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Developing awareness of English pronunciation

1.1 Introducing features of pronunciation

This activity introduces some key terms (vowel, consonant, consonant clusters, word stress and intonation) and gets students thinking about differences between pronunciation in English and their first language.

Focus Key pronunciation terms

Level Elementary

Time 20–30 minutes

Preparation Copy the material in Box 1 onto a handout.

Procedure

- 1 Give a copy of the handout to each student and ask them to look at the section on vowels.
- 2 Present the examples in 1. Say the words and explain that vowel sounds are underlined.
- 3 Students do the exercise in 2 and check the answers.
- 4 Give students some time to think about the question in 3. They should talk about their answers to a partner or other students in a small group. (In a multilingual class, students in each pair/group should have different first languages if possible.)
- 5 Finally, discuss the answers with the class as a whole. Highlight similarities and differences between English and the students' first languages, and check that students have understood the key term (vowel) correctly.
- 6 Repeat the procedure for each of the key terms. Note that in the section on intonation, you will need to demonstrate the tones (fall, rise, rise-fall, and fall-rise) on the words in 1 or play the recording. Then say (or play) *No* with each of the four tones. You could add a step at this point where you get students to repeat, chorally and individually, the four tones on *No* after you.

Note

Consonant clusters are dealt with in more detail in Activity 1.4.

Pronunciation Practice Activities

Box 1 Student handout

Vowels

- Examples: job give good car
- Underline the vowel sounds in these words:
 fall learn way road
- Does your language have the same vowel sounds?
 Give example words:

.....

Consonants

- Examples: my top work this
- Underline the consonant sounds in these words:
 shoe rob good leave
- Does your language have the same consonant sounds?
 Give example words:

.....

Consonant clusters

- Examples: black drop trip queen
- Underline the consonant clusters in these words:
 space play climb strong
- Does your language have the same consonant clusters?
 Give example words:

.....

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Answer key

Vowels: fall, learn, way, road

Consonants: shoe, rob, good, leave

Consonant clusters: space, play, climb, strong

Syllables: helicopter (4), some (1), trousers (2), president (3)

Word stress: banana, teacher, engineer, alone, chemistry

Intonation (as on the recording): No ↗ No ↗ No ↘ No ↘

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Box 1 continued

Syllables

- 1 Examples: bad (1 syllable) arrive (2) computer (3) supermarket (4)
- 2 How many syllables do these words have?
 helicopter some trousers president
- 3 Does your language have words with the same number of syllables?
 Give example words:

Word stress

- 1 Examples: traffic about terrible tomorrow conversation
- 2 Underline the stressed syllable in these words:
 banana teacher engineer alone chemistry
- 3 Does your language have words with the same stress pattern?
 Give example words:

Intonation



- 1 Examples: Yes ↘ Yes ↘ Yes ↗ Yes ↗
- 2 Listen and mark the same tones in the word *No*.
 No No No No
- 3 What are the words for *yes* and *no* in your language?
 Is it usual to say them with the same four tones?

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1.2 Getting you thinking: a pronunciation questionnaire

In the early stages of a course, it is useful to encourage students to think about their current English pronunciation and particular problems; how important English pronunciation is to them, and how its importance might vary in different contexts; and what their pronunciation targets are. This can help students clarify their thoughts on important questions they may not have considered before, and it can help you to know where to aim in helping students improve. This questionnaire provides the basis for a discussion. If the terms used in the questionnaire aren't familiar to students, revise or introduce them first using Activity 1.1.

Pronunciation Practice Activities

Focus	Grading pronunciation and identifying difficulties
Level	Elementary+
Time	30 minutes
Preparation	Copy the material in Box 2 onto a handout.

Box 2 Student handout

A How good is your English pronunciation?

1 Circle your answer: 1 = high, 5 = low.

- | | |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| vowels | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| consonants | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| consonant clusters (e.g. cl-, fr-) | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| word stress (e.g. aGO, FOLLOw) | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| intonation (e.g. Yes , Yes) | 1 2 3 4 5 |

2 Note any particular problems you have with English.

- vowels
- consonants
- consonant clusters (e.g. cl-, fr-)
- word stress (e.g. aGO, FOLLOw)
- intonation (e.g. ~~Yes~~, ~~Yes~~)

B How important is it for you to have good English pronunciation?

Circle your answer: 1 = high, 5 = low.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| When you talk to your fellow students? | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| When you talk to your teacher? | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| When you talk to native speakers of English? | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| When you talk to other non-native speakers in English? | 1 2 3 4 5 |

**C Who would you like to sound like when you speak English?
 Why?**

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Developing awareness of English pronunciation***Procedure**

- 1 Give a copy of the handout to each student and give them some time to complete it. (This might be best done as a homework activity.) Point out that the person they think of in C doesn't have to be a native English speaker. It could be, for example, someone who shares their first language, who they have heard speaking English.
- 2 Students report back their answers. Encourage comparison and discussion of differences. For example, students might feel they have different problems with English pronunciation, particularly in a multilingual class, or they might have different priorities, and this might become apparent when talking about the answers to question B. If students have selected both native and non-native English speakers for question C, talk about the relative difficulties of having one or the other as a 'target model'. You may also want to discuss which accents of English (again, either native or non-native speaker) they find more or less attractive and why this might be.
- 3 Keep a copy of the students' answers for your own records. You could use the information about particular problems for prioritising teaching.
- 4 Later in the course (if the course is of a reasonable length), ask students to repeat the exercise and compare their answers with those they gave earlier. Talk to them about whether and why their answers have changed.

1.3 Making vowel sounds

Focus	Position of organs of speech when making English vowel sounds
Level	Elementary+
Time	20 minutes
Preparation	Make a copy of the vowel chart ¹ in Box 3 on an OHT or large piece of paper, and also make a small copy for each student.

¹ Source: Underhill, A. (1994, pp. 10 and 15, adapted).

Pronunciation Practice Activities

Procedure

- 1 Display the chart in Box 3. Point to /i:/ and say the word *me* a few times, elongating the vowel. Explain the chart by saying that when we say this vowel the tongue is ‘high’ in the mouth, nearly touching the roof of the mouth; that the tongue is pushed towards the ‘front’ of the mouth; and the lips are spread and less forward. Ask students to say the vowel until they become aware of these three features in their own mouths. Next, point to /ɒ/ and say the word *stop* a few times, elongating the vowel. Explain that when we say this vowel the tongue is ‘low’ in the mouth; that the tongue is pulled towards the ‘back’ of the mouth; and the lips are rounded and slightly forward. Ask students to say the vowel until they become aware of these three features in their own mouths.
- 2 Write on the board a list of the remaining simple vowels, randomly ordered, and example words which include them:
 /ɪ/ sit, /ʊ/ stood, /u:/ you, /e/ pen, /ə/ ago, /ɜ:/ bird, /ɔ:/ more, /æ/ hat, /ʌ/ up, /ɑ:/ car
- 3 Students should work in pairs or small groups to try to fill in the remainder of the chart. They should say the words/vowels to each other while they are doing this. During this time you should visit the pairs/groups and say the words/vowels at the students’ request. When the pairs/groups have reached their decisions, collect answers from the class, fill in the rest of your chart, and talk about differences of opinion and difficulties. The completed chart, for your reference, is given in Box 4.

Note

If students are not familiar with phonetic symbols, use example words in the chart rather than symbols. (A full list of phonetic symbols is given in Appendix 1.)

Box 3 Student handout

FRONT

HIGH

i:

ɒ

BACK

LOW

Lips spread and less forward

Lips rounded and slightly forward

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Box 4 Teacher reference

FRONT **BACK**

HIGH

LOW

Lips spread and less forward
 Lips rounded and slightly forward

1.4 Consonant clusters: English and first-language differences

The possible consonant clusters at the beginnings of words varies from language to language. This exercise builds awareness of what is possible in English and how this may be different from what is possible in the student’s first language.

Focus Comparing consonant clusters in English and students’ first language
Level Elementary+
Time 15 minutes

Procedure

- 1 Write a list of consonant clusters (comprising two or three consonant sounds) on the board. You could write these either as letters or using phonetic symbols. These should be a random mixture of possible and impossible combinations for the beginning of English words. (See Appendix 3 for possible combinations.) For example:
possible: pl-, fr-, tr-, mu-, dw-, thr- scr-, spl- (or /pl/, /fr/, /tr/, /mj/, /dw/, /θr/, /skr/, /spl/)
impossible: tl-, mr-, vr-, thl-, gw-, pw-, nl-, spw- (or /tl/, /mr/, /vr/, /θl/, /gw/, /pw/, /nl/, /spw/)
- 2 Students work in pairs to decide whether the clusters are possible in English, and to give an example word for each, and whether they are possible in their own first language. If you have a multilingual group, you could build up a list of possible and impossible combinations in different languages.
- 3 Write on the board the example English words for each cluster found by students. Students repeat these after you. Correct where necessary.

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Extension

If you find clusters that are possible in English but not in a student's first language, it may well be that these will cause them pronunciation difficulties. Use this activity as a diagnostic exercise to identify clusters that may need attention.

1.5 Comparing slow and quick speech

Focus	Noticing differences between the way words are said at conversational speed and their citation forms (i.e. how they would be said in isolation, slowly and carefully)
Level	Elementary+
Time	25 minutes
Preparation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Record onto a cassette a short extract (15 seconds or so should be enough) of authentic conversation between native English speakers. Recording from radio or TV should give the high-quality recording needed for this activity. Alternatively, you could use the extract given on the recording. Identify short (maximum of about three seconds) sections within the extract used that are 'complete' in that they are either complete utterances or are part of a longer utterance but have a pause at the end. If possible, record these separately onto another cassette, with gaps in between. This makes it easier to play and replay. A 'gapped' extract is given on the recording.

Procedure

- In the class, play the first utterance a couple of times and ask students as a group and then individually to repeat, trying to say it in exactly the same way.
- Then ask 'What words did you say?' and write these on the board. Ask students to say how the pronunciation on the recording differs from the pronunciation of the words said slowly and carefully. The following examples are on the recording for this book:

('Did y-'
said as /dʒ/) (weak form) (weak form)
 /dʒə/ /jə/ /ət/
Did you enjoy your time at Exeter? /



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Erm. Yes, I did. Erm, because I was I was doing /
(weak form) /wəz/

on the whole subjects that I was very interested in doing /
(weak form) /ðə/ (glottal stop instead of /t/) (weak form) /ðə?/ (linking sound between 'very' and 'interested') /wəz/ /j/

and I'd made up my mind before I went /
(weak form) /ən/ (glottal stop instead of /t/) /wen?/

you know what it was I wanted to do /
(weak form) /jə/ (left out or 'unreleased') (weak form) /d/ /tə/

Extension

Repeat the activity using short sections of recordings you use for other purposes (e.g. in teaching listening or as model dialogues), to develop awareness of changes in pronunciation in connected speech.

1.6 Sounding English

	The aim of this activity is to get students thinking about how other non-native speakers pronounce English and what pronunciations students value highly. If appropriate, you could make this more explicit at the end of the activity by asking why they have chosen particular students as having 'better' English pronunciation. What is it about these students' pronunciation they particularly like?
Focus	Identifying good English pronunciation
Level	Elementary+
Time	Depends on size of class

Procedure

- 1 Organise the class into groups of five or six, and get students to stand in a line in their groups.
- 2 First demonstrate the activity with a group at the front of the class. Explain that you are going to find people with the best English pronunciation. Write on the board the letter vowels A - E - I - O - U. The student at the front of the line (S₁) should say these letters to the person behind (S₂), who then says them in reply. They should be said loudly

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enough for the other members of the group to hear. The rest of the group decides (perhaps by a vote) who has the best English pronunciation of these two students. If S₂ ‘beats’ S₁, they should move to the front of the line; otherwise, the order stays the same. S₂ is then ‘challenged’ by S₃. If S₃ beats S₂, they should move up the line and then challenge S₁. This should continue until everyone has had a chance to challenge for first position or it becomes clear that the person with the best English pronunciation in the group is in this position.

- 3 When the person with the best English pronunciation has been found in each group, they could come to the front and perform. You could take a vote among the class as a whole on which of these ‘winners’ has the best English pronunciation.
- 4 Do the same for a number of features of English pronunciation:
 - Simple vowels: give students a list of words including simple vowels and ask them to focus their attention on these. Choose four or five from: *car, sat, bed, fit, sea, lot, four, book, food, her, sun*.
 - Complex vowels (diphthongs): give students a list of words including complex vowels and ask them to focus their attention on these. Choose four or five from: *my, now, day, bear, here, go, boy, sure*.
 - Consonants: give students a list of words beginning with single consonant sounds and ask students to focus their attention on these. Choose four or five from: *but, do, fill, good, hat, yes, cat, lose, me, no, put, run, soon, talk, very, win, zoo, ship, sin, cheap, thin, then, June*.
 - Consonant clusters: give students a list of words beginning with two consonant sounds, or three consonant sounds, and ask students to focus their attention on these. Choose four or five from: (two consonant sounds) *play, pray, pure, tree, Tuesday, twist, clock, cross, cube, quick, blue, brush, drip, glass, grow, news, fly, few, view, throw, slip, sweet, spill, start, snow, huge* (note that other consonant clusters are possible); or (three consonant sounds) *split, spray, strain, scream* (note that other consonant clusters are possible).

If you know that students in your group have particular English pronunciation problems because of interference from their first language(s), make these the focus of activities. (See Appendix 2 for information about this.)