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Six Pronunciation Priorities for the Beginning Student[1]

Instruction in pronunciation should begin early in the language-learning process. If pronunciation instruction is postponed, students frequently develope habits that must be undone. Another reason to start early is because if students are not intelligible, they may become discouraged when they try to use what they have learned in class in any practical situation. As a result, they may give up trying—making them even harder to teach. On the other hand, beginners have so much to learn that the time available for pronunciation work is apt to be quite limited. Also, to attempt 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. When we cut down the workload, we increase the likelihood of real learning.

Since we as teachers should do something to address students' pronunciation needs, but cannot do everything, we must choose which aspects of pronunciation are immediately important and which should be left for later work. Beginning students of English need to work on the most basic or "core" elements of the spoken language before they are asked to deal with less essential aspects. Core elements are those aspects of pronunciation most necessary for intelligibility. This article summarizes a core curriculum addressing six priority topics (Bolinger, 1986; Dalton, & Seidlhofer, 1994; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Jenkins, 2000; McNerney & Mendelsohn, 1992): (a) core vowels—decoding the printed language; (b) core consonants—making sound distinctions that convey information about grammar; (c) syllables—using the rhythmic effect of the right number of syllables; (d) linking—joining the words in a thought group; (e) word stress—using strong (long) and weak (short) syllables to make the word clear, and (f) emphasis—using intonation to make clear which is the most important word.

Core Vowels

One of the most urgent skills needed for beginning students is the ability to decode the printed language. Decoding means to convert the printed letter into its appropriate sound (spelling to pronunciation). This is an essential early skill for learning English because students need to be able to use printed material outside of class in order to reinforce what they have been

taught; if they can decode, they can review pronunciation on their own. The traditional way to teach spelling to English speaking children is to give them a rule such as, "A vowel sounds like its name if there is a silent letter 'e' at the end of the word." Alternatively, they are asked to "sound out the letters." But these approaches are not very effective for nonnative speakers because (a) they don't know how to pronounce words so they don't know when final "e" is silent, and (b) their mental inventory of sounds derived from their first language (L1) is not the same as the sound inventory required for English, so they may not be able to "sound out" letters accurately, especially vowels (e.g., *cat*). This particular vowel sound does not exist in many other languages. Because beginning students may not know when an "e" is silent, or may not know the common vowel sounds, it is important to give beginners, as early as possible, some reasonably reliable decoding rules especially adapted for second language learners.

The first necessity is to teach the names of the letters in the alphabet. This is doubly important because, aside from the value of decoding print, learning to spell aloud is a good way to correct a communication breakdown. But spelling aloud depends on being able to say the names of the letters. The problem is that most teachers think they taught the alphabet on the first day of study of a new language and therefore don't need to do anything more. But did students actually learn how to pronounce the letters? Think of José, who, if required to spell his name aloud might well say "G - O - S - A."

After learning the names of the alphabet letters well enough to be able to spell aloud easily, students need practical rules to deal with the complexity of English vowel spellings. Vowels are usually taught by comparing vowels that are near each other in tongue placement and consequently tend to be confused (e.g., *ship/sheep).* But for the purpose of helping students learn to decode, it is more efficient to teach these sounds according to the two ways the letter is usually pronounced. Below are two core rules for decoding vowels that work reasonably well, despite many exceptions (Gilbert, 2001). They are based on percentages of time these spellings are pronounced with these sounds (Carney, 1994).[2]

Alphabet vowels. The first rule (see Figure 1) deals with *alphabet vowels* (i.e., those vowels pronounced like the name of the letter in the alphabet). Alphabet vowels all have a characteristic shift of the tongue upward while they are being said. This shift produces an off-glide sound and also means that A, E, and I end with the lips spread into a "smile" (shown with the superscript ^{y}) and the vowels O and U end with the lips rounded. (shown with the superscript ^{w}). Many languages have only pure vowels (with no change in the position of the tongue), so the superscript can help remind students of this special English shift of the tongue. Presenting vowels in this two-way distinction (with or without the off-glide) is helpful for beginning students.

If there are two vowel letters in a short word (or strong syllable), the first vowel sounds like its "alphabet name."				
A^{y}	**E^{y}**	**I^{y}**	**O^{w}**	**U^{w}**
cake	tea	ice	cone	lute
rem**a**in	rep**e**at	arr**i**ve	s**o**apy	exc**u**se

Figure 1. *Alphabet vowels and the two vowel rule.*

Relative vowels. The second rule (see Figure 2) has to do with *relative vowels*. These vowel sounds are often called "short vowels." However, when the terms *short* and *long* are used for this purpose, they tend to be confusing since vowel length also applies to the very important difference between *stressed* and *de-stressed* vowels (as explained in Word Stress below). To avoid this confusion, the term relative is used here to show that this particular pronunciation is related to, but different from, the alphabet pronunciation of the same letter. Actually, the relative vowel sounds are the most common pronunciation of the vowel letters, but they are more challenging to learn. Therefore, the alphabet vowels should be taught first.

If there is only one vowel letter in a short word (or strong syllable), it sounds like a "relative" of the alphabet vowel.				
A	**E**	**I**	**O**	**U**
had	bed	his	hot	sun
thank	pencil	listen	comic	summer

Figure 2: *Relative vowels and the one vowel rule.*

Once students are comfortable with these two rules, they can be provided with additional practice comparing alphabet vowels and relative vowels, as illustrated in Figure 3:[3] This list does not cover all the vowel sounds of English, but these 11 vowels, plus *schwa* (discussed below in Word Stress) are *core vowels* and must be mastered before other complications are added.

Alphabet Vowels		Relative Vowels	
A^{y}	ate made	**A**	at mad
E^{y}	beat teen	**E**	bet ten
I^{y}	kite time	**I**	kit Tim
O^{w}	load note	**O**	lot not
U^{w}	cute assume	**U**	cut sum

Figure 3. *Student practice comparing alphabet vowels and relative vowels.*

Core Consonants

When time is limited for teaching consonants, and for pronunciation lessons in general, it is best to focus on consonant sounds at the end of words because grammar signals typically occur at the end of words (*I have money/ I had money*). Many languages do not allow final consonants, or allow a very limited number. This can cause trouble in English when the grammar depends on the presence of a consonant in that final position. Also, many languages do not allow consonant clusters (e.g., *ks* or *ld*) that are quite common in English, especially when the grammar requires an affix (*book/books, smile/smiled*). The most useful distinction to teach is that between a *stop sound* (in which air is stopped coming out, as in the final sound of *but*) and a *continuant sound* (in which the sound can be continued as long as there is air in the lungs, as in *bussss*). Following are examples of grammar endings that depend on the difference between stops and continuants:

Table 1
Grammar Endings Using Stops and Continuants

Grammar Point	*Examples*		
Tense	He'**s**/He'**d**	I'**ll**/I'**d**	sha**r**e/share**d**
Singular/Plural	boo**k**/book**s**	ca**b**/cab**s**	ra**t**/rat**s**
Question words	whe**r**e/wha**t**		
Positive/Negative	ca**n**/can'**t**		

For intelligibility purposes, it doesn't matter how precisely these consonants are articulated, as long as the consonant is present, and the stop-continuant feature is preserved (e.g., *I'll, I'd* or *has/had*). Once students have a firmer control of these core word-final consonants other sounds in other positions can be added—assuming there is time and that the other topics in this core curriculum have been mastered.

Linking Sounds

Linking is a high priority phenomenon because of its effect on listening comprehension. Students learning English tend to expect silence in between words (much like the white space used in the written language) and teachers tend to "help" students by supplying such a separation between words. But in real spoken English, words are run together in order to link thought groups as much as possible (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: *The linking phenomenon.*

This makes it hard for students to recognize the beginnings and endings of words and thus make sense of normal run-together speech. Practice with linking words can be enhanced by having students draw a linking line (a half circle)between the last sound of one word and the beginning sound of the next word (e.g., *call up; turn over; send in*). Of course, if there is a silent "e," the link mark should start with the last consonant letter (e.g., *leave on; change over; line up*). Since silent "e" is very common, practice with such linking can help students to use their ears, not just rely on their eyes.

Work with linking words can assist students not only to process incoming speech but also to manage particularly difficult sounds. Sometimes these sounds are easier to say at the beginning or at the end of a word, depending on the rules of the student's first language. When they are practiced in a drawn-out link with the next word, students for whom they are easier in one

position or the other will be helped. For instance, the distinction between /l/ and /d/ can be drilled in the type of exercise demonstrated in Figure 5.

Written Words	Pronunciation	Practice Sentence
mail it	mailɭit	Mail it home.
feel OK	feelɭOK	Do you feel OK?
mailed it	mailɭdit	I've mailed it.
hold everything	holɭdeverything	Hold everything!

Figure 5. *Linking exercise practicing the distinction between /l/ and /d/.*

The Number of Syllables

We all learn the rhythm of our L1 in early infancy and thereafter tend to transfer it unconsciously to any new language. For that reason, it is essential to help students become consciously aware of how rhythm is formed by successive syllables. English learners often add or subtract syllables, depending on the rules of their L1. For instance, an L1 that does not allow consonant clusters or final consonants may cause the learner to add a vowel to break up the English clusters (e.g., *sekalah* for school or *gifuto shoppu* for gift shop). On the other hand, a syllable might be dropped completely to avoid a difficult sound or consonant cluster (e.g., *gahment* for government). Whether learners add syllables or delete them, their intelligibility can be severely undermined.

Since rhythm is physical, practice of syllable number should involve tapping a pencil, a foot, or some other physical effort to provide *kinesthetic reinforcement*. (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Gilbert, 1987). See Figure 6 for an example of a rhythm exercise.

Number of Syllables	Examples	
1	pie	milk
2	tuna	coffee
3	egg salad	lemonade
4	tuna sandwich	Pepsi Cola
5	potato salad	vanilla ice cream

Figure 6. *Rhythm exercise.*

Word Stress

The basic rhythm for many languages depends on a relatively equal length for all syllables. But clarity in spoken English depends on considerable variations in the length of syllables. Because this kind of rhythm is so foreign to many students, they need a lot of practice hearing and producing syllables of different lengths.

The most important use of syllable lengthening in English is to make stress and emphasis clear to the listener. Word stress patterns are an essential part of communication in the spoken language because English speakers tend to use this information to remember and recognize words (Brown, 1990). As a result, a misplaced stress can cause great confusion, especially if it is accompanied by any other kind of error.

The words *stress* and *de-stress* are probably too abstract for beginners, so the simple rules below use the terms *strong* and *weak.*

Strong syllables. The first set of rules deal with strong syllables, the syllables that are highlighted (i.e., stressed) by making the vowel longer than neighboring vowels (see Figure 7).

Strong Syllable Rules

When you say a word alone:

1. Each word has one strong syllable. [the primary stress]
2. The vowel in a strong syllable is long.

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

Figure 7. *Strong syllables.*

Because stress is so important, there are several signals to make the stress pattern clear to the listener, but lengthening is perhaps the most important and probably the easiest to teach kinesthetically (Brown, 1990; Wong, 1987). Use whatever visual or physical means you can think of to reinforce the practice: stretch a rubber band or use some other contrastive hand gesture or write the vowel wider than the others.

Weak syllables. The second set of rules pertain to the weak syllables—those syllables that are de-emphasized. These rules (see Figure 8) explain how the highlighting of strong syllables is enhanced by contrastively shortening neighboring vowels (i.e., *de-stressed*, or *reduced* vowels). The reduced vowel is called *schwa* (e.g., the sound of the first and third vowels in *b<u>a</u>nan<u>a</u>* or the second vowel in *penc<u>i</u>l*).

Weak Syllable Rules [schwa ə]

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 same.

bənanə sofə musəc

Figure 8. *Weak syllables.*

Although schwa is the most common vowel sound in the spoken language, there is no sign of it in the written language. Because it is so short and purposely obscure, schwa is a serious barrier for listening comprehension. While some learners may never be able to incorporate schwa into their speech, they can all benefit from listening practice with schwa sounds because it helps them to tolerate or adapt to the very frequent presence of this "foreign" phenomenon.

Emphasis

The English speaker chooses which words the listener should notice and highlights them using intonation (timing and melody). Probably the most essential element of this system is the extra lengthening of the vowel at the center of the primary stress (*strong syllable*) of the *focus* (most important) *word*. The purpose of the lengthening is to make it easier for the listener to notice the pitch change that occurs when that particular word is highlighted in a sentence (Gilbert, 1991). In English this signal means "Pay attention to this word!" 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. Because language-specific systems for emphasis are learned so early that they are unconsciously applied to any new language, it is necessary to train students to notice how English uses intonation for marking the focus of thought (the topic.) The rules presented in Figure 9 can help students to understand this phenomenon.

1. Each thought group has one focus that is the most important word.
2. The vowel sound in the strong syllable of that word is extra long.
3. The voice goes up or down on the strong syllable in the focus word.

How do you spell "s **o** fa"? What does "sofa" m **e** an?

I want a ban **a** na, not a p **e** ach.

Figure 9. *Focus rules.*

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, in summary: (a) sound distinctions that convey information about decoding and grammar, (b) rhythmic effects of syllable number and variable vowel length, (d) intonational highlighting of the most important words.

Beginning students who acquire these essential aspects of pronunciation can achieve functional comprehensibility without being overwhelmed by the more subtle aspects of the spoken language. At the same time, teachers can integrate these core elements of pronunciation into a multi-skills English as a second language (ESL) course while ensuring that the other language skills also receive adequate attention. A focus on these core elements offers teachers a manageable way to give students instruction and feedback in this vital area, rather than leaving acquisition to chance.

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Endnotes

[1] An earlier version of this article entitled, "What are the teaching priorities for the very low level learner?" appears in the Ask the Experts section of the TESOL Speech and Pronunciation Interest website at http://www.public.iastate.edu/~jrlevis/SPRIS/.

[2] Most spelling books present only one-syllable words, and this is a sensible approach when first presenting the spelling rules for vowels. But students need to be able to decode multisyllabic words. So, as soon as they can understand the meaning of *syllable* and *stress* (or *strong*), include practice with multisyllabic words.

[3] More advanced students can practice with multisyllabic words such as arr***a***ngement, electr***i***city, t***e***levision, Wisc***o***nsin.

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