

**Trinity CertTESOL****Study Resource 8: Teaching Listening and Speaking through Phonology for CertTESOL**

Spoken English is not easy to understand. Not because English has particularly unusual sounds (though the two 'th' sounds in *this thumb* are not overly common in other languages), but because of the way we connect words together by dropping and adding sounds. Therefore, learners need a great deal of practice in both of the skill areas involved in oral communication: listening and speaking. This is where the teacher's knowledge of phonology is very helpful.

This Study Resource will take a closer look at teaching listening and speaking for the Teaching Skills and Language Awareness components of the course:

- What is meant by phonology
- The use of the International Phonetic Alphabet
- Helping learners with their pronunciation
- Phonology and teaching listening and speaking
- Modelling pronunciation for your learners

For each **Reflection Task**, take a moment to think and make notes mentally or in writing before you continue to read.

The Trinity CertTESOL [Syllabus](http://www.trinitycollege.com/site/?id=702) (www.trinitycollege.com/site/?id=702) states that 'Trainees will be able to demonstrate ... knowledge of the main grammatical, lexical and phonological features of Standard English' (p. 5).

**Reflection Task 1**

Make notes on the following task. As you read through the example, you can add more ideas to your notes. When you've finished reading the resources, compare your ideas with the examples at the end of this document.

Look at the following question and read it out loud a few times.

*Can I ask you a favour?*

What do you notice about how you say it? What do you think a learner of English would need to know about how to say this? Try to think of at least 3 things you would want to focus on.

The term **phonology** breaks down into two word-elements from Greek, meaning 'sound' (think of *microphone, telephone*) and 'study' (for instance: *astrology, geology*). Phonology is the study of the sounds of language and what happens to them in natural speech.

In the CertTESOL phonology inputs, the following areas are addressed:

- Phonemes – the individual sounds
- Word and sentence stress – emphasis
- Intonation – emphasis in combination with rising and falling tones
- Connected speech – changing, adding or dropping sounds in the boundaries between words

### **The International Phonetic Alphabet**

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols are a very useful aid to teaching and learning, especially when the way a word is spelt doesn't fit logically with how it's spelt (*rough/know*). The IPA can be useful to show, for instance, that the words *write* and *right* are pronounced in exactly the same way: /raɪt/.

#### **Reflection Task 2**

1. How familiar are you with the IPA? Have you used it in any previous language learning?
2. How useful do you think it is? Can you think of any potential difficulties students might have with using it?
3. Say the following and then write the sentence using our usual alphabet:

/aɪˈæm wɒt aɪˈæm/

The sentence above is an example of what happens in natural connected speech. Firstly, it shows how the five words *I am what I am*, said naturally without any pauses between each word, comes across to the listener as one chunk of language which needs to be decoded and processed. Secondly, the extra /j/ sound is added gently between the vowel sounds to make it easier to say. The symbols really help to show what sound is made when words run together. It's important to use the IPA rather to show how words are pronounced rather than using the normal alphabet as this might cause confusion about how the word is spelt. Once students get confident reading the IPA, they can look words up the correct pronunciation in the dictionary.

A striking feature of English is the very lightly pronounced sound you hear in the unstressed syllables of *about*, or *mother*. The /ə/ sound is far and away the most common vowel sound in English, so even it's a really important sound to focus on with your learners.

There are 44 symbols for both British (BrE) and American English (AmE), with only slight differences between them. Thanks to the internet, they're not difficult to learn at all. The Oxford University Press has an excellent site with the symbols built into picture keywords and audio to go with them. The keywords are really useful, because the images are memorable and you can refer back to them in class: "the fish vowel", "the yacht consonant", "the phone vowel".

- [www.oup.com/elt/global/products/englishfile/elementary/c\\_pronunciation/](http://www.oup.com/elt/global/products/englishfile/elementary/c_pronunciation/)

The BBC also has some excellent videos showing how to demonstrate the sounds of English.

- [www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/grammar/pron/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/grammar/pron/)

### Other phonological features

#### Reflection Task 3

1. How confident do you feel about correcting learners' pronunciation in class?
2. Are there clear rules for pronunciation?

Phonology covers far more than the individual sounds of a language. English is quite musical and very rhythmic so a lot of attention is paid to stressing the right syllable in long words and emphasising the right words in sentences. If learners don't do this, the risks of not being understood properly are quite high.

Some languages have very reliable rules about what we term *word stress*. For instance, in French it's always the final syllable of a word which takes the stress – something which for us can sometimes go against the grain. English does have patterns in stress placement, too, though not hard-and-fast rules. Think about how, for example, where the stress would be in verbs that end in -ing, such as running, swimming, enjoying etc. You wouldn't stress the -ing part, would you?

What adds to the potential confusion is that, in so-called word families, the nature and number of affixes (additions to words such as un/er) tends to shift the position of the stress. So, a *PHOtograph* is taken by a *phoTOgrapher*, using *photoGRAphic* equipment. If a learner says one of these words with the wrong stress, the native listener may well hear the word that fits the stress pattern used, not the word actually intended. However, there's nothing technical about teaching stress patterns: it's a matter of getting learners first to hear the stressed syllables, and

then to imitate them, making sure that the most important syllables are louder, higher and longer than the other syllables. We use physical actions and gestures, as well as creative use of the board marker to raise our learners' awareness of these features.

See the British Council Teaching English clip for demonstrations and ideas.

- [http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/teaching-speaking-unit-3-individual-sounds?utm\\_source=TE\\_Facebook&utm\\_medium=Social&utm\\_campaign=Pr\\_onmonthFeb2015](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/teaching-speaking-unit-3-individual-sounds?utm_source=TE_Facebook&utm_medium=Social&utm_campaign=Pr_onmonthFeb2015)

Intonation is another important area of phonology since many learners struggle to vary the pitch of their voices the right amount, and this can make them sound bored, disinterested or rude. English is a relatively sing-song language, and we use pitch variation for a number of different purposes: not only to show our attitude to what we're saying, or to the person we're talking to. We often indicate that we've not yet finished speaking, for instance, by making the pitch of our voice rise, rise again, rise perhaps yet a third time and then finally fall (e.g. *I ate a sandwich, a pancake, some soup and a banana.*). This is a signal to the other party that it's their turn to speak, because falling intonation usually means finality, whereas rising indicates incompleteness, or a questioning attitude.

Well, this used to be the distinction. Over the past 20 years or so, things seem to have been changing, as a rising pitch is now being used more and more for definitive statements. There's no agreed name for this phenomenon, though a handy label that some people use for it is *upspeak*. You'll recognise it the moment you hear an example. There are several Youtube clips on what some people call Australian Question Intonation (AQI), with experts discussing its possible origins.

### **ADDRESSING PHONOLOGY IN LISTENING AND SPEAKING CLASSES**

What actually goes on in the classroom when listening and speaking are being taught?

#### **Reflection Task 4**

1. What is the relationship between phonology and listening skills?
2. How could you teach phonology as part of a listening lesson?

Teaching *communicatively* means that the teacher tries to set up tasks that learners need to cope with in the world outside. Ideally these tasks will be linked in some way. For instance, learners might focus on the stages of getting a job, so first of all there'll be a reading activity (scouring a website or newspaper). Then they'll (email or) phone for an information pack and application form, so this will entail role-play. They might listen to an example of a job interview, and they may well talk about the ins and outs of the job with friends or family in a discussion. Then they'll fill in the form and produce a covering letter, which means practice in writing skills, and hopefully this will lead to a simulated interview.

At all the listening and speaking stages, part of the teacher's role is to help the learners, either to make better sense of what they hear or to pronounce what they say with greater accuracy or fluency. Lessons focusing on pronunciation alone are rare: it's usually done in an integrated way.

In a speaking lesson you will highlight and drill the phonological features of the target language. This may mean: attending to individual sounds that are challenging for your particular speakers; focusing on word stress in vocabulary; highlighting intonation in functional language, such as rising intonation in polite requests; and helping the learners produce the features of connected natural speech, as in *I am what I am*.

Traditional listening lessons in most course books are usually based around the three stages of

- Pre-listening
- While listening
- Post listening

In the pre-listening stage, there is usually preparation related to challenging lexis that will come up in the recording and drawing out what learners know about the topic. While-listening tasks generally focus on first listening for the general idea, and then answering more detailed comprehension questions. In the post-listening stage, answers are checked and language discussed.

This, however, does not address the challenges learners meet in terms of decoding the stream of natural connected speech, and how speakers use stress, intonation and pausing to convey their message. It is therefore useful to analyse the spoken text by playing a sentence or two and setting tasks that help them identify these features.

Such tasks could be, for example, asking learners to:

- count the words in the sentence they hear
- mark the pauses, stress and intonation in a brief script accompanying the recording
- read along with the recording

These tasks could be performed either before the comprehension questions are tackled in order to help learners 'tune in', or after general and detailed meaning has been dealt with in order to raise the learners' awareness further.

You can read more about decoding in an article by Richard Cauldwell and watch a video on Introduction to Teaching Pronunciation Workshop by Adrian Underhill:

- [http://www.developingteachers.com/articles\\_tchtraining/perception1\\_richard.htm](http://www.developingteachers.com/articles_tchtraining/perception1_richard.htm)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kAPHyHd7Lo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kAPHyHd7Lo)

### **Modelling the language for the learners**

#### **Reflection Task 5**

1. How do you feel about providing the voice model for your learners?
2. How accurate to we expect our learners to sound, and in which accent?

Very few people speak with a so-called Received Pronunciation (RP) accent. This is not a disadvantage at all. Learners today get exposed to a wide range of accents, native and non-native ... via the media, in the classroom and in the world outside. As long as you speak clearly, slow down a little and choose your words according to the level of your learners, you can keep your native accent without encountering any problems.

Likewise with the learners: not many actually want to sound like a native, and even fewer are capable of it. Their own accent is part of their identity. Your job as a teacher is simply to ensure that they can 'decode' a wide range of accents, understand what's said to them, and be easily understood when they speak.

- Did you know that 'only' 400 million or so people speak English as a native language? This is around the same number as speak Spanish, and only half the number who speak Mandarin Chinese.
- Did you also know that there are far more speakers of English as a second, international language than there are native speakers of Spanish and Mandarin combined? Few of them actually sound like native speakers, but does this matter, as long as they're easily intelligible to both non-native and native listeners?

We hope you have enjoyed this introduction to teaching grammar in context for the Trinity CertTESOL course and found it useful.

**Suggestions for Reflective Task 1**

*Can I ask you a favour?*

- *'Can' is pronounced /kən/*
- *'Can' and 'I' are connected*
- *There is a /j/ sound between 'I' and 'ask'*
- *There is a /w/ sounds between 'you' and 'a'*
- *The first syllable of 'favour' is stressed*
- *The second syllable is pronounced /ə/*
- *Intonation needs to be polite*