

Seven “Secrets” to Improving Pronunciation

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Abstract

The importance of incorporating pronunciation in the ESL¹ curriculum is highly underrated. Teachers tend to shy away from pronunciation activities. On the one hand, for most teachers, it is a matter of time management and curriculum requirements that force pronunciation to be pushed back or pushed out of the ESL classroom experience. For others, it is the belief that pronunciation must be taught in a formal, time-consuming manner that tests their abilities and skills. On the other hand, students need pronunciation instruction and welcome the opportunity to work on theirs. From my experience, ESL students look forward to the opportunity to improve their pronunciation to converse better with native speakers and teachers in the academic setting. Most students would welcome 3-5-minute mini-lessons that could help them communicate more effectively. Therefore, the knowledge that students want and need pronunciation practice should be a catalyst to inspire teachers to begin to find ways to incorporate

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- 1 In North American high schools, colleges, and universities the broadly accepted term English as second language (ESL) is an all-inclusive term used to describe many forms of American English instruction. ESL encompasses other common terminology such as English as a foreign language (EFL); English for speakers of other languages (ESOL); English as an additional language (EAL); and the recently adopted English as a new language (ENL), accepted mainly in American High Schools. In addition, the term Intensive English Program (IEP) is mainly used in colleges and universities where the goal is to offer a condensed, accelerated program of study that allows diligent, academic-driven students to begin taking college courses for credit sooner. The term *IEP* is most closely associated with the term *English for academic purposes* (EAP), used in many colleges and universities outside North America. Considering the variety of preferences that educational institutions at different levels may have, this paper addresses instructors at all levels of teaching English to non-native speakers, focusing mainly on those teaching in college or universities. More specifically, this paper refers to any study of American English as ESL, when the goal is to improve communication skills and/or to further education.

pronunciation instruction time in their classes. The good news is that teachers do not have to devote hours teaching pronunciation, but, just by allotting a few minutes a day to pronunciation activities, they can give ESL students the tools and resources needed to make continued progress on their own. This paper will uncover seven so-called “secrets” educated speakers of English internally understand and can pass on to their ESL students. It also illustrates pronunciation teaching techniques that can be covered quickly without sacrificing vital classroom time.

1. The Dilemma

The discussion surrounding the teaching of pronunciation has certainly been lively over the past few decades, and a collective affirmation for a more visible presence of pronunciation in the ESL classroom has been gaining continuous momentum and ground. There seems to be no shortage of research and literature on the subject. Grammarians and other scholars have contributed copious amounts of books, papers, and resourceful online materials, underscoring the importance of teaching pronunciation. Furthermore, many teachers at schools, colleges, and universities agree that pronunciation needs a more prominent status across the curriculum. Fraser (1999) states that “the pendulum has swung back again, and more ESL teachers now agree that explicit pronunciation teaching is an essential part of language courses” (para. 1). The fact that teaching pronunciation has become more of a topic of discussion in ESL research and literature highlights the need for more pronunciation instruction.

Current thinking in research supports Fraser’s understanding of the importance of pronunciation. In an article focused on adult learners, Schaetzel and Low (2009) claim that “recent research has shed light on pronunciation features to be taught and on learner’s goals and motivations for improving pronunciation. By incorporating current research and its implications into their teaching practice, teachers can help learners gain skills they need for effective communication in English” (para. 1). All ESL teachers’ involvement in teaching pronunciation is perceived by some ESL scholars as part of the solution to the overall lack of pronunciation instruction.

ESL teachers must see beyond grades and tests in grammar and writing so as to see that students must be able to communicate effectively. Such communication goes beyond the classroom or campus. American students want to be understood at work, while running errands (shopping, banking, etc.), and dealing with social services, or medical emergencies. Furthermore, many students are called upon to be translators for their parents and must communicate effectively with nurses and doctors. So, correct pronunciation also has its benefits in practical ways that are important for our students outside of academia.

Consequently, with all this justification for increasing pronunciation activities in our ESL curriculum, how is it that pronunciation has yet to receive the consideration and attention that it deserves? True, there are teachers making an earnest effort to include pronunciation in their curricula, and many schools and universities even have separate pronunciation classes. It is encouraging to see that pronunciation is being given some level of consideration in curricula. Nonetheless, there still seems to be a sizeable schism between what is perceived to be the crucial role of pronunciation and how that perception is transferred into practical classroom lessons that teachers can easily offer students. In short, we have enough literature on the matter, but we do not have enough well-established pronunciation classes or lessons with teacher-student-friendly materials. How do we bridge the gap between the recognized benefit of pronunciation instruction and the actual implementation of it in the classroom? How can we break through the noteworthy plethora of literature to equip teachers with genuine pronunciation skills that they feel comfortable with and students find beneficial?

Students need assistance from their teachers in honing their pronunciation skills. Not understanding and not being understood can create an accumulation of frustrating and embarrassing experiences that often weaken a students' determination and drive to improve their English pronunciation. Sometimes students are already aware that their pronunciation leaves much to be desired. These discouraging thoughts can further negatively affect their communication skills. Gilakjani (2012) states “we judge people by the way they speak,

and so learners with poor pronunciation may be judged as incompetent, uneducated or lacking in knowledge” (p. 96).

Many students come to my class with the attitude that they simply cannot improve or change the way they speak. They have fallen into a pronunciation rut. Students must understand that the goal is not to speak perfectly, but to improve their overall mutual intelligibility. Once teachers focus more on the needs of the students, they will overcome any concerns or fears that they have about broaching the subject of pronunciation. A handbook for teachers and trainers by the Commonwealth Department of Education (2001) sheds light on the issue when it states:

One of the main problems found by this report is lack of confidence among teachers as to how to teach pronunciation, stemming from their own lack of training in this area. Yet many teachers really wish to be able to help learners with this crucial aspect of language. (p. 5)

So, the goal of this paper is not only to advocate for pronunciation to be taught in classes, but also to give support to teachers who are doing so and help build confidence for those teachers that want to, but simply do not know how or where to start.

1.1 The Challenge

While languages are not 100% phonetic, most languages do have a relatively close relationship between letters and sounds. This means that once you learn the alphabet, you are able to read the words of the language, even if you cannot understand them. Again, this is because what you see is what you read. On the contrary, the spoken and written forms of English are strikingly different. The English spelling system does not accurately reflect the spoken language. One of the reasons why pronunciation needs to be a part of English language instruction is that English orthography and English phonology are worlds apart. As educated speakers, we understand this fact and have consciously (through any formal learning we had in grade school) or subconsciously (through any spelling conventions or rules we have internalized) developed an

understanding in various degrees of the two forms of representing English. Tapping into this natural resource and making students aware of our thought-process and insights into English has been a substantial catalyst for the “secrets” in this paper. The purpose of this paper is to give students what we naturally know, supplying them with what they need to start taking more responsibility for their role in mastering pronunciation. McCrocklin (2013) highlights this point when she acknowledges that “students need strategies, skills, and tools that empower them to experiment with pronunciation, without relying on the teacher for constant monitoring and feedback, tools that will help students become more autonomous as pronunciation learners” (p. 18).

To sound more native-like when speaking, students eventually must comprehend at some point in their acquisition of English that there are really two independent forms of English they are learning. Without this fundamental awareness, their pronunciation will continue to be falsely misguided by the spelling conventions of English. In speaking about the spoken and written forms of English, Vacek (1973) states that “any language user belonging to a cultured language community should have an equally good command of both norms of the language concerned, because only then will he [*sic*] be able to exploit the systemic possibilities of the language to the full” (p. 16).

Even armed with a recognition of this reality, the teaching of pronunciation tends to sit on the back burner in an ESL curriculum. It is rarely a focus and often totally neglected. I believe that pronunciation needs to reach the same level of attention as reading and grammar do. Only then will it be constantly on the radar of teachers and students alike. Pronunciation affects all areas of ESL students’ academic lives. Students must learn to speak well when put into groups or pair work, and they must have correct pronunciation when they go to the registrar, library, advising, and other college services if they want to be understood. Students are often required to give class speeches or presentations in academic classes at North American colleges and universities. Many ESL students come to me for help on pronouncing words that they need in their presentations. They also confess that teachers and other students do not always understand them when they speak. Given all of the scenarios where

and ESL student's pronunciation is key to understanding and communicating well, it is amazing that more pronunciation courses are not taught. If students are to reap the full benefits of communication in all their courses and academic life, then pronunciation must become a visible and active part of the ESL curriculum.

Incorporating elements of pronunciation in the ESL classroom has never been an issue of extreme debate. As stated earlier, teachers and students both see the value of having pronunciation practice at some point in the ESL curriculum. The issue has never been about whether to teach pronunciation or not. Most teachers could clock unlimited and untold hours they have contributed to helping students with their pronunciation. The real issue has been and continues to be deciding when and how to teach pronunciation. For most teachers, it is a matter of time management and curriculum requirements that force pronunciation to be placed on low priority or removed entirely from the ESL classroom experience. More accurately, many teachers are hoping that somehow, someday students are getting the help they need with their pronunciation.

1.2 Too Little, Too Late

When pronunciation is taught formally, it is often reduced to a one-semester class, where the teacher is expected to address all the difficulties students have been having with pronunciation. I teach a pronunciation course (Pronunciation Course SL120) at my community college. I enjoy teaching this class and seeing how students focus and make serious effort to improve their pronunciation. However, the first mistake is that this course is offered to students after they have completed the ESL program, and just before students begin taking academic classes for credit. The second mistake is that it is optional, undermining the purpose for the course, which is to ensure that our students improve their pronunciation as they move into regular academic classes at Mohawk Valley Community College or transfer to a four-year college. It is also designed to help those who are or will be employed and need help communicating with their managers and co-workers. The unfortunate fact is that

many students fall through the cracks and end up missing out on the opportunity. Also, some international students, who would not necessarily benefit from taking ESL classes, are still in dire need of improving their pronunciation. Offering more ESL courses earlier in pronunciation and making it a requirement would prove to be extremely beneficial for all ESL students in the long run.

While the goals of our Pronunciation Class are admirable, the execution is ill-timed. I often must break through many fossilized inaccuracies and trivial blunders the students have unknowingly adopted over the last four semesters. For example, students mispronounce words with the American *r* in them, such as *work*, *bird*, *heard*, and *church*. They tend to pronounce the vowel sound before the American [r], making four distinct vowel sound combinations with the American [r]. They are quite shocked when they learn that the vowel and [r] combination in these words is pronounced the same. As I teach correct pronunciation, I must also weed out erroneous paradigms, shatter genuine misperceptions, and destroy deep-rooted habits. For example, many students pronounce the *ed* sound in all past tense verbs. So, while saying *wanted* and *needed* with two syllables is correct because the root ending of the verbs are [t] and [d], this rule does not apply to verbs whose roots end with something other than [t] or [d]. Students say things like, "I talked to him," where the word *talked* is said with two syllables, instead of one. Another example is the *schwa* sound, which sounds like [uh] in the second syllable of the word *soda*. Most students do not understand that unstressed vowels in American English are reduced to the schwa. The word *tomato* in most American English vernacular sounds like *tuh MAY tuh*. There are three syllables with the stress on the second syllable, *may*. These are minor vocal infractions that could have been addressed semesters ago, but now have become a part of the students' everyday speech habits that are hard to break.

My colleagues often inquire if I am working on the students' pronunciation of the past tense or covering any number of phonemes that students are mispronouncing in their classes. I sincerely welcome the suggestions and advice from my colleagues. However, for all the challenging work that I do in my pronun-

ciation classes, my class is not a panacea for all the ESL pronunciation problems. Although I accept the challenge to improve students' pronunciation in 16 weeks, it is not enough time to make even the slightest dent in their actual pronunciation because the students come to me too late. I do think they walk away with a more conscious awareness of American English pronunciation. Nevertheless, from what I hear in the hallways, and before and after classes have started, my eleventh-hour assistance has had little effect on most students' day-to-day speaking practices.

Then there are those conscientious students who ask me why there was no offer to help them improve their pronunciation semesters earlier. I understand their frustration. It does make me wonder: Would there be one grammar class to deal with all the issues that students are having with grammar? Would one reading class be offered to cover all the issues that students have with their reading? Like grammar and reading, teaching pronunciation must be taught in a multi-level, cross-curriculum manner. Perhaps not as complex as English grammar, but pronunciation covers a wide-range of segmental and supra-segmental features from phonemes, to words, to linking, to word and sentence stress, to intonation. With all the intricate aspects of pronunciation, I believe it would be more effective to teach pronunciation as we do grammar, teaching it based on levels from basic to advanced. Perhaps formal instruction of pronunciation with several levels would be more helpful for students and easier for teachers. This leads to the question of when and how pronunciation could be taught.

1.3 Hope on the Horizon

The reality is that teaching pronunciation need not be a daunting, dreaded task. Teachers can learn how to present pronunciation in a practical way that will not overtax students' abilities. The specific information needed to teach pronunciation effectively can start out minimally and gradually increase as the teacher gains more knowledge and confidence. Students really need very little instruction to make progress in improving their pronunciation. Teachers can unhurriedly train themselves on the basic concepts of pronunciation and slowly introduce them to their students as needed. The focus would not be to

become an expert, but to be able to see a student’s needs and address them in a timely and beneficial way. There are manuals, books, handbooks (Commonwealth Department of Education, 2001), and articles online and in print to equip teachers with necessary tools to teach a pronunciation lesson. (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996). Teachers can quickly cover relevant issues in pronunciation without sacrificing classroom time.

Teachers across the ESL curriculum must make pronunciation important and transmit this importance to their students. This paper encourages teachers to seek practical ways to enhance the language experience and their lesson plans with time for pronunciation activities. As Pesce (2017) has noted, “effective communication is a two-way street. ESL students must understand others when they speak English. But they must also make themselves understood. For ESL students who struggle with pronunciation, this is easier said than done. Which is why it is essential for you as an ESL teacher to include pronunciation practice in the course syllabus, and not merely correct pronunciation mistakes on the fly.”

We know that first impressions can be indelible. We have all been judged at one time or another according to the way we talk and pronounce words, especially in an academic setting. Consequently, our ESL students must see that improving pronunciation undeniably helps them to communicate more effectively. What do we know subconsciously that we can pass on to our students to help them in this endeavor? In this paper, I am offering seven effective and productive methods of improving a student’s overall pronunciation that I have personally implemented over the past few years with some success. Some of these methods are recycled concepts with a fresh perspective and twist. Indeed, teaching pronunciation really can be stress-free when the focus is creating exercises that are manageable and entertaining. Teaching pronunciation can be simple, practical, effective, and enjoyable!

2. Secret One: Raise the Ability to Make Accurate Predictions with the International Phonetic Alphabet

Secret One involves raising a student's ability to make accurate predictions by increasing extrapolative skills. The ability to infer, conject, and guess in L2 acquisition is fundamental in increasing language proficiency. It helps L2 learners to relate to language more like native speakers. Native speakers have a naturally high level of predicting the spelling of a word when they hear it and the pronunciation of a word when they see it. This is so because we have spent years learning how to spell, read, write, and speak English. Much of this ability comes from coding and decoding segments of sound and spelling that have become a part of our subconscious knowledge of how our language works. Vacek (1973) asked and answered the following question about consciousness:

How do we classify some orthographic systems as easy or difficult? This question may be somewhat clarified if we recall what was said above of the coexistence of the two norms, spoken and written, in the consciousness of every member of a given language community who, as we put it, must be able, if need be, to switch over from the one norm to the other. (p. 52)

The challenge is to get our students to be more aware of their pronunciation by telling them what we ourselves have learned about English pronunciation.

Tapping into and sharing this invaluable storehouse of knowledge will be of profound assistance to ESL students as they continue to develop their phonemic awareness as L2 learners—the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate phonemes. Students need to improve their ability to accurately guess the pronunciation and spelling of new words they encounter. Predictive skills are an essential part of language learning, but to cultivate predictive skills students must make use of the available building blocks intrinsic in the language. Students must learn to see the connected relationships that exist within the language. Chard, Pikulski, and Templeton (2000) state that:

In order to understand that there is an orderly relationship, learners must be aware of sounds, or phonemes, of the spoken form of the language (phonemic awareness),

and they must become very familiar with the letters of the alphabet (orthographic familiarity). (p. 1)

In time students can learn to predict sounds, a skill that they also need in other areas of study. Avery and Ehrlich (1992) make the point that:

Listeners as well as speakers need to be shown how guessing plays a role in understanding. Prediction is as central to spoken contexts as it is to reading. As in reading, incorrect predictions are a normal part of the process of sorting out meaning. (p. 234)

In addition, Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996) refer to the teacher’s role in teaching pronunciation stating:

It is important for ESL teachers to understand the correspondences between English phonology and English orthography so they can teach their learners (1) how to predict pronunciation of a word given its spelling and (2) how to come up with a plausible spelling for a word given its pronunciation. (p. 269)

Raising the ability to make accurate predictions about what a word or stretch of speech sound like is a common objective of all teachers. If this objective is clear, then it will influence the way we talk about pronunciation and the way we incorporate it in all our classes. There might be some obstacles that need to be overcome, but we need to start somewhere. Like the mouse with a huge block of cheese in front of it, we must encourage our students to just start nibbling. Furthermore, rather than viewing the task of teaching pronunciation as daunting and overwhelming, teachers just need to start teaching it no matter how competent we feel. To that end, teachers need a reliable tool that would allow them to start talking about pronunciation. What could assist teachers in raising students’ ability to make predictions when it comes to pronunciation? What would help students to be exposed quickly to the details of English sounds that could help them focus entirely on pronunciation? The answer lies in the International Phonetic Alphabet.

2.1 A Little Help from the IPA

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is like a phonics crash course for our ESL students. It can be a visual bridge between the written and the spoken forms. Learning IPA helps students to hear and see how the words are pronounced. IPA is a tool that gives students the ability to *catch up* and quickly raise their ability to make predictions. It removes the heartache of using spelling to help with sound and focuses on a sound system designed to help with distinguishing and reading these sounds. IPA also helps to distinguish spelling and pronunciation because it offers a visual insight into English. It allows students to isolate sounds, understand them individually, and manipulate them.

Atkielski (2005) uses a pertinent analogy when he says that “the relationship between phonetic transcription and spoken language is very similar to that between a printed musical score and a musical performance” (para. 2). When someone is learning to sing, the musical notes provide an excellent tool to assist the learner in *seeing* the key and key changes, notes and note-lengths, pace, loudness, and chords, all of which improves the overall singing. IPA provides similar cues that help the student to see the smaller segments of words and focus on them to improve their overall pronunciation. Verner (2017) highlights this point when she states:

I am a firm believer that every ESL student should know the phonetic alphabet. Rather than depending on spelling, it is used to transcribe the exact sounds in English words. Students who know the phonetic alphabet and whose teachers use it get additional input when they are learning the correct pronunciation of words. They not only hear the correct pronunciation, but they see it, too. Phonetic transcriptions show students, even those who are struggling to hear the correct pronunciation, exactly how an English word is supposed to sound.

Celce-Murcia (1996) adds:

In most language classrooms, it is not essential that the students be able to transcribe words themselves; however, the ability to read phonemic transcriptions will

enable the student to comprehend the elements of pronunciation visually as well as aurally. (p. 40)

Even when students make errors as they use the IPA system, it allows them to compare their mistakes with the correct pronunciation in bitesize portions that are visible and easy to discern. In addition, IPA helps students to see the differences in spelling and sound in homophones *won* [wʌn] and *one* [wʌn]; homographs: *read* [rid] and *read* [red]; stressed and reduced unstressed vowels: [ˈkʌnflikt] and [kənˈflikt]; voiced and voiceless endings: *rote* [rout] and *road* [roud]; and [haus] noun and [hauz] verb; and phrasing and linking, such as *an ice boy* [ən aɪs bɔɪ] and *a nice boy* [ə naɪs bɔɪ]. These examples point out the practical benefits that the IPA system can give to students.

Most of all, IPA helps to raise student pronunciation awareness which in turn increases students’ ability to make predictions. Lintunen (2013) conducted a study that focused on a comparison of a student’s pronunciation and a self-evaluation of their pronunciation. Lintunen concluded that:

Phonetic teaching is an essential part of EFL teaching as it raises the learners’ awareness of the target language sound system and the phonological forms of words. When it comes to the explicit teaching of pronunciation skills and phonetics, it seems that by focusing on the sound systems and individual phonemes learners also start evaluating their pronunciation accordingly. (p. 58)

Making students aware of what they are doing well in pronunciation and areas where they need to improve is essential if we want them to continue to improve. IPA plays a vital role in helping students become aware of pronunciation. It allows them to distinguish and manipulate the sound system and brings them a tangible, concrete tool that they can continue to use throughout their academic lives and beyond.

3. Secret Two: Weave Pronunciation into Your Lesson Plans

Secret Two focuses on anticipating pronunciation errors and preparing mini-lessons in advance. Start early in your classes introducing and showing the importance of correct pronunciation to students. The more students are exposed to tips that improve their pronunciation, the more likely they are to remember and apply those tips. Perfection or sounding like a native is not the goal. However, sounding more native-like is. Regular pronunciation practice helps learners to develop their own hypotheses and gut-feeling for English pronunciation, something experts and researchers have long emphasized as an essential skill of a good language learner. Teachers should carefully consider weaving pronunciation lessons and tasks into regular classes when it is fitting and most effective. Therefore, teachers should teach pronunciation when needed instead of randomly, since teaching pronunciation randomly has little overall effect. So, discover what areas of pronunciation your students need and, then plan accordingly. When teachers are alert to pronunciation issues that arise in their classes, it becomes easier to prepare mini-lessons tailored to the needs of the class. While some pronunciation errors are more common among most ESL students, some errors may only show up in a particular class, especially when many students are from similar language backgrounds. So, an ESL teacher would have a resource of mini-lessons that covered errors that most students make. In addition, they would prepare mini-lessons for those errors they hear ESL students make in their classes. I often work on pronunciation on a word in my reading classes. One way I do this is to have the students repeat the word or phrase, even if I am correcting one or two students with that problem. This way no one student is singled out for mispronouncing any word. This drill exercise takes less than 30 seconds, but the results can be amazing. I have had students tell me that they appreciate being able to pronounce words correctly in class. This drill exercise also helps students to remember the correct pronunciation. Often the word will appear again in a reading and a student will pronounce the word correctly, often after self-correction. This and other pronunciation tips are essential for giving pronunciation its suitable place in ESL.

For example, when a teacher is teaching the simple past in English, this might be the opportune time to have a quick mini-lesson on the three pronunciation differences there are in the regular past tense. [/t/, and /d/, and /ɪd/]. Another example is when new vocabulary is being introduced in a reading class. Why not take a few minutes to have students repeat the words together? This will give students immediate feedback on their pronunciation. Many students have stilted vocabulary growth simply because they do not know how to pronounce words. From my experience, students often do not recognize words they know because they do not know how the word should be pronounced. Teachers might find students have more confidence using the new words in speaking and in discussions with their peers if they have been given a chance to *linger* on the pronunciation of the new vocabulary a bit. Often teachers do not understand why student do not remember words. However, it is important not only to teach vocabulary, but to ensure that students have proper pronunciation. Zielinki and Yates (2014) argue that “it makes little sense to immerse beginning learners in to the grammar and vocabulary of English but leave them to struggle on their own with the pronunciation” (p. 59).

Likewise, in listening and speaking classes students might enjoy reviewing new words orally that they will use in speeches, class presentations, and class discussions. Again, boosting their level of confidence will no doubt encourage them to make use of the new words when possible. Incorporating pronunciation skills activities in our classes can give students the tools that will create self-awareness and self-production and students will benefit the most when the teaching of pronunciation is both timely and effective.

4. Secret Three: Include Memorization Techniques

Secret Three centers on a fresh viewpoint of *deliberate* memorization. The idea is that students are asked to memorize the pronunciation of words that they will need in discussions, pair work, or presentations. It might also be words they will read in a reading class. The goal of memorization in this way is not merely to retain information for a test or to be reiterated in a closed exercise.

The goal is to transfer and apply the memorized information into other settings and situations. This involves analytic and critical thinking. In these instances, students see first-hand the effects of good pronunciation. In turn, using correct pronunciation becomes a fundamental interest of our students in all aspects of their learning (Mayer, 2002, p. 227).

Memorization has its place in the ESL classroom. We recognize the importance of memorization as native speakers, but why do we hesitate to use it as another tool to help students with their pronunciation? How many times a day on average do we commit things to memory? Many of us memorize a shopping list, addresses, phone numbers, and passwords, just to name a few. How many mnemonic ways have you practiced remembering a name? This way of using memory is positive because it has a definite purpose. I want to memorize my students' names, not just so that I can say them properly, but so that I can show respect to the student and make a personal connection with them. Indeed, when memorization is connected to a task or a purpose, then it is more meaningful. Students can see the value in having good pronunciation.

Memorization can help students learn to internalize the differences between written and spoken language. In this sense, they can become more native-like in their approach to the language. For example, educated speakers have memorized a lot of words. Think of all the words that you have memorized the spelling of. Try to spell *thorough*, *parallel*, *committee* or *rhyme*! No doubt memorization played a large role in you being able to spell those words. If we tried to spell words based entirely on sound, we would be no better off than our students! One use of memorization that I have used in the past is to give the students 10 words a week that they must memorize. I record the words on an online recording system that allows the students to see the pitch and volume of the word they are learning. They can record their own voice and see how close they can get to my recording. I will use these words throughout the week and incorporate them in lectures, discussions, and homework assignments. These are not just a random list of ten words, but ten words that I want the students to know in order for them to apply them on different occasions when the opportunity presents itself.

Here are a few more tips. Write key words on the board and have students repeat them. Repeat key words that will be in upcoming speeches. Give students a list of words they have mispronounced and tell them they will have a spelling quiz. You will be surprised how many students love the opportunity to focus on spelling. It is like a dictation, and they get to focus on pronunciation and spelling, something they rarely get the chance to do.

Have students write 5–10 essential words from a reading or exercise on a scratch sheet of paper, say them aloud and have the students repeat. Next have the students write the words down again without looking, and then write the words on the board. I call these spelling checks. Spelling checks tie in well with memorization because it quickly tests a student’s knowledge, but gently reminds them that correct spelling and pronunciation are important. It also reminds the students of important words that you are asking them to learn. I do spelling checks if I have a few minutes at the end of class or to get things started at the beginning of class. These activities can take up little time, but the lasting benefits are immeasurable.

Create a list of core words for your class that you would like students to know by the end of the class. You can attach the words to your syllabus. As students learn the words they can check them off. Use the words as much as possible on tests and in class. From time to time encourage the students to see how many words they have learned. Go over the pronunciation of these words repeatedly and reward students for using them in their speaking and writing assignments.

One more key that will assist memorization is learning *roots*. Educated speakers know their roots. We can master many vocabulary words because the segments of the words remind us of their meaning. We must pass this gem on to our students. When the situation presents itself, write a root and root words on the board and give a mini-lesson on their pronunciation. For example, you could give students the root *dict* and give them a short list of words they know such as: *dictation*, *dictator*, *dictatorship*, *dictionary*, *predict*, *predictable*, and *verdict*. Say the words with the stress. Ask students if they know any other words with this root. Teach students the importance of compiling a journal of roots and

words that they are learning in class. Have them record the pronunciation of those roots. Give mini-lessons on pronunciation where students can practice them in the safe environment of your classroom. In this way you will be empowering the students to see roots more in their studies, and to predict how those roots are pronounced in unfamiliar words. It is also a great tool for raising their ability to make predictions. Keep reminding students that this is how native speakers increase their vocabulary. Root learning along with pronunciation instruction will quickly boost a student's ability to read and understand, not to mention the fact that their storehouse of vocabulary will quickly increase.

Educated speakers use memorization techniques as a way of gaining, organizing, and retaining information, and so can learners of English. Memorization has its place. Share this with your students and they will see the importance of memorization too.

5. Secret Four: Repetition Really is the Mother of Learning

Secret Four is all about drilling. It is closely connected to memorization, but the focus is more on repetition of pronunciation. If repetition is the mother of learning, then why do we no longer have more repetition in our classes? I enjoy spending a few minutes every day just drilling key words or phrases in my pronunciation class. First, it just gets their tongues moving and provides immediate feedback. They know that they are mispronouncing the sounds and they try harder to imitate my pronunciation. In drilling sessions, students get to focus on a few phonemes and/or minimal pairs which allows them to think about and analyze their own pronunciation and where they might need improvement. Lintunen (2013) agrees: "The role of consciousness, becoming aware or noticing certain features of the target language, is important in language learning." This is also referred to as "awareness-raising" (p. 55).

Drilling can be used as a warm-up exercise before moving on to a more serious task. It is like warming up the body before a heavy workout. Also, the shy or

the less confident students can participate in this activity because they can blend in with the whole class. It provides a few minutes for them to focus just on the accuracy of a word. You might be surprised to see how much the students respond to this activity when it is simple and well-prepared. Dictations are a great technique for drilling as well. Nilsen and Nilsen (2010) claim that “dictation exercises also provide good opportunities for error analysis in which you think and talk about why a student wrote one word instead of another” (p. 2).

I often give weekly dictation tasks that review the material and vocabulary we have gone over that week. It gives students the chance to hear, identify, and manipulate the spelling and sounds of English. It also allows them to revisit key vocabulary.

To further assist our students, new words can be accompanied by the IPA forms next to them, such as *business* [bɪznɪs]. Give students a list of words from your class and have them look up the IPA in the dictionary. Then have students record these words (repeating each word twice) and then send the recording to you for a weekly or bi-weekly grade. You can also find exercises in your pronunciation books that you can assign as a weekly recording. Students love these bite size recordings because they get to focus on one or two phonemes repeatedly, and they feel a sense of accomplishment when they send in their polished recordings.

You may also find it advantageous to invite students to come to your office to discuss issues that they are having personally and offer them an exercise tailored for them. I call these 5-7-minute meetings in my office *mini-conferences*. I try to address a problem or two that each student is having. I also take the time to see if they have any questions or concerns about their pronunciation. This may be a kind way to address issues that only a few students might be having. We might do some drilling exercises right then in my office. Drilling should always be relevant and quick! It is meant to jaunt the memory and to stimulate the brain. From my personal experience in teaching, drilling also reminds students that correct pronunciation is important! They know that when I am drilling, the exercise is to review, highlight a reoccurring problem,

or prompt their attention for an item on an upcoming test or quiz. I also use drilling to prepare them for upcoming recording assignments. From my experience, students willingly participate in drill exercises when they understand the reason or purpose for them. So, ESL teachers will need to make it clear why such drill exercises are important and beneficial for the students.

I like to see if students can recognize patterns and become aware of exceptions. Pattern recognition exercises can be given as homework assignments, giving students time to ponder and search for patterns they would not normally see. I also like to point out patterns in pronunciation. For example, when stress often dictates if the word is a verb or a noun: CONflict-noun and conFLICT-verb; REcord-noun and reCORD-verb; INcrease-noun and inCREASE-verb. When students see patterns, then they will most likely predict with greater precision new words that they encounter.

6. Secret Five: Teach Students to Recognize Patterns

Secret Five is an extension of Secret One and the introduction of the IPA in that it focuses on pattern awareness and recognition, but it is about increasing students' ability to predict the pronunciation of new words autonomously, that is, without the aid of teacher-provided insight. After using memorization and drill techniques, students should ideally begin to recognize patterns. However, this is not necessarily the case. We must continually highlight stress patterns and create awareness. Celce-Murcia (1996, pp. 131–173) presents a variety of ways to help students to see patterns in pronunciation. While the tools used to improve pronunciation are centered on getting students to pronounce words correctly, the goal of pronunciation is to get students to predict sounds and learn to apply this knowledge to new words. To that end, students can be introduced to mini-lessons that offer snippets of language that can be handled in less than five minutes to give the students something solid and practical to build up their ability to make predictions. Morley (1994, pp. 26–28) offers the pattern in Example 1.

VC+e	<i>slate</i>	<i>hate</i>	<i>mate</i>	<i>rate</i>	<i>fate</i>
VC#	<i>slat</i>	<i>hat</i>	<i>mat</i>	<i>rat</i>	<i>fat</i>

Example 1 – Pattern snippet

In this example, students can clearly see the connection between the final vowel *e* and how it alters the *a* sound. A simple example such as this is easy to understand and provides a visual tool as well. This simple exercise can give the students a solid basis for analyzing new words like this in the future. Morley (1994) calls this “empowerment.” When we give students the proper tools, we empower them to continue to use these tools on their own long after pronunciation classes are over. Morley (1994) emphasizes the importance of teaching pronunciation when she says, “The best teaching is the teaching that meets needs. Teaching to empower students in pronunciation is not only a reasonable aim for instruction, but, because it meets the students’ needs, it should be an obligatory one” (p. 30).

7. Secret Six: Use Practical Exercises

Secret Six involves giving students practical exercises that foster learning and productive outcome. Think about what students need, and create an exercise that will help resolve the issue. Understanding how to pronounce words can come from a variety of clues. It can come directly from context, it can be the length of a vowel, or mouth and lip movement. In the exercise below, students learn to differentiate between minimal vowel pairs. The position of a student’s mouth when producing these words can make a world of difference. The shape of the mouth when saying “caller” is more oval-shaped than saying “collar,” which requires a fully-opened mouth. Students can benefit a lot from using their mouths (sometimes exaggeratingly) to distinguish between minimal pairs. We ask students to use a mirror or their cell phones to see if they are moving their mouths appropriately. The visual aid in Example 2 helps them to see and manipulate their mouths to mimic the sounds.

I also have given students *small talk tasks* that require them to speak to native speakers. It gets the students talking to people outside of the classroom. This is helpful because classmates and teachers are very forgiving. In the task below (Example 3), students get to focus on two things: short/long vowels and voiced/voiceless endings. The native speaker also gets a copy and is told to respond only if it is not clear. They are asked not to help or coach the student, and they are asked to sign the paper. Students enjoy it when other people understand their English. It is quite motivating. They also get immediate feedback from a native speaker who might not fully understand them. Students are highly motivated to want to sound more like native peers.

I didn't like the old collar/caller.

The bus/boss was loud today.

These cups/cops are dirty.

Here's a nut/note.

I wander/wonder all the time.

Example 2 – Minimal pairs

Listening exercises can also provide excellent feedback on pronunciation. Students often freeze up when they are doing listening exercises. They often write nothing because they cannot spell a word. This causes them to suffer greatly in listening comprehension and note-taking exercises. To get students in the mindset of just writing down what they hear, I use this exercise in three steps. Step One: Students go home, listen, and write exactly what they hear from a provided audio recording. I do not count spelling. I am trying to teach students to hear the words and not focus on spelling at this point. I am also trying to prepare students for regular class with lectures. When students hear new words, they need to learn to write what they hear. Later, they can go and check spelling and meaning. However, if they have written nothing down, then they will be lost and not have a reference point to ask further questions. Even a misspelled word can be a point of reference in many instances. So, the students are asked to write down what they hear from the listening exercise.

Some students write down new words in IPA and then rewrite them in English afterwards. Step Two: Listen again in class. Step Three: Check spelling and review pronunciation. Example 4 is an example of a listening exercise.

Task One

Student Copy {Go out of the classroom}

Read each word to your Native Speaker. You may have to repeat if they do not understand you. Please note how many times you had to repeat each sentence. Don't repeat any more after three times.

[g]	[k]	one	two	three
bag	back			
pig	pick			
sag	sack			
dug	duck			
rag	rack			

Have the Native Speaker underline what they think they hear you say. The native speaker does not have to say anything except for "Repeat Please" if they don't understand you.

Example 3 – Small talk task

I expect a variant of spelling errors. If they are close to the correct spelling, they get credit. They lose points or half points only if the spelling is way off or if the response has a grammatical error such as writing *overbook* when it is clearly *overbooked*. This exercise emphasizes the importance of writing down as closely as possible what they hear, a skill they will need in regular academic classes. It also forces students to engage in meaningful learning as they acquire the ability to bridge the gap between sounds and spelling.

Hello. Passengers of flight 17 (1) ___ for Caracas, with stops in Atlanta and Miami. The (2) ___ gate has been changed to 30B. Also, there will be a (3) ___ departure delay due to (4) ___ weather outside. The ground (5) ___ is in the process of deicing the (6) ___ in preparation for departure. It also looks like the flight is slightly (7) ___, so we are offering (8) ___ round-trip tickets to a few passengers willing to take a (9) ___ flight. We should be boarding about a (10) ___ to the hour. Thank you for your patience.

Answers: bound, departure, slight, inclement, crew, wings, overbooked, complimentary, later, quarter (Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab – For English as a Second Language)

Students' answers: bowned, depachur, slide, inklement, cru, wings or wins, overbook, complementary, late, quart

Example 4 – Listening exercise

The next exercise (Example 5) is based on verb/noun stress patterns. Here is where context gives a clue. After a mini-lecture on homonyms with different stress patterns, students must mark the stress.

1. *The numbers of international students coming to the US are increasing every year.*
 2. *There has been an increase in the number of sales over the past month.*
 3. *They got an upgrade on the flight.*
 4. *The men were suspects in the robbery of the local bank.*
 5. *There's a misprint in the book.*
-

Example 5 – Verb/noun stress patterns

Students learn to recognize that context plays an important role in pronunciation. Just as context can reveal meanings of words, it can also reveal the way a word is pronounced. It is a profound lesson for a learner of English.

Also, the power of a video cannot be underestimated if the host shows you how to say words exactly. Here students get to mimic and exercise mouth movements. My favorite website for this is Rachel's English Page (<http://rachelsenglish.com/>) because she shows front and side positions of the mouth, lips, jaw, and teeth close up. This gives students a direct view of the position of their mouth when uttering certain vowels or consonants. This website is great for students who want help with a phoneme and need more guidance outside of the classroom. Teachers can just direct the student to the website and show them how to navigate through it in less than 3 minutes. It is extremely student-friendly.

These are just a few examples of practical exercises. The point is that these exercises have one purpose, they are short, and students quickly see the benefit. The more exercises of this nature are offered in class, the more our students will improve in their overall pronunciation.

8. Secret Seven: Make Pronunciation Enjoyable and Practical

Secret Seven involves having fun! Learning English through pronunciation can be enjoyable. It can create a relaxing atmosphere. How about a limerick? For their final project students in my pronunciation class must write their own limerick. They dread it at first, but when they understand it is supposed to be a simple, whimsical poem, they truly get creative and come up with some funny ones. I make it clear that the purpose is to demonstrate they understand sentence stress, rhyming, rhythm, and intonation. All of this is from a simple limerick. Egelberg (1999) points out:

The limerick is a light verse form that is appealing because of its humour, wordplay, rhythm.... The limerick is very regular, and each limerick follows the same rhythmic pattern. Because of this, limericks offer a clear example of how stress works in English. (p. 6)

Other poetry can also be of great help to students. This famous poem, for instance, about the dreadful English language covers information we have gone over in my pronunciation class:

*I take it you already know
Of tough and bough and cough and dough?
Others may stumble, but not you
On hiccough, thorough, slough, and through.*

As part of their final project, students must record their reading of this poem. Students put so much work into it. They take pride in the fact that they can record it with minimal errors.

Tongue-twisters (Example 6) are another great way to start or end the class. Students love the challenge of learning them. I offer students bonus points for recording and sending them to me by a certain date. I am usually flooded with recordings towards the end of the semester. No doubt, tongue-twisters test pronunciation. However, they also test rhythm, stress, and intonation. I always urge students to choose ones that do not come easy to them to make it a challenge.

The thirty-three thieves thought that they thrilled the throne throughout Thursday.

I saw a kitten eating chicken in the kitchen

Example 6 – Tongue twisters

Example 7 is a great intonation exercise that I do each semester, which the students enjoy very much. Students receive a dialog that they cannot alter. Then they are given their respective roles. The only thing that can change is intonation and gestures. Give students a week or two to prepare. Such skits teach students the power of intonation (Celce-Murcia, 1996, pp. 122-124).

A: Hi, how are you?

B: Fine, thank you. And you?

A: Just great. What have you been doing lately?

B: Oh, not much. But I've been keeping busy.

A: Well...it's been good to see you.

B: Yes, it has...well, bye!

A: Goodbye.

Roles to play: two old people who are all but deaf; two people who are angry at each other; two people who have met before, but can't remember where; two old friends who run into each other; and/or a detective and a criminal (Dave's ESL Café www.eslcafe.com)

Example 7 – Intonation skits

The class must guess the relationship between the students. It is a day of laughter and giggles, but students walk away remembering how important intonation is.

9. Conclusion

There are so many ways to incorporate pronunciation into our classroom teaching. When pronunciation is sporadically taught, students do not see its importance, nor are there lasting benefits. For pronunciation to be effective, it needs to be consistently present across the curriculum. When all ESL teachers take on the responsibility to teach pronunciation, then students will also view it as important.

By now it is clear that the secrets are not really secrets at all, but information and knowledge that we know but keep to ourselves. There are many more secrets to share with our students. What has helped you to improve your pronunciation in English or another language? What are some of the resources or materials that you can share? What have you considered to be an effective way to help a student’s pronunciation? Pass it on, do not keep it as a secret!

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