

SIX PRONUNCIATION PRIORITIES FOR THE BEGINNING STUDENT

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For the last five years I've been puzzling over how to help beginning students. Surely it would be better to help them early, rather than wait until they have developed habits which must be undone. Another reason to get going early is that some students never reach a necessary threshold level of intelligibility, so they can't use what they've learned in any practical situation. Discouraged, they give up trying -- which makes them relatively unteachable. On the other hand, beginners don't have enough language to understand abstract explanations. Besides, they have so much else to learn that the time available for pronunciation work is apt to be quite limited. To try to tackle everything in the beginning is to risk wasting the whole effort, because students can only deal with a limited number of challenges at one time.

Clearly, we need to do something, but not everything. Therefore the first task is *triage*: deciding which aspects of pronunciation are immediately important and which should be left for later work. For instance, the voicing distinction (e.g. *have/half*) is important, but it could be left for later. Of more immediate importance is the stop/continuant distinction (e.g. *had/have*) because of its usefulness in relation to grammar. Below are my six candidates for early essentials.

1. DECODING PRINT

I would give a lot of attention to decoding spelling. This may seem odd when time is limited, but it seems to me that students need to be able to use the printed word as early as possible to reinforce their pronunciation, as well as to help themselves review what they've been taught in class.

The most obvious part of decoding is the alphabet. The problem is that most people believe they learned the alphabet on the first day of study of a new language. But do they actually know how to pronounce the letters? Think of José, who, if required to spell his name out loud might well say "G - O - S - A". Spelling out loud (i.e. saying the names of the letters) is a useful way to correct a communication breakdown, and therefore is worth serious practice time.

After the alphabet, the next order of business should be some kind of crude rules for decoding combinations of letters, otherwise known as spelling. What kind of rules are practical? It is common to present spelling to ESL/EFL students in the same way that it is done for English-speaking children, but this doesn't work very well for non-native speakers because they don't have the same sounds in their mental inventory. However, it is possible to adapt standard elementary school rules (e.g. "When two vowels walk together, the first one talks and the second one walks.") in a way that is useful for English learners.

The most serious problem in decoding English spelling is converting vowel letters to vowel sounds. The presentation below is not a traditional analysis, but I think that stubborn pedagogical problems require new solutions. To begin with, students who come from "pure vowel" languages need help coping with off-glides. Phoneticians define

diphthongs and off-glides so variously that it seems to me that lumping them together is good enough for practical purposes. If the presentation below seems eccentric, keep in mind that it is intended for very low level students.

1.1 The alphabet

The “alphabet names “ of the vowel letters:

A^Y E^Y I^Y O^W U^W

Physically, off-glides might best be shown by drawings (or demonstration) of the position of the lips as the vowel sound ends in ^Y (spread lips) or ^W (rounded lips).

1.2 Crude rules for decoding print to sound.

These rules are true for many words.

The Two-Vowel rule: if there are 2 vowel letters in a short word (syllable), the first vowel sounds like its “alphabet name”.

A ^Y	E ^Y	I ^Y	O ^W	U ^W
cake	tea	ice	cone	juice
remain	repeat	arrive	soapy	excuse

The One Vowel rule: if there is only 1 vowel letter in a short word (syllable), it sounds like a “relative” of the alphabet vowel. (Note: no off-glide.)

A	E	I	O	U
had	bed	his	hot	sun
thank	pencil	listen	comic	summer

“Relative vowels” are traditionally called “short vowels” (also “lax vowels”), but I think there are serious reasons for avoiding the terms “short” and “long” in naming vowel sounds. For one thing, the actual length of the vowel can change according to use. It is true that the “short” vowels do not have an off-glide and so are shorter when said alone. However, in the context of a word these vowels might in fact take longer to say for other reasons. Compare the actual length of the “long” vowel in *bite* with the lengths of the “short” vowels in *bid* and *bin*. An even more important consideration is that when any vowel is stressed, the importance of length as an indicator of stress overrides any other timing difference. (Bryan Jenner, personal correspondence).

1.3 “Alphabet vowels” and “Relative vowels”.

The pairing of the vowels below (e.g. *time/Tim*) is not according to the usual arrangement (e.g. *ship/sheep*) because it isn’t meant to describe tongue placement in the mouth space, but to help students decode spelling, using the crude rules above.

A ^Y	A	E ^Y	E	I ^Y	I	O ^W	O	U ^W	U
ate	at	beat	bet	kite	kit	load	lot	cute	cut
made	mad	teen	ten	time	Tim	note	not	assume	sum

2. GRAMMAR SOUNDS “S(Z)” “T(D)” “R” “L”

The most crucial sounds are those which make a grammatical difference, and they occur at the end of words. Many languages do not allow final consonants, or allow a very limited number, and this can cause trouble when the grammar depends on the presence of a consonant. Examples:

Tense	<i>He's / He'd ; I'll / I'd ask ; share / shared</i>
Singular/ plural	<i>book/books</i>
Question words	<i>where/what</i>
Positive/ Negative	<i>can/can't</i>

It doesn't immediately matter exactly how these consonants are said, as long as the consonant is present somehow, and the stop/continuant feature is preserved. I think if students get some control of this distinction, they will be on the road to controlling final consonants in general.

3. LINKING *We cannmalways* *We cantalways*

This is a high priority phenomenon because of the effect on listening comprehension. Students tend to have difficulty identifying beginnings and endings of words, and thus in making sense of normal run-together speech. Perhaps this is because their first language separates words with silence, or because they have learned English through print and depend on “white space” between words. Work with linking words can help not only with learning to process running speech, but can also help in learning to manage particularly difficult sounds, since sometimes these are easier to say at the beginning or at the end of a word depending on the rules of the student's first language. For instance, the distinction between /l/ and /d/ can be drilled in the following type of exercise.

1. mail it	(mailit)	Mail it home.
2. feel OK	(feellOK)	Do you feel OK?
3. had it	(hadit)	I've had it!
4. hold every	(holdevery)	Hold everything.

4. RHYTHM (THE NUMBER OF SYLLABLES)

English learners often add or subtract syllables, depending on the rules of their first language. For instance, an L1 which does not allow consonant clusters may cause the learner to add some kind of vowel to break up the English cluster or, alternatively, to drop the syllable completely. For example: *giffuto shoppu* (gift shop) or *gahment* (government). This can damage intelligibility. Since rhythm is physical, practice of syllable number should involve tapping a pencil, a foot, or some other physical effort.

1	2	3	4	5
□	□□	□ □ □	□ □ □ □	□ □ □ □ □
pie	tuna	egg salad	tuna sandwich	potato salad
milk	coffee	lemonade	Pepsi Cola	vanilla ice cream

5. RHYTHM (LENGTHENING FOR STRESS, SHORTENING FOR DE-STRESS)

We all learn rhythmic structure of speech in babyhood and it becomes a natural aspect of our speech from that point on. When this rhythm is unconsciously transferred to a new language, it can seriously affect communication. Clarity in spoken English depends on systematic variation of the length of syllables, so students need lots of practice hearing and producing this variation.

The most important use of length in English is for making stress and emphasis clear to the listener. Even advanced students tend to assume that word stress patterns are some sort of frill, or else they do not notice them at all. Far from being frills, word stress patterns are an essential part of communication in the spoken language, because English speakers tend to store vocabulary according to stress patterns. For this reason, a stress mistake can cause great confusion, especially if it is accompanied by any other kind of error. (e.g. *committee / comedy; deputy / the beauty*). To make sure the listener will be able to identify the stress, English uses several signals, but as Gillian Brown said, "...from the point of view of teaching production of stress, *length* is the variable that most students find easiest to control, and is a reliable marker of stress." (Brown, G. 1990:43-4). Following are crude stress rules for beginners.

Strong Syllable Rules

When you say a word alone:

1. Each word has one strong syllable.
2. The vowel in a strong syllable is long.

ban **a** na s **o** fa m **u** sic

Weak Syllable Rules

1. Some vowels keep their regular sound, but some vowels get weak.
2. A weak vowel sound is short and not clear.
3. Most weak vowels sound the same¹

bɛn **a** nɛ s **o** fɛ t e lɛphone tɛl **e** phɛny

6. EMPHASIS (Most important word)

The English speaker chooses which words the listener should notice, and highlights them by means of intonation (timing and melody). Probably the most essential element of this system is the lengthening of the vowel at the center of the most-stressed syllable of the chosen word. The purpose of the lengthening is to make it easier for the listener to notice the pitch change which occurs when that particular word is highlighted in the sentence (nuclear stress). In English this signal means **PAY ATTENTION TO THIS WORD!** This system is specific to English. Other languages may use other signals: perhaps word order, or a special particle or word that alerts the listener to notice this part of the message. As Jennifer Jenkins put it, "English is relatively restricted syntactically and morphologically in its capacity to highlight important aspects of a message in other ways..." (Jenkins:123) Because language-specific systems for emphasis are learned so early that they are applied unconsciously to any new language, it is necessary to train students to notice the length difference for the primary stress of the most important word. Following are crude rules for beginners.

¹ Actually there are three different forms of weak vowels, but from a beginning student's point of view, their obscurity makes them all sound pretty much alike."

Emphasis Rule 1. Every sentence (thought group/clause/utterance) has one most important word.

Emphasis Rule 2. The strong syllable in the most important word is extra long and has a change of pitch. (down or up, but a change)

I want a ban **a** na, not a p **ea** ch. How do you spell “s **o** fa”? What does “sofa” m **ea** n?

SUMMARY

Beginning students of English need to work on core elements of the spoken language before they are asked to deal with less essential aspects. These core elements are:

1. Sound distinctions that convey information about grammar
2. The rhythmic effects of syllable number and variable vowel length
3. Intonational highlighting of the most important word.

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