ID²EAS for teaching pronunciation

Robin Walker comes up with some memorable ways of dealing with pronunciation.

Interest in pronunciation is making a slow comeback after being pushed to the margins of ELT by communicative approaches in the 1980s. This growing interest is reflected in new publications both on how to teach pronunciation, and of classroom activities and resources. Technology is joining the act, with apps and computers now aiding the learning process, but this makes it more important than ever for us to organise the types of activities we use in class into some sort of coherent structure.

One way to do this is to think about activities aimed at segmental or suprasegmental aspects of English pronunciation. Another is to organise them around receptive and productive pronunciation skills. A third way is to organise activities around the way they attempt to generate learning, which is what I want to do in this article.

ID²EAS is the acronym I use for the classification of teaching activities that occurred to me some years ago. It stands for:

I  Imitation
D  Discrimination
D  Demonstration
E  Explanation
A  Association
S  Stimulation

Imitation

‘Listen and repeat’ has a bad reputation today. The 50s, 60s and 70s had seen some grim episodes of students suffering under its rigid dictates. ‘Blind, imitative drill’, French called it (1950, vol. 3: 9), with students repeating sentences that made no sense, and were full of words they didn’t need. But that doesn’t mean that imitation has no place in teaching pronunciation. However much we know about a target feature, the acid test is if we can do it. Pronunciation has a significant skills component, and skills acquisition involves ‘watch and do’ more than ‘listen and learn’. In so many sports and hobbies we start off by imitating a skilled friend or instructor. We can do the same when teaching pronunciation.

The sound /ɜː/ as in her or were, doesn’t exist in Spanish, the mother tongue of most of my students. But this doesn’t stop them from listening to me model the sound, and then imitating what I do, almost always without any problem. If, like me, you teach in a context where your students share the same L1, I’m sure you will be able to think of parallel situations of successful imitation.

We mustn’t be afraid, then, of listen and repeat, although I find that it is very important to switch on the listening. It can’t be ‘blind’, so normally I model a target sound various times before I allow my learners to repeat. I move around the room as I do this and ask them to focus their attention on what I say, to ‘catch’ it in their minds, to masticate it in their brains. Finally, I give the command to ‘listen and repeat’.

Discrimination

If you can’t hear the difference between two items, how can you make it? In class, most students find it frustrating to be asked to differentiate between hat and hut, for example, when the two words sound exactly the same to them. For this reason, when we work on features that are not part of the learners’ mother-tongue pronunciation system, and that sound the same to learners, we need to provide abundant discrimination exercises. There are various simple activities we can use for this.

Same-Different. In this popular exercise the target feature is modelled in close combination with a similar sound, word or phrase. For example, if my students can’t hear the difference between I’ll go and I’d go, then I model them in different combinations:

1. I’ll go. I’ll go.
2. I’d go. I’d go.
3. I’d go. I’ll go.
4. I’ll go. I’d go.
5. I’ll go. I’ll go.

On hearing each pair students write down Same or Different. For the exercise above the answers would be Same, Same, Different, Different, Same.
Odd one out. Here the teacher models the target feature four times, one of the four being different. The stress in record (n) and record (v) can be built up into an exercise like this:

1. REcord REcord reCORD REcord
2. REcord reCORD reCORD reCORD
3. reCORD REcord REcord REcord
4. reCORD reCORD reCORD REcord

After hearing all four words, students note down or shout out the number of the ‘odd one out’ (3, 1, 1 and 4, in the examples above).

Classifying sounds. In this exercise three or four target sounds are modelled in complete words. Learners have to put the words they hear into the appropriate column. The past simple or past participles of irregular verbs are a favourite classification exercise in many coursebooks:

/ɔː/ /əʊ/ /eɪ/ /e/ 

broke
brought caught chose came drove fell gave went left paid read saw taught spoke wore wrote

However, the same exercise could be done with word stress or the placement of nuclear (sentence) stress in short phrases.

Demonstration
If learners can ‘hear’ a new sound, we can model it and ask them to imitate us. If they can’t, we can try to demonstrate the problematic item. If this is a consonant, we can make the sound in front of the group, encouraging them to focus their attention on our face, especially our lips. Korean learners of English have problems with /v/ and /f/ which can sound like /b/ and /p/, respectively. The difference is easily demonstrated, and as we slowly model each sound, preferably in complete words like vote.
and boat, or far and purr, we draw the learners’ attention to the way our lips meet for /b/ and /p/, as opposed to the way the top teeth sit on the bottom lip for /v/ and /f/.

Demonstrating /h, v/

The plosive/fricative qualities of these sounds can be demonstrated, too. We can model /b/ by clapping our hands with each model word to reinforce the plosive quality of the sound, then model /v/, making a sweeping arm action to demonstrate its fricative nature.

The deeper inside our mouths a sound is made, the harder it is to demonstrate it. Diagrams come to our rescue. Because they show the inside of our mouths rather than trying to describe it, many learners find them more intuitive to use. For /h/ and /d/, for example, a simple line diagram is often enough to get students to put the tip of their tongues on the alveolar ridge without the need to mention either ‘tip’ or ‘alveolar ridge’.

Demonstrating /p/ and /b/

Voicing is a characteristic feature of English consonants, and there are a number of voiced-voiceless pairs, including /b/ /v/, /θ/ /ʃ/, /z/ /ʒ/ or /d/ /ŋ/. To introduce learners to voicing, I get them to make /s/ and then /z/. I then ask them to repeat this process but with their thumb and first finger on their throats. Most are surprised on feeling the voicing of /z/ as a noticeable vibration in their throats. I then tell the class that in future, if I put my thumb and finger on my throat, it is because we need vibration to make the sound we are working on. In this way, whenever /b/, /v/, /θ/, /ʃ/, /z/ or /ʒ/ are part of the learners’ mother tongue pronunciation, they can be used as building blocks for /v/, /ð/, /z/ or /ʒ/ respectively.

As a teaching technique, demonstration is invaluable for a number of reasons:

■ It is natural. We show people how to ride a bike; we don’t describe the physics of dynamic equilibrium.

■ It is aural, visual and physical, and as a result appeals to multiple intelligences.

■ It requires no meta-language. Ordinary vocabulary such as soft or sudden is enough to refer to features like fricative or plosive.

■ It can be done immediately and on-demand. No technical equipment is needed.

■ It can be exaggerated / repeated / slowed down / speeded up / etc. This means that the learners interact with the teacher (and each other), which improves the quality of learning.

■ It can provoke laughter and enjoyment (which improves the quality of the learning).

Demonstrating /p/ and /b/

**Explanation**

When demonstration fails to show a learner how to produce a target feature, we might be tempted to turn to an explanation. There is a classic moment in the novel *Three Men on the Bummel* (Jerome, 1900), in which one of the men describes the sort of instruction language teachers frequently give learners:

‘Press your tonsils against the underside of your larynx. Then with the convex part of the septum curved upwards so as almost but not quite to touch the uvula, try with the tip of your tongue to reach your thyroid. Take a deep breath and compress your glottis. Now, without opening your lips, say “Garoo”.’

The more we know about pronunciation, the easier it is for us to slip into the mistaken belief that our students should know this as well. But one thing is to know about the bio-mechanics of running, and quite another is to help a friend who simply wants to keep fit.

In the same way, with pronunciation we should consistently avoid explanations if we can, especially those explanations that rely heavily on technical terms. Yes, /v/ is a labiodental fricative and /b/ is a bilabial plosive, but the terms soft and sudden will be more memorable, and therefore more useful, to most learners.

**Association**

If learners fail to imitate a target feature and we are unable to demonstrate it, then we need an alternative approach. For me this is association. When I started learning Spanish the sound that first drew my attention was the guttural consonant at the beginning of words like *gente* (people) or *jota* (the name of the letter ‘j’). It sounded (somewhat unpleasantly) like clearing your throat. This very ‘unpleasantness’ fixed the sound in my mind and I was quickly able to make it with little or no effort.

Although we think we are rational beings, learning often takes place for the most irrational reasons. This ability to link what we are trying to learn to something not apparently connected to the object of our learning, can be exploited to good effect with pronunciation, and in my experience there is no real limit to the ‘anchors’ we can associate new pronunciation to.
Colours. Linking a sound to a colour is a classic example of association in action. It works well with vowels, which can’t easily be imitated or demonstrated. Tables can be put up in the classrooms with target sound-colour combinations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sound</th>
<th>Colour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/ɪ:/</td>
<td>green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ʌ/</td>
<td>pink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/o/</td>
<td>red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ æ /</td>
<td>black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɔ /</td>
<td>purple</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During classes we can point to the colour that we want students to make. During the year they can put vocabulary on coloured cards according to the sound of the stressed vowel in the new word.

Images. Anybody familiar with OUP’s English File adult coursebook will also be familiar with Paul Seligson’s highly imaginative set of drawings for the IPA symbols. Students looking at the drawings as they practise a sound are usually better able to remember the sound because of this aural–visual association. My favourite image is the /ʃ/ symbol, which has been cleverly made to look like a shower head. An image I frequently use is of squid rings cooked in a dark chocolate sauce. On seeing it students tend to express their disgust with the sound ‘Urr!!’, which is virtually the same as the vowel /ɜː/.

Movement. Physical movement is a powerful agent for stimulating memory. American pronunciation expert Judy Gilbert never goes anywhere without elastic bands, which she uses in order to get students to acquire correct word stress patterns. Clapping or stamping your feet have a similar effect. I use two hand actions constantly: one is a short chopping action and the other a long sweeping action. My students quickly learn that I am warning them about vowel length, and when I introduce a new vowel sound, I accompany it with the appropriate action. I get my students to do the same during early practice activities, thus linking vowel length to physical movement.

Humour. Anecdotes are a fabulous way to get learners to remember a feature of pronunciation. In order to get my students to focus on /æʊ/, a sound which has no equivalent in Spanish, I tell them about arriving home late one Friday, tired and hungry. In the kitchen I opened the fridge only to find there was nothing to eat. At this point in class I make a long, silent /æʊ/ at the same time as I let my face show my disappointment at having nothing to eat. I silently repeat the /æʊ/ once or twice, getting the students to focus on my face. I then repeat it once more, making the sound as I open the imagined door. We then all open the imaginary door, and say /æʊ/. In future classes I only need to ‘open the fridge’ to stimulate the target sound.

“...The more we know about pronunciation, the easier it is for us to slip into the mistaken belief that our students should know this as well.”

Stimulation

Joanne Kenworthy (1987) lists mother tongue, age, amount of exposure, phonetic ability, attitude and identity, and motivation and concern for good pronunciation, as key factors in how good a learner’s pronunciation will become. She then asks which of these factors can be effected by teaching. Clearly L1, age and phonetic ability can’t. Nor is there much we can do with identity. The amount of exposure in class is usually limited, but what is not limited is the concern we as teachers can show for pronunciation. If we show that it matters, learners will take it seriously. If we stimulate an interest in pronunciation by our own attitude in class, learners will also show an interest. As Kenworthy points out, there are three key ways to stimulate our learners’ interest in pronunciation:

1. Persuade and regularly remind learners of the importance of pronunciation for effective communication.

2. Persuade and regularly remind them that a native-speaker accent is only their goal if they want it to be. Help them to understand that accent and intelligibility are NOT the same thing, and that for most learners intelligibility is a meaningful, realistic goal.

3. Stimulate your students’ concern for pronunciation by constantly showing your own concern for it in class, and by awarding marks for good pronunciation in exams.

References


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