

Practical teaching ideas

An activity for integrated pronunciation practice

Shem Macdonald – La Trobe University

Aims

Develop students' awareness of pausing, linking of words and reduced forms of words and encourage students to practise using these elements in their own speech. Since these are a routine feature of regular speech, not merely of slang, informal or incorrect English, and often interfere with student comprehension of spoken text, it is important to address these issues explicitly in the classroom.

Overview of idea/activity

Students develop an awareness and understanding of some important elements of pronunciation using a 'whole text' or 'top down' approach. They then practise these elements in their own presentations.

Materials/preparation

Record a model introduction for a short talk (see example). This model should be taped before the class and should be read at slightly slower than normal speaking speed. However, when the model is recorded you should avoid making each word separate and distinct, but should run words together (or link them) and reduce sounds, the way we do in normal speech (eg The word 'to' is not pronounced fully as 'tooo' but more like 'tuh' or even 't').

Example model introduction

(You'll need copies of your model for each student and also one on an overhead transparency where available).

Today my presentation is about places to visit in Melbourne. Firstly I'm going to talk about places to go shopping. Then I'll introduce a few of my favourite restaurants and cafes. Finally I'll talk about places to go out late at night.

Procedure

STEP 1 DICTATION

Play the model introduction. Students work in pairs with one student as the scribe. The passage should be played through completely first, then played sentence by sentence with pauses to allow students to discuss what they have heard and to write.

STEP 2 ASK STUDENTS TO COMPARE THEIR WRITING WITH A TRANSCRIPTION OF THE ORIGINAL

It is expected that a number of the errors will relate to difficulties students have hearing words which are linked or contain reduced syllables or contractions. This can lead into a discussion about why they have problems and what is taking place in connected speech to make doing this dictation, and listening to native speakers, difficult.

NOTE: POSSIBLE AREAS OF DIFFICULTY FOR STUDENTS

In bold are words or phrases that are likely to contain examples of linked or reduced speech. These words may be misheard or left out completely from the students' transcripts. The way linking and reduction occurs is likely to vary from speaker to speaker. The following example shows characteristics of my middle class Australian English accent.

Today my (1) **presentation is about** places (2) **to visit** in Melbourne. Firstly I'm going (3) **to talk** about places (4) **to go** shopping. Then I'll (5) **introduce a few of my** favourite restaurants (6) **and** cafes. Finally I'll talk about places (7) **to go out** (8) **late at** night.

- 1 'presentation zebout' – 'is' gets reduced to 'z' and links with 'about'.
- 2 'to' becomes 't' – it is likely to be left out of students' dictations completely.
- 3 'to talk' and 'to go' become 'tuh-talk' and 'tuh-go'.
- 4 as in 3
- 5 'dyoo suh fyoo wuhv muh' – the /s/ sound at the end of 'introduce' links to the 'a'. A strong /w/ glide is added at the end of 'few' and links to the following 'of'. The words 'a', 'of', and 'my' become reduced to 'uh', 'uhv' and 'muh'.
- 6 'and' becomes 'n'.
- 7 'to' becomes 't'.
- 8 'late at' becomes 'lay dat'.

STEP 3 DISCUSS THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LINKING AND REDUCTION

Elicit from the students what is happening. Introduce these names for these two characteristics. **Note:** I even find myself using hand signals to emphasise linking or reduction (eg I trace a 'U' shape in the air with my index finger for linking; I bring my index finger and thumb together to show something becoming smaller or shrinking for reduction).

STEP 4 DRILL (YES, DRILL!)

Get the students to repeat after you the segments of linked and reduced language. Do this again and again, faster, slower, until it becomes almost a nonsensical drone or chant. **Note:** Make a game of it. Bounce the language around until the students are responding spontaneously and unselfconsciously. Success of this will depend on your comfort and confidence, so you may want to practise before class or at least make a list of the bits of language you want the students to practise.

STEP 5 MARKING THE PAUSES

Play the first part of the tape again. On the whiteboard or overhead mark where you pause on the first part of the transcription. This can be done with one slash (/) or two (//) depending on the length of the pause eg Today / my presentation is about / places to visit / in Melbourne. // Firstly / I'm going to talk about / places to go shopping. // Then ... etc. Students mark the remainder of the pauses. **Note:** Pausing (like linking and reduction) may vary from speaker to speaker and even from time to time with the same speaker. This is why it is useful to use the recording as the model because it will be consistent.

STEP 6 MORE DRILLING

STEP 7 STUDENTS WRITE THEIR OWN INTRODUCTION

Students write this out (word for word). **Note:** I don't agree with asking students to give presentations using only notes. I find that it often forces students to memorise their entire presentation and regurgitate it in a mechanical manner. In addition, some of the best native-speaker presentations I have heard are scripted. With these, there is usually less waffle, repetition or loss of train of thought. By writing it down, students can get the content right and then work on the delivery, rather than risk having both faulty, thereby making their presentation difficult, if not impossible, to follow.

STEP 8 STUDENTS MARK PAUSES ON INTRODUCTION

After some practice students can usually predict where pauses will occur. You can help and check, and students can also check the work of their peers.

STEP 9 STUDENTS MARK SOME LINKING AND REDUCTION

This step might take a bit longer.

STEP 10 STUDENTS PRACTISE AND PRESENT

Students can practise in pairs, small groups and then do their final presentation to small groups or the whole class. **Note:** Recording the presentations allows students to hear themselves and self-assess. This can be done on audio or video

tape. I prefer audio because it focuses the listener on the way the words are said and not on how they did their hair that morning. In addition, audio tapes are easier to manage and distribute for student use.

Variation – alternative to student presentation activity

If you don't think you could sit through one more student presentation about 'a festival in my culture', you could make this task part of a current affairs topic. For example, I have had my students summarise a current news story from the newspaper. They then each prepare a TV/radio news bulletin item based on the story. Next, as newsreaders, they present their news items. By videoing / taping this and keeping the tape rolling between news items, students become inspired to do their best and tend to produce very polished performances.

Note: Word stress. I haven't mentioned word stress in this activity. Certain words within any utterance are going to be said with more stress than others. This can involve such things as differences of volume, length of vowel or intensity/quality of voice. Identifying the stressed word in sentences is an activity which has some merit. However, from my experience, not everyone is confident enough to correctly identify the stressed words, and often people differ about where they hear it. Pausing, on the other hand, seems to be more manageable for most students (and teachers) and it seems that if students get the pausing right, their word stress, and often their linking and reduction, follow.

Conclusion

Improvements in pronunciation take time. Activities like this one need to be made part of the weekly program and, if possible, records of student performances kept. (Each student might have a cassette tape to bring each week for this purpose.) Developing awareness in students of what the characteristics of spoken English are, and giving them regular opportunities to practise these, are essential if improvements are to be made. Feedback from the teacher, from peers and best of all, from the student him/herself are an important part of this learning process. Not knowing how to address pronunciation in a class of students with different first languages is often a problem for teachers. The thing I have found particularly useful about embedding pronunciation in an activity like this, is that each student can work at his/her own level. Improvements in pausing, linking and reduction can be made by most students. Students whose pronunciation is poor improve markedly, while those who are already quite understandable or almost native-like, are happy to be able to speak even more clearly.