

Some practical aspects of the Teaching of Pronunciation

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This article is concerned with some of the practical aspects in the teaching of pronunciation in Malaysian schools. It is primarily intended for teachers who do not have specialist training in phonetics, and as such, technical terms are kept to a minimum.

It is not possible to teach a foreign language to any type of learner without giving some attention to pronunciation. On the other hand, it is not really essential for our pupils have to acquire a perfect pronunciation, that is, a pronunciation which can be understood with little or no conscious effort on the part of the listener.

Aim of the Language Teacher (General)

The limited purpose of the language teacher is the attainment of intelligibility. The pupils, instead of being taken systematically through each English vowel and each consonant as well as the complexities of intonation and rhythm, would have presented to them certain carefully chosen features on which to concentrate. Also, attention must be given to certain incorrect habits which they have acquired in the earlier stages; these would require corrective exercises.

Some basic requirements for teachers

The teacher's requirements are briefly as follows:—

- i an understanding of how the vocal organs work. A knowledge of this is an advantage as it will help us to manipulate the vocal organs to produce a particular English sound
- ii a knowledge of the main English vowels and consonants (refer to Diagrams A and B). Later, when time permits, it is useful to find out the different positions of the tongue, the teeth and the types of lip-rounding which are required for the production of the different sounds and to be able to draw rough sketches for illustrations
- iii the teacher must always be conscious of the sounds made by pupils so that any mistakes made are immediately detected and corrected.

Main Principles

At the elementary stage we have to train our pupils to

secure habits of accurate observation, reproduction and imitation. Ear-training is essential so that he will be able to discriminate and recognise the different sounds and produce them as accurately as possible. If his ear-training is neglected during the early stage he will replace foreign sounds with those of his mother tongue and insert intrusive sounds into the words of the language he is learning; he will become unable to receive any but eye-impressions.

We may use the following exercise to help pupils to acquire proficiency. Before each exercise make sure that there is complete silence in the class and that every pupil's attention is centred on the teacher. Sometimes allow them to close their eyes and listen to the sounds produced.

ENGLISH VOWELS

Number	Phonetic Symbol	CV	CVC	CVC
Vowel No. 1	i:	bee	bead	beat
Vowel No. 2	i	—	bid	bit
Vowel No. 3	e	—	bed	bet
Vowel No. 4	æ	—	bad	bat
Vowel No. 5	ɑ:	car	card	cart
Vowel No. 6	ɔ	—	cod	cot
Vowel No. 7	ɔ:	caw	cawed	caught
Vowel No. 8	u	—	pull	foot
Vowel No. 9	u:	two	pool	hoot
Vowel No. 10	ʌ	—	cud	cut
Vowel No. 11	ə:	cur	curd	curt
Vowel No. 12	ə	collar	perhaps	dinner
Vowel No. 13	ei	bay	bayed	bait
Vowel No. 14	ou	bow	bode	boat
Vowel No. 15	ai	tie	tied	tight
Vowel No. 16	au	bow	bowed	bout
Vowel No. 17	ɔi	boy	void	voice
Vowel No. 18	iə	peer	peered	fierce
Vowel No. 19	ɛə	bare	bared	scarce
Vowel No. 20	uə	cure	cured	Stuart

Diagram A

CONSONANTS OF ENGLISH

	initial	final	medial
p	pin	sip	happy
b	bin	mob	hobby
t	ten	net	better
d	done	nod	body
k	come	luck	shaking
g	gun	hug	beggar
m	man	ham	hammer
n	nut	run	runner
ŋ	—	sing	singer
f	fat	rough	safer
v	very	leave	ever
θ	thin	cloth	nothing
ð	then	loathe	clothing
s	see	piece	looser
z	zoo	bees	loser
ʃ	ship	rush	pusher
ʒ	—	rouge	measure
tʃ	chip	catch	itchy
dʒ	jam	edge	edging
w	win	—	away
l	let	fell	sailing
r	run	—	hurry
j	you	—	beyond
h	he	—	ahead

Diagram B

Exercise A

Dictate pairs of words which are distinguished by their vowel or consonant sounds. Allow pupils to listen to them carefully (once or twice) and then to write the pairs of words in their exercise books. Examples:

- | | |
|---------------|-----------------|
| a bag — bæg | g loose — lu:s |
| back — bæk | lose — lu:z |
| b cub — kʌb | h rise — raiz |
| cup — kʌp | raise — reiz |
| c half — ha:f | i lied — laid |
| halve — ha:v | laid — leid |
| d log — lɔ:g | j rope — roup |
| lock — lɔk | robe — roub |
| e cord — kɔ:d | k wrap — ræp |
| cod — kɔd | grab — græb |
| f pull — pul | l trade — treid |
| push — puʃ | tread — tred |

(Pupils are not required to write in the phonetic forms.)
Check their work immediately and correct any errors

made. Allow pupils to say their pairs of words aloud once or twice and then call a few pupils to say them individually. This will give them practice in reproduction.

Exercise B

Dictation of short sentences. Examples:

- a Was it a collar?
Was it a coaler?
- b Whose coat?
Whose cot?
- c He made a bet.
He made a bat.
He made a bit.
- d Peck it.
Pick it.
Pack it.
- e He's parking it.
He's packing it.
- f The queens were there.
The quins were there.
- g Part them.
Pat them.
- h She was heartless.
She was hatless.
- i Were they larks?
Were they lax?
- j Hit it.
Heat it.

(These examples could be used for oral practice as well.)

Exercise C

Dictation of short passages. Read the passage through once normally and then once at dictation speed; make sure that all the pupils listen to each segment carefully before they start writing.

Example: "The Playful Donkey"

A man who owned a donkey and a monkey was one day very amazed to see the monkey going through all sorts of antics on the roof of his house. He laughed heartily at his tricks, and petted him a great deal when he came down from the roof. The donkey saw this and thought he would try the same thing. So the next day he climbed up onto the roof, but being heavy and clumsy, he broke a good many of the tiles, and as soon as his master saw him, instead of laughing he came after him and drove him down with a thick stick.

(Allow pupils to check each other's work and let a few read their passages aloud.)

Ear training exercises such as the examples given above should be given at regular intervals but each exercise should not exceed 15 minutes. Sometimes the teacher can write a number of words on the blackboard, say each aloud at a time and ask a pupil to point out the correct one.

The Vowels and Consonants

Many of our pupils who are not taught the correct vowel and consonant sounds will often say, 'The ship grazed under the tree.' (sheep) 'The driver looked for a suitable liver.' (lever) because the long i: sound may be non-existent in their mother tongues. The Tamil pupils will say, 'We are going to the awl' (hall) because of their difficulty with 'h'. The Chinese will say, 'We like flied lice,' (fried rice), 'She did () collections after school,' (corrections) because there is no 'r' sound in their own mother tongue.

Those sounds which pupils have difficulty with should be given immediate and concentrated attention – a little and often.

Difficult Vowels: i:, ɔ:, a:, u:, ə, e, ʌ.

Each sound should be practised in isolation first, then in a list of words containing the particular sound. Where the sound has a similar counterpart requiring combination of the same set of speech organs, differing only in the length of the vowel, or utterance further back in the mouth, they may be practised in pairs for contrast. Such pairs also offer good material for sound recognition.

Sample exercise to practise i:

eat	–	i:
bit	–	beat
sin	–	seen
ship	–	sheep
pill	–	peel
live	–	leave
lid	–	lead
sick	–	seek

Short sentences with words concentrating on the particular sound may be practised. Examples:

- Bo Peep is seeking her sheep.
Three sheep are eating under the trees.
- Heat it.
Hit it.
- Here's a bin.
Here's a bean.

- Not in the list.
Not in the least.
- How many birds were there?
How many beads were there?
- The hills are too high.
The heels are too high.
- Were they sleeping?
Were they slipping?
- Who ripped it?
Who reaped it?
- There were greens everywhere.
There were grins everywhere.

Difficult Diphthongs ai, ei, ou

Most diphthongs can be better produced if each element of the diphthong is revised separately first. For example, practise (for ei) e - i / e - i / e - i = ei uttering each single vowel separately and quickly, then with organs in e position without utterance, slide into short i position as the sound is uttered.

Sample exercise to practise ei, ai

ei	–	ai	ei	–	ai
ace	–	ice	mail	–	mile
race	–	rice	tail	–	tile
bait	–	bite	bay	–	buy
late	–	light	day	–	die

- The mail is late today.
- Kaye may stay for the races.
- I like to buy Siamese rice.
- Mr Lye tried to run five miles.

The Consonants

Many pupils can produce them at the beginning of a word, but may make mistakes when the sound occurs in mid-position or at the end of words. Common faults include:

- dropping off final sounds altogether or producing them incorrectly. This is particularly common in the production of final 's' and 'es'. Example, plurals of nouns and third person singular of present tense, and with final 'd', 'ed' and 't' for example in simple past tense.
- voiceless 'th' (θ) for which pupils must be encouraged to bring the tip of the tongue slightly between the teeth.
- both 'w' and 'v' pronounced as 'w'; it is best corrected by insisting on top teeth showing, slightly biting lower lip.

- iv some voicing of final 'k', thus giving 'pig' for 'pick'.
- v omission of 'h' aspirate at beginning of words e.g. 'as' for 'has' (a particular remedial problem with Tamil pupils.)
- vi initial and medial 'r', a special difficulty with Chinese pupils who tend to render 'r' as 'l'. This can be overcome by teaching in contrast with 'l' as red — led; rip — lip, etc. or from 'tr' contrast position e.g. tread — red; trod — rod; trip — rip, etc.

- sts — masts, pests, posts
- sps — gasps, wasps, lisps
- sks — asks, basks, tasks
- spt — gasped, clasped, lisped

Sample exercise: (θ) voiceless 'th'

Initial	Medial	Final
thigh	ether	teeth
thick	method	loath
thin	mathematics	mouth
thumb	arithmetic	path
thing	pathetic	worth

Sentences for practice

- a It cost about a thousand dollars.
- b Tell me the truth.
- c The thief was disturbed by a thunder-clap.
- d Have you anything that Catherine wrote?
- e Ruth enjoys arithmetic but I prefer the theorems.

Consonant Clusters

They need constant practice after the single consonant sounds have been taught and the pupils can pronounce them correctly in initial, medial and final positions. Clusters which are likely to cause difficulty are:

A. In initial position

- kr — crow, crowd, crown, cross
- tr — trap, trip, tray, truck
- sr — shred, shrew, shrewd, shrine
- θr — three, thread, throw, throat
- sl — slow, slew, slim, slide
- sf — sphere, sphinx, spherical
- skr — scream, screen, scrub, scrap
- spr — spruce, sprang, sprung, spray
- spl — split, splendid, splash, spleen

B. In final position

- fs — puffs, coughs, laughs
- ts — bats, pets, lots
- ls — else, pulse, waltz
- ft — coughed, puffed, laughed
- sp — wasp, gasp, lisp
- sk — ask, bask, task
- fts — gifts, lifts, rifts

Syllable and Sentence Stress

Some attention has to be given to syllable and sentence stress as the meaning of a word or sentence can alter when the stress moves from one position to another.

Example:—

- i Syllable stress: 'refuse (rubbish)
re'fuse (to say 'no' to)
- ii Sentence stress: 'She is correct.
She 'is correct.

General rules

Words that are stressed

- i all words of more than one syllable
- ii full verbs (eat, love, take, try, etc.)
- iii nouns (head, chair, book, etc.)
- iv adjectives (good, blue, cold, etc.)
- v adverbs (well, just, quite, not)
- vi generally picture words, i.e. words which give the picture or provide most of the information.

Words that are unstressed

- i Words of one syllable if they are purely grammatical words like pronouns (I, me, you, he, she, etc.), prepositions (to, for, at from, by, etc.), articles (the, a, an, some)
- ii syllables which contain the vowel ə are not stressed.

Practice on stress should be given frequently but in small units. We can begin by giving one or two exercises based on the example below. Pupils will get the idea, without explanation, that stress can alter meaning.

Example A 'I am Miss Goh
I 'am Miss Goh
I am 'Miss Goh
I am Miss 'Goh

(Substitute with pupil's own surname and perform the drill individually).

Other exercises can be in the form of:

- i substitution tables (refer to Example B)
- ii dialogue taken from a play
- iii a passage from the text book

Example B

- i The be'haviour of the 'children at the 'sports an'noyed the 'teacher.
- ii The screams
The noise
The cheering
The yelling
"children" could be replaced by boys/girls/
students/pupils
"sports" could be replaced by swimming pool/
picnic/beach, etc.

Conclusion

Although pronunciation is an important aspect of our language teaching it is essential to remember the following points:

- () The exercises should be short but given frequently,

- ii avoid giving remedial work for every single error, otherwise it will kill pupils' interest in their language work. Generally, concentrate on the major weaknesses first.
- iii Except for the major errors, try to integrate the pronunciation exercises with the rest of the language work.

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