

# Pronunciation – views and practices of reluctant teachers

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## ABSTRACT

Why don't some teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) teach pronunciation? There is evidence to suggest that both students and teachers see the value of intelligible pronunciation in adult second language learners. However, studies have shown that some teachers in Australian ESL contexts lack confidence in this area, and do not teach it in a systematic, planned way. Interviews with eight ESL teachers investigate why they find pronunciation a difficult or problematic area to teach, and/or why they tend to avoid teaching it.

Their reasons include the absence of pronunciation in curricula, which creates a situation where there is little incentive for these teachers to expand their skills and knowledge about pronunciation through experiment and practice, and through formal training or in-servicing. There is also a lack of suitable teaching and learning materials of a high quality, and an absence of a skills and assessment framework with which to map student ability and progress in this area. In light of these results, a number of recommendations are made that, it is hoped, will promote teacher confidence, skills and knowledge in this area.

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## Introduction

Pronunciation is a key element of the learning of oral skills in a second language, but the role it plays in English language programs for adults varies, and the amount of time and effort devoted to it seems to depend, to a large degree, on the individual teacher. This means that it may or may not form part of regular classroom activities or student self-study. However, students often cite pronunciation as being very important and a priority for them (Willing 1988). A review of Australian studies of ESL teachers' attitudes and practices in the last decade and a half revealed that pronunciation is an area which some teachers avoid or are reluctant to teach. Studies by Brown (1992), Claire (1993), Fraser (2000) and Yates (2001) suggest that teachers in adult ESL programs in Australia face some difficulties meeting the pronunciation learning needs of their students, and have indicated that many teachers tend to avoid dealing with pronunciation because they lack confidence, skills and knowledge. In addition to this, these studies found that curricula, methodology and the lack

of suitable materials, all contributed to inadequacies of the teaching and learning in this area.

This article reports on a study which explored the reasons for this reluctance, or lack in confidence, interest or skill. It was felt that a more detailed understanding of the issues involved would inform future teacher training, professional development programs and the design of materials, as well as highlight the role pronunciation should be taking within curricula. The design of the study is briefly outlined followed by presentation of some of the key issues arising from the interviews. These issues are discussed with reference to other studies. Finally some recommendations are made about ways in which the teaching of pronunciation could be encouraged and supported.

### Study design

In-depth interviews were conducted with eight ESL teachers to explore their views and practices in regard to pronunciation. These people were identified via a questionnaire which was part of the first phase of the study. This questionnaire was sent to teachers in both ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) and migrant programs around Australia, resulting in 176 responses from people in all states and territories except Tasmania. It sought information about teachers' views towards ten teaching areas, including pronunciation. From this sample, six interview participants were chosen who indicated that the amount they taught pronunciation was *not enough* to meet the needs of the students they were then teaching, and who also indicated that they *did not like teaching it*. All except one of these six people also indicated they were *not good at teaching it*. A seventh respondent was chosen who reported liking pronunciation less than most other areas and teaching it *infrequently*, while the eighth teacher who was chosen reported teaching it *infrequently* and had ranked her likes, and her skills, lower for pronunciation than for all the other areas. Further details of this first phase will not be discussed here due to space limitations.

The contexts in which the participants were teaching varied with teachers working in both migrant and ELICOS programs. Five of the eight participants had experience teaching both groups. The group consisted of seven females and one male and they were all working in different centres in three different states in Australia. Four of them had experience teaching English outside Australia, and the range of years' teaching experience varied from one year to more than 20 years. This variation was sought with the expectation that it would provide information about a wide cross-section of views, attitudes and practices that teachers hold about pronunciation. Information about the participants and their questionnaire responses are summarised in Figure 1.

Participant Number	How much do you like teaching pronunciation?	How good are you at teaching pronunciation?	How much time do you spend on pronunciation?	Is the time you spend enough to meet your students' needs?	Sector	Sex	Years teaching
1	Don't like #	Not good at *	Every day	NO	ELICOS/ MIGRANT	F	2.5
2	Don't like *	Not good at *	2 or 3 times per week	NO	ELICOS	F	14
3	Don't mind #	OK	< once per 2 weeks #	YES	MIGRANT	M	2
4	Don't like *	Not good at *	< once per 2 weeks *	Don't know	MIGRANT	F	8
5	Don't like #	Not good at *	< once per 2 weeks #	NO	MIGRANT	F	1
6	Don't like *	Not good at	< once per 2 weeks *	NO	MIGRANT	F	8
7	Don't mind *	OK *	Once per 2 weeks #	-	ELICOS	F	20+
8	Don't like *	Good at	1 or 2 times per week	NO	ELICOS	F	10

\* This 'score' for pronunciation was the lowest score of all the ten teaching areas in the questionnaire.  
 # This 'score' for pronunciation was the equal lowest score. One or more other areas were given the same score.  
 - No response given.

**Figure 1: Interview participants' details and responses**

## THE INTERVIEWS

The interviews explored in depth the reasons why these teachers reported that they *did not like*, *did not feel good at* or *did not teach* enough pronunciation, focusing on: speaking tasks; assessment of pronunciation; curricula; teachers' skills, knowledge and confidence; types of teaching and practice activities; materials; and teachers' backgrounds. The guiding questions for the interviews are given in Appendix 1.

## Results and discussion

The main issues that arose from the eight interviews were related to:

- formal curricula
- learner goals and assessment (including the teacher's role)
- teaching communicatively and in an integrated way
- teaching and learning materials.

## FORMAL CURRICULA

The teachers' comments indicated that the curricula that they were using did not encourage them to teach pronunciation.<sup>1</sup> Two interview participants working in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) felt that the *Certificates in Spoken and Written English* (CSWE) curriculum does not have a pronunciation requirement 'inbuilt' (4/30, 6/32). One said that pronunciation is easy to overlook and claimed there is not a 'big push to focus on pronunciation because you're so focused on getting through competencies' (4/32). She felt that pronunciation was not easy to 'fit' into the curriculum and because of this she found herself not liking it (4/14–16). Another teacher explained that because there are so many other things to teach, pronunciation needs to be taught 'through' these other areas. While she felt this was a real possibility, she said that her lack of training stopped her from doing this (7/160). These views reflect the comments of teachers in Claire's (1993) study who felt that pronunciation had been 'marginalised' in the CSWE.

Within the ELICOS sector generally, it is more difficult to ascertain pronunciation's role within curricula as there is not one framework which all centres must, or do, follow. The National ELT Accreditation Scheme (NEAS) sets minimum standards for accredited ELICOS centres to meet with regard to all aspects of these programs. However, these are broad criteria related to curriculum design, and are not designed to provide detailed information for use at the planning and implementation stages of a

course (NEAS 2000). Pronunciation is certainly taught within ELICOS programs, but there are a number of different approaches and priorities given to it. Some ELICOS centres develop their own curricula while others use commercially produced core texts which have a pronunciation component, and these guide teachers. An example of this is the *Headway* series, which have accompanying pronunciation texts (Bowler and Cunningham 1991).

In the current study, several ELICOS teachers spoke of a lack of ‘centre policy’ to direct their teaching in this area. One teacher said that in her centre there was ‘no real focus on ... emphasis on pronunciation’ (5/38) and she had been directed to the *Headway* pronunciation books, but these were not extensively used and, apart from these, there was nothing prescribed for the teaching of pronunciation. A second person observed that each teacher had her/his own plan, but she felt that this was not adequate and she wanted more directives about how to approach pronunciation (6/14). As a third teacher noted, guidelines for pronunciation consisted largely of worksheets on the predicted difficulties of students from different language backgrounds (7/42). Some of these were formally published materials, while others were compilations of individuals’ worksheets handed from teacher to teacher.

In short, pronunciation does not appear to have a central and integrated position within the ESL curricula of the teachers interviewed, and in many cases the objectives relating to pronunciation are mostly vague descriptions of learner goals which lack sufficient detail to be easily and consistently used by teachers.

#### **LEARNER GOALS AND ASSESSMENT**

In the current study, assessment or monitoring of student progress in pronunciation also emerged as an area of difficulty or confusion for teachers, and is clearly an impediment to their teaching of pronunciation. None of the teachers described using or having knowledge of a framework which they found helpful for the assessment or recording of students’ pronunciation. One teacher did refer to formal assessment guidelines but said that these included descriptions like ‘audible’ or ‘clearly understood’ (7/77) and these were too broad to be of much help. In the absence of a specific framework or guidelines, teachers used various (and mostly quite unspecific) criteria to assess pronunciation. For example, one person felt that dealing with things which ‘impede communication’ were high priority (3/24). Another teacher talked about the need to get through competencies (within the CSWE), which meant she overlooked pronunciation as long as they could ‘communicate’ with her. Other similar comments include: ‘I forget about

pronunciation as long as you are clear and the other party can understand, I'm happy with that' (6/94). 'As long as it's OK, we tend to ignore it ... I mean if it's not holding them back in communication, we don't fuss over it' (7/160). One person said that pronunciation that was 'a little bit unusual' was not a problem at all and she only addressed it where it caused communication difficulties (2/16).

The first issue which emerges from these comments is that students' pronunciation is only really noticed when the teacher cannot understand them; otherwise it is largely neglected. This indicates that these teachers do not view pronunciation as an integrated and fundamental element of language or language learning, but rather an add-on that is only attended to when it causes problems that cannot be ignored. Related to this is the issue of how and when teachers or programs cater for students who need or want to sound more than just intelligible. As an example of learners in this category, one teacher suggested that there was a clear need for very good pronunciation among students in employment service courses. She believed that the pronunciation of these students was affecting their ability to present well for jobs (4/88).

Furthermore, the terms 'OK, clear, able to communicate, a bit unusual, not holding them back' are linked to the notion of *intelligibility*. However, *intelligibility* tends to mean different things to different people and depends, to a certain degree, on the attitude or point of view of the listener. Even ESL teachers from the same centre can make different assessments of how *intelligible* particular students are. This may be partly due to the fact that teachers become accustomed to how their students speak and make a lot of allowances for them. As one teacher expressed it:

The thing is when you get a new class the first time, when you speak to them you never understand them. After a while you get used to, your ear gets trained to, their way of pronouncing the words and then finally you understand them, but if another teacher takes the class, it's very difficult for that person. (6/114)

What some teachers find *intelligible*, may not be acceptable or understandable speech for different listeners in different contexts. As one teacher put it, 'Out in society ... not everyone is quite as patient or understanding' (4/96).

While the goal of pronunciation teaching and learning has moved from that of native-like pronunciation (as in the audio-lingual approach), to *intelligibility* (Kenworthy 1987; Morley 1994; Celce-Murcia et al 1996), the comments of several teachers in the current study indicate that what *intelligibility* means, and how it is measured, is a 'slippery concept' (Morley 1993: 328). *Intelligibility* is complex and tangled up with different views,

personalities and experiences, but it is a concept pivotal to examination of learner goals and assessment for pronunciation. Some guidelines and practical ideas for the setting and assessment of learner goals are currently available to teachers (Kenworthy 1987; Goodwin et al 1994; Morley 1994; Celce-Murcia et al 1996), but the fact that these teachers lacked knowledge of these resources or others like them is an issue which explains, in part, why some teachers do not teach pronunciation.

### TEACHER'S ROLE

A further issue which emerged from the interviews was concerned with the uncertainty that some teachers had about their role in correcting or monitoring student speech. Several of the teachers interviewed were very reluctant to take part in any monitoring. One teacher mentioned that students at higher levels often have a greater ability to articulate how they feel about learning English. She felt that to concentrate on these students' pronunciation was 'very personal' and to ask them to change the way they speak is 'a big thing' (4/40). According to her, such an intense focus on an area which is very much part of a person's being or character was not wanted by the student, and doing so caused embarrassment or discomfort for the student concerned. She said that students were 'resistant to being taught pronunciation' and they find the focus on them personally intrusive. 'I just think that students just ... feel that they don't want to have that intensity of being told ... how to change' (4/40). This teacher reflected on her own discomfort when monitoring students and wondered whether she felt this way because her approach to teaching pronunciation was 'faulty' or that this aspect of teaching was something she had not developed or had 'overlooked' (4/34). A second teacher also felt reluctant to correct students' pronunciation because she believed that by doing so she was interrupting their flow of speech and this would inhibit them (6/68). Interestingly, one person said that if she were learning a language she would want to be corrected, but as a teacher, she did not feel she had a methodical way of doing this with her students (2/106).

These views suggest a need for professional development which highlights the necessity and importance of monitoring of students' pronunciation by teachers. This is part of the recommended 'speech coach' role of teachers, as described by Morley (1994: 88). Such training would help teachers by providing them with skills in, and knowledge about, the process, allowing them to explain confidently to their students why and how they are going to monitor them. This is likely to reduce resistance to this process which stems from the (perceived) insecurities of some learners. An example

of such teacher development is provided by Fraser (2001) who reports that teachers in her study were able to overcome their reluctance to provide feedback to students. Several of the teachers involved in this project report developing greater confidence in their role as monitors of student speech. In addition, one person comments that, 'Students, too, can learn to monitor their own speech for intelligibility inside and outside the classroom and self-correct' (Fraser 2001: 100).

### **COMMUNICATIVE APPROACHES AND INTEGRATING PRONUNCIATION**

While communicative approaches and communicative curricula are used in both AMEP and ELICOS courses, there is evidence to suggest that not all teachers are adequately equipped to address the pronunciation needs of students when working within a communicative approach (Brown 1992), and lack an understanding of how to address pronunciation in an integrated way.

The teachers who were interviewed for this study integrated pronunciation in different ways and to different extents: a session on pronunciation written into the weekly timetable; pronunciation of new vocabulary items which were presented through other work each day; and dealing with pronunciation in an incidental manner, 'as it comes up' (2/24). One teacher reported dealing with pronunciation 'informally', and said her training had not taught her how to incorporate it into the syllabus: 'If pronunciation could be taught through what else we're teaching then we would probably do more of it. And I'm sure it could be taught through what else we're doing, but, I suppose most of us are not trained along those lines' (7/160). This supports Yates' (2001) contention that there is a tendency to regard pronunciation as only needing attention when it causes problems. She describes this 'problem orientation' as part of a 'deficit model' which underlies some teachers' approach to pronunciation.

The teachers who were interviewed, and those like them, are likely to benefit from increased access to materials, ideas and curriculum support to help them teach pronunciation in an integrated and communicative manner. In addition, encouragement, and resources to develop new integrated approaches for the teaching of pronunciation, would be a valuable supplement to the mainly impromptu approach currently taken. Some resources are available which offer ways to address pronunciation within a communicative curriculum in an integrated way, and these include, among others, those by Chela-Flores (2001) and Fraser (2001). As mentioned above, the teachers involved in Fraser's project finished with considerably more confidence and ability with pronunciation than they started with. Nevertheless, it is unclear to what extent other teachers currently exploit such resources in order to



improve their knowledge, skills and overall confidence in this area, and teach pronunciation more frequently and effectively.

### TEACHING AND LEARNING MATERIALS

Brown's (1992) study of AMEP teachers' attitudes to pronunciation found there was a lack of suitable materials for the teaching of pronunciation. Although a number of new resources have become available since that study was conducted, two recent studies found that there is still a need for additional material. Fraser (2000: 19) notes that it is the lack of methods and materials for teachers that account for the 'lack of provision of oral communication skills for ESL learners', and Yates (2001), in her review of teacher pronunciation needs in the AMEP, found that there was a need for materials: 'that integrated attention to pronunciation with other teaching objectives; that provide short activities to focus on pronunciation; that focus on suprasegmentals, particularly intonation and voice quality; that deal with Australian English'. An available Australian text which focuses on suprasegmentals is one by Zawadzki (1994) entitled *In tempo*, which concentrates on word and sentence stress, giving a lot of practice in using appropriate rhythm. More recently, other material with Australian content has been published (for example, Boyer 2001). However, a survey of AMEP teachers by Yates (2001) found that the most commonly used or cited pronunciation book was *Ship or sheep* (Baker 1981), which focuses on individual sounds.

A lack of materials appropriate for learners at higher levels was also reported as being a reason for avoiding teaching pronunciation:

... once you get to level intermediate ... and above it's really hard ... for the students to understand that ... although they can speak English ... they're not actually making good pronunciation and they feel like they're too high a level to be going through things like *Ship and sheep*. (5/12)

Coordination of the use of materials at one teacher's centre was a problem, and the one 'good' pronunciation book, *Pronunciation games* (Hancock 1995), was often in high demand. Often particular exercises from this book had already been taught at an earlier level and it was not considered appropriate or possible to repeat them. This raises the question of how much repetition and practice is necessary and/or tolerable for students in this area. Teachers wanted 'hands-on' material for pronunciation. This was understood to mean practical material which could be taken straight into the classroom with minimal adaptation or preparation on the teacher's part. While several teachers said that they were familiar with a wealth of resources for other teaching areas, they felt that an equally diverse range of materials for pronunciation was not available to them, and this was preventing them from teaching in this area.

The only mention of teacher-developed material was by one person who said that she had not produced a lot of her own resources for pronunciation. This is perhaps an indication that teachers are not clear about how they might integrate aspects of pronunciation into their lessons by adapting materials, not necessarily focused on pronunciation, to include instruction or practice in this area. It appears that teachers are looking for 'off-the-shelf' materials that do not require adaptation, but are part of stand-alone or extra-curricular lessons on pronunciation, and this would seem to reflect a general attitude or approach which puts pronunciation outside the central focus of the teaching and learning.

## Recommendations

On the basis of the issues that arose from the interviews with the eight teachers, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1 Give pronunciation increased prominence within formal curricula, offering detailed guidance for teachers on teaching and learning goals and assessment; develop 'centre policies' or a 'centre culture' conducive to the teaching of pronunciation.

This involves:

**Using the curriculum to drive change.** From the interviews, it appears that unless teachers perceive a need to upgrade skills in this area, they are not likely to change what they do and how they feel about pronunciation. Their comments suggest that some of the necessary impetus for change could be best created or located at the curriculum level. Therefore, this study recommends that pronunciation be highlighted and given increased prominence within formal curricula. If this is done, then it is likely that several of the other issues which emerged from the interviews would also be addressed.

**Developing a centre culture or policy.** It was apparent that, in some centres, less explicit curriculum or syllabus guidelines are provided or followed. In situations like these, development of a 'centre policy' or centre culture of teaching pronunciation is recommended, through teacher in-service sessions and development of teaching and learning resources.

**Integrating pronunciation.** A clearly described syllabus which integrates pronunciation with the other skills, topics and activities within a course would provide clear direction on what to teach. For example, pronunciation needs to be 'built into' the CSWE curriculum and become a core component of a number of the competencies that students need to achieve to obtain a certificate.

**Setting learner goals.** It is recommended that curricula include detailed guidance for teachers on what goals they should be setting, and on the goals

they can help their students set for themselves. It is important that these learner goals cover a range of levels of achievement from goals that can be set for beginners' pronunciation, through intelligible speech, and up to advanced levels of pronunciation. While 'native-like' pronunciation is not necessarily a realistic, or a desirable aim, learners who want to have 'more than just intelligible' pronunciation, as described by one of the teachers, would benefit from the setting of higher goals to take them beyond the minimum acceptable level of 'intelligibility'. Another advantage of setting and/or offering higher goals with pronunciation, particularly at beginner levels, is that student motivation and concern for pronunciation would be encouraged from the early stages of their English learning, and continue right through to advanced levels. Doing this may also accustom students to receiving instruction about their pronunciation and overcome the problem, expressed by one of the teachers interviewed, of the perceived unwanted 'intensity' of this type of feedback.

**Devising assessment frameworks.** Hand in hand with the development of a range of learner goals should be the development of frameworks for the assessment and recording of students' pronunciation. Such frameworks need to be developed and integrated into ESL curricula, and teachers need to be given instruction on how to use these tools, and have opportunities to moderate their assessments with experts and colleagues. Existing frameworks, such as those provided by Kenworthy (1987), Morley (1993; 1994), and Fraser (2001), can provide starting points for development of sound and practical assessment tools that include agreed descriptions or benchmarks of what constitutes 'intelligible' speech. This development needs to be informed by the understanding that intelligibility depends, to a large degree, on the listener.

- 2 Redefine the teacher's role with regard to pronunciation as that of a speech coach responsible for monitoring student speech and encouraging student self-monitoring.

There is a need for training which develops among teachers an understanding of their role as a speech coach who monitors learner speech and, more importantly, provides students with ways to self-monitor, both in class, and when away from class, on an ongoing basis. As well as this, it is important for teachers to assist learners to recognise their own accomplishments. It is also important to develop confidence in teachers that focusing on students' pronunciation should not be considered intrusive or a punishment, but is, in most cases, welcomed by the students. Clear explanations of why these understandings need to be reached, and clear steps for how

teachers can adopt this special 'speech trainer role' need to be presented to teachers through planned and ongoing pre-service and in-service training.

- 3 Develop teachers' skills in integrating pronunciation, and increase their access to a range of suitable activities for teaching the various elements of pronunciation to students at all levels and from different backgrounds.

Teacher training in pronunciation is needed, both at the pre-service stage, and as part of ongoing professional development programs. This training needs to focus on ways to plan for comprehensive and integrated instruction; ways to teach pronunciation 'through' other areas; and ways to integrate pronunciation in a deliberate, planned or formal manner. A change in teacher attitudes and approach is required to eliminate the practice (described by the participants in this study) of only dealing with pronunciation when it is a problem, or in an incidental manner 'as it comes up', and otherwise ignoring it. Simply putting pronunciation on the timetable is not enough. It needs to be regarded as an integral part of any ESL program and needs to be addressed regularly and consistently.

The problem of how to incorporate into a class program new activities that are compatible with communicative approaches to language learning, was also revealed in the interviews. This could be addressed in professional development programs which help teachers explore ways to implement new ideas, confident that they can find a place for them in the curriculum.

- 4 Promote existing materials and develop new Australian materials for the teaching and learning of pronunciation, including materials for classroom use as well as those for student self-access.

It is recommended that existing materials be promoted and made available to teachers. In addition, new, ready-to-use, quality materials, particularly those which model Australian accents, need to be developed for classroom use and student self-access to suit a range of learner levels and learning styles. Finally, teachers need to be encouraged to develop their own pronunciation materials which can be both integrated with other skills, and used as 'stand alone' support. To do this, they need resources, and direction on how best this can be done.

## **Conclusion**

The in-depth interviews with this small group of teachers who were working within adult ESL programs in Australia have highlighted a number of issues which they feel prevent them from doing more in the area of pronunciation. The limitations of this study mean it is not possible to ascertain how wide-

spread these views are among other teachers. Nevertheless, the comments made by this group, and the results of some earlier research, indicate that there is a need for ongoing development in the area of pronunciation among some teachers. In light of this, recommendations have been made with a view to overcoming teacher reluctance in this area and encouraging teachers like those in this study to teach pronunciation confidently, effectively, and more often.

#### NOTE

- 1 The participants are referenced in the following way: the first number identifies the participant: the second indicates the line(s) from the transcript.

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## **Appendix I: Interview questions**

### **SPEAKING SKILLS**

Do you assess your students' speaking skills?

What and how do you assess? How do you report/note down that assessment?

What activities do you use in class for speaking?

What do you do with students whose speaking is very difficult to understand?

### **CURRICULUM**

Are there any external considerations when planning the speaking component of the course for your students or can you alone, as teacher, decide what to teach to your group of students? (What are the external considerations?)

In teaching/learning situations with prescribed curricula that you have some knowledge of, or experience in, to what extent is pronunciation a feature?

How much time within these courses/situations is devoted to pronunciation?

### **TEACHER'S ATTITUDES, FEELINGS, OPINIONS AND PRACTICES**

What emphasis do you feel should be placed on pronunciation? (How important is pronunciation?)

Do you teach pronunciation? Why? Why not?

(Do you like it? Are you interested in/confident when you teach it?)

When/If you teach pronunciation, what do you do? Which aspects do you focus on?

Some different approaches to pronunciation are listed below. Which of these do you use? Describe when, how often and why you choose each/some/ a particular method.

- Whole class tasks/activity with pronunciation as the main focus
- Whole class tasks/activity with pronunciation as component
- One-to-one situations
- Small groups of students
- Referral to a specialist teacher where available
- Other approach?

Which pronunciation materials are you aware of/familiar with?

Which do you use? Why?

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF THE TEACHERS**

How have you learnt what you know about the teaching and learning of pronunciation? Pre-service or in-service training, other non-teaching studies?

What experiences have you had as a learner/user of another language?

How have these influenced your teaching of pronunciation?