Sounding right:
Learning and teaching pronunciation

Ben Crompton
ACEIA Seville 2016
7 things I’ve learnt about teaching pronunciation in Spain since 2009.

1: What I believe pronunciation is about.
In the session I deliberately avoided technicalities, instead looking at my core understanding of what pronunciation learning and teaching is about. Pamela Rogerson-Revell’s book outlines elements of pronunciation and learner subskills to present an overall picture of what fully rounded pronunciation teaching should include. Although I avoided these technicalities in the session, I thoroughly recommend the book if you would like a full and in depth view of the aspects and learner skills of pronunciation.

2: Aim for receptive skills first, and productive ones second.
Pronunciation is not just about speaking. Indeed, I argue that first and foremost, pronunciation teaching lends itself to developing receptive skills. As students acquire these skills and the confidence that goes with them, the production side of pronunciation teaching becomes easier. I use the schwa as the perfect example of this: a sound so common that students need to know what they’re (not) hearing. Yet it’s also the sound of the unimportant syllable, and therefore it’s a sound that we should never teach the pronunciation of.

3: Set yourself clear aims for your teaching and their learning.
Pronunciation is such a key element of learning a language that we need to set clear objectives for our teaching of it. Students need to do the same for their learning. Ask your students about their perceived strengths and weaknesses. What do they think pronunciation should be? And challenge any student who says that good pronunciation is native-like. Accent is something you work with rather than avoid, and in light of the growing popularity of the English as a Lingua Franca theory, this is a key idea. Aim for intelligibility.

4: Find the confidence to say “I can teach pronunciation”
Lots of areas of teaching English are challenging, but pronunciation still stands as one of those grey areas of the job. Lots of new and experienced teachers struggle with pronunciation because of the lack of clear methodologies, and often find themselves without the confidence to tackle it head on. Learn the essentials and keep developing, just as you do with other aspects of teaching. Soon you’ll have the confidence to say you can teach pronunciation.

5: There’s lots to apply from the way Young Learners are taught pronunciation.
Young Learner materials have a variety of activities for teaching pronunciation. Adapt and use these with your teens and adults. Creative drilling, spelling rules and patterns, and even colouring activities work very well.

6: Correction should be continuous, quick, and effective.
Even if intelligibility is our aim, there’s still a mountain of errors to correct. Nothing makes me happier than when a student makes an error - dealt with in the right way, they offer one of the best ways to continue learning. Try using quick instructions on mouth shape or tongue position. Underline and delete stressed syllables. Ask them to say it like a native would.

7: Sounding right is about intelligibility.
Learning about pronunciation

Take a look at the diagram. Everything you can see here is crucial to pronunciation and the production of different sounds. What different parts of your mouth can you feel with your tongue? What can’t you feel? Why not?

Next, I suggest you take the time to study Underhill’s Phonemic Chart. The symbols won’t mean anything to you without sounds, but fortunately there are a few websites to help you. MacMillan have created an app for Underhill’s Phonemic Chart: Sounds, The Pronunciation App. This is a great little tool for Android and iOS, although the free version doesn’t come with exercises, and it’s annoyingly buggy for use on tablets. There’s a web version of the chart at www.macmillanenglish.com/phonemic-chart. Listen and repeat the sounds, and pay close attention to what your mouth is doing.

Asking yourself these questions will give you a good understanding of how different sounds are made:

1) Where is my tongue? Is it touching any parts of my mouth?
2) Can I feel any air pushing past my tongue?
3) Can I feel any air coming out of my mouth? (Try holding a piece of paper in front of your lips. See what happens).
4) What the shape of my lips?
5) Is my mouth more open or more closed?
6) What happens if I pinch my nose? Can I still say the sound? (If not, the sound’s made with air passing through the nasal cavity and through the nose).
7) Is there a vibration on my voice box?

These are the types of questions you should be asking yourself. Once you get more confident, you can start asking your students these questions (or demonstrating the answers) to help them become more familiar with their mouths.

I also thoroughly recommend looking at the Sounds of Speech website, which models exactly what’s happening inside your mouth for most sounds: http://soundsofspeech.uiowa.edu/ This also has an app to download, although this doesn’t have a free version :(.
A useful concept for students: build a house.

I’ve often used this to explain English pronunciation to students. We can put words into two categories: **function words** and **content words**. Function words are grammatical words like auxiliary verbs, pronouns, prepositions, and articles. Content words - like verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs - carry meaning

What words are important to us? The ones with meaning. So, these are the words we’re going to stress. They are the bricks in the house. The function words are *important*, because they are the grammatical glue that makes the sentence make sense. They are the mortar. Both are needed to build your house.

However when we speak English, we normally only want to stress the content words, because these are the ones that matter to us.

**WHAT DO AT THE WEEKEND?**

This can be a good guide for students to help them say the sentence correctly. But I think it’s more crucial that they know what they can expect to hear.

**WHAT DID YOU DO AT THE WEEKEND?**

Students need to know when, for example, weak syllables contain a schwa. I argued in the session that teaching students how to say this phoneme is irrelevant. Yes, students will *want to say it right*, because that’s what students want to do. But our goal as teachers should be for students to *learn to ignore the sound when they’re speaking*. But also, we want to be teaching them the contexts when they can expect a schwa to appear.

**How important is the Phonemic Chart?**

There’s a lot of debate about whether using the phonemic alphabet is valuable in a monolingual context. From my experience over the past few years, I’ve found it can be very helpful for a number of reasons. It can make teaching **specific sounds** much more **effective**. It can help with **error correction** and **quickly dealing with errors**, and it lends itself very nicely to numerous **pronunciation activities**.

---

*Email ben@ela.org.es | get pronunciation help benela.tumblr.com |*
Challenges for Learners

Have you ever asked your students what they think about pronunciation learning and teaching? I did, and the results have been interesting. This question offered students five different aspects of English pronunciation, and asked them to choose the most difficult. Consonants with different sounds in different contexts (the horrid gh, for example) rated highest at 29%, the number of English vowels and pronunciation of long words ranked next, with word stress and long and short vowels tied for fourth place.

Now that’s interesting. I’ve got a good amount of experience in Spain, and I’d say that the biggest problem I’ve seen students facing is the differentiation between long and short vowels, or production of English vowels in general. Consonants with different pronunciations are annoying, but not a deal breaker for most Spanish students.

The second question I showed in the session is even more interesting: what’s the best way to improve your pronunciation. Most popular was watching English TV shows and movies, next was going to an English speaking country. That measly 4%? Pronunciation activities in class.

It’s important to note that this was a limited sample: 60 students across two B2, two C1, a C2, and an A1 class. What I find interesting though is that over half the students say that receptive work is the key to improving their pronunciation, and that accent plays but a small role. Some students will wrongly argue that their accent is terrible.

What I think we’re left with is the task of reminding ourselves and our students about what we’re aiming to achieve with our teaching and their learning, and to give them short and meaningful activities which they know will help them, step by step, to develop their pronunciation skills.

**Ultimately, I argue that sounding right is not about sounding native or having the perfect accent, it’s about having the skills and awareness to articulate English sounds well (both individually and in the context of words and sentences), and having the skills and awareness to know what they can expect to hear.**
Here are a handful of quick pronunciation activities that I find useful in lots of different contexts. I think pronunciation teaching can work best when it’s done in short bursts regularly throughout the course, and most of these are 10 minute activities or less. The table below is based on the subskill areas from Rogerson-Revell.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner Subskill</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Ability to notice similarities and differences between English and Spanish.** | Say it with an English accent  
Pronunciation Journey  
Spelling-pronunciation rules  
Phones as mirrors |
| **Ability to discriminate between English and Spanish sounds.** | B and V  
Pronunciation Journey  
Phonemic Charts & websites  
Creative drilling  
Sausage!  
Phones as mirrors  
Phonemic charts & websites |
| **Ability to imitate and produce sounds accurately.** | Nonsense words  
Dictated spelling tests  
YLE Colours and Phonemes  
Building a house  
Silent videos |
| **Ability to reproduce sounds without prompting or support.** | Nonsense words  
Sausage! |
| **Ability to contextualise sounds within connected speech.** | Say it with an English accent  
Using the phonemic chart  
McCarthy’s words |
| **Ability to generate pronunciation in new contexts.** | /b/ & /v/ (as an example of training) |
| **Ability to correct their own pronunciation.** | |

/b/ & /v/ - one of the big Spanish errors (from Robin Walker)

Spanish speakers will make this mistake because Spanish doesn’t have a phoneme for /v/, even though the letter is used in writing. This can cause lots of problems in English pronunciation.

The key is to not compare the two. Both /b/ and /v/ are voiced sounds (say the sound with your fingers on your voice box, you’ll feel the vibration). Instead, you want to compare /v/ with /f/, which does exist in Spanish. First ask students to create a long /f/ sound:

`fffffffff`

Then ask them to add voicing to it.

`vvvvvvv`

The position of the lips against the teeth does not change (despite some YL courses differentiating the sound with the key words BABY and VAMPIRE). Actually, the only difference is to do with voicing, and showing your students this trick will make them aware of what the mistake is, and how they can correct it.
Building a house - a simple way to introduce the idea of stress

Follow the method we used in the session with your students to introduce the concept of **content** and **function** words. I’ve found that with reference to this over a few lessons, students really start to understand the idea of what words they need to stress, and **what words they can expect to hear**.

**Creative drilling.**

Despite being an old method of teaching pronunciation, drilling can still be an effective method. Here are two tips:

1) Say it with a happy face: take a word or model sentence and, once your students have it clear how it should sound, model saying it with different moods (like happy, sad, angry, incredulous, excitable, etc.). This gives a more dynamic way to drill with students, and can be especially effective with older or higher levels, it can expose them to the ways that mood and attitude can change pronunciation.

2) Back-chaining can be a very effective way of drilling sentence stress and connected speech. Take your sentence and separate it into chunks. Typically, I’d select chunks which have one content word, plus any other function words whose sound merges together. Starting at the end of the sentence, drill the final chunk. Then model and drill the preceding chunk, and so on. For longer phrases, consider separating the sentence into two parts. It can be fun to split the class into two halves, each producing a chunk in order.

**Dictated spelling tests**

Often listening exams will ask students to write words they haven’t seen or heard before, as a test of their receptive pronunciation. A good way for you to test this reception is to give your exam classes a dictated test of words you know they haven’t encountered before (a good rule of thumb is to take words from a wordlist (most courses have them) for a few units ahead of where you currently are with your class). Dictate them twice, and then review the answers. Use the feedback as a chance to both correct spelling and explore the pronunciation rules behind the mistakes they made. This can help raise awareness of common mistakes like educación or beneficial, where Spanish students often believe the /ʃ/ in -tion/-tial is written as a <c> rather than a <t>.

**McCarthy’s words**

In the session I demonstrated the quick method for correction and pronunciation of new words that Michael McCarthy introduced in his ACEIA 2014 plenary. I’ve been using this with all my classes since then. It requires introducing, but it gives an immediate indication of how to pronounce words without having to spend lots of time working on drilling and pronunciation when that is not an aim of your class.
Nonsense words (requires students have a working knowledge of the phonemic chart)

Prepare a set of phoneme cards (vowels and consonants) that you've been working on, or that you know students are having problems with. In pairs, students match the phonemes together to make words. Alternatively, have them select a couple of consonant and vowel phonemes to pronounce as a nonsense word. This focus is entirely on their knowledge of English sounds, and can help you pinpoint precise errors.

A template and example set is available on the ACEIA page. On Word, click Insert - Symbols to find phonemic symbols.

Phones as mirrors

When I started teaching my pronunciation course, I was determined that we’d have little mirrors for each student. This is so students could actually see what their lips and teeth and tongue were doing, and notice the differences between English and Spanish sounds. I never got the mirrors, because I discovered phones worked just as well. Students can either use it with the screen off or, better yet, with the selfie camera on the front.

You can model a sound in class, and students can use their phones as a guide for how closely they are forming their mouths in the correct shape.

This can also work with private study, along with the Sounds of Speech website.

Silent videos

Film yourself or one of your colleagues saying some vowel sounds, or a sentence. It’s then quick and easy to edit the sound out with Movie Maker (or even just play it muted). Can the students work out what’s being said without the audio, just using mouth shape? This is a neat little activity for practising awareness of vowel production and connected speech.

Phonemic charts and websites

Don’t underestimate how useful these can be in class, and the more you use them the more your students will grow accustomed to the Phonemic Chart and the shape of their mouth for different phonemes (especially vowels). Be sure to have a copy of the chart in your room, along with a diagram of the mouth.
Pronunciation Journey (from Mark Hancock)

This classic activity tests how well students can hear the difference between different phonemes, such as the commonly misheard /i:/ as in sheep and /ɪ/ as in ship. It works best with minimal pairs, and a Google search will give you lots of examples.

In the example below, you would tell the class that LEFT is /ɪ/ and RIGHT is /iː/. Read sentences with the words in context. Students must listen and choose left or right at each stage. At the end of the activity, ask Ss to confer as to which city they’ve ended up at. Review by writing the words you chose on the board and modeling pronunciation.

Learn from Phonics and start introducing spelling-pronunciation patterns.

Learning pronunciation can be made a lot easier if we give students rules for different aspects. A simple Google search (i.e. adjectives and adverbs pronunciation rules) will give you some good advice for teaching. Here are some examples:

1) What syllable is stressed in these words?: information justification education. What is the pronunciation of the -tion suffix?

2) Past simple ED endings: verbs normally ending in /t/ and /d/ always pronounced /td/; verbs normally ending in voiceless sounds /p/ /s/ /k/ /tʃ/ /ʃ/ /f/ are always pronounced /t/. All the rest (voiced final sounds) are /d/.

Some handouts for students are available on ACEIA page for ED endings.
Say it with an English accent

For higher levels, this can be an effective and quick instruction to help students correct their pronunciation, especially when they make mistakes with vowel sounds.

Try the activity we used in the session to build awareness of the differences between English and Spanish. On your board, write a few Spanish sentences. Try to include words which are similar to English. Then ask your students to try saying them in an English accent with their partner. Review as a class, and highlight the differences in sounds between the two languages.

Sausage!

You might have noticed that intonation is something your students struggle with. Even though Spanish is a very expressive language, I’ve noticed that the range of their intonation is quite small (although the students themselves might think it’s more pronounced). At higher levels (B1 and above), good intonation skills are essential, because changing the intonation of a sentence can change the meaning considerably. This longer activity is great fun, and can really tune students into the idea that intonation really can convey meaning.

0) Preparation: four or five situations on cards. Good ones involve at least one angry or upset person, i.e. a teenager wants to go out on a school night, someone caught stealing, a bouncer at a club turns away two underage teens, etc.

1) Pre-teach any necessary lexis.

2) Groups of 2-3 students take a card at random. Prepare to mime the scenario. No language allowed.

3) Groups act and the rest of the class guess. This stage will be difficult because there’s no language.

4) Collect in the situation cards and redistribute. This time students prepare to mime with language. They must replace any words they want to say with one word, like sausage or banana. Demonstrate how they need to say the word with different intonation patterns to convey meaning.

5) Groups act again, with the class guessing.

6) Groups keep their second scenario, and quickly plan the role play with full language. The final time they act, their language will be encoded with the intonation appropriate to the situations.
1: General reference and teaching methodology

Adrian Underhill’s *Sound Foundations* remains one of the best introductions to teaching pronunciation. It’s based on using the phonemic chart for all your pronunciation needs.

Pamela Rogerson-Revell’s *English Phonology and Pronunciation Teaching* is a useful mix of theory and practical ideas, and offers a very thorough discussion of many different approaches to teaching pronunciation, including Underhill’s chart.

Adam Brown’s *Pronunciation and Phonetics* is aimed at trainee teachers learning about pronunciation teaching, but each chapter is presented as an adaptable lesson plan.

I’m still not sure how easily this can be applied to the context many of us work in, especially if teaching Cambridge, Trinity, or even EOI exams, but Robin Walker’s *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca* is both fascinating and insightful.

2: teaching resources

Mark Hancock’s classic *Pronunciation Games* offers some useful pronunciation activities for all levels, although bear in mind many of these require working knowledge of the phonemic chart.

His newer book, the aptly named *Authentic Listening Resource Pack* is geared towards improving listening skills, but has several lesson plans dedicated to the receptive side of pronunciation. As the title suggests, all the listening materials come from native speakers. Levels B1+

He’s got a new series coming out soon too - PronPack - so do keep your eyes peeled for this. Go to www.hancockmcdonald.com for some free samples and lots more activities.

3: references for the session


Walker, R. (2010), *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca*, OUP

Go to the ACEIA website for a full selection of photocopiables for this session.