

Tips for teaching pronunciation: Recording students' voices in the classroom

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Introduction

Many teachers record students' voices for purposes of providing assessment or feedback about their pronunciation. However, it seems to be much rarer for recordings to be used as part of the lesson itself. In this article I would like to encourage teachers to record students' voices in the classroom, and to make the recordings part of the lesson. This is much easier to do than most people realise, and can provide extremely effective learning experiences for appropriate groups of students, as I hope to show.

Why record voices?

We all know how different our voices sound when we listen to them on a tape recorder. Most people feel surprised when they first hear themselves in a recording, and many are embarrassed, thinking that they sound more 'squeaky', 'nasal' or whatever than they had realised. However, if you can overcome the embarrassment, you can learn a great deal from listening to your own voice: the difference between what we think we say and what we really say can be quite noticeable - at all levels, from grammar, to pronunciation, presentation and clarity.

With regard to pronunciation, not only do we sound impressionistically different from what we thought, the details of our pronunciation can be quite surprising when we listen back to it in a recording: very often people who say 'I never say such and such' are forced to eat their words when a recording is played back to them! The point is, unless you record your voice, your memory of exactly what you said and how you said it is likely to be both fleeting and faulty.

For learners of ESL, this problem is much worse. When you know a language imperfectly, it is extremely difficult to remember the details of what was said, even immediately afterwards. Your mental 'replay' button is not yet fully operational. To gain some empathy for your students' situation, try (or remember) listening to a language you know imperfectly or not at all, and simply repeating what was said - this is much more difficult in a foreign language than in your native language.

So when we correct a student's pronunciation by simply calling their attention to an error and modeling a better version, often they will not be fully aware of the difference between your version and their own: they can't 'replay' the two and compare them even as well as a native speaker can (which as we have seen is not really very well at all!).

This is where recording can be so useful: you can record the student's pronunciation and your own and replay them as often as needed, allowing the student to hear both of them 'externally'.

Another advantage of recording is that it prevents alteration or exaggeration by the teacher. It is almost impossible to repeat the same pronunciation several times without any alteration; and it is extremely tempting to emphasise or exaggerate the particular aspect of pronunciation that is proving difficult for the learner. Unfortunately, however, this can confuse rather than clarify, as the learner does not know enough about English phonology to understand the emphasis, and to disregard (what a native speaker considers to be) minor variations in repetitions.

Using recordings

You may think on-the-spot recordings are only suitable for one-on-one lessons, but they can be used very successfully with appropriate groups of mature students, either in separate pronunciation lessons or as one-off examples in a general lesson where a pronunciation issue has come up. Here is one basic scenario, which can be expanded or altered to suit your needs.

Ask students to prepare and practise some spoken material appropriate to their level. Ask one of them to come forward to be recorded - reassure them that though it is embarrassing at first, it is very worthwhile; I have found most students warm to this process when they see how useful it is. If it is a dialogue, you take one role (but keep the microphone on the student). Replay the attempt for the whole class, and ask the one who spoke to comment on it. Then ask the rest of the class for their comments. Do not give any information yourself at this point, just listen to their responses - you may find some of these interesting or even surprising. If the responses are all spot on, tell them so and, if appropriate, let the student have another go, keeping the first recording for comparison, and repeat the procedure.

If the students are not picking up errors which you think are important, still don't tell them anything, but simply replay the part of the recording where the error occurs, telling them that it contains a mistake. It can be useful to write the sentence on the board, and simply point to the part of the sentence which contains the error. At this stage you will probably find that some of the learners notice the error while others do not - let them help each other in describing what it is that is wrong about the speaker's pronunciation. Listen to what they say and give guidance without 'putting words in their mouths'. A useful kind of guidance is to tell the class what an English speaker might think the speaker had said.

If the original speaker is now confident about the nature of his or her error, try one more recording. If not, record your own model of the phrase or sentence that is causing trouble, and play it back to back with the learner's version, replaying it several times. If necessary, point again on the board to the main areas of difference between your pronunciation and the learner's.

Once you think the speaker is confident of the distinction, allow him or her to re-record one more time. If you think it is appropriate, now is the time to give your impression of the speaker's error, explaining that to an English speaker their word sounded like (for example) 'sink' instead of 'sing' (or, if the word was just incomprehensible to the average listener, that an English speaker would not have understood their pronunciation because it didn't contain the clues they need to recognise the word). If it is a pronunciation lesson, you may now want to drill some similar material with the whole class, and give some rules or generalisations so that they can gain a more conscious understanding of the types of errors they make. Then move on to work with another student, or return to your other lessons and work with another student on another day.

Let's look in a bit more detail at just one example, to which you will be able to add many from your experience. Consider the learner who turns 'ng' endings into 'nk': perhaps they say 'sing' so that it sounds like 'sink'. Remember that the reason they do this is that they do not notice any difference between these words - they can physically hear the difference, but they need to re-train their perception so as to pay attention to this distinction, which is important in English but not in their mother tongue. Telling them 'don't sound the /g/' is likely to be ineffective - they don't think they are sounding the /g/! Understanding this description of their error depends on (subconscious) understanding of English phonology - which of course is precisely what the learner does not yet have. Playing the learner's attempt

alongside the model, and letting them pick out the difference themselves (with guidance as to whereabouts in the word the critical difference exists) can be a real eye (ear!) opener for them. Sometimes it is also an eye-opener for teachers, who may find it difficult to appreciate just how different learner's interpretation of English sounds is from native speakers'.

Critical listening

This method is very successful because it relies on students' own 'critical listening' - they have to perceive and understand the difference between the learner's pronunciation and the native speakers, and the effect of errors on a native speaker's understanding of what they are saying. They cannot simply rely on the teacher to tell them whether they are 'right' or 'wrong'; and they cannot simply parrot back a 'rule' of English. They must come to understand the nature of the problem in their own terms, and they must be able to apply any rules they have learned.

This is the reason it is important for the teacher not to 'put words into the learners' mouths', but to listen attentively to how the learners themselves describe their errors. This can be very interesting and useful for teachers, in showing how different the learner's perception of speech is from that of a native speaker. It also allows you to give guidance on pronunciation by 'starting from where they are', rather than giving information that may actually mean less to the learners than you realise.

'Communicative' times three

This method forms part of a 'communicative' approach to pronunciation teaching. This approach is communicative in three distinct but equally important ways.

First, it is communicative in the fairly obvious way that it embeds pronunciation lessons in 'real language'. So the emphasis is heavily on getting learners to practise whole sentences, particularly sentences that are directly relevant to their own lives outside the classroom. Drilling of words and sounds is also emphasised, but always in the context of whole sentences, with both segmental and suprasegmental (intonational) aspects of pronunciation.

Second, it is communicative in the sense that students are encouraged to think of their pronunciation AS communication, and consider the effect their pronunciation has on a native listener. From the teacher's point of view, this means defining 'errors', especially at early stages, in terms of whether an ordinary Australian listener would understand the learner's sentence easily, rather than in terms of the noticeable differences between the learner's pronunciation and a native speaker's. Encouragement can be given for any pronunciation that the teacher considers would be comprehensible to a normal native speaker (remembering of course that teachers themselves are far from 'normal' (!) in this sense, as they can often understand learners who are quite incomprehensible to the average person).

Third, and most importantly, this method is communicative in the sense that it emphasises the need for good metalinguistic communication between teachers and students. In other words, a lot of attention is paid to finding the best way to explain errors to students, and suggest improvements to them. This is not always best done in terms of phonetics or phonology, but often needs insight into the learner's own mental representation of their pronunciation. That is why in the preceding suggestions teachers were encouraged to listen first to the learners' own description of how they hear the differences between their own pronunciation and that of the model.

Tape recorder or computer?

Most teachers are familiar with the use of tape recorders for classroom recordings. However, some teachers may not be aware of the ease and advantages of using a computer instead of a tape recorder, so let me say a word about this, at the risk of teaching some of you to 'suck eggs'.

Many computers these days come supplied with a 'sound editor'; or if not, sound editors are readily available, either free or cheap: ask a friendly computer wizz. Sound editors work, from the user's point of view, just like a tape recorder: you plug in a microphone and then use 'record', 'play' and 'stop' button exactly as you are used to.

The advantage is, you can see the 'soundwave', select the part you want to play, and then simply click for as many repeats as you want - there is no rewinding, missing the spot, accidentally playing another student's attempt, etc. Also, you can cut in a new recording (eg. your model of the attempted word) at any point, and listen for comparison between the learner and the model, or between several attempts from the same or different learners.

It takes less learning than you think to become fluent with a computer sound editor, and once you have done so, you'll never want to go back to a tape recorder. If your institution has a laptop for classroom use, or a desktop you can take your class to, try using it for your own lessons as well as for internet and prepackaged materials. Ask your friendly computer wizz how to attach your tape recorder's speakers to the computer if the computer's own speakers are not loud enough for all to hear.

Conclusion

I have seen a number of dedicated teachers record students in class and then take the tapes home to spend their own time marking them to return in the next lesson. Marking may be necessary for assessment purposes, but for learning purposes it is much more valuable to work on the recordings then and there, with the students.

Some teachers have expressed a degree of discomfort with the idea of 'using whatever comes up' in the way I describe, preferring pre-planned lessons on 'stress', 'diphthongs' or whatever. I must say I find this quite surprising, as nearly all the teachers I have spoken with have had enormous reservoirs of experience, knowledge and insight that make them more than able to work with students in the rather 'ad hoc' way I recommend.

About the Author

Helen Fraser is a Senior Lecturer at the University of New England, who is currently on leave to continue her research in the area of second language phonology and methods of teaching pronunciation. You can read more about her and her work at <http://metz.une.edu.au/~hfraser>

Helen has recently produced a CD-ROM with material for communicative pronunciation lessons, and is currently working on a companion CD-ROM for teachers; you can find information about this and her other publications at her website. She is more than happy to receive questions or comments from teachers on any aspect of the communicative approach - email her at hfraser@metz.une.edu.au. Or why not post your query or comment to the Pronunciation Bulletin Board, and let everyone benefit from the discussion? Find the Bulletin Board at <http://metz.une.edu.au/~hfraser/pronunc.htm>

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