

Pronunciation: An Individual Approach

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Teaching a pronunciation class presents a special set of challenges. As in any class, each student enters with unique issues. The pronunciation teacher needs to identify and address these individual and personal differences. This paper presents one successful way of doing this. An initial assessment of both listening and speaking skills should be made on the first day of class. This assessment is the basis for an individual assignment sheet matching textbook units. No two assignment sheets are exactly the same. Students must also meet with the teacher at least three times a semester for one-on-one instruction and assistance. At the end of the class, the same assessment instruments are administered to measure changes in listening and production. Results have always shown that more than 80% of the students improve their skills.

発音強化のクラスを指導することは特別な努力が必要である。どんなクラスでも、個々の学生達がそれぞれ異なった弱点を持っているからだ。発音指導教員はそのような一人一人の違いを認識し、改善に取り組んでいかねばならない。まず一回目の授業でリスニングとスピーキングの両方のレベルアセスメントを行うべきである。このアセスメント結果をもとに、テキストのユニットに合わせた個別の課題シートを与える。一人一人異なる課題シートであり、全く同じものはない。学生は1学期中に少なくとも3回、教員との1対1の個別指導を受ける。授業の最終日に初回と同じアセスメントを行い、リスニングと会話力の上達度をはかる。その結果80%以上の学生にスキルの向上が見られた。

Pronunciation: An Individual Approach

Becoming an English Pronunciation teacher was not a job I sought. It befell me because I wanted to be an ESL teacher. I was working in the San Francisco Bay area as a speech therapist and a part time English teacher. I liked ESL and applied for a fulltime position, but I lacked the appropriate credentials. However, a master's in Speech Pathology brought me into the ESL community through the proverbial back door. I was the perfect candidate to teach pronunciation to the many adult students at my local community college who felt they needed it, and there were many. One class actually had an enrollment of forty-five students. The situation made me laugh—once a week for fifty minutes was all I had to reduce the accents of forty-five ESL speakers from all over the world. I had groups of students who came to class, went to the lab, did the assignments, and appeared to enjoy themselves as I led them through what I thought was a well-organized text, *Pronouncing American English* (1988) by Gertrude Orion, but their speech never seemed to change. After a couple years of this I quit.

My next adventure with teaching Pronunciation was, again, an accident and a result of my MA in Speech Pathology. This time, however, I had a new textbook, *Well Said* by Linda Grant (1993). It was through this text that I discovered the value of thought

groups. Thought groups are the phrases, short clauses, and single words we pause after as we are speaking. Thought groups can be identified linguistically as prepositional phrases, subject phrases, verb phrases, noun phrases, short subject and verb clauses, conjunctions, relative clauses, and parenthetical expressions. Within each thought group is a key or focus word that is stressed (usually the last word) before the pitch of your voice goes down. With a little manipulation of a piece of text (“Thought groups/ are the phrases/ short clauses/ and/ single words/ we pause after/ as we are speaking.”) I could lead any student to intelligibility. I was amazed at the power of thought groups. Since that discovery, I have continued to dabble in pronunciation teaching to the point of developing a system that gives the students and me some concrete evidence showing that each of them has improved.

Addressing Individual Student Abilities

On the first day of class, I know nothing about my students’ abilities, so I do both listening and speaking assessments (since listening and speaking are co-dependent). The listening instrument that I use, at present, is The Clear Listening Test at the beginning of Judy Gilbert’s *Clear Speech* (1993). It is easy to grade, gives me a numerical measure for future reference, and introduces some suprasegmental concepts, e.g., stress, rhythm, and thought grouping. I have done some reliability and validity testing on this tool and found it to be lacking, but I am using it as a basis of comparison between initial and final testing, and this test easily provides that. The initial assessment continues with a speaking evaluation. Here the students have

a paragraph to read as well as an opportunity to provide me with a spontaneous speech sample by answering a few questions about their English speaking experiences.

With all this data (a listening score and two speaking samples), I can develop an individual assignment plan for each student. Students receive their plans in the second class. Orion’s second edition of *Pronouncing American English* (1993) is the foundation for the assignment plan, but you can use any pronunciation text that appeals to you. I returned to Orion’s text because it is loaded with practice material and comes with eight cassette tapes. The practice material is not difficult and focuses heavily on whole language structures with correct intonation, rhythm, pausing, and stress. I examined each unit in the text and found specific assignments that students can record after studying the assigned chapters. The students have varying abilities, so assignments are geared for different levels (see Appendix 1).

After assignments are recorded, students are expected to listen to and evaluate their own tapes before submitting them to me as completed (see Appendix 2). When I listen to a recorded assignment, I give it a numerical assessment based on the number of productions. If the recording is less than 70% accurate and/or intelligible, it needs to be done again. Students are expected to complete anywhere from twelve to fifteen assignments a semester depending on their designated level of English language functioning. (The program in which I work pre-tests all students before they enter, giving them an initial language ability level. Most classes in the program have students grouped according to ability level, but the Pronunciation class accepts everyone except those in the lowest level.)

There is some choice as to how students can complete individual assignments, e.g., recordings or presentations, but for three of the assignments there is no choice. Each student must meet with me privately three times a semester. In these meetings, we can work on an assignment, work on a presentation, or work on a personal concern of the student. It is in these meetings that I can talk about blatant problems an individual might have that interfere with intelligibility, e.g., a lisp, a rapid rate, or hypernasal speech. In this one-on-one situation, there is less chance for embarrassment and more opportunity to deal with such personal issues.

At present I am teaching the course in a language lab. The students each have individual listening/recording devices, and I sit at a console that connects with all of them. I can listen to their practice and make comments and suggestions as they work. Part of each class is spent listening, practicing, and recording. Since every student must make at least one short presentation during the semester, I also give students class time to practice and make their presentations. My instructional time is generally used for interacting with students on an individual basis as they work at their desks, but I also spend a few minutes preparing students for various games I have selected or designed which focus on different suprasegmental features.

The Process for Individualizing a Pronunciation Class

In a nutshell, my classes operate according to the following steps:

1. Assess listening and speaking abilities of students on the first day of class.

2. Evaluate data and give each student an individual assignment sheet that follows the units in your selected pronunciation text. The assignment sheets direct students to specific topics they need to work on in the text.
3. Have students listen to, practice, and make tapes according to their individual assignment sheets.
4. Have students evaluate their own tapes before you listen to and evaluate their work.
5. Meet with each student three times a semester one-on-one to address individual needs and work on assignments.
6. Have individual students make small presentations focusing on one problem area.
7. Use class time for suprasegmental games, individual listening, practicing and recording, and individual presentations for the whole class.
8. Administer the same initial tests at the end of the semester to measure changes in skills.

Using this system, students work independently, in groups, in pairs, and with me on individual problems.

Student Improvement and Response

In every pronunciation class I have taught using this model or parts of it (depending on how far along I was in its development), 80 to 90% of the students show improvement in their listening scores. Improvement in the listening score is a pre-requisite for passing the class. If a student does not

show improvement on the first posttest, I let that student take the test again individually. There are many factors influencing why a student does not show improvement, and many of those factors are out of my control, e.g., number of absences, number of missing assignments, amount of effort, or individual ability. But the majority of students do show improvement on the first posttest, and 99% do after examining their tests (pre- and post-) and taking the test again. Some learners, as we all know, just need that extra boost to meet course expectations.

The final speaking test gives you an opportunity to address thought groups again. You can practice in class with the initial reading marked for thought groups and focus words. Give each student a copy of the marked paragraph and a recording of you reading the paragraph using the identified thought groups and stress. If you give students the tape one or two weeks before they make their final recording, they have time to listen and practice. With all this input (visual and auditory), students always make changes in their production when compared to their initial recordings.

For the last few times I have taught Pronunciation, I forgot to include self-evaluation of individual tapes. I only remembered that component when I was compiling materials for my presentation. Hence, I do not have specific student responses regarding self-evaluation. However, students did comment positively on the value of listening to themselves. To be able to hear yourself is fundamental to making changes in your own production. I am glad I found the evaluation sheet while preparing for my presentation. I will never omit that step again. When students were asked to comment on what they liked most about the course,

eleven out of thirty-seven said, “the teacher”. Additional and more relevant comments included “speaking with the teacher in her office,” “checking and commenting on my mistakes,” “making progress in pronunciation,” “efficiency of the class,” “tape assignments,” “listening and practicing pronunciation many times,” “discovering my own pronunciation problems,” “learning about focus words,” “syllable stress and reductions,” and “recording and listening to myself.” When asked what they liked least about the class, twenty out of thirty-two said, “nothing”. Other relevant comments included “at first my homework was not effective,” “too many classmates,” “too many different levels of ability,” “could not understand the teacher all the time,” “not enough communication with others,” and “I think my pronunciation wasn’t improved.”

Everyone’s listening score showed improvement after the first or second posttest. Since only one student out of thirty-two felt that he or she made no improvement in pronunciation, I feel the class procedure was successful. When I teach Pronunciation again, I will try to make the students understand that improvement begins with small steps like better listening ability, which clearly resulted from this process. I will also help students understand that improvement is sometimes a slow and tedious process since old habits are difficult to change, and new ones are not always easy to develop.

References

- Gilbert, J. (1993). *Clear speech: Pronunciation and listening comprehension in North American English*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Grant, L. (1993). *Well said: Advanced English pronunciation*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Orion, G. (1988, 1997). *Pronouncing American English: Sounds, stress, and intonation*. New York: Heinle & Heinle.

Appendix 1

Sample Pronunciation Practice Assignments

Name _____

Individual Practice and Recording Assignments

Follow these steps:

1. Practice all the pages for the concept or sound you are working on.
2. After you practice, you may be ready to make a recording.
3. You must practice with the teacher for a minimum of three (3) assignments.
4. Select the assignments that are the most difficult for you and practice those with the teacher.

Practice pages and recording assignments.

- _____ 1. Syllable Stress Practice pages 18 through 33 with tape. Record D. 2 on p. 29. A/B level record C.2 p. 33 also.

- _____ 2. Vowel and Consonant Length Practice pages 34 through 39 with tape. Record C on p. 38. A/B level record 4 p. 39 also.
- _____ 3. Content and Function Words Practice pp. 40-51 with tape. Record sentences a and b in C p. 43. A/B level record 8 p. 51 also.
- _____ 4. Word Stress and Phrasing Practice pp. 52-61 with tape. Record E on p. 60. A/B level record 5A pp. 60-61 also.
- _____ 5. Intonation Practice pp. 62-70 with tape. Record D.2 top of p. 69. A/B level record 8 A p. 70 also.
- _____ 6. /iy, ɪ/ Practice pp. 82-89 with tape. Record 6 p. 87. A/B level record the poem on p. 89 also.
- _____ 7. /ey, ε/ Practice pp. 90-97 with tape. Record 6 p. 95.
- _____ 8. /æ/ Practice pp. 98-104 with tape. Record sentences in 5 p. 103.
- _____ 9. /ɑ/ Practice pp. 105-113 with tape. Record 5 p. 110-111.
- _____ 10. /ay/ Practice pp. 114-118 with tape. Record 6 p. 118.
- _____ 11. /aw/ Practice pp. 119-124 with tape. Talk to the teacher. Record 5 p. 123. A/B level record 6 p. 124 also.
- _____ 12. /ə/ Practice pp. 125-133 with tape. Record 7 p. 131.
- _____ 13. /ø/ Practice pp. 134-141 with tape. Record 6A p. 140. A/B level record 7 p. 141 also.
- _____ 14. /ɔy/ Practice pp. 142-146 with the tape. Record 5 pp. 145-146. A/B level record 6 p. 146 also.

- _____ 15. /ɔ/ Practice pp. 147-155 with tape. Record 7 dialogue pp. 153-154.
- _____ 16. /ow/ Practice pp. 156-162 with tape. Record 6 p. 161. A/B level record 7 p. 162 also.
- _____ 17. /uw, ʊ/ Practice pp. 163-171 with tape. Record 7 p. 169. A/B level record complete sentences for 9 p. 170-171.
- _____ 18. /l/ Practice pp. 178-182 with tape. Record 6 pp. 181-182. A/B level record 7 p. 182 also.
- _____ 19. /r/ Practice pp. 183-191 with tape. Record all the sentences in 4 B pp. 185-187. A/B level record 7 p. 190 also.
- _____ 20. /p, b/ Practice pp. 192-201 with tape. Record 9 p. 200. A/B level record p. 201 also.
- _____ 21. /t, d/ Practice pp. 202-214 with tape. Record 12 A, B and C pp 212-213.
- _____ 22. /k, g/ Practice pp. 215-225 with tape. Record 11 pp. 224-225.
- _____ 23. /f, v/ pp. 226-237 with tape. Record 9 pp. 235-236.
- _____ 24. /θ, ð/ Practice pp. 238-249 with tape. Record 11 pp. 248-249. A/B level record the poem on p. 249.
- _____ 25. /s, z/ Practice pp. 250-265 with tape. Everyone record all the sentences in 5 B pp. 253-254 and the sentences in 11 A p. 263, 11 C p. 264, and 11 D p. 264.
- _____ 26. /ʃ, ʒ/ Practice pp. 266-271 with the tape. Record 6 pp. 270-271.
- _____ 27. /tʃ, dʒ/ Practice pp. 272-281 with the tape. Record 8 p. 279. A/B level record p. 281 also.
- _____ 28. /h/ Practice pp. 282-288 with the tape. Record 7 p. 287.
- _____ 29. /y/ Practice pp. 289-295 with the tape. Record 6 pp. 293-294.
- _____ 30. /w/ Practice pp. 296-301 with the tape. Record 6 pp. 300-301. A/B level record 7 p. 301 also.
- _____ 31. /m/ Practice pp. 302-307 with the tape. Record 6 p. 306.
- _____ 32. /n/ Practice pp. 308-315 with tape. Record 8 p. 315.
- _____ 33. /ŋ/ Practice pp. 316-323 with tape. Record 6 p. 322.

The page numbers given here correspond to the pages in Orion (1997). You can build an individual assignment sheet based on whatever text you decide to use for your class.

Appendix 2

Sample Listening Evaluation Form

Name _____

Listening Self-Evaluation Form

Listen to your tape. Fill out this information sheet. If you don't like the tape, do it again. If you like the tape, give the teacher this paper and your tape. Make sure your name is on your tape and this paper.

Assignment number _____

Assignment page(s) _____

Write any words that were difficult for you to pronounce.

Pronunciation Clarity

Give yourself a + or – for each of the following points.

1. Clear consonants and vowels in key words _____
2. Good stress in key words _____
3. Effective sentence stress and focus _____
4. Appropriate thought groups/pauses _____
5. Adequate speed and volume _____

Write any other comments or concerns you have.