

# EFFECTIVE ENGLISH LEARNING

## Unit 8: Pronunciation



Anyone who speaks another language will know it can be difficult to produce certain sounds that we do not use in our first language. Many international students are nervous about speaking and believe their pronunciation of the sounds of English is an obstacle to effective communication. However, in the case of spoken English, there are two important things to bear in mind:

- You do not need native-like pronunciation of English sounds in order to be comfortably understood
- Other aspects of pronunciation are actually more important for your listeners than the sounds you make

We will be looking at both those points in this unit.

### **‘I need a pronunciation teacher’**

ELTC gets a lot of enquiries from students who believe they need individual coaching in English pronunciation. We also get many requests from School teaching staff at the University of Edinburgh to ‘do something’ about particular students’ pronunciation.

Let's explore first the assumption that pronunciation is something that can be changed by teaching. Can it?

**Task 8.1**

Imagine you are attending an English academic writing class. Would you expect the teacher to correct your pronunciation when you ask a question about a grammar point?

To compare your opinion with ours, click [here](#) for Feedback

The evidence from research into second language learning is that the long-term effect of teachers' corrections is very limited.

In the short term, a student who has just been corrected will probably be able to imitate the teacher's pronunciation of a word immediately afterwards. However, the chances are that the next time the student needs to use the word, they will produce it incorrectly, as they had done before.

**Task 8.2**

Why do you think it is that (adult) language learners tend to revert to their usual pronunciation of a problematic word, even after they have been corrected by a teacher and have successfully copied the teacher's pronunciation?

For Feedback, click [here](#)

Research also shows that there are other factors, over which the language teacher has no control, that exert a great influence on a learner's pronunciation:

*The factors which turn out to be important for accurate pronunciation are those which teachers have the least influence on. Native language, the most important factor, results from historical accident. Similarly, the learner's ability to imitate foreign sounds is beyond the control of the instructor... Similarly, length of residence in a country where the second language is spoken natively is largely beyond the instructor's control. Finally... the learner's concern for pronunciation accuracy is often the result of personal motivations and attitudes established well before the student enters the classroom.*

(adapted from Purcell and Suter, 1980, in Pica 1994: 72)

### Task 8.3

Which of these four sentences is the best summary of the views of Purcell and Suter?

- a) Teachers can do relatively little to improve a learner's pronunciation
- b) Some teachers can teach a learner to sound like a native speaker
- c) No learner can sound like a native speaker
- d) For the learner to sound native-like, the teacher must be a native

To check your decision, click [here](#)

## Intelligibility

There is good news and bad news about pronunciation. The bad news first: with very few exceptions, adult speakers of a second language will not achieve a native-like accent.

The good news: you don't need to sound like a native speaker. What you should aim for, according to Joanne Kenworthy, is 'to be **comfortably intelligible**' (Kenworthy 1987: 3).

The use of the word 'comfortable' is important; it refers to the comfort of the listeners, rather than the speaker. Comfortable intelligibility 'implies that second language learners should not

only make themselves understood to their listeners, but should not irritate. This is not just a matter of pronunciation, but of general speaking habits' (Parkinson 1993: 56).

**Task 8.4**

Are there any features of English speech (of native or non-native speakers) that you find irritating or unpleasant?

Are you aware of anything in the way **you** speak English that seems to cause (a) comprehension problems or (b) irritation, for people listening to you?

For Feedback, click [here](#)

**Task 8.5**

Read the extract below. Try to imagine what it sounded like as it was said. The speaker, Kim, was an international student in an English class at Edinburgh, responding to a question from another student.

If she asked you for advice about improving her speaking, what would you tell her?

**Kim:** from different childhood + or different education + uh + + woman don't + woman can't avoid + can't avoid um being being femi + uh feminist + being female + fema-- + more fema-- + more feminine (*deep breath*) more um + more feminist + feminist feminist + more feminist + like more calm and more um + not positive not aggressive and + there + when the uh + when the women face a certain technology + in my my my + in my case is same + when I uh when I face the technology I have + I don't have confidence + this is usual situation

To compare your comments with ours, click [here](#)

In the last few years, a new expression has come into use among language teachers: **international intelligibility**.

### Task 8.6

What do you the term “international intelligibility” means?

Watch Robin Walker’s video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qoh07EovCsE>

Then write your definition of *international intelligibility*

and [compare it with the Feedback here](#)

## The central role of stress in spoken English

Two types of stress are crucial in being understood: correct syllable within a word, and appropriate stress of words in a sentence.

### Syllable stress in words

The key to making yourself comfortably intelligible to other people in English is **to make sure you put the main stress on the correct syllable of word**.

Although we have a wide variety of accents in the British Isles, but - with one or two regional exceptions - everyone uses the same pattern of word stress. So British listeners are quite used to understanding the different sounds - especially vowels - produced

by native and non-native speakers of English. But if a speaker changes the word stress, their listeners can have great problems in understanding what was said.

Knowing how a word is stressed is essential when you use it yourself for the first time. Even if your pronunciation of the sounds is accurate, you will often be misunderstood if you place the stress on the wrong syllable.

### Task 8.7

Here are four words from the two previous paragraphs. Underline the part of the word that should be stressed:

SYLLABLE    ACCURATE    MISUNDERSTOOD    VARIETY

Check your answers [here](#)

### Word stress in a sentence

In English it is possible to put the main stress on (more or less) any word in a sentence. Where the speaker places the main stress reflects the meaning they intend the listeners to understand.

For example:

1. This is **your** Italian book    (= not hers)
2. This is your **Italian** book    (= not your French one)
3. **This** is your Italian book    (= not that one)
4. This **is** your Italian book    (= why did you say it wasn't?)

Try this website, ***Word stress in sentences***

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpPCBWsVUp0&feature=related>

## RESOURCES

### Dictionaries

Use a dictionary to check the stress pattern of new and important words that you come across in your reading. If you are not sure how word stress is marked in your dictionary, check the User's Guide (usually at the front). If you are not familiar with the phonemic symbols used to show pronunciation, your dictionary will provide a guide explaining which sound each symbol represents, with words illustrating each sound.

#### Task 8.8

There are 26 letters in the English alphabet. How many English sounds are there?

Check your answer by going to

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/activities/phonemic-chart>

### Websites

There is a wealth of material on pronunciation on the Internet. At the moment, googling for "English pronunciation" produces over 8 million hits.

A good place to start, if you are interested in British English pronunciation, is the BBC Learning English website, which offers a series of short video tutorials

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdRmGvmeY1U>

Two sites that our students have recommended:

#### How to improve your pronunciation

[http://esl.about.com/cs/pronunciation/ht/ht\\_prononce.htm](http://esl.about.com/cs/pronunciation/ht/ht_prononce.htm)

#### Improving your pronunciation

<http://www.english-at-home.com/pronunciation/improving-your-pronunciation/>

For a demonstration of word stress:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WX1rrFh4OZw>

BBC video on the sounds of English

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/grammar/pron/sounds/>

## ADVICE FROM OTHER STUDENTS

Here is the view of an international student at Edinburgh who made a conscious effort to improve his speaking ability in English.

*I try to involve myself in situations where I have to speak and discuss with people - in kitchens, social events, visits to friends and so forth. Or I record myself and try to improve my pronunciation by repeating again and again the words that are difficult for me to pronounce. I also request friends to help me by pointing out my weak points in speaking.*

### Task 8.9

How many techniques does that student use?

Check your answer with the Feedback [here](#)

### Task 8.10

The advice below was chosen as the 'Best Answer' to the question "How can improve my English pronunciation?"

Which parts of it do you think are the most useful for you, in your situation?

Are there any parts of it that you would not be able to adopt?

#### 1. Listen to spoken English as often as possible.

Listen to how English speakers (on TV, the Net, in person) pronounce specific words and phrases, and "model" your pronunciation on what you hear.

#### 2. Learn the phonemic alphabet.

Use the English phonemic alphabet page, which you find at the beginning of good dictionaries, as a guide to pronouncing new words.



### 3. Don't forget to learn the word stress of a new word.

Every English word has its own normal stress pattern. For example, the word "believe" has two syllables (be and lieve), but only the second syllable is stressed. Your dictionary should show the **syllable stress** by an apostrophe (') before the syllable to be stressed: 'be'lieve'.

### 4. Work out which sounds cause you most problems in English.

Depending what your first language is, you are likely to have problems with certain sounds. For example, most French speakers have difficulties with "th"; speakers of Mandarin have difficulties with "r" or "l", and the "zh" in 'usually', and Arabic speakers with "p" and "b".

### 5. Practise the sounds you find difficult.

A useful exercise is a "minimal pair" exercise. For example, if you have difficulty distinguishing between "p" and "b", try practising pairs of words which are the same except for the sound "p" and "b": For example, "pair" and "bear"; "pond" and "bond"; "pie" and "buy" etc.

### 6. Be aware of intonation and **sentence stress**.

Not all words in a sentence have equal stress, and generally only the "information" words (nouns and verbs) are stressed.

- 'Where's the **pen** I gave you?
- 'Where's the **red** pen I 'gave you?
- 'Where's the pen I gave you **yesterday**?

The unstressed words (such as "the", "I", "you" and "and") don't carry as much "weight" as the stressed words. They become much smaller in length, and are almost abbreviated. For example, "and" becomes "un".

### Changing stress

**Sentence stress** isn't "fixed" like word stress. In fact, you can stress words that are normally unstressed in order to highlight different meanings.

For example:

- I bought the **book** = not the DVD
- I** bought the book = not Arthur
- I **bought** the book = I didn't borrow it

### Intonation

There are a couple of easy-to-remember rules about intonation. Usually our voices go up at the end of the sentence to show a question, and down at the end to show a statement.

Intonation is also important in "tag questions":

You know him, **don't you?**

(With rising intonation on "don't you?" to show it's a question)

You know him, **don't you.**

(With falling intonation on "don't you" to show it's a statement that you expect the other person to agree with.)

### 7. Learn to recognise spelling patterns.

For example, "-tion" on the end of a word is pronounced "-shun", while "-sion" can be pronounced "-zhun". There are often many ways to pronounce a particular spelling pattern, but it certainly helps to know what the variations are. For example, the pattern "ough" can be pronounced "uff" as in "enough" and "tough", or "or" as in "ought" and "bought" or "oh" as in "although" and "dough".

### 8. Don't rush.

If you speak too quickly, you risk skipping over some sounds, failing to pronounce them completely, or mixing them up. If you speak too slowly, you might end up sounding unnatural. But it's better to speak slowly and clearly than too quickly.

Source:

<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20081128034212AAQNJIO>

That's the end of this unit on pronunciation and also of these *Effective English Learning* materials. A key element in improving your English, from this point on, will be **practice** – not just reading about ways of enhancing your English, but actually trying them out and seeing if they suit you.

The English proverb 'Practice makes perfect' is over-optimistic. But what we can say with certainty is that **practice combined with feedback** represents the most effective route to better command of a language.

I hope that these materials have given you some insights into the ways in which other international students have made progress. If you devise your own informal techniques for learning English, I would be delighted to hear about them at [A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk](mailto:A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk)

Prof. Tony Lynch, English Language Teaching Centre

## Pronunciation

### Feedback: study notes and answers

#### Task 8.1

As a teacher of English, I would only correct a student's pronunciation in a writing class (or any other class than speaking) when I did not understand what they had said. For me, a pronunciation error is only 'serious' when it obstructs comprehension. To return to the page you were on, click [here](#)

#### Task 8.2

The basic reason is that when we are saying something in a foreign language, our mental focus is on the meaning of what we want to say. Our attention (processing capacity) is directed solely on that message, and not on the form of what we want to say.

This means it is natural to 'forget' what a teacher has said – perhaps, days or weeks before – about the pronunciation of a particular word that we need to use in what we want to say, when our mind is on the message. Other things have greater priority at the time of speaking.

That is why, for example, it makes good sense to **rehearse a presentation** several times before giving it, so that we are familiar with what we want to say, and therefore have time (= spare processing capacity) to focus on the pronunciation of particular key words when we are actually doing the presentation. To return, click [here](#)

#### Task 8.3

Sentence (a) is the best summary. Purcell and Suter's view is that, although some exceptionally talented individuals may be predisposed to achieve a native-like accent, this is not due to teaching, but to a number of prior variables over which the teacher has no control: (1) the native language, (2)

ability to imitate, (3) length of stay in the second language culture, and (4) concern for pronunciation accuracy. [To return, click here](#)

#### Task 8.4

These are open questions, but some sources of irritation I have heard British people mention are: repetitive intonation; lack of clear stress patterns; excessive hesitancy; excessive self-correction; mumbling; speaking too loud. [To return, click here](#)

#### Task 8.5

The features that irritated Kim's listeners most were her hesitation and self-repetition. She seemed to be driven by an excessive desire to choose the precise word, rather than to get her message across. That can tax listeners' patience. [To return, click here](#)

#### Task 8.6

I would define it as: 'the extent to which a person can be easily understood when speaking English to listeners from different language backgrounds'.

Robin Walker, who you have just watched on video, is a leading authority on pronunciation teaching. Among other things, he has written about the 'Lingua Franca Core', which is the set of key elements of English pronunciation that an adult learner needs to master in order to be understood in situations where English is the language being used as a *lingua franca* (as the common language for international communication). If you are interested in knowing what these core elements are, click [here](#).

#### Task 8.7

The correct main stresses in those words are:

SYLLable

ACCurate

misunderSTOOD

vaRlety

[To return, click here](#)

## Task 8.8

The BBC English phonemic chart shows 46 distinct sounds (*phonemes*) - 19 vowels and diphthongs, and 27 consonants. To return, click [here](#)

## Task 8.9

This student seems to be a very active learner. He mentions three ways of improving: social practice in speaking with other people; individual pronunciation practice with an audio recorder; and getting feedback on his performance. To return, click [here](#)

**Task 8.10** is an open question

### References in this Unit

Kenworthy J. 1987. *Teaching English Pronunciation*. Harlow: Longman.

Parkinson B. 1993. 'Teaching Phonology'. ACELT distance learning course materials. Institute for Applied Language Studies, University of Edinburgh.

Pica T. 1994. 'Questions from the language classroom: research perspectives'. *TESOL Quarterly* 28/1: 49-79.

Purcell E. and Suter R. 1980. 'Predictors of pronunciation accuracy: a re-examination'. *Language Learning* 30/2: 271-87.

## The Lingua Franca Core (for teachers of English) by Robin Walker

The Lingua Franca Core comprises seven areas in which it is essential to eliminate error in our students' pronunciation:

- **Vowel quantity:** vowel quality varies widely from one native speaker accent to another. However, the length differences between the vowels of English feature in all accents, and the long English vowels are very long in comparison with average vowel lengths in other languages. Because of this, the distinction between long and short vowels is more important than exact vowel quality, and should be clear in speech.
- **Consonant confluents:** when a consonant of English does not occur in their mother tongue, learners may replace the 'missing' sound with something similar. The substitution of one consonant for another can cause serious confusion for both native and non-native listeners - for example, when a Korean speaker of English replaces /f/ with /p/ and produces *paint* for *faint*, or *copy* for *coffee*.
- **Phonetic approximations:** another strategy is to use a sound from your mother tongue that is close to the required English sound. However, some approximations lead to unintelligibility, as with /B/, the fricative sound the Spanish use for the 'b' in *cabin*, or /F/, the sound they use for the 'g' in *again* or 'a girl'.
- **Consonant cluster simplification:** learners tend to use two radically different strategies to deal with consonant clusters. Of the two, deleting one of the consonants to simplify a cluster can affect intelligibility considerably, whilst the addition of a vowel seems to cause fewer problems. Turkish speakers of English, for example, will often insert a vowel before or after an 's', so *stone* will sound like *istone* or *sitone*. Although this may sound foreign to a native speaker, it is much less damaging to intelligibility than eliminating one of the two consonants, leaving *tone* or *sone*, for example.
- **Prominence and weak forms:** on the continuum between stress-timed and syllable-timed languages, English tends towards the stress-timing end. Learners often find native speakers harder to understand than non-natives. Pronunciation teaching should focus on helping them achieving adequate prominence: with correct prominence, a learner's English is intelligible, even if they do not produce weak vowel used by native speakers.
- **Tone groups:** failing to use tone groups to divide the stream of speech into manageable, meaningful chunks has a serious effect on intelligibility. On the one hand, it may lead to breaks in speech in unexpected places, reducing intelligibility; on the other, it reduces planning time for the speaker, which will inevitably lead to new errors of all types.
- **Nuclear/contrastive stress but not tone:** one almost unique characteristic of English is the way in which it varies the most prominent stress in a tone group to create meaning. Thus, the utterance *They rented a FLAT* does not carry the same meaning as *They RENTED a flat*. Many other languages use grammar changes to alter meaning, so learners often fail to pick up the significance of the tonic stress in English. Putting the main stress on the wrong word in a spoken sentence will direct the listener's attention to the wrong place, leading to confusion.

Source: Robin Walker

<http://www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues/internationalintelligibility.html>

To return to the main study unit, click [here](#)