7 Best Practices for Teaching Pronunciation
by *Martha C. Pennington*

Many language teachers teach pronunciation as a component of a speaking class or other oral skills class, or as an autonomous class. As an aid in deciding how to approach the teaching of pronunciation, I offer seven recommendations for best practices based on a review of approaches I gave in my presentation at the 2019 TESOL Convention (Pennington, 2019; download the handout here).[1]

1. Teach Segmental and Suprasegmental Features Together

The teaching of pronunciation has traditionally aimed for accurate production, based on a native speaker model, of segmental features—the individual consonant and vowel sounds, or phonemes, of a foreign or second language (L2). Although some pronunciation specialists maintain that segmental phonemes are easier to teach and learn, teaching the larger units of the sound pattern of a language, its suprasegmental features of stress and intonation and their effects on sounds in context, is also important.

Because speech occurs in a connected stream of sound, it is more realistic to teach pronunciation "top-down" (Pennington, 1989), in context, rather than teaching only individual sounds in isolation. It is also more useful to learners, as research has shown (Lee, Jang, & Plonsky, 2015) that teaching segmental features together with suprasegmental features is more effective than teaching them alone.

2. Draw Learners' Attention to Pronunciation Form in Relation to Meaning and Communication

Language teaching and learning focused on meaning and communication, as in communicative language teaching, often results in learners who reach an intermediate or advanced level of proficiency with "fossilized" pronunciation errors. For this reason, communicative methodologies such as communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching have

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[1] See also Pennington & Rogerson-Revell (2019) for an extensive review of research and practice in the teaching of pronunciation and a forthcoming issue of *RELC Journal* (Pennington, in press) devoted to the teaching of pronunciation.

increasingly incorporated a focus on form with a goal of fine-tuning pronunciation to improve communication and expression of meaning.

Form-focused instruction designed to draw learners' attention to pronunciation in relation to the performance of communicative tasks may include the following:

- Listening to examples of the pronunciation of a phoneme in different contexts together with instructions and practice on articulation of that phoneme as preparation for a communicative task (*preinput*).
- Corrective feedback while performing an activity in communicative language teaching or task-based language teaching (*in-process input*).
- Delayed feedback as well as further instruction once the activity is completed (*postinput*).

Research supports the value of focusing on form, especially instruction on articulation combined with corrective feedback, for improving pronunciation of both segmental and suprasegmental features.

3. Use Implicit Learning as a Prelude to Explicit Teaching and Learning

Most pronunciation teaching has an explicit focus on form that aims to raise awareness and conscious understanding of pronunciation features and to improve control of articulation through a combination of perceptual training and repetitive practice. Such training and practice might involve, for example, (1) repeated listening to minimal pair words such as *sit* / *set* or *pat* / *bat* followed by repeated pronunciation of those pair words, as a way to train learners to hear and then produce the difference or (2) listening to a certain phoneme as pronounced in many different words or by many different speakers as a way to train learners to correctly perceive and produce it. Perceptual training combined with other kinds of explicit form-focused instruction, such as teacher instructions on how to position the lips and tongue to make a certain sound, is recommended for improving pronunciation both in the language classroom and in workplace contexts, such as for communication by L2 doctors and by L2 customer service representatives working in call centers (Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019, ch. 7).

Pronunciation instruction can also provide opportunities for implicit learning through language exposure rather than explicit teaching. Implicit learning occurs as a result of exposure to natural speech in listening, through the brain's inborn mechanisms for detecting patterns. Listening to authentic speech samples is especially valuable for implicit learning in the initial stage of language learning, as preinput before explicit instruction and speaking practice.

4. Make Use of Learners' Multilingualism

Most approaches to pronunciation teaching reference only the L2 and not learners' multilingual knowledge and identity. Yet research in sociolinguistics and multilingualism has shown how speakers express their agency and identity by using more than one variety of language. Sociolinguistically informed, multilingual views of language support attention to learners' various language competences in instruction, such as explicitly comparing and contrasting the

pronunciation of the first language and different varieties of the L2, and to matters of identity, such as "roleplaying to practice style-shifting and projecting different identities associated with different features of pronunciation and accent" (Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019, p. 214).

5. Use Role-Play or Mirroring Techniques

Learners are able to significantly modify their pronunciation as they "try on" and play with different identities in role-playing or mirroring the voice and related communicative behaviors of another person (Tarone & Meyers, 2018). Such top-down approaches as role-play and mirroring that encourage learners to project themselves into new roles and identities may prove more effective in altering pronunciation than some traditional phonetically based approaches.

6. Incorporate Different Voices and Models

Explicit attention to different voices and models for pronunciation reinforces a multilingual concept of pronunciation while also sharpening perception of the range of variation in suprasegmental and segmental pronunciation features. Perceptual training has been found to be highly effective when it makes use of a variety of different voices and models for pronunciation, and it is useful to incorporate different voices and models for pronunciation in any listening material used for implicit learning or as preinput to pronunciation instruction.

7. Keep Abreast of Developments in Technology and Use Technology to Support Classroom-Based Activities

Pronunciation instruction can be provided with technology, which nowadays is mainly available through web-based sites or apps. Technology can be used in class to supplement other modes of instruction and learning, or outside of class as pre- or postinput to classroom instruction. Pronunciation technologies typically focus on form with little or no attention to context, though some of the best programs teach pronunciation in context. Increasingly, pronunciation programs include automatic speech recognition technology that can give feedback on performance, such as Protea Textware's Connected Speech, and the best ones reliably differentiate errors from correct or acceptable performance.

Recommended Websites and Apps

- University of Iowa's Sounds of Speech
- Protea Textware's Connected Speech
- International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA)
- George Mason University's Speech Accent Archive
- Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE)

Phonetics websites and apps, such the University of Iowa's Sounds of Speech, include animated visuals of articulatory motions and audio-recordings that can be used in pronunciation instruction. Several websites and apps offer access to large databases of speech, some with transcriptions, that can be used in L2 and multilingual approaches to instruction, such as the

International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA), George Mason University's Speech Accent Archive, and the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE). Other technologies not designed for pronunciation instruction can be used in a pronunciation class or curriculum, for example, social media such as Twitter (Mompean & Fouz-González, 2016).

In addition, preexisting, teacher-made, and student-made audio and video recordings of speech can be used in explicit teaching or as preinput for implicit learning, not only in traditional L2 instruction but also in multilingual approaches. (For more information on technology in pronunciation, see "21 Online Pronunciation Resources for Teaching and Learning," by Henrichsen, and Chapter 5 of *English pronunciation teaching and research: Contemporary perspectives* by Pennington and Rogerson-Revell)

Technologies can provide access to many different kinds of input to language learning that would otherwise not be available, and students are usually eager to learn with technology. It is therefore important to keep up to date on technologies and how these can be used to support classroom-based teaching. Research supports the value of many different kinds of technology for improving pronunciation, both those specifically designed to work on pronunciation and those not so designed but which have been creatively applied within a pronunciation curriculum. However, an extensive review of research on pronunciation teaching (Lee, Jang, & Plonsky, 2015) found greater effects for human-based instruction than computer-based instruction. A sensible position to take is that technology should not be used to replace classroom-based pronunciation instruction but rather to complement or supplement it.

Summary of Best Practices

1. Teach segmental and suprasegmental features together.
2. Draw learners' attention to pronunciation form in relation to meaning and communication.
3. Use implicit learning as a prelude to explicit teaching and learning.
4. Make use of learners' multilingualism.
5. Use role-play or mirroring techniques.
6. Incorporate different voices and models.
7. Keep abreast of developments in technology and use technology to support classroom-based activities.

Applying the Best Practices

In this brief article, I have made recommendations as to what might be considered best practices for the teaching of pronunciation at the present time, based on the available approaches and what is known about their effectiveness. I encourage all language teachers to consider how these recommendations might be applied in their own teaching of pronunciation, whether as an autonomous course or as supplementary to a speaking or other type of language course.

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