

Prescribing the Pronunciation Path: A client-centered approach for ESL professionals from a speech pathologist

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Tri-TESOL; October 21, 2011; Highline Community College

Pronunciation training often involves prioritizing what we as instructors feel is most critical or what we feel most comfortable teaching: intonation, stress, consonant and vowel sounds, conversational speech. We'll take a look at a student-centered approach.

First, I'd like to:

- 1) share my biases as a speech pathologist
- 2) define speech
- 3) talk about assessments
- 4) explain the importance of monitoring

1) Speech pathologists almost always begin with a diagnostic assessment which yields information about what clients can and can't do. Then they design an instructional approach, establishing a starting point based on the **client's abilities/strengths** and moving in **very small** steps—and there are many—from what clients can almost do (or can do with a little help) to something they can do independently and then making this a habit—that is, doing it whenever they need or want. One reason clients fail to progress is because they are asked to go from A to K, not A to B.

They don't start with what the client absolutely **cannot** do and there is a reason for that. Clients (students) need to build up to that level—it is not a starting point. Where do we start working? Right where the client begins to have difficulty. In this way we facilitate progress where the client is capable of making change and clients learn important skills, such as self-monitoring and following a progression of difficulty. This builds confidence as they master an area and allows you to progressively introduce new areas to work on. I would only start with something that is **not** in a student's repertoire, **if with teaching**, they can quickly learn it.

It's my belief that it is important to determine your students' strengths and weaknesses, and their unique needs. Then use that information and the knowledge you have about pronunciation to analyze what will be the most effective areas to begin with to improve their spoken English.

2) **Speech**—it's important to understand that **it is different than language**. There are students with good English language skills who have difficulty with pronunciation, right? And, there are also students with only rudimentary language skills whose pronunciation is quite good. Speech is a complex **motor** act: one that becomes sub-conscious with practice. In order for it to become automatic, it needs to pass through a number of stages. Instructors need to analyze which variables have the greatest responsibility for compromising intelligibility (ESL professionals use the term "comprehensibility"), determine what to address, and facilitate the small steps it takes to reach the goal.

Let's analyze the variables of speech and considerations for each one:

- a) **Volume or loudness** needs to be adequate and appropriate for the situation. How many of our ESL students speak too softly? Quite a few. Too loudly? Not so many. It's clear that anyone who speaks very softly—whether they have an accent or not—risks being misunderstood. Less likely, but still worthwhile to address is the person who speaks too loudly. They may sound angry or be irritating; however, it is hard to think of a situation where loudness makes them more difficult to understand.
- b) **Rate of speaking** also needs to be adequate and appropriate for the situation. How many ESL students speak too quickly? Many. Too slowly? Some. Anyone who speaks very quickly, especially if they have an accent, is increasing the risk they will not be understood. By speaking more slowly they often give the listener the additional time to process what they are saying. Often, students speak word by word and it's not so much the rate that needs to change but the flow. Many people believe they speak too slowly but, in reality, they don't. Many of us learn that when we record ourselves and listen the recording.
- c) **Consonant sounds** can certainly be a problem for non-native speakers. These individuals may not have a particular sound in their native language. And, they may not have learned that often English is not pronounced as it is spelled. How do you decide which consonant sounds are the most important for your students? You can predict to some degree which sounds are going to be problems for specific nationalities, but this is not certain. Can you look at the frequency of occurrence? Aren't the more commonly used sounds more important? Maybe, but maybe not. You can consider how close their approximation of the target sound is. For example, if it's a "reasonable" or close approximation, it may not be as critical, as if it is very different as measured by our perceptions. A good example is this: a distorted R sound is often more understandable than an L for R substitution: "three" (with a distorted R) vs. "thlee."
- d) **Vowel sounds** are a consistent area of difficulty for non-native speakers. Our vowel sounds inconsistently result from 5-6 letters and combinations of those letters which makes this confusing for students. There is no reliable symbol-sound relationship. And, because they have often learned English by reading it, what happens? Yes, they pronounce words like they are spelled.
- e) **Linking** is how sounds are connected when we talk. Interestingly, it is not just a forward process. Sounds are affected by sounds that precede them and sounds that follow them. Linking is responsible for the smooth flow that makes speakers sound more fluent, less accented.
- f) **Syllables** are beats of energy. When we produce words of several syllables, one syllable is **stressed**—louder, longer, and of higher pitch. Incorrect syllable stress can make a word unrecognizable: say "de MON strate" instead of "DE mon strate." Adding an extra syllable is very distracting to us as listeners: "HIS sto ry" instead of "HIS-try" or "collegee" for "college." Omitting syllables can be problem, too: you may hear "co mmu ca tion" instead of "co mmu ni cat ion." Another issue is stressing all syllables equally. These are worthwhile addressing because they change the natural rhythm of spoken English.
- 7) **Word stress**: If students use equal stress or fail to stress particular words, it's not differentiated and that is very unlike standard American English. According to some experts, this is one of the most important factors in reducing comprehensibility.

8) **Intonation** is the unique pattern of pitch changes in our language. It supports the speaker's message and can be a critical variable affecting comprehensibility. Integral to intonation are the pauses that are used to separate thought groups. Because pauses reinforce every speaker's intent, they are very helpful for the listener. For a second language speaker who has a significant accent, pauses, when well placed, allow listeners to catch up. Have you ever listened to someone—someone who is speaking to you in a second language or with a heavy accent--and began to lose what they were saying and then you became functionally deaf? Your system just shuts down. Well placed pauses might have resulted in a different outcome.

3. Assessments

Because each person's speech patterns are unique, each person's needs are different. Think of your students: they are from different countries; they have been here various lengths of time and they have acquired different levels of pronunciation but more importantly, they are individuals with unique strengths and weaknesses. Not all speakers of any language group are identical. Are there patterns? Yes. Think of it this way for a moment. Think about siblings, yours or someone else's. They come from the same gene pool and a very similar environment. Is their speech the same? Probably not. So, consider looking at individual students' needs—individually. A thorough diagnostic assessment is the best starting point. But, you may say, "I don't have time to individually assess each student." My response is, "Can you afford not to?" There are ways to break up an assessment over time. You can also do some of the assessment in groups. When you have the results, you can create a class chart for the various pronunciation needs to make this manageable.

What qualifies as **an assessment**?

a) **Analyzing conversation and responses to open-ended questions** is the end goal but it is difficult to get a comprehensive picture of someone's speech this way because you may not be hearing the full repertoire of American English. It's also very difficult to repeat at a later time to get a reevaluation. Try getting the student to repeat a conversation to analyze it at a later time. We have tried. Even if you ask identical questions of your students now and 3 months later, you get very different answers.

b) **Reading aloud** doesn't reflect spontaneous English because speaking and reading aloud are somewhat different. Typically some aspects of pronunciation are better when students are looking at the text. It is easier for them to produce plural endings, for example, when reading because the spelling is a prompt. Think about this: does your speech—the way you talk--sound like the way you read aloud? No. It may be faster; it may be slower. It's often "flatter." It is usually a little more precise.

If a mispronunciation occurs even occasionally in reading aloud you can be assured it is an issue in conversation unless it reflects a student's lack of knowledge of the vocabulary. In conversation it's probably a greater issue, so don't exclude aspects that are even 90% accurate when reading aloud. Actually, these are among the best kinds of problems to address because, the student is already 90% correct. They just need help to push that to 95%, to 100%. This also means you ideally need to hear an adequate sample of a target (we advocate 20 occurrences), to determine that there are no issues in this area. Is this practical? My response is that it's better to invest the time here to get an accurate picture. Then you can prioritize accurately and not guess, not waste time, and not set the student up to fail.

To use reading aloud as an assessment tool requires phonetically balanced material—a series of sentences or a paragraph that has all of the sounds of American English, good examples of multi-syllable words, word stress, different kinds of intonation, and opportunities to show linking.

Reading aloud does yield the most comprehensive view and it allows a repeatable method of re-evaluation. We advocate a combination of conversation and reading aloud.

c) Both of these are expressive assessments, though. What about a **receptive assessment** to learn what the student hears? This can be done using software or in class with a group. You can stand behind the class and say words, phrases, or sentences, providing the student with a checklist to mark what they hear. If they are less than 100% accurate, you will probably notice they do have this as a pronunciation issue and they can benefit from tuning into this target before moving on to pronunciation. If there is breakdown, even 5% of the time, the person is probably missing this target in conversation and can benefit from working on hearing it and discriminating it from similar targets. With a little work he/she can move to 95% -100% accuracy. If students are 100% accurate in listening tasks but you have noticed they have this pronunciation issue when they talk, they may be directed on to practice producing the target. Because they have shown that they can hear the target, they need to be encouraged to monitor their own speech. This is much easier if they can play a model back and their recordings back--repeatedly

Of course, if someone is only 50% accurate discriminating between two targets, they are only at chance accuracy. They have demonstrated they are not really hearing this. Put it on hold for the time unless there is an exceptionally good reason not to.

I would never move someone on to **pronunciation which requires self-monitoring** if their monitoring of others is even at 80% accuracy. Because that means that one time out of 5 they're going to miss others' production and it's even more difficult to monitor yourself. And, when we talk about checking this out we're not talking about presenting 3 trials. You need a much larger sample—20 or more—to be thorough.

4) Monitoring

Students usually come to us knowing they are challenged by pronunciation but not really understanding what their specific issues are and, therefore, what their goals are or what and how they need to change. Students hear instructor's feedback: "yes, that's right" or "not quite" or "try that again" and they hear explanations and other information. But, if they don't know what to **do** with this information, they're lost outside of class. We've made them dependent. It's frustrating. And, then what happens to their motivation?

The key is to get them to become aware of their pronunciation issues, to internalize them so they can make their own appraisal of "not quite." They need to know what their targets are and how to change. Until they do, **they cannot modify their pronunciation much**. I have told my clients they need to put me out of a job by providing their own feedback. Very soon in this process of teaching pronunciation, students need to monitor the instructor (because instructors can exaggerate target vs. error), monitor others, and, finally, themselves. When they can, it does wonders for confidence and the rate of learning. **Pronunciation is a process of awareness, monitoring, and change.**

Let's talk about where to begin with your classes.

1. Should you begin with teaching the anatomy of the mouth and pronunciation terminology? Is it really necessary for students to learn the names of anatomical structures and pronunciation terms? Lingua-palatal? Inter-dental? Affricate? This is often nothing more than an intellectual exercise—perhaps interesting to some, but helpful? Not likely. At worst, it can intimidate students and we're trying to create a positive, successful environment. Pronunciation is challenging enough without adding an extra layer. I share terms and explanations when asked by clients but don't offer much more in this area because I don't feel it's necessary. It's easy to use clear explanations without using uncommon jargon. Think about a beginner speaking a foreign language: "como esta usted?" Is it good? No, not very; it's "different" than a fluent / native speaker. Do I need to know specifically what is wrong? Or, can I often imitate a model and shape my pronunciation in the direction it needs to go?

2. Does a "one size fits all" approach work? No. But, can you use common strategies to help various students at the same time—yes. There are different learning channels: auditory, visual, tactile, kinesthetic. Teach to all of them. Auditory is the most crucial and students may not have learned to use this channel. The auditory channel is compromised by the existence of a first language. We know that the innate skills present at birth, if not reinforced, are pruned—that is, lost. We cannot hear the sounds of a foreign language as well as a native can because we grew up **not** hearing those sounds. Our native language's sound system is the one that our brain stored. As adults, we are almost certainly not going to learn a second language and speak it without an accent. But, can we get "better" at hearing and speaking? Of course, we have observed that.

According to some accounts, Meryl Streep, in order to learn to play the title role in "Sophie's Choice," went into a room where a group of Polish people were speaking Polish. After an hour and a half she came out speaking English with a Polish accent. Now, not everyone has the superb skills of a Meryl Streep, but I think it does say something about the importance of the auditory channel in changing one's accent.

Students have often learned English by reading and when you are working on pronunciation they want to read the word, right? The visual channel (reading) frequently misleads students because English words are not pronounced as they are spelled. To counteract this, you can adopt a phonetic system like IPA which is a more accurate representation of speech. It takes time to learn, though. Is this the best use of your students' time?

They want you to show them what your tongue is doing when you pronounce English. They may want to look in a mirror. Students may benefit from watching how a mouth moves in order to reproduce that movement. Do we know what our mouth looks like when we are talking? It will probably help to fade these visual attachments as soon as you can by teaching them to internalize how it sounds and how this feels (kinesthetic channel).

Many effective teachers use gestures and visual cues to reinforce aspects of speech such as duration and pitch changes. It's important to gradually fade these cues by teaching students to monitor how it sounds and feels.

There is evidence suggesting that mixing up activities to elicit the same target heightens interest and facilitates learning. Making practice relevant—using vocabulary they need and activities they are familiar with is more engaging.

3. **What about following a fixed curriculum?** It does no good to cover 15 consonant sounds in 15 weeks and not dedicate time to allow students to master anything. Sure, the students may learn **about** the sounds of American English and what their issues are but they won't have adequate opportunity to practice enough to make changes. Nor will they have the tools to make the changes in the future. This is why the sound a week approach doesn't work in pronunciation training—15 weeks, 15 sounds—no way.

4. **Do you begin with “consonants”?** Not everyone in a class needs the same sounds. If they do, it is unlikely they all have the same breakdown level so it will be inappropriate for some. Can you sacrifice what they need the most to work together as a group?

How about the TH sound? Doesn't almost everyone mispronounce it? Yes. But, how easy is it going to be? Not. It's a difficult sound to master. How discouraging will that be? Quite. How important is it? Debatable. Is “whiff” for “with” critical?

When you focus on consonant sounds, analyze the difference between commonly confused sounds. Can students **hear** the difference? Can they **see** the difference? Can they **produce** the difference? Can they **feel** the difference? Can they **practice the contrast between the confused sounds**? You can certainly point out the differences, such as W requires rounded lips; the V uses the top teeth are on the lower lip. Be careful not to over exaggerate. You can't—and don't want to—make a V with your teeth on the outside of your lips a habit. The top teeth should rest on the inside, not outside of the lower lip. If you do exaggerate it to teach it, fade the exaggeration quickly. Ask students what they and others need to remember when making the sound. Encourage them to monitor others and then themselves. “Did I get it?”

It's important to understand the hierarchy of the position of the target sound within a word. For the CH sound, for example, “choose” (beginning) is usually easier than “kitchen” (releasing) and that is usually easier than “much” (final) and that is usually easier than “speechless” (arresting). But, if students only have trouble at the higher levels, they can use the easier levels to “warm up.” A note of caution: this hierarchy varies for some people, so consider what the individual's own hierarchy is and structure practice accordingly.

Levels of difficulty may also be related to phonemic context. “THink” is easier than “THree” simply because of the R sound. Some words demand complex movements so you want to begin with simple demands and gradually add difficulty.

Another variable to consider is habit strength. It may be easier to teach “math” than “with” because the student has said “wit/wis/wih” many more times and it is more ingrained.

Is there ever an argument for starting with the least frequently occurring sound in American English—the ZH sound? Yes, actually there may be. Here is one: If the person has voiced vs. voiceless issues and produces an SH instead of a ZH sound, then teaching voicing can be an easy step to master the ZH sound because these sounds are made identically except for the voicing quality. Teach students to feel it initially by putting their fingers on the front of their throat when they make these two sounds. The SH sound will not yield any vibration because it is made with escaping air but ZH will cause vibration because the vocal cords are vibrating. More importantly, they need to learn to hear it. After the student practices and masters the 50 or so English words with the ZH sound (such as usual, television), he or she has learned about voicing and monitoring and this builds confidence to go on to the next step.

Pronunciation practice should move from easy to more complicated, depending on the student's needs. A fairly dependable hierarchy is repeating the sound, repeating the sound in conjunction with a vowel sound, repeating it in a word, repeating words multiple times, repeating words in context, repeating it at sentence level. Again, look at what is easiest, what is hardest for each student. Start with the area that is strongest, but still an issue; discourage starting with the areas that are poor. And, remember they are not just practicing the target--they are focusing on everything in an utterance: the sounds, the volume, the rate, the duration, etc. Teach them to "Sound just like the model." Ask them to monitor you, others, and lastly themselves so they can respond, "Yes I sound like the model." or "No, let me try it again." Ask them to comment on what they or others have to change to sound like the model? This builds the awareness that is a critical precursor to pronunciation.

5. Do you begin with vowel sounds? Are vowels important? Vowels are incredibly important. Let's take two consonants and vary the vowel sound between them: B and T. Listen to what occurs just by changing the one vowel sound: "beet, bit, bait, bet, bat, bought, boat, bite, bout." One small change and we get an entirely different word. But, vowels can be difficult because there are few tactile or positional clues to reinforce. They are usually more difficult than consonants to modify. You can teach tongue placement and muscle tension for each sound but do you actually know what is happening in your own mouth when you are talking? No. How do you know you **are** doing it correctly? By listening, so vowels are almost wholly dependent on auditory monitoring. Very quickly students must learn to say to themselves: "Aha! That does/doesn't sound like an 'ee'."

Think of someone who speaks English with only a mild accent, though. They either have 1) a relatively "good ear" or 2) they learned to speak English at an early age yet they **still** have issues with vowel sounds—what does that tell you? Vowel sounds may be among the most resistant to change.

One important aspect of dealing with vowels is that you can simultaneously address vowel length as it relates to stress which is very important. "Problem" is "PRO blm" not "PRO BLEM."

6. Do I begin with intonation? I have described intonation to my clients by saying, "Imagine a group of speakers from your native country if you could not hear them well enough to hear their words? Contrast that with a group of American speakers?" What **are** the differences? (You can include volume and rate in here, too.) Are they louder or softer? Faster or slower? More or less fluent? What happens to pitch? In this way, students can identify their patterns and understand the target and the directions they need to move.

7. Do I begin with stress? Syllables are the building blocks of words and the basis for the timing of our unique rhythm. You can use all modalities to teach stress--auditory, visual, and gestural. Almost every student can learn something helpful whether they are beginners or more advanced. When addressing stress, it is very helpful to teach that the vowels of stressed syllables are "stretched" and the vowels of unstressed syllables are shortened and relaxed. If I were forced to choose one place to recommend starting, it would be with syllables and syllable stress because it's something most ESL students need for one reason or another and it builds into word (focal) stress. And you can elevate practice quickly for more advanced students.

8. Why don't I just begin with the most outstanding problem? I offer a caution here: that one problem may be something that the student really cannot get. Efforts may result in limited success and it will frustrate them. You will lose them in a few weeks. R/L substitutions, for example, can be notoriously difficult to change. Don't begin with something the student can NEVER do **unless** you can teach it to them quickly by beginning simply. For example, students may not have the concepts of syllables and you can often teach this by asking them to tap with each beat they hear. "high-line" "co-mmu-ni-ty"

Voice Projection

Before I close, I would like to teach you a technique that I have found very helpful. It benefits many people, including non-native speakers. I learned it myself and found it beneficial. You will need a pencil or pen and a recording device (any kind, including phone voice mail.) Do this: Turn on the recorder, say one sentence **in your normal speech**. Do **not** change it for the situation. Then hold up the pen or pencil vertically about 6 inches from your mouth. It is your microphone. The top of the pen or the eraser on the pencil is the receiver of the microphone. Say the same exact sentence into the mic. Stop the recorder and play it back. Is there a difference? Analyze the difference. Is it louder, softer, slower, faster, more precise? Does it have better intonation or more pauses?

The next step is to extend your arm straight out in front of you, holding the pencil or pen as a microphone. Say another sentence, projecting your voice to the mic. You don't need to raise your volume because it's a very sensitive mic. 😊 How do you sound? Is it different than your normal speech?

You can teach this to an entire class and encourage students to comment on the specifics of **what** is different about each person's projected speech. Prompt them to listen to the various aspects of speech which influence intelligibility. You will be educating them in the process.

After they try this at arm's length, you "turn off" their mics and "turn on" yours—still a pen or pencil that you are holding. Ask them a simple question and ask them to respond to the mic. Some will be engaged with thinking of their response and forget to project. You can often tell because their eye contact is elsewhere. Encourage them to try again, look at the mic, and speak to it. You may need to remind some they don't need to raise their volume because it's a very sensitive mic. Make sure they are comfortable with their volume. If they feel they are too loud, they will not use this technique. Ask them to try again in a softer voice, one they are comfortable with. Even at lower volumes, projected speech can be quite clear.

The final step is establishing the "mic" focal point on yourself for students to project to—earring, bridge of glasses, nose. Ask another question and prompt them by pointing to your focal point if they don't project. Ask others in the class what they are hearing. "Does that student sound 'better' than in normal conversation?" In my experience, about 5 out of 6 students are noticeably clearer. Why? Well, a microphone suggests someone is listening to them so they ramp it up a little. It is a "trick" they can turn on and off when needed. You want them to believe in it if it helps them because this will motivate them to use it.

Next, you will need to create situations in which they use voice projection. You can use a gestural prompt, such as wiggling your earring, as needed. Pair up students to practice. Remind them that they are both working—one is talking, the other is listening to determine if there is projection. Give them an assignment outside of the classroom. Assure them the listener will not know what they are doing.

Thank you very much for your time and participation in our session today. There is much to learn from each other.