



Making Time for Pronunciation Instruction: 6 Strategies

by [John Rothgerber](#)

Pronunciation instruction can provide important benefits to students in regards to both comprehensibility and speech perception. As a teacher, however, it can often feel overwhelming to fit pronunciation instruction into an already busy lesson plan. In a 2012 survey of teachers working in an intensive English program, 71% reported that they did not teach pronunciation at all in their classes (Darcy et al., 2012). However, all of the surveyed teachers rated pronunciation instruction as “very important” for communication classes, and 92% rated it as either “very important” or “important” for daily life. What accounted for the low rate of teaching despite the perceived importance? According to the survey, the two main reasons were a lack of time (43%) and a lack of training (25%).

The availability of excellent reference books such as [Teaching Pronunciation: A Course Book and Reference Guide](#) by Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) can help teachers overcome a lack of familiarity with the different features of English pronunciation, but insufficient class time can remain a serious hurdle. For example, the communicative framework for teaching pronunciation proposed by Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) includes the following five stages for teaching a single feature:

1. description and analysis
2. listening discrimination
3. controlled practice
4. guided practice
5. communicative practice

This is well-suited for a course focused entirely on pronunciation, but it can be difficult to implement in a more general communication or multiskills course, both in terms of in-class time and preparation time.

In the following sections, I introduce several ideas and methods that I have found useful for teaching pronunciation in a general communication or multiskills class when time is a limiting factor.

1. Incorporate Pronunciation Into Communicative Activities

Rather than doing controlled activities targeted only at pronunciation, incorporate pronunciation instruction into other communicative activities when time is limited. For example, introduce question intonation before students do an interview activity, or teach word stress before an activity that involves many multisyllabic words. The intention is to draw awareness to a particular feature of pronunciation and have students devote a portion of their attentional resources to it while also accomplishing the communicative goals of the activity. Students have a tendency to focus more on communication, but careful monitoring and feedback can help keep the pronunciation goal in sight without disrupting the communicative nature of the activity.

I find that giving students the opportunity to practice pronunciation in this way has a more positive impact on spontaneous speech than only using highly controlled pronunciation activities or drills. Of course, when time is not a factor, more controlled activities can also be useful, as in the communicative framework (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

2. Prioritize Suprasegmentals

Instruction in suprasegmentals (aspects of prosody such as stress and intonation) seems to have a greater effect on improving comprehensibility than instruction in segmentals (consonants and vowels; Gordon et al., 2013). In my own experience, students are often highly aware and sensitive to difficulties they have with pronunciation of individual speech segments, but they remain relatively unaware of suprasegmental features. Therefore, calling their attention to these features can have a greater impact when time is limited.

I typically introduce suprasegmentals in the following order:

1. word stress (with vowel reduction, given their connected nature),
2. sentence stress (including a focus on connected speech, reduced speech, and contractions), and
3. intonation and prominence.

This order represents an easy-to-follow increase in scope, from word to complex sentence. If time permits, I introduce consonants and vowels after suprasegmentals.

3. Set a Narrow Focus

I try to always keep pronunciation instruction limited to small, easily digested portions for any given lesson. Not only are students learning about new sounds, they are also learning to shape their vocal tracts to make those sounds, all while recalling vocabulary and constructing sentences to express ideas in their second language. Keeping individual pronunciation lessons limited in scope can increase the chances that students are able to maintain focus on pronunciation as they also juggle the other factors involved in speech production. Doing so also keeps pronunciation instruction more manageable when time is an issue.

4. Give Brief Explicit Instruction

Explicit instruction is an important part of teaching pronunciation, because students often have difficulty perceiving a feature or contrast that is absent from their native language (Darcy, 2018). Rather than go into a detailed phonetic analysis, however, try to keep this as brief as possible when time is limited. The goal of explicit instruction should be to raise awareness of the target feature and to describe, in simple terms, how it is produced. Diagrams and visual aids, as well as varied examples, are helpful in doing this. Minimal pairs can be used to demonstrate a contrast, such as the word stress contrast seen between the noun *PERmit* and the verb *perMIT*. In addition, word-nonword pairs can also be used when good minimal pairs are difficult to find (e.g., *MONkey* and *monKEY*).

5. Focus on Frequent Repetition

Improvements made in isolated pronunciation drills often do not carry over to spontaneous speech (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). However, frequent repetition of the same forms in communicative practice is an important step in developing automatization, or the ability to automatically produce features of pronunciation without focused effort (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005). Because of that, I always try to use communicative activities that involve high repetition of the target feature.

For example, if focusing on question intonation, then an activity that requires students to constantly ask questions is ideal. For word stress or segmentals, carefully select activity-critical vocabulary that contains the target feature. The activity should be one that requires this vocabulary to be used frequently. Before beginning, review the pronunciation of each word, and during the activity, provide feedback specifically on those words. In future lessons, you can draw on this same vocabulary for review activities. Especially when time is limited, building automatization for a small selection of words or structures will promote more generalization for the target features as students advance.

6. Promote Independent Growth

Improving pronunciation is often a lengthy process that extends beyond a single course. Students may have spent their entire language learning careers up to that point encoding the wrong pronunciation in their mental lexicons if, for example, they could not perceive the difference between /l/ and /ɫ/. As such, it is important to encourage students to continue to focus on pronunciation outside of class. To that end, we must give them the tools and knowledge to become independent learners of pronunciation.

Introduce the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to your students and demonstrate how it can be used to identify a word's segments and location of word stress when looking in a dictionary. You can have your students frequently record and analyze their speech for homework, as well. For example, you might provide them with a sample from an online video and ask them to record themselves imitating the rhythm and stress of the speaker. Share with them the free website [English Accent Coach](https://www.englishaccentcoach.com/) to practice listening to difficult consonant and vowel contrasts. Such homework encourages students to practice pronunciation outside of the classroom.

Conclusion

These ideas have guided the way that I fit pronunciation instruction into an already busy classroom, and I hope that they can serve as starting points for teachers who may be looking to focus more on pronunciation in their classes. Providing students with good pronunciation instruction can not only improve their comprehensibility and perception, but it can also improve their confidence to speak. Even with limited time, the benefits make it worthwhile and rewarding.

References

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