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## Pronunciation

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In all my years in the classroom and working as a trainer, pronunciation has been one of the most difficult areas related to learning English, for learners and teachers alike. I remember as an experienced teacher I did an observed lesson on intonation which made me realise how difficult it was to teach something which I wasn't sure about, and which my learners simply didn't hear! Speaking to other teachers now or watching them teach, I realise that often they're in the same situation I was in then: trying to teach something related to spoken English which they're not 100% sure about, and which the learners don't really hear - meaning of course that they have a limited chance to actually speak like that!

Today, we will consider alternatives to this approach, so I hope you will have a clear idea of what pronunciation should mean in your classes, and exactly what you want your learners to achieve when you work on pronunciation.

**Over to you:** What is teaching pronunciation about? Look at the list of ideas here, and think which ones you agree with, and which you disagree with.

### What is teaching pronunciation?

Well you could probably argue a case for all of those statements we looked at in that activity, but some clearly are more relevant than others. One point I'd like to reiterate is that most of those comments are about pronunciation as a productive skill (not unsurprisingly) which reflects the fact that pronunciation as part of receptive skills practice (i.e. listening activities) is often overlooked.

#### A traditional definition

If we take one of the most comprehensive introductions to teaching English and look for the chapter on Phonology, it covers these areas:

- sounds
- word stress
- prominence
- connected speech

Scrivener, J (2011). *Learning Teaching*. Oxford: Macmillan.

Within these areas, features such as stress and unstress and intonation are also covered. I think it's a pretty good overview of what the pronunciation of English is all about, but it also rightly points out that some areas are easier for teachers to work with than others.

### Which do you find easier to teach? Grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation?

One of the reasons teachers can be intimidated with pronunciation is because perhaps more than the grammar of a language it requires both quite an in-depth knowledge and also an awareness that that knowledge might not cover everything. In other words, an understanding of the variations of English and their sounds and features – particularly the variations of English that their learners will encounter – and how it's difficult to say something is right or wrong...

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## The difficulties of teaching pronunciation: Intonation

Thinking back to my attempt to teach intonation: I was teaching something I was unsure about. I realise now what a tricky area intonation is! If I am not sure about it, should I still be teaching it?

Perhaps a better question is: what do you mean by 'teaching intonation'? Can you just go into a classroom and expect learners to produce the area of phonology you are focusing on?

I'd argue with something like intonation that you shouldn't go in with that kind of aim. Like most areas of pronunciation, it's a long process which begins with awareness raising, and the ability of the learner to 'hear' the features of a language. This is unlikely to happen in one lesson. Even if it does, it will be worth re-visiting it, reminding them, maintaining their awareness.

Another good question to ask is: should you be teaching something you're not comfortable with? And the answer here is - probably - no. Intonation is very much at the high level of pronunciation teaching as far as I'm concerned. There are plenty of other areas which are much easier to learn about/teach and which also have a real value to the learners - stress and linking for example.

So, to re-cap, think about these two issues:

1. 'Picking up' or 'hearing' the features of a language's pronunciation takes time.
2. As a teacher, work with areas of pronunciation that you're familiar with.

Another question that is good to ask is: What do they need English for? Where will they be using it? When they're speaking or listening?

This could involve interactions with native or non-native speakers who speak different varieties of English with associated differences in pronunciation... So which one do you teach?! The obvious answer is that your English is the first model for your learners, and that you should try to supplement that by giving them access to the English of the 'target group' they are likely to be interacting with - perhaps speakers from India or speakers of English as a foreign language rather than native speakers from the US or the UK, for example.

Another question that you should consider is: what is most important to help your learners in achieving their goals?

**Over to you:** What are the classic mistakes that your learners make with pronunciation?

Very often, what teachers sometimes perceive as 'bad pronunciation' doesn't actually impede in communication. Let's take some examples:

- My favourite beer <beer> is from the Czech Republic. It's not too strong, and goes well with heavy food.
- Can I borrow your telephone <teLEfon> please?

It's not perfect English, of course, but the problems here (wrong vowel sound in 'beer' and wrong word stress in 'telephone') are unlikely to lead to a breakdown in communication.

So I think we should be realistic as teachers in what we expect from our learners, as very often what sounds like a 'bad accent' is actually a perfectly acceptable way of speaking which achieves the speakers aims.

What I would argue is important but often overlooked with pronunciation is raising awareness to help learners with their listening skills in English. In the real world it is often an unfamiliarity with certain features of native speaker language (e.g. connected speech, unstress) which cause a breakdown in communication - because the non-native speaker cannot understand.

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## Listening for pronunciation

I've already spoken about the importance of taking time to raise your learners awareness of pronunciation features, and I think that is very important. I would also suggest that you embed this simple approach I'm going to outline into your teaching on a regular basis. In other words, don't just 'do' pronunciation for your learners in lessons from time to time, but regularly raise awareness of it by following the process:

- raise awareness of features;
- help them understand how those features work;
- (non-essential) help them produce some of these features.

**Over to you:** You're now going to try a couple of activities, as if you were in an English language classroom. Afterwards, you will have the chance to reflect on which parts of the three stage process above each activity relates to.

### 1. Count the words

In this activity, prepare a few sentences in English - ideally with plenty of auxiliary verbs. Make each sentence a little longer than the one before. Explain to the group that you are going to say sentences a little faster than normal. They have to listen and just count how many words are in each sentence. Contractions count as two words e.g. I'm = I am. Say the sentences a little faster than normal. When checking their answers, ask them why it's difficult and what aspects of pronunciation it raises awareness of. It can help in many areas, but especially for linking, elision and unstress.

### 2. Dictation

Again, prepare a few sentences in English. Ideally they should be questions, again with plenty of auxiliary words. Say the words much more quickly than normal, and ask the group to write them down. When you check what they have, again ask what this raises awareness of. It is, once more, useful for highlighting elision, unstress, linking, etc. The great thing about this kind of dictation is that you can use it at any stage in a lesson, to introduce questions for discussion, a comprehension activity, etc.

## Conclusion

It's difficult to do justice to pronunciation in such a short space of time! What I've done is try to give you a way of approaching pronunciation which puts less stress on the teacher, yet hopefully at the same time is very useful for the learner. Most learners will never achieve the kind of 'native' speaker level that some teachers still demand even today – understanding that they don't need to reach that point is the first stage in making the teaching of pronunciation an easier and more enjoyable element of English lessons.

**Over to you:** How do you apply these kinds of activities to working with materials? You're going to have a look at some Premier Skills English content and evaluate how you could use them to support pronunciation work for your learners.