

## Pronunciation and Phonetics: A Practical Guide for English Language Teachers

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This book consists of 35 Chapters, each one formatted as a lesson for a teacher trainee, with learning objectives at the beginning, and a summary, exercises and references at the end. The chapters are divided across two sections – ‘Phonetics’ in Section 1 and ‘Teaching Pronunciation’ in Sections 2. In addition, there is a third section of sample exercises, and a support website with audio recordings.

The first and longest section of the book, ‘Phonetics’, presents the essential background knowledge a pronunciation teacher will need in 23 bite sized chapters, moving from individual sounds through features of connected speech to suprasegmental aspects. The brevity of the chapters makes for a very accessible read, easing the new teacher into what can be a very daunting topic. This section was for me the strongest part of the book and I can easily imagine using it as a set text in a teacher training context. I will not attempt to summarize it all here, but just highlight some of the content I found most interesting, plus one or two points I would query.

Chapter 1, ‘Introduction’, includes a tree diagram showing how the various components of pronunciation relate to one another. The diagram has four stems: segmentals, connected speech processes, syllable structure, and suprasegmentals. A notable absence on the diagram was tonic stress placement, which seems to be subsumed under ‘pitch movement’. Although it is mentioned later in the book, it might have been better to include it here in view of its importance, and to counteract the impression that intonation is only about the ups and downs in melody. A pronunciation teacher may well decide to teach tonic stress placement but *not* tone, as recommended by Jenkins (2000), for instance.

The book has many little gems, and the first one I would mention comes in Chapter 3 ‘Airstreams and the vocal cords’. Here, during a discussion of voicing, the author gives a number of bullet-pointed tips for testing whether a consonant is voiced or not – for instance, block your ears and feel whether the sound booms or not. Similarly, in the same chapter we see ways of becoming aware of glottal stops such as imagining you are trapping air in your lungs while lifting a weight. Pedagogic tricks of this kind can be the very heart of a pronunciation lesson.

In Chapter 7, ‘Plosives and nasals’, and other chapters on consonant sounds, there are some useful diagrams which analyse the movement of the parts of the mouth

responsible for the sound. The diagrams represent time moving from left to right and show in detail how the airstream is modified not only during the sound, but also immediately before and afterwards. This close analysis yields useful insights as to how the sounds vary according to their context, for instance the circumstances under which plosives such as /p/ are aspirated or not.

Chapter 13, 'Accent differences', was particularly interesting in dealing with a topic which is often high in the minds of pronunciation teachers, but poorly represented in the books they use. I would therefore like to dwell on it at some length. The author classifies accent differences into four types. The first is where two accents differ in their phonemic inventory. So for example, for many Scots speakers, there is only one vowel sound in the pair *full* – *fool*, while in Southern English, these are two different sounds. The second is where two accents share the same sound distinctions, but differ in the precise realisation of many of these sounds, for instance an /r/ being more or less rolled. The third area of variation relates to the rules of how sounds are realised in different positions in the syllable. For example, in Southern English, an /r/ doesn't occur at the end of a syllable, while in many other accents it does. The fourth and final category, 'lexical differences', is much more idiosyncratic, referring to the way specific words or groups of words are pronounced one way in one accent and another way in another accent, for no generalizable reason. Examples here include whether words like *laugh* have a short or long vowel sound, or the much disputed alternative pronunciations of *either* and *neither*. It seems that this fourth category of accent variation is what looms largest in the popular imagination of native speakers, but it is also arguably the most trivial in terms of pronunciation teaching, having negligible impact on intelligibility. The author's main message in this chapter is, 'what is more important in the speech of learners is that contrasts are maintained, rather than the precise allophonic realization of those contrasting phonemes'. In other words, an accent's intelligibility is more important than the way it sounds. Also important in this chapter is that no distinction is made between native and non-native accents – the four categories of variation mentioned above cross-cut this distinction.

In Chapters 20 and 21, on intonation, I was surprised to see that Brazil's (1997) model of discourse intonation was not highlighted more. For instance, the author provides a grammatical explanation for how speech is divided up into tone units, rather than using a discourse-driven one. Perhaps the reason for this is purely pragmatic – it can be fiendishly difficult to teach discourse intonation, even with good classroom material such as Bradford (1988). It may be more practical in the end just to work with rules of thumb like, 'Make sure you pronounce the punctuation'. The author's comment ends this section implies this pragmatic stance: 'Claims have been made that all intonation is discourse intonation ... However, this does not necessarily mean that a discourse analysis is the most useful one for language teaching purposes'. (p. 143).

The second section of the book, 'Pronunciation teaching', was less successful than the first, in my opinion, for two reasons. Firstly, I felt that it was too ambitious in scope. For instance, in Chapter 25, we have a brief history of ELT methodology, while in Chapter 27 we have a distillation of the topic of motivation. The purpose of including these chapters here was not clear, since one would imagine that a trainee teacher using this book would need to have covered these topics elsewhere at much greater length. Secondly, I felt the area of pedagogy specific to pronunciation teaching was not covered in sufficient depth. For example, perhaps there should have been a chapter of strategies

which teachers can use in class to work the physical articulation of sounds – for instance, the kind of material in Underhill (2005). All in all, then, I had the feeling that there was a hole in the middle of the book, which can be visualized as in Figure 1.

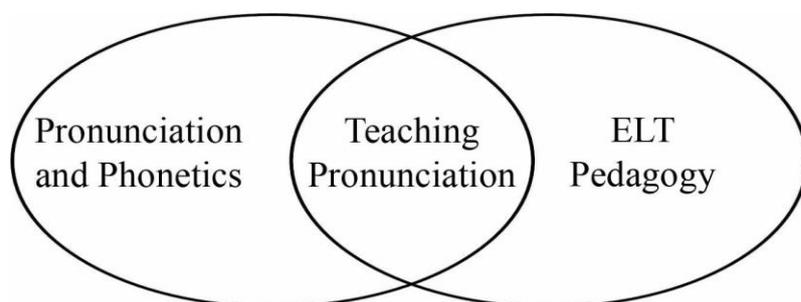


Figure 1

Section 1 of the book deals very effectively with the topic of Pronunciation and Phonetics, on the left of the diagram. Section 2 deals too broadly with ELT Pedagogy, on the right, but with not enough detail on the intersection of this with pronunciation, in the centre.

That said, however, there were some very valuable chapters in Section 2. For example, in Chapter 30, we have some interesting detail on the functional load of sound distinctions, introducing the idea that not all minimal pairs are of equal importance. Functional load is an important topic the author has dealt with in detail before, in Brown (1991). Meanwhile in Chapters 31 and 32, there is some very useful material on focusing on spelling in relation to pronunciation.

The third and final section of the book is the shortest and consists of sample material for practising the various aspects of pronunciation outlined in Section 1. The materials generally take an imaginative, fun approach, ranging from drama activities for suprasegmental features, rhymes for rhythm, jokes for homophone awareness and puzzles for word stress and sounds, many of the latter being very similar to the games in Hancock (1995), and also the author's own book, Brown (2005). Most of the activities dealing with individual sounds depend on the learners having a working command of the phonemic alphabet, which limit their utility. I would rather have seen some activities focusing on producing and perceiving sound distinctions, based on minimal pairs perhaps, which would rely less on phonemic symbols.

To sum up, in spite of my reservations regarding the second half of the book, I would certainly recommend it on the strength of the first part, which is one of the most useful and accessible introductions to the topic available. I would certainly consider using it as a class text in a teacher training module on pronunciation, perhaps with a little supplementation in the area of intonation.

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