

Pronunciation Strategies and Techniques Workshop

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Although your current aim for improving your pronunciation might have an end goal of sounding like a native speaker of English, a better end goal is to **improve your English pronunciation so that you can communicate with people unfamiliar with your accent.**

When you create your goals for improving pronunciation, bear in mind the following:

Consider your personal time commitments and abilities.

Identify strategies to achieve your goals, create a plan with specific objectives, and execute it.

Monitor your progress and refine your goals, objectives, strategies, and plans as needed.

The more you put into your language, the more you will get out of it.

Factors that Influence Pronunciation:

Your age

Your ability to mimic and pick up new accents

Your first language influence

How many years you have spoken English

Your motivation and commitment to change

The amount and frequency of contact with native English speakers.

Almost everyone can change his/her language patterns enough to be understood.

But improving your language skills does require getting out of your comfort zone.

When we think of improving pronunciation, we tend to focus on individual consonant and vowel sounds, but habits like word stress and sentence stress can have as much or more of an impact on whether or not you are understood.

Pronunciation targets can be divided into two main groups: Sounds within **Words**, and Sounds within **Sentences**.

Sounds within Words include:

Word Stress

Phonemes—Vowels, Consonants, Consonant Clusters

Final Sounds and linking

Sounds within Sentences include:

Thought Groups

Focus Words

Intonation

Speech Rhythm—Sentence Stress

Word Stress

Words are made up of syllables. Content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) will stress one syllable over all others. Stressed syllables are **Louder, Longer, and Higher in pitch**.

In English, the patterns of stress are often irregular, and must be memorized. For instance, compare **PHO**tograph, pho**TO**grapher, photo**GRAPH**ic.

But word stress is very important. It helps you (and your listeners) distinguish between a **DE**sert and des**SERT**, or **MIS**ery and Mis**SOU**ri.

Even if your words do not have word twins such as those, stressing the wrong syllable may confuse your listener enough to impede communication.

There is also a set of words that exist in both noun and verb forms, where word stress is how the forms are distinguished. Words like *export*, *compound*, *object*, *address*, and *protest* (and more!) have this status. When the first syllable is stressed (EXport, COMpound, OBJect, ADDRess, PROtest), the word is a noun; when the second is stressed: exPORT, comPOUND, objEct, adDRess, proTEST), the word is a verb.

Phonemes—Vowels, Consonants, and Consonant Clusters

In addition to one-on-one EAP tutoring, there are a lot of online resources that can help you work on pronunciation of individual sounds.

The **clickable IPA** lets you click to hear any letter in the International Phonetic Alphabet (vowels and consonants): <http://www.yorku.ca/earmstro/ipa/>

The **Color Vowel Chart** will help you learn and practice your vowel sounds by associating them with colors: <http://colorvowelchart.org/index.php/explore-sp-302660307>

Rachel's English provides videos to demonstrate different phonemes, and also provides other instruction in pronunciation: <http://www.rachelsenglish.com/video-category/sounds>

Okanagan College Segmentals also provides video for teaching different phonemes: <http://international.ouc.bc.ca/pronunciation/>

MSU has a great resource for teaching you to pronounce the **technical vocabulary** in various fields: <http://www.tap.msu.edu/team/resources/>

Word Endings

In English, unlike some other languages, it is important to pronounce the ending letters of words.

Sometimes these ending letters will be softened, such as -ing to -in', or -t to a softer -d in less formal communication. But these endings are still voiced.

It is also common, especially in informal English, to link words when the first word ends with the consonant, and the second with a vowel, and the words are within the same thought group.

For instance: **Goodevening** or **Goo devening** instead of **Good. Evening.** with a hard stop and a breath in between.

But if the words are not in the same thought group (see directly below), then the consonant does not carry over.

For instance: “Give me an onion, and an apple” could be said: “Give me **an onion**, an **danapple**” but not “Give me an onio **nand** an apple”, because “and” comes after a comma, and is not in the same thought group as onion.

Note: depending on the context, linking words in this way can be a sign of proficient, but not necessarily proper English.

Pronunciation Targets—Sounds in Sentences

can be broken down into two groups: units of meaning, and ways to express units of meaning.

Units of meaning include: **Thought Groups** and **Focus Words**

Ways to express units of meaning include: **Speech Rhythm, Sentence Stress, and Intonation**

Thought Groups are **verbal punctuation** that makes speech more understandable.

Every Thought Group (TG) has three characteristics:

One strongly-stressed word (Focus Word, FW)

A change in pitch

A pause at the end

Short thought groups make speech easier to understand.

Especially remember to divide long numbers, addresses, and websites, into smaller chunks so as to make them intelligible.

Basic Stress Patterns

We can use rhythm of speech and intonation to emphasize meaning

The Focus Words change in pitch and get strong stress to call attention to what is most important.

FW is usually the last content word in a Thought Group

FW is an important part of speech: noun, verb, adjective, adverb

If there are several content words in a row, the last one tends to get focus

Adverbs at the end of sentences that answer the questions where and when are often unstressed: now, there, today, here, already

Structure/function words at the end of TG are usually unstressed and fall in pitch

Longer sentences should be divided into several TGs

Changing Focus

FWs will change based on the previous statement or question, because context determine what information is most important.

Speakers may stress words that would not normally receive strong stress based on an unusual context.

FWs are used to highlight new information, respond to a question, show agreement or disagreement, return a question, and show contrast.

You can put these lessons into action through frequent practice!

One excellent way to practice is the use of **Key Word Cards**

Key Words are not Vocabulary words, but words you already know the meaning of but have trouble pronouncing, need to repeat often, or which your instructor has advised you to practice.

Examples:

Words that contain difficult consonant or vowel sounds

Words that contain difficult groups of sounds (clusters)

Words needed in your field

Here is a sample Key Word Card

construct /kuhn-struhkt/
con STRUCT

Eventually, they intend to construct genes, and new forms of life, from scratch.

Each Key Word Card should contain the word, the phonetic pronunciation, the word's stress, and using the word in a sentence.

Several times a day, review each word slowly, emphasizing each sound. AS you practice, say the words at a more natural speed.

Practice using a mirror. Focus on your mouth and lip movements. How do they compare to those of native speakers?

Be sure to practice these words in full sentences, using natural speech.

Add more cards to your list as you encounter difficult words.

Learning to Self-Monitor as you speak is also important. Try to determine if you are pronouncing words properly, and if you need to correct yourself.

Focus Speaking Practice

Record yourself: for instance, talk about academic topics as if you were talking to an expert.

Listen immediately, and again after 24 hours.

What do you notice about your own speech?

Which sounds do you have difficulty hearing?

Where do you pause or hesitate?

What vocabulary are you using?

Favor frequency vs. length

You will improve more quickly if you record yourself 10 minutes every day than if you try to do 2 hours once a week.

Remember to practice in a quiet environment.

Listen for the content of your speech and grammar, along with pronunciation

Continually self-monitor.