

Practical Pronunciation Teaching

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1 Linger Longer

When introducing new vocabulary, linger over the sounds of words longer. Explore potential onomatopoeia. Play around with the sound: what does it rhyme with? Do you like the sound? Let some words become a kind of class joke. Decide if words sound like what they mean – for example: soothing; stubborn; hustle and bustle. Savour words in the mouth like boiled sweets!

2 Symbols aren't a syllabus

- Phonemic charts look like a box of chocolates. This encourages us to perceive a false parity between them. But they are not all the same – schwa is different in kind, for example. You get an impression of false parity of frequency too. One coursebook makes the symbols look appealing like chocolates, but some of the exercises just teach the symbols, not really pronunciation. Teaching symbols is not the same thing as teaching pronunciation.

- Advent calendar: even if learning the symbols is useful, the gradual reveal not ideal for a school with a rolling intake of students like English in Chester.

- Classifying words into sound columns is not very satisfying. The most important thing about sounds is that they are different from each other. The columns don't highlight contrasts well, and just look a bit random.

- Minimal pairs: I would replace or supplement the coursebook sound sorting tasks with minimal pair work.

- Look out for exercises which depend on accent. For example, 'room' has a vowel which is short in one accent and long in another. A meaningless contrast is the very opposite of a minimal pair. Here we need pairs like full-fool, pull-pool to demonstrate the difference between these two vowels.

3 Don't sweat the schwa

- Schwa very common in coursebooks because it is not an issue which only appeals to specific L1 backgrounds, and it fits in easily with grammar because it doesn't require minimal pairs. However, we need to avoid focusing on what it sounds like exactly. Its exact sound quality is unimportant – the important thing is that it is not stressed.

- Avoid treating schwa as a sound like any other; treat it more like an allophone of any other sound when in an unstressed position.

- Raps are good for stressed and unstressed contrast – for example, the rap 'Pasta'.

4 Loop the Links

- Drilling got bad press for being uncommunicative, but it's important for pronunciation and students like it.

- There are a wide variety of drilling procedures, often great fun: individual; choral; whole sentence; back-chain, micro-drilling; looping the link. It's important to break the sound chain in unexpected places sometimes to focus attention on sound-not-meaning. Practice drilling beforehand, and identify potential loops for micro repetitions.

5 Switch the pitch

- Grammar and pronunciation are like the proverbial chicken and egg. The normal sequence of language presentation in books is: grammar pitch; pronunciation afterthought. Why not switch this order sometimes, and work on the pronunciation first, so the language we are studying is a fully 3 dimensional form.

- Use the example grammar sentences from the book, or create your own, and do a thorough pronunciation workout on them before kicking into the grammar presentation.

6 Voices, Choices

- When it comes to intelligibility, accent doesn't necessarily matter; there's no such thing as 'correct'. Discuss the alternative pronunciations with students, let them choose what they prefer.

- For example, no need to insist that students don't pronounce the 'r' after a vowel in the RP fashion – let them curl the 'r' American style, or roll it Scottish style if that suits them better.

7 Peer power

When students are working on pronunciation, avoid always being the one who evaluates; ask another student what they think; if A can do it but B can't, get A to 'teach' B. This gives them sense of pride and control and communal support; it also develops a cooperative class spirit.