

**Mark Hancock's**

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**50**

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**Tips for Teaching  
Pronunciation**

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# Mark Hancock's 50 Tips for Teaching Pronunciation

Mark Hancock



Consultant and editor: Scott Thornbury



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Key: C = Chapter

### Text

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# Why I wrote this book

I wrote this book for teachers of English who feel the need for guidance in dealing with pronunciation. Although learners usually place pronunciation high up on their list of priorities, it is often neglected by teachers, perhaps because it seems difficult to teach. I'm hoping that this book will convince readers that pronunciation teaching need not be 'difficult', and that it can in fact be a pleasure. Could pronunciation be the part of the lesson that you and your learners look forward to most? *I think so!*

The reader I have in mind is a general English teacher, rather than a specialist. By 'specialist', I mean, for example, somebody teaching phonology on a linguistics course, or somebody who is training air-traffic controllers. By 'general English teacher', I mean somebody whose learners will need their English for general international communication, rather than some very specific professional or personal purpose.

The reader may not have a specific interest in **phonology**, beyond the basics they need in order to teach. For that reason, I have tried to keep the tips as light as possible in terms of terminology. I see no reason to put obstacles in the path of those who would seek to explore this fascinating area of language teaching. Where I *have* introduced a technical term, it is printed in bold (see 'phonology' above) and you will find a brief explanation of it in the glossary.

I imagine the reader may well be looking for practical advice on a wide range of issues, rather than in-depth analysis of one specific area. I have tried to strike a balance between 'zooming in' to focus on details, and 'zooming out' to get a wide view of the subject as a whole. I think this balance of detail and big picture is important, so that we don't focus exclusively on one thing and neglect the rest.

I wrote this book in the form of fifty standalone tips. You may choose to go through them in sequence from beginning to end, or simply to dip in to the topic that is of interest at any given moment. Each tip has references to useful teaching resources and further reading on the aspect of pronunciation focused on in the tip. The order of the content is not

random. The tips are grouped into three sections A–C, and I would like to explain the rationale behind this.

I think that pronunciation teachers need to answer three big questions before going into the classroom: why, what and how. ‘Why’ refers to the reason your learners need to develop their pronunciation – their purpose. ‘What’ refers to the content that you are teaching them – the phonology. ‘How’ refers to the materials and techniques that you use to teach it – the pedagogy. I think each of these questions is equally important and for a balanced approach, we need to consider all three. Think of a table with three legs: if you remove one, the table falls over! The three sections of this book correspond to the three questions: A. Goals and models; B. What to teach; C. How to teach it.

For readers wishing to go into more detail about any of the three questions, I would suggest the following books, in addition to the ones that are referenced in some of the tips:

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#### Why (purpose)

Jenkins, J. (2000) *The Phonology of English as an International Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Levis, J. (2018) *Intelligibility, Oral Communication, and the Teaching of Pronunciation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walker, R. (2010) *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

#### What (phonology)

Catford, J. C. (2001) *A Practical Introduction to Phonetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cruttenden, A. (2014) *Gimson’s Pronunciation of English*. Oxford: Routledge.

Roach, P. (2000) *English Phonetics and Phonology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

#### How (pedagogy)

Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. M. and Goodwin, J. M. (2010) *Teaching Pronunciation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Derwing, T. M. and Munro, M. J. (2015) *Pronunciation Fundamentals*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Underhill, A. (2005) *Sound Foundations*. Oxford: Macmillan.

And for actual teaching materials, there are the books below:

Gilbert, J. B. (2012) *Clear Speech*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hancock, M. (2017) *English Pronunciation in Use Intermediate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hewings, M. (2017) *English Pronunciation in Use Advanced*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marks, J. (2017) *English Pronunciation in Use Elementary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

# A: Goals and models

The tips in this section are concerned with the purposes of pronunciation teaching. Here, we deal with such issues as accent and intelligibility, learner motivation and English as a Lingua Franca.

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## Keep your eye on the goal

- 1 Focus on intelligibility
- 2 Be coherent about outcomes
- 3 Don't obsess about target models

## Focus on the learners

- 4 Discuss the class objectives
- 5 Find out what motivates learners
- 6 Find out about your learners' L1
- 7 Be aware of factors that can affect the learners' pronunciation

## Focus on the context

- 8 Raise awareness of English as a Lingua Franca
- 9 Identify priorities
- 10 Focus on accommodation skills
- 11 Identify any special purposes

## Focus on the teacher

- 12 Don't worry that your accent is non-standard
  - 13 Be aware of your own accent
-

# 1

## Focus on intelligibility

Teaching pronunciation is about helping your learners to become more intelligible in the target language. It's important to regularly check that what you are doing in class contributes to this basic objective.

In many languages, there are **accents** which are thought to be elegant and others which are felt to be ugly. Speakers with an elegant accent are perceived to be better educated and more intelligent than speakers with an ugly accent. Consequently, to improve their prospects in life, speakers may attempt to 'improve' their accent through **elocution** lessons. I write 'improve' in quotes, because this evaluation is based on prejudice rather than any intrinsic superiority of the prestige accent.

I am often surprised by how many teachers and learners seem to think pronunciation classes are essentially the same thing as elocution lessons – helping the learner to acquire a 'better' accent (again, I put quotes around the evaluative word). To me, the purpose of learning a language is to communicate – to understand and be understood. In this context, pronunciation is less about sounding good and more about being intelligible.

I feel this insight is so fundamental that it deserves to be the first tip in this book: when you are teaching pronunciation, always check that in the end, you are focusing on intelligibility. Whether you are presenting a pronunciation point or giving a learner feedback on their pronunciation, always keep this question in mind: *Why am I doing this?* Your answer may be one of these:

- This will help my learner to be more clearly understood.
- This will help my learner to understand other speakers more easily.

In this case, you know you are on the right path because there is a good reason for doing what you are doing; you aren't simply teaching a pronunciation point because it exists.

If you teach in a context where the classes come from mixed linguistic backgrounds, it is relatively easy to tell what is intelligible and what is not. A Japanese learner, for example, may misunderstand a Mexican classmate because of a certain vowel sound. A German learner may misunderstand a Vietnamese classmate because of a stress pattern. The problems stand out, not only to the teacher, but also to the learners themselves.

However, intelligibility is less easy to judge in a context where most of the class have the same language background. In this context, the learners will tend to settle on a form of pronunciation which is intelligible amongst themselves but may be unintelligible to outsiders. The problem can be compounded when the teacher also shares the same language background, or has spent so long with learners from that language background that he or she no longer notices the local idiosyncrasies.

If you work in a context where your learners share the same L1, it is a good idea to regularly refresh your memory about which localised pronunciation features are non-problematic and which ones are likely to lead to misunderstandings. If you share the same L1 as your learners, you will be in a good position to do this because you will be able to reflect on the communication problems you had when you were learning the **target language** yourself.

Intelligibility isn't such a simple concept as it seems at first sight, and you will probably need to revisit and refine your intuitions about what is intelligible during your teaching career. Keep in mind, too, that intelligibility is not just a question of language – it is *people* who are intelligible, not accents. Making yourself understood is not just a matter of your pronunciation – you also need to be flexible in interaction.

However, keeping the fundamental goal of intelligibility in mind whenever you teach pronunciation is a good place to start.

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Levis, J. (2018) *Intelligibility, Oral Communication, and the Teaching of Pronunciation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**If our aim is intelligibility, then success is when the learners have achieved intelligible pronunciation. To be intelligible, it is not necessary to sound like a native.**

While almost everyone learns to pronounce their first language (L1) ‘perfectly’, the same is not true for their second language (L2). Here, the outcome is strongly dependent on the age that a person starts learning the L2: the older the learner, the less likely they are to acquire a ‘native-like’ **accent**. Once passed the age of puberty, very few will do so. This observation appears at first glance to offer little ground for optimism as regards pronunciation teaching and learning. However, I would argue that any such pessimism is misplaced.

The clues lie in the words I placed in quotation marks above: ‘perfectly’ and ‘native-like’. They imply that the goal of pronunciation learning is to acquire a specific accent and any other accent would be less than perfect. However, what if this is not the goal? What if the goal is not to acquire a certain accent, but rather to become a clearly intelligible L2 speaker? It is perfectly possible for a learner to achieve this outcome *without* sounding like a native. Of all of the possible accents of English, there is no evidence that the native ones are necessarily more intelligible globally.

Given the goal of pronunciation learning is intelligibility, we need to be coherent about outcomes. If we agree that the desired outcome is intelligibility, we should not then judge our learners’ success in terms of how ‘native-like’ their pronunciation is. Instead, it should be judged in terms of how effective it is: is the learner able to make himself or herself understood? The presence of a noticeable L1-influenced accent need not be a handicap in this regard.

I should clarify that up to now, I have been talking about teaching pronunciation to non-specialist learners. We must bear in mind that there may be learners who need English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and

in some cases, this may have implications for pronunciation goals. For example, you may be teaching a class of learners who are preparing for a professional role that requires them to acquire a specific native accent, or something as close to that as possible. This may be the case for would-be call centre staff, for example (see Tip 11). We could describe our endeavour in such circumstances as teaching ‘Pronunciation for Specific Purposes’ or perhaps ‘accent training’, and in this realm, the criteria for success would be entirely different. However, this book is not about accent training.

We must also bear in mind that our learners may themselves not be clear about their desired outcomes. Naturally enough, most of them will not have been trained in applied linguistics, and their view may reflect what is taken to be common sense to society at large. If you ask the average person in the street, they may say it’s obvious that the objective of learning to speak, say, Italian is ‘to sound like an Italian’. It would take a bit more focused thought to refine that objective to something like ‘to make myself understood in Italian’. As pronunciation teachers, we may need to devote some class time to negotiating and refining objectives in this way.

One simple tip in this regard would be: present L1-appropriate potential role-models. For example, for a Thai learner of English, a role-model could be a well-known Thai person who speaks English in a way which is widely intelligible, rather than, say, a British or American celebrity. You could play a selection of short videos of local celebrities speaking English to initiate a discussion about pronunciation goals.

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Derwing, T. M. and Munro, M. J. (2015) *Pronunciation Fundamentals*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.



The choice of target model is probably not as important as people sometimes believe. Intelligibility does not depend on the learners sounding exactly like any specific model. In any case, as the teacher, the main model is you!

Let's say a footballer aims for the centre of the net but the ball goes into the corner of it instead. Is this a success or a failure? A success, surely – a goal is a goal, after all. Similarly, in pronunciation learning, I think the goal is much wider than the specific point you may be aiming at. For instance, you may aim at a standard British or American English, but succeed in producing perfectly intelligible English that *isn't* obviously British or American. Congratulations – you've scored!

I mentioned British and American as targets because these are perhaps the models we see most widely offered. There may of course be others, such as Australian or Scottish, but in my view we needn't make a big issue about the choice of target. All of them are well between the posts of the same goal, and in the end, the learner will probably hit the back of the net in a slightly different spot anyway, typically by producing a version of English which is L1-flavoured.

At this point, it may be worth making a distinction between a reference model and an attainment standard. To return to the football metaphor, the reference model is the precise point the learner aims at. The attainment standard is the entire goal, and the learner may happily settle for any shot which results in the ball going in. I suspect that the reference model is sometimes mistaken for an attainment standard, such that any deviation from it is seen as 'incorrect'. The consequences of this seem absurd. Let me explain.

Reference models of English pronunciation are what we typically find in dictionaries and other published material. For British English, for example, the reference model may be what is known as Received

Pronunciation (**RP**), while for American it may be General American (**GA**). I personally speak a version of British English which differs in some respects from RP. If we took the reference model to be an arbiter of correctness, I would have to confess to being in error, as indeed would the majority of British speakers. Can this be right?

As the title of this tip suggests, I think some people may obsess unnecessarily about which target model to choose. In some cases, it may be an obsession which is fuelled by commercial interests: schools may offer learners a specific **accent** such as ‘British English’ in the belief that this is a selling point. Learners see ‘British English’ being offered by a number of schools and conclude that it must be desirable. In this way, the advert creates a demand for the thing it is advertising.

However, offering learners a choice of target accents as if they were outfits in a clothing store seems unrealistic in the extreme. To begin with, as I have said, the learner is unlikely to come out speaking with exactly the accent selected. Then there is the teacher’s accent. Few teachers can just change their accents at will, according to the stated preference of the learner. Realistically, teachers will teach in their own accent, whatever that may be.

We could sum up the situation as follows. The learners in your class are subjected to a variety of influences:

- you, the teacher, with whatever accent you have
- the reference models presented in the various materials you use
- the various forms of English that the learner is exposed to outside the classroom
- the learner’s own background – especially their L1 (see Tip 6)
- last but not least, the learner’s own interests and motives – celebrities who they would like to sound like, for example.

With all of these things going on, do we really need to obsess about target models?

Learners sometimes have unrealistic ideas about the aims of working on their pronunciation. You may need to spend some class time talking about accents and the idea of ‘correctness’.

Of all possible shades of blue, which one is the bluest? It’s strangely tempting to think that this question makes sense. Many of us might feel we could, if necessary, select the bluest blue from a number of samples. There may even be a degree of consensus between us. However, the question is essentially subjective.

A similar question could be asked of **accents** – which one is the purest, or most correct? I’ve been told, for example, that the purest accent of Spanish is to be heard in the city of Valladolid. Other people have told me that it’s in Burgos. Learners who believe that there is such a thing as a purest accent may assume that there must be one for English too, and without question, this is the one they should master. In the realm of British English, for example, I’ve heard mention of ‘Oxford English’, or ‘the Queen’s English’. Clearly, unless you share this view of pronunciation, there may be a need to negotiate the class objectives with such learners.

There is no doubt that as regards teaching pronunciation, English is a special case amongst languages, in that it is probably the most international language. The majority of learners globally are likely to use it as a Lingua Franca (ELF), often with other non-native speakers. You may find that this fact is worth pointing out to your class. You may even feel the need to go into the issue in greater depth. The book referenced at the end of this tip has 14 different lesson plans for discussing issues relating to ELF with learners, so clearly the authors perceive a need (see Tip 8).

I would say that at the very least, you need to make sure your learners appreciate the following three points:

- 1 No matter how ‘standard’ your own accent is, you cannot guarantee that the people you speak with will also have that accent. Even

if you travel to a country where English is spoken as a native language, you will hear a wide range of accents, both native and non-native. You therefore need to be able to deal with ‘non-standard’ pronunciation receptively at least.

- 2 Even if you speak with a ‘standard’ accent, you cannot guarantee that the people you speak with will understand you easily – ‘standard’ accents are not necessarily more intelligible than other accents, globally. You may therefore need to modify the way you speak in order to make yourself understood even if you speak the standard accent perfectly.
- 3 Although you may choose a ‘standard’ accent as a target to aim for, you should bear in mind that not many learners actually hit that precise target. Most learners end up speaking with an accent which is recognisably different from the ‘standard’ one. However, this is not necessarily a problem for intelligibility.

None of the points mentioned above should prevent your learners from striving for a ‘standard’ accent if they feel so inclined, or if they feel it would benefit them in their future circumstances. If they insist that this is their goal, you can take account of it in the way you provide feedback to them on their pronunciation.

Finally, you may of course find that you need to encourage learners in the other direction: there are some who feel that pronunciation doesn’t matter and that ‘anything goes’. Such learners may benefit from feedback such as the following:

- ‘If you pronounce it that way, you are almost certainly going to be misunderstood. I strongly advise you to work on this.’
- ‘I understand you if you pronounce it that way, but you may find some people don’t. If the person you’re speaking to clearly doesn’t understand, you may have to pronounce it differently.’
- ‘Many people, including native speakers, pronounce it the way you do. However, it is not “standard”, and you might find that some people disapprove of it. You should probably avoid it, especially in formal contexts.’

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Kiczkowiak, M. and Lowe, R. J. (2018) *Teaching English as a Lingua Franca*. Peaslake: Delta Publishing.