Fact sheet – Setting goals for teaching pronunciation 2

These fact sheets have been developed by the AMEP Research Centre to provide AMEP teachers with information on areas of professional concern. They provide a summary as well as identifying some annotated references that can be used to broaden knowledge and extend understanding. These references can be obtained through the AMEP Resource Centre at rescentr@nceltr.mq.edu.au

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In this fact sheet we discuss what models to use in teaching pronunciation, what our goals should be and what factors affect the learning of pronunciation for adults.

What model of English should we use?

The model to be used depends on what our students want to use and what we are able to provide as teachers. Most AMEP clients are aiming to settle in Australia, and many AMEP teachers speak some variety of Australian English, and so this is a reasonable model for the AMEP. But familiarity with other accents – so-called native (eg New Zealand, British) and non-native (eg Chinese, German) – is also crucial for learners, and teachers with these accents have just as important a role to play in providing models for pronunciation. Indeed, whatever the teacher's accent, the gap between the student's accent and the teacher's is much bigger than that between the accents of different teachers.

Whatever their accent, the teacher's role is vital in providing a good model of spoken English, and every student should have the opportunity to listen to a range of accents in order to prepare them for life outside the classroom.

What should our goals be?

Most people agree that intelligibility is the most appropriate goal for learners, although different learners may have different specific goals. Thus the aim of some learners is simply to be understood in ordinary conversation, while others may aim for greater proximity to native speaker models. Fraser (2000: 10) suggests that learners of ESL need to be able to 'speak English with an accent, or accents, of their choice which is easily intelligible to an ordinary Australian English speaker of average goodwill'. However, as Jenkins (2000) notes, in some contexts learners rarely speak to native speakers. It seems sensible to assume that AMEP learners need to be intelligible to both native speakers and non-native speakers.

However, while ESL teachers may be sympathetic to accent differences, others may be less able or willing to understand certain types of heavily accented speech.

*Teachers should aim to help learners become both **intelligible** and relatively **easy to understand**.*

What is intelligibility?

There is a lack of agreement about what is meant by intelligibility. Three related but separate notions are important here:

- *accentedness*, or the strength of accent;
- the degree to which the hearer can understand what is being said; and
- *interlocutor load*, or the difficulty the hearer has in understanding what is said.

Learners with a strong accent may be unintelligible, in the sense that we cannot understand what they are saying, or they may be intelligible, but understanding them requires a lot of effort – that is, the interlocutor load is high. It is also possible that learners with a strong accent may be perfectly intelligible and may not place any burden on the hearer, particularly if the accent is a familiar one. Intelligibility is thus a two-way process, involving at least the speaker and the hearer. A speaker may therefore be unintelligible to a hearer because of what they are doing as they speak, or because of something about the hearer that makes the task of understanding difficult. Intelligibility also depends on factors other than pronunciation that do not relate specifically to language learning, but to communication in general, such as whether the topic is familiar or whether it is expected in the context.

Intelligible to whom?

Listeners bring with them their own values, abilities,

experience and prejudices which may influence their judgments about intelligibility. These include:

- familiarity with the speaker's accent

- expertise in understanding speakers from different backgrounds

- attitudes to the speaker and the speaker's ethnic group.

Different listeners may judge the intelligibility of the same speaker differently depending on how sympathetic they are to the speaker, how familiar they are with the speaker, or with other speakers from the same L1 background and other non-native speakers in general, as well as how much they know about the topic.

As AMEP teachers are often both sympathetic to a learner's needs and experienced with a range of accents, they may find learners more intelligible than non-teachers do. While this may give the learners confidence that they are able to be understood by someone, it may not give them a realistic reflection of how well they will be understood outside the classroom.

What makes a speaker intelligible?

In addition to general proficiency in English and general speaking skills, the following elements are important for intelligibility (for definitions of these, see *AMEP Fact sheet – Pronunciation 1*):

- overall prosody (including stress, rhythm and intonation)

- phrasing and sense groups

- intonation

- word stress

- rhythm (use of stressed and unstressed syllables)

- syllable structure

- segments (sounds)

- voice quality.

Traditionally, in language teaching there has been a strong focus on the individual sounds of English. However, all aspects of pronunciation, including prosody, individual sounds and syllable structure are important for how intelligible a speaker is, and some recent studies have suggested that prosody may be more important, whatever a speaker's L1 background (Anderson-Hsieh and Koehler 1988; Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson and Koehler 1992). Different aspects of pronunciation may be particularly important at certain levels of proficiency or for certain aspects of interaction.

- **Intonation**. Work by Munro and Derwing (1999) suggests that intonation is more important for how *easy* relatively advanced speakers are to understand, than for how far they are actually understood.

- **Stress patterns**, at both the word level and the sentence level, are important for intelligibility, and offer a useful starting point for teaching pronunciation, particularly with a class of students from different L1 backgrounds (Benrabah 1997; Chela-Flores 2001).

- **Speech rate**. How fast a person speaks only seems to be a problem for learners when the speaker is excessively fast or speaks fast and has a strong accent. Neither is 'faster better', except for very slow speakers, and ideal speaking rates for non-native speakers appear to be a little slower than the normal native speaker rate. When learners try to speak at a lower or higher rate, they may become less intelligible (Anderson-Hsieh and Koehler 1988).

- **Voice quality** seems to be important for intelligibility, particularly where the settings for a learner's L1 are very different from English. This suggests that work on improving articulatory settings will be useful for many learners in Australia (Kerr 1999, 2000).

- **Individual sounds**. Errors in individual sounds may affect how strong a learner's accent is perceived to be, rather than how far they are accurately understood (Munro and Derwing 1999). They may be particularly important when non-native speakers of English are speaking together (Jenkins 2000). Although there has been little work on different types of errors in individual sounds, the deletion of consonants seems to particularly interfere with intelligibility, at least for speakers of English from some L1 backgounds (Suenobu, Kanzaki and Yamane 1992).

Which is most important for the learner?

Authors such as Pennington (1996: 157) argue that the segmental aspects of pronunciation build upon other, more fundamental aspects, and she proposes a hierarchy in which the breath and the voice setting are the foundation of good pronunciation:

Consonants

    Vowels

        Word stress

           Rhythm

              Intonation

                Voice (quality) setting

              Breath

Where time is limited, she proposes that teachers start at the bottom of the hierarchy with the fundamentals of pronunciation such as breath, voice setting, intonation and rhythm, before focusing on aspects of pronunciation that depend on these, such as individual sounds.

However, the extent to which these different aspects of pronunciation interfere with intelligibility for a particular speaker will vary, and in deciding what to start on first, the teacher has to take other factors into consideration. These include the composition of the class, what is teachable in the circumstances, and whether a global or segmental approach is favoured. Many other authors also recommend a more global approach, which starts with the larger units of prosody from the **top-down**, rather than with individual segments, or **bottom-up**. This approach fits in well with an integrated, discourse-oriented and communicative approach to language teaching in general. Because of its centrality in making meaning, its relevance to learners from all backgrounds and levels, and its teachability, stress has been suggested as a useful starting point (Dalton and Seidlhofer 1994; Chela-Flores 2001). Approaches to teaching pronunciation are discussed in more detail in *AMEP Fact sheet – Pronunciation 3*.

What factors affect how adults learn pronunciation?

Several factors appear to influence how adults learn pronunciation:

- age
- first language
- motivation
- strength of ethnic identity
- personality and affective factors.

The impact these have on the learning of pronunciation is discussed briefly below.

Age

Although adults may not be able to master pronunciation in the apparently effortless way that children do, they can nevertheless make great progress, as many studies have shown (see, for example, Derwing, Munro and Wiebe 1997 and Wajnryb, Coan and McCabe 1997 for evidence that teaching works with adults, and Leather and James 1991 for theoretical background).

Adults are very different from children, for a number of reasons:

- **Time and opportunity**. They may have less time for language learning in general, fewer opportunities for interacting in English.

- **Self-consciousness**. They may be more reticent to try things out and risk making mistakes.

- **First language**. Adults have already developed a strong sense of the sound system of their first language (see below).

- **Identity**. Their sense of identity is invested in their first language, and they may be reluctant to speak like someone else.

- **The effect of ageing**. Most studies of the effects of age on the learning of pronunciation have suggested that there is a progressive decline, rather than a strong drop-off after puberty, in the ability to learn the sounds of a new language.

*The good news is that these neurological differences between adults and children seem to result from a change, rather than a deterioration, in the way the sounds in a new language are processed, and so training **can** help adults improve in their ability to discriminate new sounds and establish new phonetic boundaries.*

First language

- **Adults perceive English using their L1 categories**. Unlike children, adults have already developed an awareness of the sound system of their first language when they come to learn English. As a result, they seem to process the English sounds using the categories they have already established in their L1, which makes it more difficult for them to perceive and produce differences between their L1 and the sounds of the target language (Leather and James 1991). This also means that, long term, they are likely to have greater difficulty producing phonemes which are very similar to those of their L1, rather than those which are very different.

- **Adults transfer from L1**. It is not a matter of simple transfer, however, as was argued in the days when it was thought that contrastive analysis could predict a learner's problems. Current approaches to transfer take into account the important role played by universal and developmental changes over time. For example, some speakers from backgrounds with few word-final consonants (eg Mandarin or Vietnamese) will omit these consonants in English, while others who are proficient in English try to overcome this difficulty by sounding the final consonants, but they also add an extra schwa syllable because of a universal tendency to avoid syllables that end in a consonant (see Jenkins 2000: 102). Thus, while their L1 may determine which English sounds cause learners problems, they may use different strategies to tackle these at different stages of their development. Usually, transfer from L1 is a more common source of

difficulty at earlier stages of language learning, and problems resulting from developmental processes are more evident later.

- **The amount of transfer varies**. Speakers transfer from their L1 more or less in different contexts. Thus sounds are more likely to be influenced by transfer when they occur in particular combinations, and speakers are likely to transfer more frequently from their L1 in informal contexts when they do not perceive themselves to be on their 'best behaviour' and may be paying less attention to the form as opposed to the context of what they are saying.

Overall, it is extremely useful for teachers to have an understanding of the phonology of their learners' first language, although this will not provide a full account of problems in pronunciation. Good sources of this for a variety of languages are Swan and Smith (2001) and Kenworthy (1987). More detailed accounts of particular languages can also be useful, if demanding, resources, such as Santry (1997) on the problems of South Vietnamese learners of English.

Other factors

- **Motivation** is an influential factor, particularly the importance attached to accurate pronunciation in English by other members of a learner's culture.

- **Strong feelings of ethnic identity** may sometimes lead learners to consciously or unconsciously resist making changes to their pronunciation because their accent is an important way of signalling their social and ethnic identity. They may use various markers of their ethnicity in their spoken English quite unconsciously. However, if the learner is able to achieve the level of effective communication that they want, these need not be a concern unless they interfere with intelligibility. Building sensitivity to the fact that we all speak in different ways to different interlocutors may help learners become more comfortable with the idea that they can change their accent in different situations.

- **Life circumstances**. The motivation to change pronunciation beyond a level of basic intelligibility may come from the demands of particular occupations or from personal circumstances – for example, marriage. It is therefore important for teachers to

  a   find out about relevant aspects of their learners' life circumstances, and

  b   help them understand how their pronunciation is perceived and understood by others.

- **Different abilities**. Individuals do differ in how well they can accurately perceive what their

mouth is doing, and thus in their ability to learn sounds of a new language. It is important, therefore, to offer learners a variety of ways in which to practise pronunciation. While careful listening and imitation will benefit most learners, some may find visual cues useful, such as the teacher modelling the position of a sound in the mouth. Some will enjoy the challenge of learning a new pronunciation, while others will find this threatening. Pronunciation teaching therefore calls for sensitivity, patience and a sense of humour, together with faith in the learner's ability to improve, however slowly.

- **Affective factors** are also important in the learning of pronunciation as an adult. Work by Guiora and associates (Guiora, Beit-Hallami, Brannon, Dull and Scovel 1972) suggests that pronunciation may be associated with psychological traits such as 'empathy', 'intuition' and 'flexibility'. They argue that a learner who is relaxed will not only improve their pronunciation at the time of speaking, but may also show longer term improvement. According to this view, a person who wishes to change their pronunciation needs to address fundamental issues about themselves in order to unlock the flexibility to mimic aspects of pronunciation and develop an English language ego (Acton 1984: 74–75). Practitioners such as Laroy (1995) argue that pronunciation teaching cannot be divorced from the people who are speaking, but should involve the whole person, and he provides a range of activities that teachers can use to promote awareness and relaxation among learners.

Implications for the learning and teaching of pronunciation

- Adults will not necessarily be able to learn an intelligible pronunciation in English without consistent, focused support and instruction. When this is given they can make progress, although it will be slow. It is unreasonable to expect rapid change. Both students and teachers must guard against unrealistic expectations of how long it takes for improvements to be made in pronunciation, particularly in spontaneous speech. This implies that pronunciation learning must be continued outside the classroom.

- Students may not realise the extent to which people find their pronunciation difficult to understand, as they have not been sensitised to the phonetic differences between the way in which they are pronouncing English and more intelligible models. Teachers should therefore devote time to helping them to understand more about differences between their own pronunciation

and more intelligible models – that is, provide opportunities for careful listening to their own speech as well as to target models.

- Since individual learners in the AMEP differ from each other in a number of ways, there is unlikely to be a 'one size fits all approach' to pronunciation teaching. A combination of approaches will help more people more of the time. However, certain recommendations can be made for pronunciation teaching:

  – there should be plenty of focused listening and practice in class;

  – the focus on pronunciation should be integrated into other language work, and it should be ongoing;

  – it seems sensible to focus first on suprasegmental aspects of language, since this allows the teaching of pronunciation to be integrated into regular teaching of spoken discourse, and has the advantage of addressing the needs of learners from different L1 backgrounds and different needs in the same class. This does not mean neglecting individual sounds, but, rather, approaching them in context.

- A number of different approaches and activities are outlined in *AMEP Fact sheet – Pronunciation 3*.

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