A few years ago I was crossing the playground in Spain, on my way to a training session with local teachers. As I was going past two young girls I heard one of them say ¿Jugamos al inglés? (Let's play English). The idea of 'playing English' roused my curiosity, and I stopped and eavesdropped. What followed was a stream of sh- and z-like sounds with not a word of English among them. But the rhythm was very English, and very un-Spanish.

By the time they get to the 9-15 age group, young learners are usually very aware that English feels and sounds different to their mother tongue. This makes this a great age for working on pronunciation, and offers us an opportunity to sow seeds that will produce very tangible benefits. We know from experience, for example, that poor pronunciation means poor fluency – you can’t be fluent if you can’t get your tongue around a sound, or get a short phrase out of your mouth. In fact, learners actually avoid words or grammatical structures that they find difficult to pronounce, and as teachers we are sometimes guilty of misinterpreting these ‘gaps’ in production as gaps in a learner’s knowledge or understanding.

But poor fluency isn’t the only outcome of poor pronunciation. Listening is a nightmare for students with limited pronunciation skills, either because they simply don’t recognise key sounds or words in their spoken form, or because they have to concentrate so hard when listening that their brains very quickly overload and ‘block’. When we spot problems with listening we are tempted to respond by doing more listening work, and are frustrated when this has no effect. What is need, of course, is focused pronunciation work.

Although problems with speaking and listening are obvious to us, poor pronunciation can also badly affect reading and writing. At the level of writing, for example, students might write coffee instead of copy, or berry instead of very. My tourism students used to write Festival at the beginning of a series of points in favour of an argument. At first I didn’t understand where this was coming from. Then they told me that I said this a lot in class. What do you think I was saying? (Answer below*)
More important than writing, however, is the dramatic impact of poor pronunciation on reading. At the end of her talk at the 2008 IATEFL Conference, researcher and OUP author Catherine Walter told the audience that if they wanted their learners to read better, they would have to improve their pronunciation. She was basing this invaluable piece of advice on academic research into how we read in English as an additional language.

Speaking, listening, writing, reading – competence is all four skills is closely related to competence in pronunciation. The same is obviously true for learning vocabulary, where doubts about the pronunciation of words make it very difficult for learners to remember them. Even grammar is related to good pronunciation, which is why the Oxford English Grammar Course is accompanied by a pronunciation CD.

What can we do on a daily basis to help our students with pronunciation? First of all, show your learners that pronunciation matters. Don’t skip the pronunciation exercises in your coursebook because of lack of time. They are too important. At the same time, don’t do exercises that aren’t relevant to your students. The difference between /b/ and /v/ matters for Spanish students of English, but not for students of many other first language backgrounds. Stick to what matters.

Integrate pronunciation into normal lessons. Don’t leave it for Friday afternoons because we all know that what we do then isn’t important. (This may not be true for you but it’s what learners often think). Integrate pronunciation into learning new vocabulary, or learning a new structure. If you are teaching advice with ‘If I were you’, insist on good sentence stress and rhythm, so that students say if I were you and not if I were YOU. If you are teaching frequency adverbs make sure that your learners are saying SOMEtimes or OFten as opposed to someTIMes and oFten. In other words, insist on correct word stress.

Insist on accuracy but don’t demand perfection. Insisting on good pronunciation is the first way of showing that it matters. Demanding perfection is the best way of failing, since many learners lose interest in pronunciation on seeing that they can never get it right. And what is perfect, any way? The identical imitation of the voice on the CD? Out of necessity, coursebooks model pronunciation using a standard accent, but we mustn’t confuse the CD model with our learners’ goal, which is to be intelligible. Intelligibility is something that something that you can achieve in many different accents, both native speaker and non-native speaker. Work on pronunciation, then. And enjoy working on it. But most of all, make sure your learners enjoy working with you.

(*Answer. In class I often begin a sequence of instructions by saying ‘First of all’, which my students heard as ‘Festival’.)