

"WHAT? I CAN'T UNDERSTAND YOU. PLEASE SPEAK MORE CLEARLY!"

Lin Illwitzer  
Director  
The School for American English  
Chicago, Illinois

As teachers, we have neglected pronunciation for a long time. This may be because we consider ourselves less well prepared to show our students how to improve their pronunciation. Or perhaps it is because we have to teach the entire English language, and can't include everything. Maybe it's because pronunciation seems difficult or impossible to teach in our large classes. Whatever the reason, we have produced generations of English speakers who have difficulty making themselves understood. It is when these speakers go into international business in their own country, or migrate to an English-speaking country, that their problems really begin. Well-educated, cultured people, whose native-language speech reflects their background, are judged low-class and ignorant as soon as they shift into English. The result is, of course, stagnation in the career, or failure in the employment interview, or inability to command attention in any situation. Social life as well as employment is affected; again, the non-native speaker with poor pronunciation is harshly judged by others who therefore never permit themselves to become better acquainted. These dreadful situations are unnecessary, and wasteful of human time and effort.

Unambiguous, clear, authentic pronunciation can be taught in the ESL or EFL classroom, regardless of classroom size or teacher preparation. By inviting (or requiring!) the students to work with each other, listening to each other's pronunciation and observing progress, critiquing and helping each other, more can be accomplished than if the teacher has to do all the work. The students need to train both their ears and their mouth muscles, and working together is a proven way to enable them to do this. It's amazing to hear one student say to another (in the native language, frequently), "No, no--you have to have the tip of your tongue against the gums, not against the teeth! Like this!"

I want to suggest certain areas of pronunciation that give quick success to Spanish-speakers learning English, and offer some practice material for use in pair work and small groups (three or four students). There are two books that you might find useful, Clear Speech (Cambridge University Press, with cassette), and Manual of American English Pronunciation (Holt/CBS Publishing, with cassette). In addition to theory, these give exercises for class use.

Intonation and stress are perhaps the most important features of pronunciation, because they are the way native speakers organize meaning in speech. The intonation used by a speaker identifies the topic of conversation and the thought groups, or meaning groups, in discourse. Two areas of intonation and stress that can be quite successfully practiced in classes are:

1. The difference between stressed and unstressed syllables (much greater difference than in Spanish), with the reduction of vowels in unstressed syllables. Compare the stress pattern of nouns

(stress on the first syllable: incline, conduct)

with that of verbs

(stress on the second syllable: incline, conduct)

in sentences like the following:

I like my birthday present. May I present my teacher,  
Mrs. Soto? That's an insult! Don't insult us! We're  
making progress now. They seem to progress very slowly.

Additional stressed-unstressed syllable contrasts are those in compound nouns, where the stress falls on the first element

(phone book, tablecloth, apple juice, bookcase),

and those in the numbers

thirty-thirteen, forty-fourteen, etc.

2. The meaning-related stress in sentences and thought groups, where the content words (nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, mainly) and the final word in a thought group usually receive the greatest stress, as in the following examples.

- a. Even if the accent/ is not strong,/ its effect/  
on a native speaker/ may be like that of a singer/  
singing slightly/ out of tune.
- b. My aunt and my sister,/ who I introduced you to/  
at the reception yesterday,/ aren't leaving until  
tomorrow/ on the seven-thirty flight.

The important thing to listen for when you are considering stressed vs. unstressed syllables is lack of stress, which of course is almost impossible to hear! But you will notice that the vowel sounds in unstressed syllables sound different from those in stressed syllables. This is because of the reduction of sound in unstressed syllables, producing such expressions as these: ham 'n' eggs, t' th' movies, it's f'r me, we're 't school. This is also the main difference between the words can and can't: in can, the vowel almost disappears, giving k'n, whereas the vowel in can't receives the full /æ/ sound as in apple.

For clear communication, it is essential to pronounce the consonants that occur at the ends of words. You can provide good practice in this area using numbers: phone numbers, clock time, plane schedules, prices, etc. Be sure your students pronounce the endings of past tense regular verbs, and the -s ending of plural nouns and third singular verbs--these are important for clarity.

Here are some specific problem sounds, and some suggestions for making their pronunciation clearer and easier:

1. The initial sounds of the words wood, wool, woman, would, and possibly word. won (one), want, women, depending on the speaker. Without making any sound, purse the lips as if for a big kiss, and begin the vowel sound as you begin to relax the lips. Be sure not to start the sound before you round your lips and tighten the muscles.

2. A letter s between two vowels is usually pronounced like z. Compare these words, in which the first word has the sound of s and the second, the sound of z: races, raises; uses (noun), uses (verb); losses, loses; rices, rises; and roses, thousand, easy, noisy, houses.
3. The difference between sh and ch, in which ch is quite explosive, as if there were a t in front of it. Compare: wash the dog, watch the dog; cash a check, catch a ball; and teach, teacher, porch, coach, reach, approach.
4. The letter m at the end of a word has to be pronounced /m/, not /n/, the lips must close completely. Practice with ice cream, come here, our team, I'm here, something, from them, somebody.
5. The difference between the letters y and j at the beginning of words. Begin with the pair yellow (like Spanish hielo), Jello, being sure there is no friction for the sound of y and a hard, explosive sound for j (which is the voiced counterpart of ch). Continue with mayor (the head of a city), major (an army rank; very important); year, jeer, Yale, jail, yet, jet.
6. The letter n at the end of a word should not be pronounced /ŋ/, like the -ing ending. The nasal sound for n is made by holding the tip of the tongue against the gums above the top front teeth; the sound for /ŋ/ is made by closing off the back of the mouth. Use the numbers one, tēn, seven, and other words for practice.
7. The American English sound for the letter r, which is hard for everyone, is something that is easiest to learn and practice with a native speaker. Even when words like car, farm; here, year; pour, corn, have been mastered, many people have problems with one vowel-plus-r combination: learn, girl, worse, fur, bird, curl. Don't let the spelling fool you! The difficulty comes from trying to combine the schwa /ə/ sound with the r sound, and success is slow.

Clearly, that doesn't cover everything; for example, vowel sounds have been ignored in the "specific cases" section, and we all know that there are problems with vowels. We can't do everything at once. But it's important for teachers to present as much as possible to clarify pronunciation. Take advantage of every opportunity to offer native-speaker-like skills to your students: invite visiting or resident native speakers to visit your classes and/or to make some cassette tapes for you; ask colleagues in English-speaking countries to tape news broadcasts and radio commercials; request materials from government-related agencies and tourist bureaux--there are many possibilities. Above all, use English all the time in your classrooms! Perfection is not the object; rather, the aim is to accustom the students to hearing and responding to English, so that it doesn't seem quite so other-worldly. They need to hear a lot of English in real contexts, not only in the materials of their textbooks. Get your students to help each other by listening and giving constructive criticism. At first, they may be uncomfortable with this takeover of the teacher's role, but in fact, they are very good at it, given the chance. And good luck! Let's hope for more meetings and workshops on this subject.