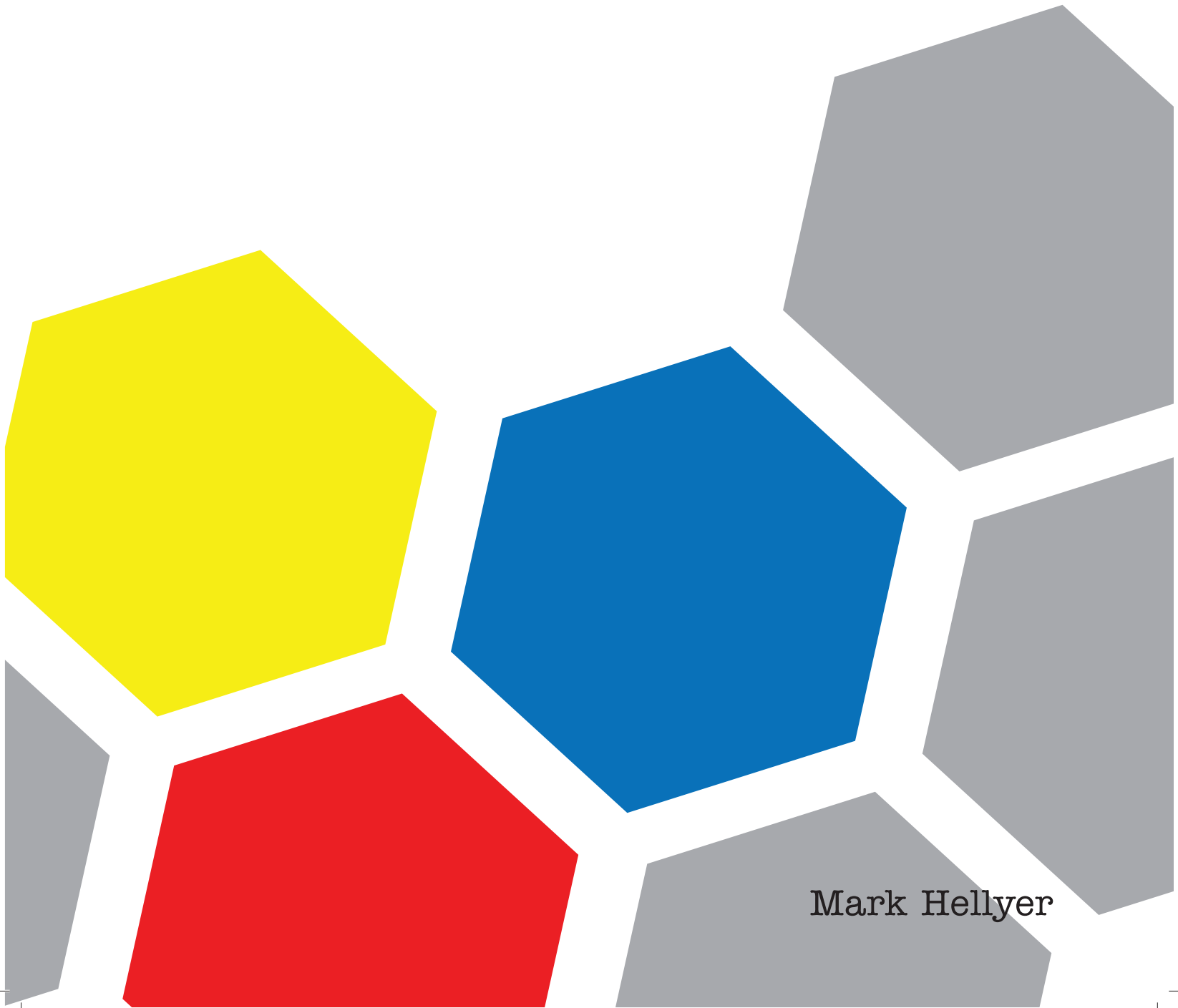


10 TEFL shortcuts to better teaching



Mark Hellyer

10 TEFL shortcuts to better teaching

Being a native speaker can be a help in teaching the language, but much more is required. Many native speakers are linguistically insensitive, and not reliable informants on what is or is not possible within the language.

Michael Lewis in *The Lexical Approach* LTP 1993

The conventional view serves to protect us from the painful job of thinking.

Prof. J. K. Galbraith (1908 – 2006) Canadian-American economist

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Introduction

Anyone who has ever applied for a job knows the value of experience. In the world of work 'experience' indicates a certain level of expertise – someone who knows what they're doing and can make the right decisions without constant supervision, and this is what employers value. Experience or expertise, however, is not easily acquired. Anyone who has ever tried to master a new skill, from playing a musical instrument to learning a foreign language, knows that it requires time, and lots of it – 'practice makes perfect' as the old saying goes.

In his 2008 book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell attempted to quantify how much time is required to truly master any skill; based on various pieces of research, he put the figure at about 10,000 concentrated hours. That's a long time (five years of forty-hour weeks, in fact), and it's a rather depressing message if you're just starting to learn something new. Wouldn't it be great if there were a fast track alternative? Well, maybe there is. Some time ago there was a television show in Britain called *Faking It*, in which a member of the public would live with and train with an expert in a particular field for four weeks. This novice would then take part in a contest against experienced participants in whatever activity he or she had learned. A panel of expert judges would then give their verdict on which participant was the 'faker'. Success meant fooling a majority of the judges, and a surprising number of candidates managed to do just that.

So what can we deduce from the *Faking It* experience? Does it prove Malcolm Gladwell wrong? Well no, because a lot depends on the skill you are trying to learn. Open-heart surgery is somewhat trickier than being a DJ or teaching English, which is why a) it takes a long time to qualify as a surgeon, and b) surgeons practise on animals. Nobody on the operating table wants to be told by the anaesthetist that their surgeon may be the one who has just finished the four-week intensive course. EFL teachers, on the other hand, tend to get thrown in at the deep end with real students. Mistakes get made, confidence gets knocked and experience is gained, but thankfully nobody dies.

With a short intensive period of training followed by a baptism of fire it appears that newly qualified EFL teachers have much in common with the participants on *Faking It*. After completing their 4-week course they are expected to perform alongside more experienced teachers, and will be 'judged' by their students (and, no doubt, by their employers, via student feedback). An added problem for the newly qualified teacher is that only about 5% of that 4-week course was actually 'hands-on' classroom experience – the other 95% was theory, which is not the same at all. Once a teacher gets their first job they are usually too busy preparing lessons and surviving in the classroom to spend much time on self-assessment. In this kind of environment teacher development can grind to a halt. Teachers usually get by on basic survival techniques and what 'feels' right, and they can often pick up bad habits. This is where *10 TEFL shortcuts* comes in. The aim of this book is to provide you with the knowledge you need to improve your students' experience in the classroom and make your life as a teacher easier, and hopefully more rewarding. When you don't have the luxury of time to learn a new skill you have to take shortcuts – in this book I'm condensing 25 years' experience into less than 2 hours, showing you what areas you really need to focus on, and what is less important.

Now a word about connotation. Language is rarely neutral. The expression 'faking it' has strong negative connotations about fooling people and claiming to be something you're not, whereas 'intensive course' or 'quick learner' are much more positive. Similarly, the word 'shortcut' can be interpreted in two different ways: it can be positive – a way to reach your destination faster, or it can have negative implications about cutting corners and ending up with a result which is not good enough, like opening a jar of pasta sauce instead of making your own from scratch. Needless to say, the shortcuts presented here are intended as the former – helping you to become a confident, knowledgeable and resourceful teacher as quickly as possible.

shortcut 1 confidence building & learner training

An expert is someone who has succeeded in making decisions and judgements simpler through knowing what to pay attention to and what to ignore.

Edward de Bono, British author and psychologist

We cannot teach a language, we can only create the conditions under which it is learnt.

Wilhelm Von Humboldt (1767 – 1835), German linguist

... it is an extensive knowledge of language as a phenomenon and learning theory, together with the personality to use this knowledge effectively in the classroom, which makes for a good teacher.

Michael Lewis in *The Lexical Approach* LTP 1993

Simply being a native speaker of a language does not in itself qualify one as a teacher of that language. Conscious and extensive knowledge of grammar does not make one a language teacher either. Rather, the defining characteristic of a good teacher is someone who can make input comprehensible to a non-native speaker, regardless of his or her level of competence in the target language.

Stephen Krashen *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* 1982

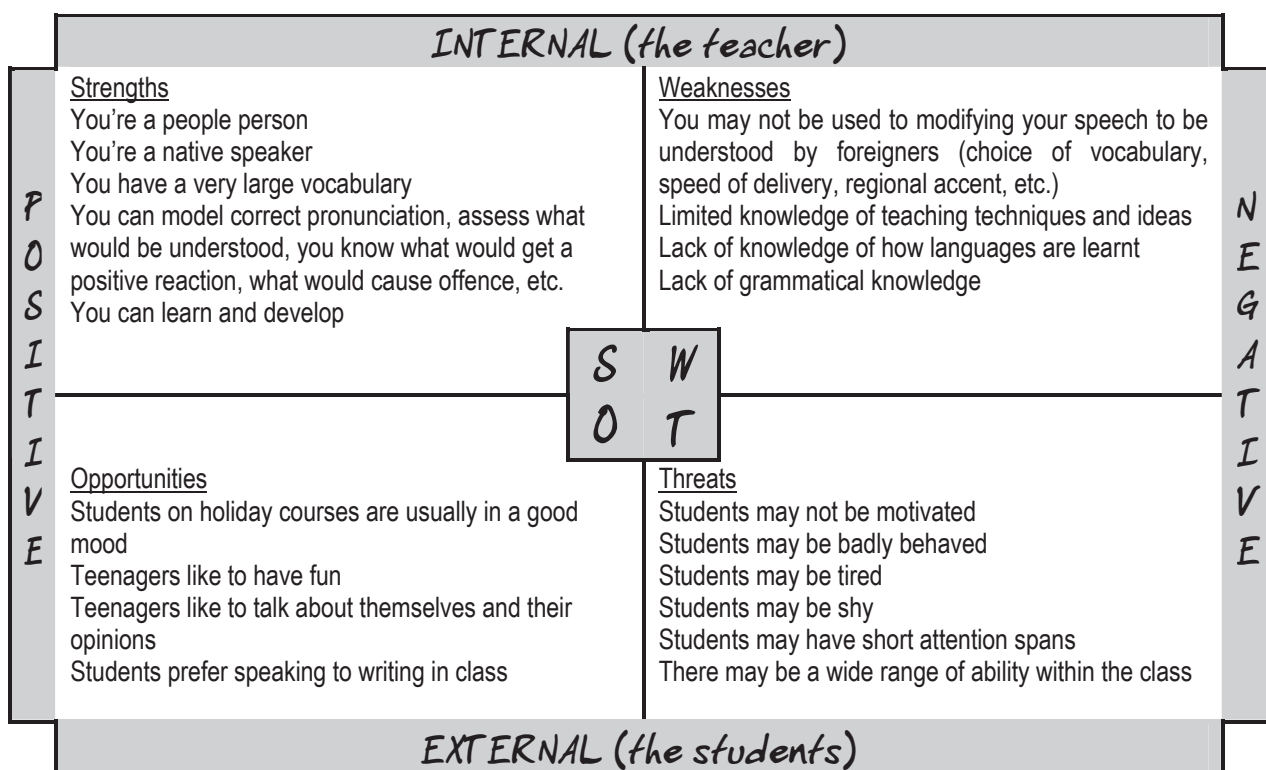
The SWOT analysis

When you enter the classroom for the first time as a newly-qualified EFL teacher you are acutely aware of your lack of both subject knowledge and classroom experience. You know your students are expecting someone who is knowledgeable about both the language and the art of teaching, and it does nothing for your confidence if you feel you are neither. This, however, is the wrong attitude to adopt. A brief SWOT analysis of your teaching situation will reveal that you have a number of strengths and opportunities which you can exploit, and it will flag up weaknesses and potential problems (threats) that you need to guard against. Having an overview of the situation in this way means you can be much more methodical in your approach, and this should give you the necessary confidence to be a successful teacher.

In a traditional SWOT analysis of a business project strengths and weaknesses are characteristics of the company (here the teacher) and opportunities and threats come from the external environment (here the students). In the following example I have imagined you are an inexperienced teacher about to teach a group of teenagers on a vacation course, and I have made various assumptions. For example, 'you're a people person' is listed under strengths. As teaching is a form of public speaking, and public speaking (along with death) regularly comes top in opinion polls when people are asked to name their greatest fear, it's probably safe to assume that if you have chosen to go into teaching you have considered this aspect of it. Frankly, if you're in the classroom and you're not a people person then you're in the wrong job. I think it's also safe to assume that as an inexperienced native-speaker teacher you know very little about the workings of English grammar; that is clearly a weakness, but not as much of a problem as you might think; see below in *How important is grammatical knowledge?*

The way to be successful in the classroom, as in most other walks of life (business, sport, etc), is to play to your strengths and avoid your weaknesses, while at the same time working to improve those areas where there are deficiencies. So a glance at the SWOT analysis indicates that in this case the most sensible approach would be to exploit your knowledge of vocabulary and pronunciation, and make sure your lessons include a high proportion of speaking activities which are fun. The points listed under threats enable you to predict potential problems you might encounter in class, and of the four points listed under weaknesses the first three can soon become strengths because they are easily learnt and practised. Teaching techniques and ideas are covered in detail in shortcuts 6 to 10.

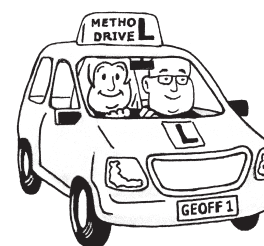
As I said in the introduction, the expression 'faking it' conveys a very negative impression. As an inexperienced teacher you know you have a great deal to learn, but there is nothing wrong with learning the tricks of the trade and applying them in order to improve your performance and boost your confidence. Doing this will also have a positive impact on the students' behaviour and learning: if you appear more knowledgeable and confident you will gain more respect from your students. They will respond better to the tasks you set them (e.g. drills, writing exercises, etc.) and attention levels will improve.



How important is grammatical knowledge?

As an educated native-speaker you have a wide vocabulary and can communicate perfectly well in English, but like any other native speaker you probably feel that you have a lot to learn about how the language 'works'. So how can you be an expert English teacher when you know very little about the subject?

The answer is very simple: it is a false assumption that expertise in language teaching derives from knowing a great deal about the language in question. Being a good English teacher is more about knowing how languages are learnt than it is about knowing everything about English. Think about teaching someone to drive a car: it is clear that it is not necessary to know how every component of the engine works in order to be successful. Similarly, it does not follow that car mechanics make the best driving instructors.



Of course, if you're teaching English then some basic grammar knowledge is essential, and you will pick up more over time because the coursebooks you'll be using will be full of it. The important thing to realise at this stage is that an encyclopaedic knowledge of English grammar is not what makes an expert English teacher, and you should not let this lack of knowledge hold you back.

First impressions

So applying a simple analytical approach to your teaching situation and focusing your lesson accordingly has the potential to compensate for your lack of experience and as a result build your confidence and improve your students' performance. When dealt with in the right way your lack of grammatical knowledge should not hinder your teaching or prevent your students from learning. Now let's build on this by looking at the basic psychology of creating a good first impression. We all know the importance of this, hence this old saying: *you never get a second chance to make a good first impression*. Unfortunately many teachers fail to make the most of this opportunity, either through lack of confidence or simply by not even considering it.

The following points are strategies which are very simple to adopt; in business terms they might be referred to as 'low hanging fruit' as they offer any easy way to improve your reputation as a teacher.

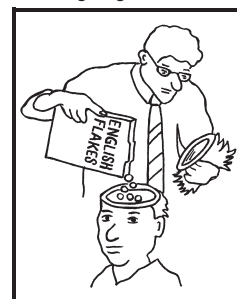
1. Be punctual. Arriving late is not professional – don't do it.
2. Dress appropriately. Make sure your appearance says the right thing about you.
3. Be prepared. Find out about your classes beforehand so you know what to expect, prepare your lesson and have a plan to follow. Make sure you have too much material rather than too little.
4. Be confident. Speak slowly and calmly. Make eye contact with your students. Smile.
5. Be a good listener. Be helpful and encouraging. Put students at their ease. Give them time to think and respond.

Confidence and authority come from understanding what is required and being able to deliver it. We've seen how a little analysis together with some basic psychology can enhance your reputation as a teacher by making people think and behave towards you in a certain way. Now let's look at something which is absolutely fundamental to language teaching: knowing how languages are learnt.

How languages are learnt

While you can get away with not knowing much about grammar, it is essential that you understand what the process of learning a language involves, what the role of the teacher is, and what the implications are for the learner. It is equally important that you convey this information to your students. Luckily these are things which are easily understood and can be summarised very briefly.

There are four essential ingredients for language learning: memory, exposure, motivation and engagement. Memory is the key to everything – without memory there is no learning. But it is not simply a case of being exposed to language in class and remembering it – our memory is simply not that efficient - studies show that we forget 75% of what we learn after just 48 hours. The memory needs help, and that comes from engagement (doing things we are interested in) and repetition (hearing/doing things again and again until they become automatic). For learning to be effective it cannot just be a passive activity. Students cannot sit in class and expect to somehow absorb knowledge into their long-term memory from the teacher – they have to be actively engaged. Similarly, the exposure to language that students get in class will not be enough. Students need the motivation to engage with the language outside the classroom if they want to be successful learners. They have to put in a good deal of effort, and they have to take responsibility for their own learning.



Learner training: the role of the 'teacher' and the learner

In the language classroom the word *teacher* is not a very accurate description of your role – *facilitator* might be better. You are not really teaching, but *assisting the students' learning*, and the starting point for this role is learner training: making your students understand how language learning works, how your classes fit into this process, and what your and their roles are. Your students cannot learn everything a native speaker has spent twenty-five years or more learning - there is simply too much to learn, so a crucial part of your role is to help them prioritise their learning so it is more effective (e.g. spending more time on pronunciation because that is what causes most communication breakdown). It is your job to create a 'learning rich' environment (exposure through engaging and memorable activities), and this environment should be seen as co-operative, where everyone contributes in order to get the benefit. Motivation must come from your students, and their learning must be active, not passive. If they are going to improve they need lots of exposure, practice and repetition, both oral and written.

Creating the right environment

These ideas are too important to be something that is just talked about once at the beginning of the course. You need to refer to them often in order to change student behaviour and make them really take responsibility for their learning, so a permanent reminder is required. This is most easily and effectively done by employing exactly the same psychology as advertisers use - prominently displayed posters with a mixture of pictures and words. Advertisers know that constant exposure to an idea or product will influence behaviour, and the language classroom is no different in this respect, but classroom walls are often overlooked as a useful aid to learning. Whatever posters you put on the walls will be under the gaze of your students for every class every day, so use this freely available premium advertising space to create a positive learning environment. There is no better way to reinforce your message about learner training than having a permanent reminder which you can refer to frequently. You can create posters similar to the ones on the next page, or get them in A1 size (841mm x 594mm) at <http://www.silverhammerpublications.com/for-teachers.html>.

Learner Training

WHAT SHOULD YOU LEARN ON AN ENGLISH COURSE?

ENGLISH, of course!

But if you ONLY learn words & grammar you will FORGET IT over time

so you need to learn ...

- SOME ENGLISH WORDS** common vocabulary
- HOW ENGLISH 'WORKS'** word families, pronunciation
- HOW TO REMEMBER MORE** it doesn't work like this

you will only improve if you practise often

Your teacher can help you but she can't do it for you

only you can learn the language

when you SEE or HEAR a word it can go into your short-term memory

OR your long-term memory

SO HELP YOUR BRAIN AND WRITE THINGS DOWN

Rhymes ✓
Facts ✓
Jokes ✓
Quotes ✓
Anything that interests you ✓

Organise what you write and repeat things ...
repeat things ...
repeat things ...

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Classroom Rules

12 GOLDEN RULES FOR LEARNING ENGLISH IN CLASS

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR LEARNING

- BE ALERT AND HAVE A POSITIVE ATTITUDE
- ALWAYS BRING YOUR BOOKS AND A PEN
- ASK QUESTIONS AND LISTEN TO ADVICE

RESPECT YOUR CLASSMATES AND YOUR TEACHER

- ARRIVE ON TIME
- LISTEN WHEN OTHER PEOPLE ARE SPEAKING
- DON'T SHOUT OUT ANSWERS - PUT YOUR HAND UP

PARTICIPATE FULLY IN THE TASKS YOUR TEACHER GETS

- REMEMBER ALL EXPOSURE TO THE LANGUAGE IS USEFUL
- AVOID DISTRACTIONS, E.G. MOBILE PHONES, FOOD, CHATTING IN YOUR OWN LANGUAGE

USE ENGLISH AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

- DON'T WORRY ABOUT MAKING MISTAKES
- PRACTISE YOUR PRONUNCIATION

DEVELOP LEARNING STRATEGIES TO HELP YOUR BRAIN

- WRITE THINGS DOWN
- REPEAT THINGS ... OFTEN

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Classroom Language

CLASSROOM LANGUAGE

WHAT DOES ... MEAN? HOW DO YOU SPELL THAT?

HOW DO YOU SAY ... IN ENGLISH? SORRY, I DON'T UNDERSTAND.

CAN YOU SAY THAT AGAIN, PLEASE? I'VE FINISHED. WHAT SHALL I DO NOW?

I AGREE WITH ANNA. I DON'T AGREE. I THINK ...

WHAT HAVE YOU GOT FOR NUMBER SIX? I'M NOT SURE ABOUT NUMBER EIGHT.

CAN I BORROW YOUR PEN? SORRY I'M LATE.

er
a h
j k

i:
b c d
e g p
t v

aɪ
i y

əʊ
o

u:
q u w

ɑ:
r

e
f l m n
s x z

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Pronunciation

English sounds /ɪŋɡlɪʃ saʊndz/

p	t	s	f	k	h	θ	ʃ	tʃ
pen	ten	sit	fat	cat	hat	thin	she	chair
b	d	z	v	g	l	ð	ʒ	dʒ
bad	do	zoo	voice	go	leg	this	vision	June
ɪ	e	m	n	r	w	j	ŋ	
fit	bed	man	no	red	wet	you	sing	
ə	i	u:	i:	ei	aɪ	əʊ		
about	city	boot	see	pay	buy	go		
ʌ	ʊ	ɑ:		ɪə	eə	aʊ		
cup	put	arm		here	hair	how		
æ	ɒ	ɜ:	ɔ:	ɔɪ	ʊə			
back	hot	bird	saw	boy	pure			

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shortcut 2 a beginner's guide to the English language

The English language is now one of Britain's most reliable exports and is the ideal British product: it needs no workers and no work, no assembly lines and no assembly, no spare parts and very little servicing.

Any literate, educated person on the face of the globe is deprived if he does not know English.

Dr Robert Burchfield, former Chief Editor of the Oxford English Dictionary.

The English language hasn't got where it is by being pure.

Carl Sandburg, American writer and poet 1878 - 1967

At first glance the history of the English language might seem irrelevant to both teachers and learners. What does it matter how the language evolved a thousand years ago when your students just want to learn how to communicate in the twenty-first century? Well, there are two basic answers to that question. Firstly, you very often get asked the question 'why?' about different aspects of the language, particularly relating to spelling and pronunciation, and it is always better to be able to give an authoritative-sounding answer than saying 'I don't know' (remember you're an expert). Secondly, understanding where English came from, how it evolved and how it compares with other languages will help you understand which aspects of the language are likely to be more problematic for your students.

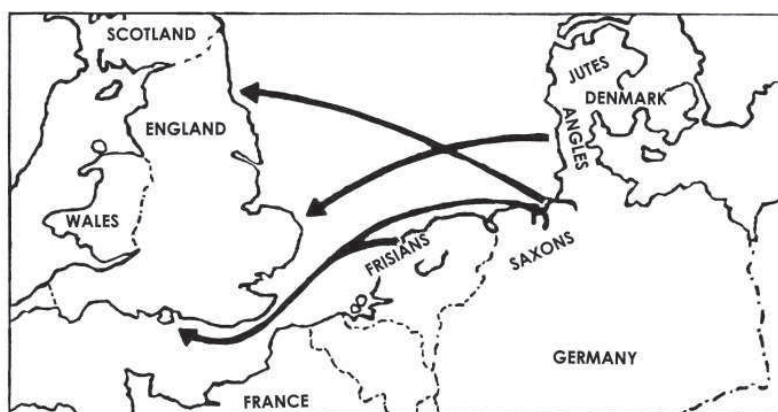
A global phenomenon

When William Shakespeare was in his prime at the end of the 16th century English was the native speech of between 5 and 7 million Englishmen (less than the current population of London). Today about 350 million people worldwide speak English as a mother tongue. According to the British Council, the number learning English will hit 2 billion in the next 10 – 15 years. That's a third of mankind. Ironically, our description of this phenomenon, "lingua franca", derives from Latin.

It was another Elizabethan, Sir Walter Raleigh, who was instrumental in starting the influence of English as a global language, because it was his guidance and inspiration that led to the first English-speaking communities in the New World.

Origins - the last 1500 years

The story of modern English really begins with the invasions into south-east Britain from Denmark, Holland and Germany which began in AD 449. These invaders were the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes, fierce warriors who pushed the Celtic-speaking Britons back to the west and the north, to Cornwall, Wales and Scotland. The language that prevailed in the rest of the country was that of the victors – Old English.



By AD 1000 this newly conquered territory became known as Englalund, home of the Angles. The word *Welsh* comes from the Old English *welas*, meaning foreigner or slave. Even today words used for ordinary objects are mostly Anglo-Saxon or Germanic in origin. Germanic languages such as Danish, German, Norwegian and Swedish, have very similar equivalents for these words: shoe, clothes, earth, sun, moon, day, man, wife, child, friend, house, food, water, sleep, love, say, live, have, be, work. Words of Germanic origin are usually short (often just one syllable) and tend to be informal in modern English.

The Latin Alphabet

In AD 597 St Augustine brought Christianity to Britain. Church words from Latin, Greek and Hebrew were absorbed into the language, but more importantly the monks brought Latin script, which meant Old English could now be written down. This was a major step forward in the evolution of Old English, except that the Latin alphabet had to cope with a sound system of nearly 40 phonemes (individual sounds), so many sounds had to be signalled by combinations of letters.



The influence of the Vikings and the Normans

The next event which had a strong influence on the development of English was the invasion by the Vikings from Norway and Denmark which began in AD 793. By AD 850 the Vikings controlled almost half the country, and by 878 the Danes in the north were living more or less peacefully alongside the Anglo-Saxons in the south. *Norse*, the language of the Danes, had the same Germanic roots as Old English, so the Danes and Saxons could understand each other more or less when they came together to trade. The effect of these two cultures intermingling was that the language of Old English became more simplified – before the arrival of the Danes, Old English, like most European languages at that time, was a strongly inflected language.



The next big change to the language came in 1066 when the Normans, under William, invaded from northern France and defeated King Harold II at the Battle of Hastings. William's victory meant that all important positions in society were taken by Normans. In government, religion and in all written records the language used was either French or Latin; the country did not have another English-speaking king for nearly three hundred years. It is no coincidence that many modern English words associated with power have their roots in Norman French: e.g. *government, parliament, judge, legal, military, nation, state* and *authority*. English went underground, and survived as the spoken language of the people of England mainly because it was so well established, and the fact that almost immediately after the conquest many Normans began to intermarry with Anglo-Saxons. The effect of this kind

of cultural interaction was that many French and Latin words entered the language, allowing fine distinctions in meaning to be made, for example *ask – question – interrogate, time – age – epoch*. The result of this mingling of Old English with French after the Norman conquest became known as Middle English. By 1250 French was becoming a foreign language, but it was not until 1399 that Henry IV became the first king to give a speech in English at his coronation.

Spelling

A common problem area for learners of English is the relationship between spelling and pronunciation, because at first glance English spelling appears to be very irregular. However, most studies show that English is actually about 75% regular. The problem is that the 400 or so irregular spellings are among the most frequently used words in the language, and this promotes a strong impression of irregularity.

The spelling of English was also affected by the Norman conquest, because the French scribes who recorded the language introducing such conventions as *qu* for *cw* (as in *queen*), *gh* for *h* (as in *night*) and *c* before *e* or *i* (as in *circle* and *cell*).

Significant changes in the sound of the language (known as the 'Great Vowel Shift') began in the mid-15th century. These changes contributed to inconsistencies between spelling and pronunciation, e.g. why *beak, break* and *swear* are spelt with *ea* but all sound different. Similarly, letters that were sounded in Anglo-Saxon became 'silent', e.g. the *k* of *know* and *knight*, or the final *e* of *stone, love*, etc. The language was also affected by the arrival of printing in 1476. This revolution in communication at the time of the Renaissance resulted in hundreds of Latin words entering the language, and it also affected spelling: many early printers were foreign (especially from Holland) and used their own spelling norms, and line justification was often achieved by abbreviating and contracting words, and also by adding extra letters (usually an *e*) to words, rather than extra space.



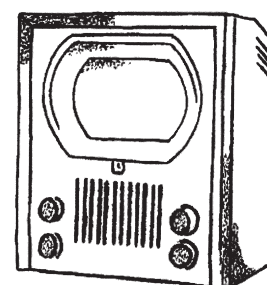
More confusion was added in the 16th century when there was a fashion to make spelling reflect Latin or Greek etymology, e.g. the *g* was added to *reign* (from *regno*) and the *b* in *debt* (*debitum*).

From the 16th and 17th centuries many new loan words entered English from such languages as French, Latin, Greek, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese. If we consider just a few words from this period such as armadillo, grotesque, epitome, piazza and pneumonia, it is not difficult to see why some of the new patterns of spelling would make learning to spell consistently a much more complex matter, especially in longer words.

The influence of Greek and Latin

During the Renaissance Italy dominated ideas in culture and architecture, and scholars wrote in Latin so they could debate with other European scholars. From the mid-16th century there was great debate (known as the inkhorn controversy) over the new words entering the language, particularly from classical literature. Critics regarded these words as useless, usually requiring knowledge of Latin or Greek to be understood. They also contended that there were words with identical meaning already in English.

Latin and Greek were also called into service in the 19th and 20th centuries to create new words for new inventions: the word *television* is actually a mixture of Greek and Latin – *tele* from Greek for ‘far’, and *vision* from the Latin for ‘seeing’. In the 19th century there were still those arguing for the purification of English by removing Greek, Latin and other foreign influences, so for example, the word *photograph*, (from the Greek for light + writing) would become *sun-print* (from Anglo-Saxon). Needless to say, this never happened. The tables of prefixes below further illustrate how Greek and Latin have influenced the development of the English language.



Greek prefix	basic meaning	examples
auto-	self, same	autobiography, autopilot
chrono-	of time	chronometer, chronological, synchronize
electro-	of electricity	electric, electrician
hydro-	of water	dehydrated, hydrant, hydro-electric
micro-	small	microfilm, microscope, microwave
neo-	new	neo-classical, neologism
ortho-	correct, standard	orthodox, orthography, orthopaedic
phono-	of sound	phonetics, phonogram, phonology
photo-	of light	photocopy, photogenic, photograph
physio-	of body	physiology, physiotherapy, physique
pseudo-	false	pseudonym, pseudo-
proto-	first, original	protocol, prototype
sym-/syn-	sharing with	sympathetic, sympathy, synchronize
techno-	applied science	technique, technology
tele-	linking across distance	telegram, television, telephone, telescope

Latin prefix	basic meaning	examples
ante-	before	antenatal, anteroom
in-/im-	in, on	intake, imprint
in-/im-/il-/ir-	not	infinite, illicit, immoral, irrelevant
inter-	between	international, inter-planetary, interchange
mal-	bad, wrong	malnutrition, maladjusted, malpractice
nov-	new	novel, novelty, nova
pre-	before, in front	predetermine, prefix, preface
post-	after, behind	post-war, p.m., posthumous
retro-	backwards	retrospective, retrograde
super-	above	superstructure, superhuman, supernatural
trans-	across	transatlantic, transplant, translate, transform

N.B. when we make opposite words we tend to use *im-/in-/il-/ir-* with Latin words, and *un-* with Germanic words.

Big vocabulary, easy grammar

The result of absorbing such an incredible number of words through coming into contact with other languages is twofold: firstly, English has an enormous lexicon (about 500,000 words, whereas German has about 185,000 and French has less than 100,000 words), and secondly, although English is historically a Germanic language, most of its vocabulary is actually Classical/Romance in origin.

The grammar of English is quite simple, particularly compared to other languages. For example, English nouns have no gender and only change when an 's' or 'es' is added to form a plural. Compare that with German, where nouns are inflected (i.e. the endings change) into four grammatical cases. English adjectives do not have to agree with nouns as they do in many languages (e.g. French *le vin blanc*, the white wine, *la maison blanche*, the white house), and English verb forms don't change beyond the third person 's' distinction in the present tense (*eats, has, does, etc.*). The past forms (*lived, came, etc.*), don't change at all, whereas in many languages the verb ending changes with the subject of the verb, e.g. in Spanish 'I said' is *yo dije*, 'you said' is *tú dijiste*, 'he said' is *él dijo* and so on.

In his webinar *7 things beginning with M* Scott Thornbury makes the point that in English the grammar is mostly encoded in the little words: the function words, the auxiliary verbs, the prepositions, articles, etc. The memory demands for the learner are consequently in the area of vocabulary.

shortcut 3 the essentials of English pronunciation

There are two key problems with pronunciation teaching. Firstly it tends to be neglected. And secondly when it is not neglected, it tends to be reactive to a particular problem that has arisen in the classroom rather than being strategically planned.

Gerald Kelly in *How to Teach Pronunciation*, Longman 2000

In research I carried out 70% of all communication breakdown between learners could be directly attributed to pronunciation problems.... Learning the sounds of English is a crucial part of achieving good pronunciation and intelligibility.

Jennifer Jenkins, Professor of English Language, University of Southampton and author of *The Phonology of English as an International Language* OUP.

There is a tendency in ELT (English Language Teaching) to focus on what is easy to teach rather than on what is most useful to learn, and as a result pronunciation is an area which is often neglected in the classroom because teachers do not feel as confident teaching it as they do with other aspects of the language. Effective techniques for practising pronunciation is an essential skill that all EFL teachers should develop, because the sounds, stress and rhythm of English are so central to effective oral communication, and often causes great difficulty for learners.

What is pronunciation?

Pronunciation is an umbrella word covering intonation, stress, rhythm and sounds. As such, it is a potentially huge subject area, so the crucial thing is to focus on the aspects of pronunciation that can be easily taught (even by a relatively inexperienced teacher) and which will immediately benefit the student. In practice this means focusing on *individual sounds*, *word stress* and *sentence stress*.

The phonemes of English may look a little daunting at first, particularly to an inexperienced teacher, but there is really nothing difficult about them, and introducing them gradually is an ideal way to learn them – both for students and teachers. The aim for students is to be able recognise and decipher phonemes, which is quite an easy skill to acquire. The teacher, on the other hand, should be aiming to be able to use them more productively in the longer term, i.e. to transcribe words and phrases into phonemic script. Developing confidence in this area will obviously take a little more time, but it is much easier than it may at first seem.



Benefits for the students of understanding English phonemes

- They provide a visual representation of individual sounds, so we can use the phonemic chart to pinpoint mistakes and help students with problem sounds. Students will understand what they need to do, even if they can't do it immediately.
- They can be used to explain the importance of stress, at both word and sentence level, and highlight weak forms.
- Knowledge of phonemes and stress makes students much more effective independent learners.
- They help make students aware of spelling patterns in English.

The basics of pronunciation that every EFL teacher should know

Sounds

A phoneme is the smallest contrastive unit in the sound system of a language. Most English learner dictionaries identify between 44 and 47 phonemes. This variation occurs because the exact number of phonemes in English depends on the speaker and the method of determining what is a phoneme and what is an allophone. An allophone is a variant of a phoneme. For example, the /p/ in *pin* is not exactly the same as the /p/ in *spin*, and we all pronounce words in our own specific way, so when different speakers utter the same phrase the sounds each speaker makes aren't exactly the same. We "mean" the same sounds (that is phonemes) but in reality we produce slightly different sounds (allophones). Some dictionaries consider the sound at the end of *pretty* to be an allophone of the phoneme /ɪ/, whereas others consider it to be a separate phoneme and mark it as /i/. Students don't need to know any of this, and for teaching purposes I identify the 45 different sounds illustrated on the chart on the right (if you don't have one this is available as an A1 or A2 size poster from www.silverhammerpublications.com).

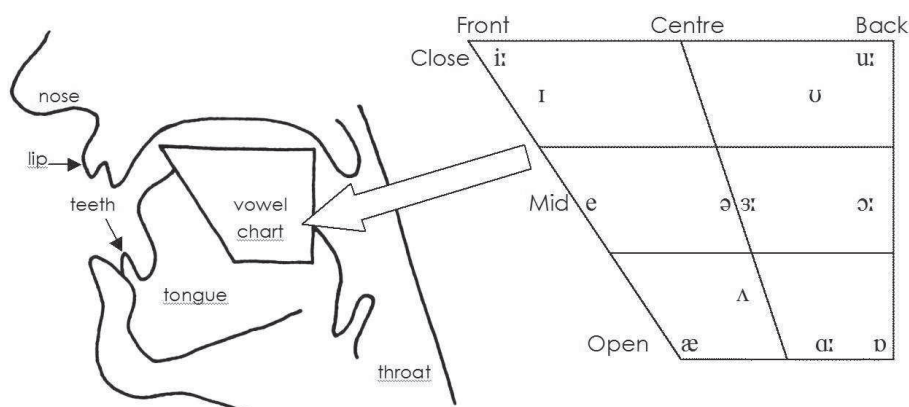
p	t	s	f	k	h	θ	ʃ	tʃ
pen	ten	sit	fat	cat	hot	thin	she	chair
b	d	z	v	g	l	ð	ʒ	dʒ
bad	do	zoo	voice	go	leg	this	vision	June
ɪ	e	m	n	r	w	j	ŋ	
fit	bed	man	no	red	wet	you	sing	
ə	i	u:	i:	ei	ai	əu		
about	city	boot	see	pay	buy	go		
ʌ	ʊ	ɑ:		ɪə	eə	aʊ		
cup	put	arm		here	hair	how		
æ	ɒ	ɜ:	ɔ:	ɔɪ	ʊə			
back	hot	bird	saw	boy	pure			

The phonemes are divided into vowel and consonant sounds. There are 8 short vowel sounds (bottom left, yellow background), 5 long vowel sounds (bottom middle, blue background), 8 combined vowel sounds called diphthongs (bottom right, red background). The 24 consonant sounds are divided into 9 unvoiced (top row, light grey background) and 15 voiced sounds (second row, dark grey background).

In the same way that there is a difference of opinion on the number of phonemes in English, there is also a lack of consistency in the phonetic transcription of words from one dictionary to another. The main differences are with words with an unstressed syllable like *fashion* which can be transcribed as /'fæʃən/, or /'fæʃn/, or /'fæʃ(ə)n/. Personally I prefer the first option, which shows the syllable without any brackets, which I feel could be confusing for students and provoke questions which lead to unnecessary and time-consuming explanations. The latter option is probably the most accurate, as the brackets indicate two possible pronunciations, but I think in this case simplicity and usefulness for students is the most important factor. The same thing happens with the letter *r*, often at the end of words such as *corner*. Possible phonetic spellings are /'kɔ:nə/, or /'kɔ:nə(r)/, or /'kɔ:(r)nə(r)/. Similarly *careful* could be /'keəfəl/ or /'keəfl/ or /'keə(r)f(ə)l/. In both these cases I prefer the first option; I think a transcription of a word with two sounds in brackets is doubly confusing for students.

Vowels

When different vowels are produced, the vertical distance between the roof of the mouth and the tongue changes and a specific part of the tongue is raised. So vowels produced with the raised front part of the tongue are called *front vowels*, and those with the raised back part are *back vowels*.



Stress-timed and syllable-timed languages

English is a stress-timed language. A stress-timed language is a language where the stressed syllables are said at approximately regular intervals, and unstressed syllables shorten to fit this rhythm (regardless of the number of

unstressed syllables in between – see example below). Examples of other stress-timed languages are German, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian and Portuguese. Stress-timed languages can be compared with syllable-timed ones, whose syllables take approximately equal amounts of time to pronounce. Examples of syllable-timed languages are Spanish, French, Italian, Hindi, Urdu, Chinese, Finnish and Japanese. Learners whose first language is syllable-timed often have problems producing the unstressed sounds in English (they tend to give them equal stress), and they also have problems recognising and then producing features of English such as contractions and elision.

In the example below the underlined words remained stressed, even as more unstressed words are added.

You me him her

You and me and him and her

You and then me and then him and then her

You and then it's me and then it's him and then it's her

Sentence stress – weak forms

Weak forms are syllable sounds that become unstressed in connected speech and are often pronounced as a *schwa* (/ə/). Structural words, such as prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliaries and articles are often pronounced in their weak form, since they do not carry the main content, and are therefore not normally stressed.

Consider a sentence like *Do you want a cup of tea?* If we look at the pronunciation of each individual word in the sentence it looks like this:

/du: ju: wɒnt eɪ kʌp ɒv ti:/

But in normal speech the stress falls on the information words: *want*, *cup* and *tea*, and the other words are not stressed, so we get something like this:

/dʒə wɒnə kʌpə ti:/

This shortening of unstressed words in sentences like this causes problems for learners, because they find them difficult to hear and this interferes with understanding. However, once they begin to understand how English pronunciation and stress works, they will be less mystified about the whole system, and less worried about not hearing words that aren't pronounced in the way they would expect.

Making pronunciation teaching and learning easier

So the benefits of teaching pronunciation should be clear, but what's the best way to go about introducing the sounds? The principle of this approach is very simple – start with the symbols for sounds that are obvious because they look just like letters, and then introduce the rest a few at a time. In the 12 pronunciation lessons in the *Everyday English pronunciation and culture workbook* the phonemes appear at the top of the page as they are introduced. The new phonemes in each lesson appear on a black background, the phonemes yet to be introduced are in grey (see examples from lessons 1 and 2 below). After lesson one the phonemes are never introduced more than three at a time.

Lesson 1

p	t	s	f	k	h	b	d	z	v	g	l	m	n	r	w	ɪ	e	ə	i	i:	ʌ	ʊ
u:	ɑ:	θ	ð	eɪ	aɪ	əʊ	æ	ʃ	ʒ	ɒ	tʃ	dʒ	ɜ:	ɔ:	j	ŋ	ɪə	eə	aʊ	ɔɪ	ʊə	

Lesson 2

p	t	s	f	k	h	b	d	z	v	g	l	m	n	r	w	ɪ	e	ə	i	i:	ʌ	ʊ
u:	ɑ:	θ	ð	eɪ	aɪ	əʊ	æ	ʃ	ʒ	ɒ	tʃ	dʒ	ɜ:	ɔ:	j	ŋ	ɪə	eə	aʊ	ɔɪ	ʊə	

A phoneme wallchart is essential for teaching pronunciation, but if you have internet access and a projector then <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/activities/phonemic-chart> is an alternative. You should introduce new phonemes by modelling the sound and doing choral and individual drilling, and you can also review phonemes introduced in previous lessons. The first exercise in each pronunciation lesson is 'deciphering' phonetic spellings. The words in these exercises only contain the phonemes introduced in the lesson plus any of those previously introduced, so the one for the first lesson look like this:

1.1 English sounds

What are these words? Write your answers below the phonemic transcriptions.

Remember: this symbol ' comes before a stressed syllable. e.g. ticket /'tɪkɪt/

/ɪk'spensɪv/	/nek/	/hɪz/	/bred/	/'mɪnɪt/	/nekst/
1 _____	2 _____	3 _____	4 _____	5 _____	6 _____
/lɪvz/	/dres/	/'vɪzɪt/	/wen/	/bɪld/	/'dresɪz/
7 _____	8 _____	9 _____	10 _____	11 _____	12 _____
/'kɪsɪz/	/kɪst/	/ded/	/'wɪmɪn/	/ges/	/hed/
13 _____	14 _____	15 _____	10 _____	11 _____	12 _____

Creating a memory aid

Besides the phonemes appearing at the top of each pronunciation lesson, the students have a full colour phonemic chart on the back of the *Everyday English pronunciation & culture workbook*. There is a space below each phoneme where students can write a memorable word containing that sound. This should also be done lesson by lesson as the phonemes are introduced, so the chart becomes a memory aid.

p	t	s	f	k	h	θ	ʃ	tʃ
b	d	z	v	g	l	ð	ʒ	dʒ
ɪ	e	m	n	r	w	j	ŋ	
ə	i	u:	i:	eɪ	aɪ	əʊ		
ʌ	ʊ	ɑ:		ɪə	eə	aʊ		
æ	ɒ	ɜ:	ɔ:	ɔɪ	ʊə			

Pronunciation lesson 1 – teacher's notes

The aims for the first lesson are:

- To introduce the concept of phonemes representing sounds
- To introduce the concept of word stress
- To make students understand the value of studying and practising pronunciation (this will be reinforced in subsequent lessons)
- To make students feel comfortable with phonemes

Tell the students that if they want to improve their English they need to learn lots more English words, but just knowing what the words mean and how to spell them is not enough - they also need to know how to say them correctly. These lessons will help them understand how English pronunciation works.

The first thing to focus on is the concept of sounds versus letters, because we are starting with the phonemes that look like letters. To illustrate what we mean by sounds put the word *chocolate* on the board. Point out that it has 9 letters, but is made up of 6 sounds: /tʃ/ /ɒ/ /k/ /l/ /ə/ /t/ and it has only two syllables (/ˈtʃɒkələt/) when speakers of many other languages would expect it to have three.

Tell the students that in some languages 1 letter = 1 sound, but not in English. Take the letter 'a' for example. Put these words on the board: *bank, want, call, car, any, patient*, and say them aloud.

/bænk/ /wɒnt/ /kɔ:l/ /kɑ:/ /'eni/ /'peɪʃənt/ So the letter a can have six different sounds.

Point out that in English there are 26 letters, but 45 sounds, and that this can be confusing for learners who don't understand how English pronunciation works. Also there will be some sounds in English which don't exist in the students' own language, so they will be new to them. Spending a little time studying the individual sounds of English will give them the chance to learn about pronunciation and practise at the same time.

Now introduce the sounds /e/ and /ɪ/. Do a little choral and individual drilling, and then put these phonetic spellings on the board: /kwɪk/ /tekst/ /'ɪntrəstɪd/ /'tɪkɪt/

Ask the students to decipher them. When you are sure that the students have understood the concept of phonetic spellings representing sounds let the students do exercise 1.1, writing their answers in the spaces provided. This is probably best done in pairs so that nobody feels isolated. Circulate to make sure everyone has understood, and then check answers when you think everyone has finished.

Word stress and weak forms

Understanding word stress in multi-syllable words and putting it on the correct syllable is essential for good/understandable pronunciation. Point out the function of the stress mark in the transcriptions of words like 'ticket' and 'expensive'. Point out how the unstressed second syllable in *ticket* is pronounced /ɪ/ even though it is written with an e. The same is also true of the first syllable in *expensive*. The schwa /ə/ is introduced in pronunciation lesson 2, which allows you to highlight weak forms in connected speech right from the beginning of the course.

Subsequent lessons

Once the students know what to expect from the pronunciation lessons they will become much easier to teach, and as the phonemic symbols are gradually introduced they will provide more scope for teaching. At the beginning of each lesson go over the symbols which were introduced in the previous lesson by pointing at them on the wallchart and getting students to produce the sounds. Repetition is essential – even if you spend 20 minutes drilling something on Monday students can quite easily forget everything by Tuesday.



Once more vowel sounds have been introduced you can contrast the way the sounds are made by getting students to produce /i:/ /u:/ /ɪ:/ /ʊ:/ /i:/ /u:/ /ɪ:/ /ʊ:/ in quick succession. Doing this kind of exercise doesn't just practise the sounds; it also demonstrates how the mouth and tongue have to move to make the journey from /i:/ to /u:/. You can use other pairs of front and back vowels in this way to help students get a feel (literally) for these sounds, or use minimal pairs.

Front	Back		
/i:/	/u:/	beat	boot
/e/	/ɔ:/	bet	bought
/æ/	/ɒ/	hat	hot

You can also try making silent facial expressions, and get the students to make the correct sounds by reading your expressions.

And remember ...

It's very easy to master a few techniques and it's very useful

The phonemes are taught gradually, so you can learn them at the same time as the students (just make sure you're one step ahead). With a little effort and perseverance you will soon develop a really useful classroom skill, and your students will quickly see the benefits of what you are doing.

Make it fun

A large part of any pronunciation exercises will be oral, and will involve the teacher providing a model of sounds for the students to repeat. This means that you will need to lose your inhibitions, because you will need to spend time making 'oooh' and 'aaaah' noises at the front of the class. This may sound silly but it is a serious point – you have to make your students feel comfortable with whatever task you ask them to do, and the best way to do this is to lead by example. If you show them that you are not afraid to make strange noises in front of the class they will be much more likely to participate, and if you can make it fun, so much the better.



Don't be afraid of repetition

Remember that for many students there are sounds in English which simply do not occur in their own language. Where this is the case, do not expect students to automatically repeat a sound perfectly at the first attempt after you have given them a model. Making new sounds involves making new shapes with the tongue, teeth and lips, and like anything practice is needed - give students plenty of opportunity for repetition. Imagine yourself in your students' position, learning a foreign language – if you were trying to pronounce French, Spanish or Japanese to an acceptable level how much practice would you want to do? Probably a great deal, if you really wanted to become proficient.

You don't need to speak with a 'standard' English accent to teach pronunciation

When giving students models of pronunciation it is probably easiest to aim for something close to the standard pronunciation used by most dictionaries rather than strong regional variations. However, there is no rule which says all foreign students must learn English as it is spoken in the south-east of England rather than in Dublin, Edinburgh, Manchester, New York or anywhere else, so this is really a decision for the individual teacher. The aim is simply for students to be more understandable.

