds and intonation patterns instantly; instead we should compliment them on their efforts.

We should also keep in mind that they will probably never achieve perfection, and the main indicator of their success is whether they can make themselves understood. Intelligibility is the main goal of pronunciation teaching – and most students are happy just to be understood. (However, if someone wants to sound like a native speaker we should not deny them that objective.)

It is intelligibility that we need to consider above all when we decide whether or not to correct our students' pronunciation errors. For example, if someone says /'tu:seɪk/ instead of /'tu:θeɪk/ for 'toothache', they will probably be understood as it is unlikely to be confused with any other word. We may still want to drill the problem word and other words with the same sound at a later stage but it is not necessary to correct the mistake immediately.

If, however, they say 'live' with the long sound /li:v/ - the way another verb, 'leave', is pronounced - we should address this problem early on because it is likely to cause misunderstanding in the future.

II. Teaching phonemes (sounds)

1. Native language interference

Depending on where they are from, our non-native speakers may have problems with certain sounds. Being aware of these commonly confused sounds helps us identify the cause of students' comprehension/intelligibility problems.

Look at the following table and notice the problems that students from different countries might have with certain sounds.

Nationality	Sound	Example	Sound produced
French	/θ/	<u>T</u> heatre	<u>S</u> eatre
Japanese	/l/	Tro <u>l</u> ley	Tro <u>r</u> rey
Greek	/ʃ/	<u>S</u> hopping	<u>S</u> opping
German	/w/	<u>W</u> agon	<u>V</u> agon

There are plenty more examples. You may have noted already how Spanish speakers confuse /b/ and /v/, so they may be heard saying 'best' instead of 'vest', or Russians, who have problems with /æ/, so 'man' and 'men' may sound the same. Finnish speakers use more air in their consonants than necessary, so 'gone' becomes 'con'. Arabic speakers tend to confuse /b/ and /p/. There are lots of other examples around the world.

2. The four steps of teaching new sounds

Teachers often want to focus on one particular sound or a pair of sounds to make students aware of their pronunciation and enable them to distinguish between two similar phonemes.

Let us say you are going to practise the phonemes /i/ and /i:/ with your intermediate class. The lesson's objective is to help your students distinguish between the two sounds and pronounce them as accurately as possible. You will teach the sounds in four steps, which we shall call 'demo', 'drill', 'check' and 'do it'.

Demo

Demonstrate the sounds using words familiar to your students and have them identify which letters create the target sounds (/i:/ is usually produced by 'ee' or 'ea' and /i/ usually corresponds to the letter 'i')

e.g., beef, teach, week, deal; bill, hit, grip, dim

Drill

Drill the following pairs of words to practise the difference between /i:/ and /i/

w <u>hee</u> l	w <u>i</u> ll	f <u>ee</u> l	f <u>i</u> ll
g <u>ree</u> t	g <u>ri</u> t	s <u>lee</u> p	s <u>li</u> p
m <u>ea</u> l	m <u>i</u> ll	ch <u>ea</u> p	ch <u>i</u> p
b <u>ea</u> d	b <u>i</u> d	de <u>a</u> n	d <u>i</u> n

Then drill the target sounds separately in phrases or sentences:

/i:/

It's very cheap
I can't sleep
Sweet dreams
Wheel of fortune

/i/

Have a good trip
Get rid of it
That's a pity
Little by little

Check

Identify target sounds. Hand out the following sentences to your students. Then either read them out or play a recording and have the students work out which word they hear:

1. I can see a small sheep/ship on the horizon.
2. Climbing that mountain was a feat/fit.
3. You need to heat/hit it before you eat it.
4. He always feels/fills his suitcase with useless things.

It is a good idea to show to the students what the position of your tongue, lips and teeth is when you form the target sounds. You could mime it or draw diagrams.

Do it

After demonstrating, drilling and checking how well your students can identify the target sounds, let them use those sounds in a communication task. Take a look at the following example. This task could be based around the question:

"What is the best way to spend a weekend?"

First the students fill in the chart for themselves. Therefore, if they think reading a magazine is a good way to spend a weekend, they put a cross, or a 'yes', or any other sign.

They can then interview two other classmates and complete the remaining two columns of the chart with each respective classmate's answers. Asking classmates will provide them with extra practice using the target sounds.

Activity	You		
visit a friend			
see a thriller			
read a magazine			
cook a meal			
go fishing			
eat a lot of chips			

3. Activities with sounds

There are plenty of other activities you can do to practise sounds with your students.

Phonemic bingo

Instead of words on the bingo cards write phonemic symbols representing sounds. When the teacher says the sound or a word containing the sound the student can cross off that square on their board. Alternatively, whole words could be written in phonemic symbols - students would then need to identify the word when the teacher says it either alone or in a sentence.

Phonemic noughts and crosses

Write a sound in each square. To claim a square the student needs to say a word which contains the sound in the square.

Pair dictation

Get your students to sit back to back in pairs. Give each of them two sheets of paper with two columns of words on each sheet. Each word would contain the sounds you are teaching. Student A reads the words on worksheet A, choosing only one word from each pair. Student B listens, looks at worksheet A, decides which column the word comes from and marks it on his/her copy of worksheet A. Then in a similar way student B reads the words on worksheet B while student A marks the words he/she thinks he hears on his/her copy of worksheet B. Then each of them compares what they've read with what the other person has selected.

Here is an example for sounds /s/ and /ʃ/.

Worksheet A

sea she
sign shine
Sue shoe
sip ship
mess mesh

Worksheet B

sour shower
sin shin
simmer shimmer
sock shock
Marss marsh

Tongue-twister dialogues

Tongue-twisters can be helpful as such but you can also turn them into an extended activity. Give students time to practise a dialogue in which the target sounds are used many times. Get them to present the dialogue to the class, trying to be as fluent and clear as possible. Let them use props to make the activity fun.

Here is an example of a tricky dialogue for sounds /s/ and /ʃ/. Consider asking two students to read out this dialogue as clearly as they can.

Mrs Marsh: Does this shop sell washing machines?

Mr Shaw: Yes, this is the newest washing machine, madam.

Mrs Marsh: Is it Swedish?

Mr Shaw: No madam, it's English.

Mrs Marsh: Please show me how it washes.

Mr Shaw: Shall I give you a demonstration? Here are some sheets and shirts. You put them in the washing machine. You shut the door. And you push this button.

Mrs Marsh: The machine shouldn't shake like that, should it?

Mr Shaw: Washing machines always shake, madam. Ah! It's finished now.

Mrs Marsh: But the sheets have shrunk, and so have the shirts.

Mr Shaw: Do you wish to buy this washing machine, madam?

Mrs Marsh: I'm not sure.

4. Teaching sound-spelling correspondences

English is different from many languages in that its spelling is highly irregular. Even though there are some spelling/pronunciation rules, there are just as many - or more - exceptions to the rules. That causes problems for learners. We should encourage them to consult a bilingual dictionary which shows the pronunciation in phonetic script. We could also help them identify some typical sound-spelling correspondences.

Here is an exercise for your students to familiarise themselves with the 'ea' sound.

Play a recording

Ask your students to listen to us or to a recording and see how many different pronunciations they can find for the 'ea' spelling in the following words:

bean real steak heard
bread create beard lead
meal seat bear clean
head sweat wear cleanse
break heart fear great

Get answers

Play the tape several times and elicit answers from the class. Everybody should remember a certain number of examples from the list, and together you should be able to come up with the following pronunciations for 'ea':

/i:/ - e.g. bean
/e/ - e.g. bread
/eɪ/ - e.g. break
/ɪə/ - e.g. real
/ɪ'eɪ/ - e.g. create
/ɑ:/ - e.g. heart
/eə/ - e.g. bear
/ɜ:/ - e.g. heard

3. Explore the subject

Elicit the fact that the most common pronunciation for 'ea' is /i:/. Ask the students to think of any other words with 'ea' in them and tell you how the double letter is pronounced in each of

their words. This could be a team activity - see which team can come up with more examples of words within the time allotted.

The reverse of the previous game can also be played, as follows:

- Ask your students to identify different spellings for the same sound:
For the sound /f/, for example, it would be 'f' in 'fine', 'ph' in 'physics' or 'gh' in 'laugh'.
For the sound /tʃ/ it would be 'ch' in 'cheek', 'tch' in 'catch' or 't (+ure)' in 'picture'.
- Give them a list of words including those with the target sound and those without, and read the words out to them or play a recording.
- Ask them to underline the words which have the target sound and tell you what the spelling options for that sound are. That way the students will be able to work out the rules by themselves, which usually helps to remember them better.

5. Helping students work out the rules

Pronunciation rules could be worked out by learners of higher levels if we ask them to read a list of words themselves and look for similarities and regularities.

To teach the pronunciation rule for 'c', you could give your students the following list (List A) and ask them to read it out.

List A:

cream
call
come
clap
curry
cow

Next, ask your student to read out list B.

List B:

cell
bicycle
cinema
cyberspace
receive
science

Ask your students to try and come up with a rule for pronouncing 'c' based on the examples given. If they are having difficulty suggest that they look at the letter that follows the 'c'.

They should then find that 'c' is pronounced /s/ when it stands before 'e', 'i' and 'y' and /k/ when it is placed before any other vowel or consonant.

III. Teaching stress

1. Syllable stress in words

For every word in the English language there is one main stressed syllable. If the word is short and contains just one syllable that will be the stressed syllable.

For example:

house **one** **joe** **big** **my**

Notice how the stress mark appears below the stressed vowel.

However, if a word contains two or more syllables, there will be one main stressed syllable, while the other syllables will not be stressed. Remembering which syllable to stress can be a challenge for speakers of the languages whether the stress in words is pre-determined, such as French or Spanish. We can demonstrate stressed and unstressed syllables in the following way (the larger circle shows where the stress falls):

math e ma tics **math e ma ti cal** **math e ma ti cian**
pho to graph **pho tog ra phy** **pho to gra phic** **pho to graph i cally**

Sometimes the main stress will change from one syllable to another depending on the function of the same word.

For example:

record **record**

The first word is a noun and the second is a verb.

Our students will need to be taught how to pronounce words correctly and we can do that by choral and individual drilling.

We can then give students a worksheet with words and ask them to put the words in correct columns according to the stress patterns.

For example:



celebration
speculation
democratic
intuition
epidemic



authority
phenomenal
theatrical
enthusiasm
celebrity

After that we can put students in teams and give them 5 minutes to add as many words to each column as they can. The team wins if they have written more words than any other team. If a word has been put in the wrong column it is not counted.

The examples above are suitable for the intermediate level upwards. Elementary learners could be given a similar exercise based on simpler stress patterns, such as °, °°, or °°°.

2. Phrase/sentence stress

Teaching syllable stress in words is important, but it doesn't mean your students will automatically be able to stress sentences correctly. The stress in a phrase or a sentence may vary depending on meaning, and sometimes a word with two or more syllables remains completely unstressed.

Let's take the sentence "I didn't do anything interesting yesterday" as an example. In this sentence, the stress may fall on 'didn't' and 'interesting' - in that case both 'anything' and 'yesterday' will be unstressed and it may even be hard to determine which is the stressed syllable in each word.

In this example, therefore, it is more important to know the main sentence stress than the stress within some of the words. Depending on meaning, practically any word in a phrase or a sentence can be emphasised, whether it is at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of a sentence. Try stressing different words in the sentence and see how the meaning changes.

Draw your students' attention to the way stress can change meaning by presenting a sentence or phrase and asking them to think what it might mean if different words took the main stress. Let's take the sentence "I bought a car last week." The words in bold print show where the stress falls.

I bought a car last week. (It wasn't my brother who did it)

I **bought** a car last week. (Not sold; I had sold my old car the week before)

I bought a **car** last week. ('Car' would normally be stressed if the speaker were presenting this as news to someone. A more emphatic stress may be placed on 'car' if it means: "you thought I'd bought a bike, but it was actually a car").

I bought a car **last** week. (Not the week before as they told you)

I bought a car last **week**. (Not last month; the emphatic stress it could also mean "it's been a week since I bought it and you still don't know about it!")

The change of stress in a sentence caused by the speaker's trying to convey a specific meaning is called the logical stress.

There are various ways you can teach stress in phrases and sentences.

You could select a dialogue from your course book and go through it with your class drawing the main stresses and intonation patterns.

You could then repeat the dialogue together several times.

Let your students practise in pairs/groups and finally let them present it to the class.

Here an example of a simple dialogue for practising logical stress in sentences.

Michael: Look, that's Jill.

Nick: Where?

M: Over there, waiting for her baggage.

N: Is she the one with a yellow handbag?

M: No, she's the one with a brown handbag.

N: Oh, I see, she is holding it in her right hand.

M: Well, she is actually holding it in her left hand.

N: Yes, I can see her! The tall one.

M: No, the short one. Look, she is waving to us.

M: Oh, yes, I can see her now. I was looking the wrong way.

IV. Teaching intonation

1. Some common intonation patterns

Intonation is the music of language – as it is the way our voice goes up and down when we speak. We use intonation to express meaning, especially when we are showing our feelings.

To raise students' awareness of how important intonation is in conveying meaning, say the word 'OK' to them in several different ways and elicit how the meaning changes. For example, you can say it:

- as if you enthusiastically agree to do something;
- as if you are finally agreeing to do something you don't like doing;
- showing interest, encouraging the other person to tell you more;
- showing amusement;
- showing boredom.

The students will see that even though the word is unchanged, the meaning conveyed is totally different.

Using a rising or falling tone can add extra definition to a sentence.

A rising tone is often used in asking 'yes/no' questions, listing things or at the end of a subordinate clause preceding the main clause.

For example:

Are you from Birmingham?

I have a mother, a father, a brother and two sisters. (voice rises on each of the listed items except the last one)

Before you open the bottle shake it well. (voice rises after 'bottle')

Sometimes raising your voice slightly on an unstressed word at the end of a sentence makes you sound less straightforward and more polite. For example in the sentence 'I am leaving tomorrow' (where the main sentence stress is on 'leaving' and it is falling tone), we may raise our voice on 'tomorrow', which will make us sound somewhat less dramatic and more optimistic than if our voice remained at a low pitch.

A falling tone is often used for statements, requests, at the end of lists and for 'Wh-' questions.

For example:

She is from Birmingham.

Two cups of tea, please. (voice falls on 'tea' but may rise on 'please')

I have a mother, a father, a brother and two sisters. (voice falls on the last listed item)

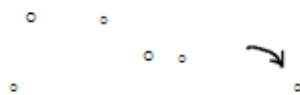
Who are you?

There are some common intonation patterns your students will need to learn demonstrated below. Here are the symbols' meanings:

- Small circles indicate unstressed syllables
- Large circles show stressed syllables where the voice does not rise or fall
- Gentle arrows show the way our voice falls or rises on some stressed syllables
- Steeper arrows show the way our voice travels a great distance from a very high to a very low pitch or vice versa (excited speech)
- How high or low a symbol is positioned underneath the sentences reflects the pitch of our voice.

1. Descending pattern with a fall.

I used to live in Stockholm.



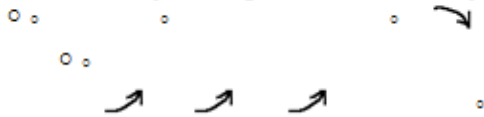
2. Descending pattern with a rise.

Did you ever meet anyone famous?



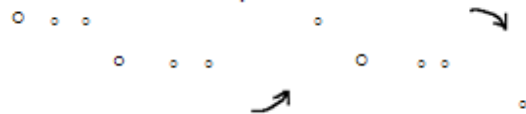
3. Listing

I invited Lucy, George, Bruce and Mary.

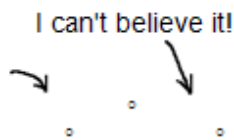


4. Rise and fall (usually in longer sentences; voice rises at the end of the first clause)

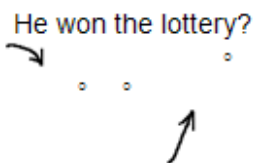
After a walk in the park we went to a cafe.



5. Emphatic fall (sounding excited or surprised; voice falls from a very high pitch)



6. Emphatic rise (expressing surprise or disbelief; voice rises from a very low pitch)



Teachers often use this or similar systems of circles and arrows to create a visual image of how our voice goes up and down. Since statistically most people are visual learners, it is helpful to supplement our choral and individual drilling of intonation patterns with such kind of visual support.

It can be argued that people use different stress patterns depending on their emotions, the situation, and the geographical area which they come from, however as teachers we need to identify the most typical patterns and help our students remember them. As they become more proficient speakers of English, they will train their ears to catch some more subtle changes in pitch and tone, and will learn to modulate their own voice in a greater variety of ways.

2. Techniques of teaching intonation

It is important to drill the intonation patterns both chorally and individually so that the students would learn them as they learn a popular tune which they hear again and again on the radio or TV.

Some teachers like to exaggerate and get their students to exaggerate the intonation patterns, which is both amusing and makes the patterns very clear.

One way to help your students with their intonation patterns is to have them listen to recorded dialogues. Leave pauses after each sentence so the students can try repeating them with the same intonation.

To improve the exercise further, let the speaker say the line one more time after the pause, so the learner can hear the correct intonation again and identify any problems. The conversation could be deliberately chosen to contain various intonation patterns.

Try using a range of dialogue emotions so your students can have fun with the exercise.

The following is a dialogue between a hungry customer (C) and the restaurant manager (M):

M: May I take your order, sir?

C: I'd like the octopus, some olives and a glass of white wine, please.

M: I'm sorry, but we don't serve octopus here.

C: But my friend told me that your octopus is the best in town!

M: You must be mistaken, sir. We most certainly don't serve octopus.

C: Oh, in that case I'll have the squid.

M: I'm sorry, we don't serve squid here.

C: Isn't this a seafood restaurant?!

M: No, this is a vegan restaurant. If you want seafood, you'll have to go next door.

Here are some examples of intonation patterns taken from the above dialogue (some are used twice to show that the intonation may vary).

Descending pattern with a fall:

I'm sorry, but we don't serve octopus here.

You must be mistaken, sir.

We most certainly don't serve octopus.

Oh, in that case I'll have the squid.

I'm sorry, we don't serve squid here.

Descending pattern with a rise:

May I take your order, sir?

Listing:

I'd like the octopus, some olives and a glass of white wine, please.

Rise and fall:

I'm sorry, but we don't serve octopus here.

I'm sorry, we don't serve squid here.

If you want seafood, you'll have to go next door.

Emphatic fall:

But my friend told me that your octopus is the best in town!

Emphatic rise:

Isn't this a seafood restaurant?!

V. A variety of accents

You do not have to speak like the Queen of England to teach. Only about 2% of Britons nowadays use the so-called RP (received pronunciation), which is also referred to as Queen's English, Oxford English or BBC English - the latter being a misleading term as a variety of regional accents can be heard on BBC these days.

While it is important for a teacher to be clear and articulate, the best idea is to stay loyal to your own pronunciation, whether you have a Scottish, Irish, American, Australian, South African or Indian accent.

Your students need to be aware that a variety of accents exist in the world and not every English speaker will speak the way you do. To get round this you can use video and audio recordings of native speakers who speak differently to you.

This way, your students will learn to understand a variety of pronunciations. You do not need to worry that being exposed to a mix of accents might spoil their own pronunciation. More often than not, our students' pronunciation will represent a cross between their mother tongue accent and our English accent no matter how many other accents they hear in class.

If your students are exposed to both British and American English you might like to draw their attention to the most noticeable differences between the two through demonstration and the use of phonetic symbols. There are some examples of this in the table here.

Word	British English	American English
grass	/grɑ:s/	/græs/
bird	/bɜ:d/	/bɜ:rd/
butter	/'bʌtə/	/'bʌdə(r)/
hunter	/'hʌntə/	/'hʌnə(r)/
tomato	/tə'mɑ:təʊ/	/tə'meɪtəʊ/