

Tasks for Teaching Pronunciation to Beginners

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Framing the Issue

When learning another language for communication, most people want to be able to speak so that others can understand them. For this reason, learning how to pronounce the target language is very important from the start. Beginners have a lot to learn. They need to (a) sensitize their ears to the sounds and sound patterns of a new language; (b) learn new words to represent things, actions, and concepts they wish to express; (c) learn how to connect a series of words together in an order that makes sense to the listener; (d) articulate sounds and use rhythms and pitch patterns that do not exist in their own language; (e) respond orally to questions in English; (f) engage in conversations with other English speakers; and (g) speak in English in their daily lives. Being able to pronounce clearly is a vital part of oral communication, and teachers of beginners play a pivotal role in helping learners establish good habits in both pronunciation and listening discrimination at the outset. Teaching pronunciation to beginners can help them gain the ability and the confidence to speak English clearly and launch them on their language learning journey.

Teachers may wonder how to teach pronunciation to beginning level students, particularly when faced with so many other objectives in the language curriculum, which may include grammar, vocabulary, reading, and composition. Teachers may also lack knowledge and confidence because their training programs did not prepare them to teach pronunciation. Even if they took a course in English phonetics or phonology, what they learned may not have a direct application to what should be taught to enable students to pronounce the language well. Baker and Murphy (2011) found that ESL/EFL training programs inadequately prepare teachers with the necessary pedagogy, techniques, and practice to teach pronunciation.

Making the Case

First of all, having a foreign accent is not a bad thing. It does not impede communication by itself, although it can contribute to how well a listener understands. People naturally use some patterns of their native language when speaking an additional language, particularly when the target language is acquired after early childhood. Munro and Derwing (1995) define intelligibility as “the extent to which the speaker’s message is actually understood by a listener” (p. 76). Teachers can help language learners, not by having them attempt to speak with a native pronunciation but instead by motivating them to speak English more intelligibly. Good pronunciation helps intelligibility.

Although we cannot change the attitude or behavior of listeners, as teachers we can guide our English learners to pronounce clearly enough to get their message across to someone who makes a concentrated effort at listening. When beginners find that their listeners understand them, they gain confidence and become more willing to speak English. With greater confidence, they become more comfortable opening their mouths, speak more often and gain greater practice, which can all serve to make their speech more understandable and promote their overall oral communication skills.

In the classroom, it is important to provide extensive listening practice before requiring that students pronounce target language sounds and sound patterns. The natural approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), which was primarily intended to be used with beginning learners, posits that students must receive great amounts of comprehensible input before they are required to speak. The total physical response (TPR) method (Asher 1969) advocates that the first stage of a language learner’s training should focus only on comprehension through a process of listening and performing actions. Listening to, witnessing, and performing a series of actions such as those presented by Romijn, Seely, Statan, Wachman, and Hanson-Smith (2013) and Romijn and Seely (2014) gives beginners comprehensible input, vocabulary in context, and logical sequencing; it provides plenty of listening, which helps lay the auditory foundation for pronunciation.

Auditory perception training, a receptive skill, affects pronunciation, a productive skill. Thomson (2011) showed that training students to perceive English vowels recorded by 20 different native speakers resulted in improved pronunciation even though speaking was not part of the training. Especially for purposes of pronunciation, teachers need to instruct students to listen, observe, and notice a particular pronunciation point rather than allow them simply to repeat in a mechanical way. For example, listeners must identify the number of syllables in a word, classify the vowel in words they hear, distinguish if an utterance is spoken with rising or falling intonation, or recall the focus word in a phrase. This process is crucial not only for absolute beginners but perhaps even more so for false beginners. False beginners have already learned some English but have not established a good grasp of the language and need to re-start with the basics. Indeed, they may have committed to memory some incorrect pronunciations. Therefore, having them listen carefully and observe good pronunciation models can help override

their stored inaccuracies. In fact, at any proficiency level, carefully planned perceptual training contributes to a learner's pronunciation ability. It calls their attention to salient points, and as expressed by many teacher-researchers such as Flege and Wang (1989), students need help noticing what they are doing. Teachers should give students practice in both perception and production of target pronunciation features as they move from simpler to more complex, from controlled to guided to more open-ended activities.

Segmental features of English refer to consonant and vowel sounds. English has 25 consonant phonemes and 16 to 25 vowel phonemes depending on the dialect, for example, British, General American, or Australian English. Suprasegmental features include stress, reduction, intonation, rhythm, and linking. Also known as prosody, these elements provide the basis for the rhythm and melody of English, a necessary foundation for learners from all language backgrounds. In a beginning class, particularly one that needs to introduce students to all language skills, it is unreasonable and impractical to teach all of the segmentals. Teachers need to prioritize what to teach based on functional load (Munro & Derwing, 2006)—that is, whether sounds differentiate a large number of words, such as the vowels /i^y/ and /ɪ/ as in *feet* and *fit* and /n/ and /l/ as in the initial consonant sounds in *night* and *light* and whether they are difficult for learners to distinguish on their own. The phonological and morphological convergences of -s and -es endings (e.g., in the words *works*, *plays*, *watches*) and -ed endings (e.g., in the words *picked*, *stayed*, *wanted*) also necessitate overt instruction from the beginning.

Suprasegmental features carry the overall meaning load of what a speaker says, and this musical pattern directs the listener's attention as to the focus of an utterance. Improperly stressed words and phrases can lead to misunderstanding (Hahn, 2004), so it is important to teach students to hear and produce stress on the correct syllable of a multisyllabic word. Miss-stressing words in a sentence is likely to cause the listener confusion or a delay in understanding the meaning because the sounds do not match familiar auditory shapes. Furthermore, we should emphasize the clarity of the vowel in the stressed syllable of the most important word in a phrase, the focus word. Gilbert (2008) calls this the peak vowel in the prosody pyramid.

He eats a baNAna for BREAKfast. (bənænə, brɛkfəst)

She goes to CANada for a VIsit. (kænədə, vɪzɪt)

The speaker's most important information, often called the focus word, receives the greatest stress and highest pitch. Compare the following:

He eats a **baNAna** for BREAKfast. (not a peach)

He eats a baNAna for **BREAKfast**. (not for lunch)

Beginning learners need models of new sounds and sound patterns. If they respond well to explanations, we need to make the descriptions easy enough for our students to understand; otherwise, they may find it unnecessarily tedious. We

should give them not only extensive listening opportunities, but also copious guided pronunciation practice.

Furthermore, approaching pronunciation as a physical act, and preparing for the physical changes required by pronouncing a new language, speakers benefit from warming up our vocal apparatus (Chan, 1985, 1994, 2015). Preparatory exercises may include relaxing the body and detaching the mind from tension and worry. They are followed by an oral workout for the jaw, throat, lips, and tongue to make the muscles stronger and more flexible so that pronunciation in the new language can become easier and more automatic. Readers can access over a dozen video clips on Pronunciation Doctor's YouTube Channel, Pronunciation Workout Playlist <http://bit.ly/PronWorkouts>.

Pedagogical Implications

This section presents sample tasks for teaching pronunciation to beginners. These tasks fall into the following categories: (a) identifying syllables and stress; (b) using auditory, visual, and kinesthetic cues; (c) using total physical response; and (d) using songs.

Tasks for Identifying Syllables and Stress Choose vocabulary relevant to your students and curriculum. Explain that when a word has two or more syllables, one syllable is stressed. A stressed syllable is longer and stronger than an unstressed syllable. For example, *mu-sic* has two syllables. *Mu-sic* is stressed on the first syllable (adapted from Chan, 2006, pp. 4–5). Use one or more of the following ways to call students' attention to syllables and stress. Focus first on listening discrimination. Start with clear instructions (e.g., *Listen carefully. How many syllables do you hear? I will say each word two times*). Specify the expected behavior. End with the following imperatives: *Then look at me and see my fingers for the correct answer*. Demonstrate with a few examples of familiar words.

How many syllables do you hear? Show me with your fingers. (Options: Clap the number. Tap a finger on the palm of the other hand. Write the number on paper.)

stu•dent	2
to•day	2
in•struc•tor	3
school	1
en•gi•neer	3

Which syllable is stressed? Show me with your fingers. Using the same word list, the answers are 1, 2, 2, 1, 3. On paper, mark the syllables and stress by choosing one of these alternatives below.

- a) Draw a dot over each syllable. Make the dot for the stressed syllable bigger. (Option: Draw dots next to the word.)

• •
begin

• •
every

•
school

• • •
president

• • •
develop

- b) Write the syllable-stress code:¹ Write the number of syllables before the dash and the stressed syllable after the dash: *mu-sic* [2-1] has two syllables and is stressed on the first syllable.

begin	[2-2]
every	[2-1]
school	[1-1]
president	[3-1]
develop	[3-2]

Tasks Using Auditory, Visual, and Kinesthetic Cues After listening and gaining awareness, have students practice the words with auditory, visual, and kinesthetic cues to accompany pronunciation. While speaking, clap and feel the rhythm, stretch a rubber band on the stressed syllable, as demonstrated here <http://youtu.be/6g-bpUJ8f1s>, or do the Stress Stretch: stand up on the stressed syllable (Chan, 1994, 2009, 2013) and demonstrated here <http://youtu.be/PWJv-l6OvAY>.

It is also important to practice rhythm and sentence stress.

Introductory dialogs appear simple on paper but often get mispronounced in terms of sentence focus, stress, and intonation. Because greeting dialogs are very common and practical, they can be used to help learners become aware of stress. In the example dialogues below the capitalized words indicate stress.

- A Hello, Donna. How ARE you?
 B Hi, Marsha. I'm FINE, thanks. How are YOU?
 A I'M fine, TOO. Let's SIT together.
- A What do you DO?
 B I'm a TEACHer. I teach ENGLISH at the HIGH school. What do YOU do?
 A I'm an engiNEER. I write SOFTware for VIDEo games.

Use rising intonation (↗) when you address a person directly; it sounds polite. Falling intonation (↘) may sound rude, angry or abrupt. Use rise-falling intonation on statements and on WH-questions, including questions beginning with *How*.

For communicative practice, make cards for a role play. On each card, write a name, an occupation, and other information that is comprehensible to your beginning students. Distribute the cards, one per student. Students, assuming the identity of the card they hold, walk around the room, find a partner, and make introductions like the model dialogs. When they are finished with one partner, they exchange cards and take on a new identity. They continue to mix, listening and speaking with different classmates. As the teacher, you circulate among the students, guiding their conversations, pronunciation, stress, and intonation.

When an idea or a piece of information has been mentioned before, it becomes “old.” Old or repeated information is spoken in a low tone, with less stress than the new information. In contrast, we focus on the new information, with a high tone and on the stressed syllable. Here are examples for beginners.

I have a BOOK. It’s an ENGLISH book.
 You have a HAT. It’s a YELlow hat.
 My brother has a DOG. It’s a BIG dog.
 My mother has a HANDBag. It’s a LEATHer handbag.
 Please try this CAKE. It’s CARrot cake.
 Please use a PEN, a BALLpoint pen.
 Please open the WINDOW, the BATHroom window.
 Please clean the FLOOR, the KITCHEn floor.

Tasks Using Total Physical Response (TPR) This activity uses minimal pairs (e.g., peel/pill, cap/cup, ball/bowl). Select the minimal pairs on which you want to focus and find appropriate props. The props can be real, artificial, or pictures. Then, determine the actions or commands (e.g., *pick the peel* or *put the cap on the bottle*) that you will use with the minimal pairs. Select actions based on how beneficial they are for students. Then call on different individuals to give commands and follow them, using the props. Place the following items on a table: a bowl, a ball, a plate, a napkin, the peel of an orange or banana, a pill, a medicine bottle, a cap, a cup. Sequence the commands as follows:

1. Point to/touch/move/pick up/put down the _____.
2. Say and perform a variety of actions before asking students to do them. Build on the students’ prior knowledge, and introduce new vocabulary at a reasonable pace.
 - Pick up the orange peel.
 - Put the peel on the plate.
 - Open the bottle.
 - Take out the pill.
 - Put the pill in the cup.
 - Cover the ball with the napkin.
 - Move the peel to the napkin.
 - Put the orange in the bowl.
 - Put the cap over the peel.
 - Drop the pill in the bottle.
 - Move the cup next to the plate.
 - Smell the peel.
3. Students respond to teacher’s commands with actions.

4. Students practice commands chorally (while role-playing actions).
5. Students produce commands; classmates respond physically.
6. Extension. Select a syntactic structure. Demonstrate and have students verbalize their actions (e.g., *I'm putting the cap over the peel* [present progressive], *I opened the bottle* [simple past], *I'm going to drop the pill on the napkin* [future with *going to*]).

Tasks for Using Songs Using songs in English is a delightful way to engage beginning English learners in repetition of new sounds, as well as in learning new vocabulary and grammatical structures. Choose a song appropriate for your learners and consider their age, interests, and proficiency level. You may choose a song for its theme, the musical simplicity, the words and structures in the lyrics, the repeated sounds, or your access to a recorded model (e.g., an audio file or a video clip) or the ability to sing it yourself. *I've been working on the railroad* and *Clementine* are two classic for songs for which melodies are easy to find online.

A beat is the basic pulse in music, like when you tap your foot to the music. A long beat takes more time and a short beat takes less time. *I've been working on the railroad* is great for teaching stress because it has long beats on the stressed content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs), and it has short beats on unstressed words and reduced syllables. It also helps students practice some contractions, for example *I've* and *someone's* and phrase reductions *can't you* (*cantcha*) and *won't you* (*wontcha*). The words appear in the left-hand column. Stress is indicated in the right-hand column with capital letters.

I've been working on the railroad	I'VE been WORKing on the RAIL-ROAD
All the live-long day.	ALL the LIVE-LONG DAY.
I've been working on the railroad	I'VE been WORKing on the RAIL-ROAD
Just to pass the time away.	JUST to PASS the TIME aWAY.
Can't you hear the whistle blowing,	CAN'T you HEAR the WHIStle BLOWing,
Rise up so early in the morn;	RISE up so EARly in the MORN;
Can't you hear the captain shouting,	CAN'T you HEAR the CAPtain SHOUTing,
"Dinah, blow your horn!"	"DInah, BLOW your HORN!"
Dinah, won't you blow,	DInah, won't you BLOW,
Dinah, won't you blow,	DInah, won't you BLOW,
Dinah, won't you blow your horn?	DInah, won't you BLOW your horn?
Dinah, won't you blow,	DInah, won't you BLOW,
Dinah, won't you blow,	DInah, won't you BLOW,
Dinah, won't you blow your horn?	DInah, won't you BLOW your HORN?
Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah	SOMEone's in the KITCHen with DInah
Someone's in the kitchen I know	SOMEone's in the KITCHen I KNOW
Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah	SOMEone's in the KITCHen with DInah
Strummin' on the old banjo!	STRUMmin' on the OLD banJO!
Singin' fee, fie, fiddly-i-o	SINGin' FEE, FIE, FIDDly-I-O
Fee, fie, fiddly-i-o-o-o-o	FEE, FIE, FIDDly-I-O-O-O-O
Fee, fie, fiddly-i-o	FEE, FIE, FIDDly-I-O
Strummin' on the old banjo.	STRUMmin' on the OLD banJO

Endnote

1 Adapted from Murphy and Kandil (2004).

SEE ALSO: Accent Reduction Versus Intelligibility; Interlanguage Phonology; Issues in Teaching Pronunciation: Prosody, Intonation, and Vowels; Lesson Planning for Teaching Pronunciation; Teaching the Sound System of English

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