Teaching Difficult Sounds
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Blogs:  adrianpronchart.wordpress.com
demandhighelt.wordpress.com

App:  SOUND: The pronunciation app v3

Book:  Sound Foundations (Macmillan)

3 minute pron video series:
www.macmillanenglish.com/pronunciation-skills/
Webinar content

Why Pronunciation is not integrated in our teaching: 2 reasons

Two corresponding solutions

The pronunciation chart

The four proprioception buttons

Presenting and practising some difficult consonants

θ ð r l
Pronunciation is the Cinderella of language teaching – necessary, but excluded!

We teachers and our methods focus on grammar and vocabulary

And we exclude the experience of the *physicality* of the pronunciation of sounds, words and connected speech.

Thus our students receive a *dis-integrated* language to learn

Making it more difficult, less enjoyable, less memorable
Two reasons for this dis-integration

1. Pronunciation is seen as mysterious, endless. What actually does it consist of? It lacks a map of the territory.

2. Pronunciation is *cognitively* taught when it is essentially a *physical, muscular* activity, more like teaching dance.

We teachers perpetuate the problem because *we do not know what is happening in our mouths*, therefore our main form of help is either:

“Repeat after me” (which assumes that learners can repeat their way out of the grip of L1 sounds)

Or the use of cognitive, abstracted descriptions
A solution to the 1st problem:

The pronunciation chart

It provides a geographic map, a visible, kinesthetic thinking tool, a complete gestalt, an all-in-one holistic view

You need to see it all in one, since it is all needed at once. There can be no pron syllabus as you have with grammar and vocabulary
A solution to the 2nd problem:

**Physicality**

Reconnect with the muscles that make the pronunciation difference.

This begins with the teacher. The teacher must know what s/he is doing with mouth, muscle, and breath.

This is not cognitive but *physical* or *kinesthetic* knowledge.

The term I use for this is *proprioception*: the inner knowing or sensing of what the muscles are doing.
Learning proprioception

The four core muscle buttons:

1. **Tongue** (moving forward and back)

2. **Lips** (spreading and back, or rounding and forward)

3. **Jaw + tongue** (moving up and down)

4. **Voice** (on/off to make voiced or unvoiced sounds)
Teaching some difficult consonants

Vowels have no restriction to the air flow, just a shape in the mouth, made with tongue, lips and jaw.

Consonants mostly have a restriction to the air flow through the mouth, made by two surfaces that come together.

So if we find the surfaces, we can locate where the sound is made

Let’s take a few, sometimes more difficult, consonants
Using /f/ to discover /θ/

Make this sound /f/ (eg four, off)
What two surfaces do you use to make the sound?

Make /f/ again. What is your tongue doing?
Make /f/ again and as you do so, slowly put the tip of your tongue where your bottom lip is

You will have the sound /θ/ (eg thaw, fifth)
Starting with /θ/ to discover /s/ and /ʃ/

Say /θ/ (eg thaw, fifth)
Now /s/ (eg saw, toss)
Now /ʃ/ (eg sure, wash)

Do those three again, moving slowly between them
Notice how the tip of your tongue moves back a few millimetres in each case
Practise a bit until you can feel it more clearly
If you can feel your tongue moving, this is proprioception
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Starting with /ð/ to discover /z/ and /ʒ/  

This is the same as the previous activity except that all the sounds are voiced

Say these three sounds /ð/  /z/  /ʒ/ (egs this, zoo, pleasure)

And notice how you the tip of your tongue moves back a few millimetres in each case
Sliding from /ð/ to /to/3/ to discover /r/

Again slide slowly from /ð/ to /z/ to /ʒ/
Notice the tongue sliding back each time
But now.... when you get to /ʒ/ don’t stop!
Keep moving the tongue back....

It has to curl upwards and you (may) discover the /r/ (eg right)
Since the palate curves upwards the tip of the tongue finds no second surface to restrict the airflow, and in this position you find /r/
Proprioception and making new sounds from old

I have tried to demonstrate:

1. Discovering new or difficult sounds from already known or easier sounds.

2. The process of sensing or feeling what the ‘muscle buttons’ are doing. This is proprioception and you quickly develop this by trying to follow these instructions.

3. This makes you better at finding new sounds outside the L1

4. None of this can be achieved by repetition.
Making /r/ from /n/

Say /n/ (eg no) Where does the air flow out? Why?
Notice how your tongue seals the airflow so that it is forced through the nose.

Keep saying /n/ and with your attention in your tongue, release the tip from behind the teeth, and curl the tip back a little... all the time voicing...

At some point you may find... /r/

Feel that position. Take an internal ‘snapshot’ of what your tongue is doing. We have discovered /r/ by a different route
Making /l/ from /n/

Now, again say /n/

Notice how your tongue seals the airflow so that it is forced through the nose.

Keep saying /n/ and with your attention in your tongue, release just the sides of your tongue and carry on voicing...

You may find the sound /l/ (eg low)

Make the position for /l/ but suck air in.

Can you feel the cold air over the sides of your tongue?

Feel that position. Take an internal ‘snapshot’ of what your tongue is doing
Steps to practicing new sounds

Get students to experiment with any sound, ‘wrong’ or ‘right’

Anything that is not an L1 sound increases their ability to escape from the grip of L1

Ask them to listen to differences between all their class mates’ sounds

Teacher should be able to listen and enjoy all this without correcting ...

And then point out one or two students versions that are closer (with pleasure but without praise or congratulation). Try to include different students each time.

Invite others briefly to imitate selected ones, but don’t push it at all

We are trying to develop proprioception, inquiry, learning rather than just being right.
Identifying sounds in the inner ear

Say the practice sound aloud yourself, ONCE, to the class.

Do NOT invite a repetition, but a silence for a couple of seconds while they hear the sound again in their inner ear.

Then ask them Sts say it aloud.
Practising new vocabulary

Take your new vocabulary items and say one aloud, once, followed by the students’ silent inner listening.

Ask how many sounds. They count and say a number, maybe correct, maybe not. It doesn’t matter...

What matters is that this makes try to separate the sounds in their inner ear.

Then ask then to say the sounds aloud while you count each sound onto a separate finger.
Pointing out a word on the chart

Then invite a student to come to the chart, and give them a pointer.

Ask them to say the word and then point at the sound on the chart.

The student points silently, but the class says each sound s/he points at, wrong or right, so that the student can self correct.
Experiencing the physicality

Be as interested in wrong sounds as right ones

The aim is not primarily to learn symbols, but to experience the physicality of each sound in mouth
Further pronunciation teaching information

Blogs:  
adrianpronchart.wordpress.com  
demandhighelt.wordpress.com

Classroom pron charts:  
From Macmillan ELT

Demo lessons  
YouTube

3 minute video series  
www.macmillanenglish.com/pronunciation-skills/

App:  
SOUNDS: The pronunciation app v3

Book:  
Sound Foundations (Macmillan)
Thank you

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