

PRONUNCIATION

It is important that learners begin to develop their pronunciation of English right from the beginning stages. Bad pronunciation habits become hard to change and without comprehensible pronunciation, good grammar and sophisticated vocabulary mean little. Without comprehensible pronunciation, learners will struggle to communicate successfully.

Comprehensible pronunciation does not mean native-like pronunciation. Only a very small portion of adult learners can develop native-like pronunciation, but they can develop comprehensible pronunciation.

The most important aspects of pronunciation to focus on are:

- ◆ Stress and intonation (**suprasegmentals**)
- ◆ Sounds of individual vowels, consonants, digraphs, diphthongs and blends (**segmentals**)
 - Vowels are the letter *a, e, i, o, u* and sometimes *y*
 - **Consonants** are all the other letters
 - **Digraphs** are two or more letters which blend to make one sound, such as *th, sh, ch, wh, ea in bread*.
 - **Diphthongs** are vowel sounds which glide from one sound to another, such as the sound of *oy* in *boy*, *ee* in *tree*, *ou* in *shout*.
 - **Blends** are two or more letters that are combined but still keep their individual characteristics, such as *bl* in *blend*, *sch* in *school*.

Stress

Words are made up of sections called syllables. Some words have only one syllable; most words have more.

Examples: dog (1 syllable) mo ney (2 syllable) a part ment
(3 syllables)

In words with more than one syllable, one of those syllables will be said louder and longer than the others.

Examples: **MO**-ney a-**PART**-ment

Even one syllable words like “dog” have sliding stress on the syllable.

Example: “Dog” sounds a little like **DAW**-uhg

Intonation

Intonation is like the music of the language. It is how the voice rises and falls through a phrase or sentence. A lot of meaning is carried by intonation. You can say sentences in different ways and change the meaning entirely.

Examples: Say the following sentence so it is a statement that is just giving information.

You want me to close the window

Now say the same sentence as if you are asking a question. Now say it as if you are angry.

You probably noticed that sometimes your voice went up at the end and sometimes it dropped. Sometimes the stress was in one part of the sentence and sometimes, it was in another. Learners must learn to recognize the intonation of a sentence and what it means. Learners must also learn to use the correct intonation to communicate their intended meaning.

Individual Sounds of Letters and Digraphs (segmentals)

Some segmentals are very difficult for learners from certain language backgrounds to say, especially if the sound does not exist in their language. Probably the most difficult digraph in English is *th*. Very few learners are able to acquire that sound and often substitute *d*. Usually, this substitution does not matter. Even if it mispronounced, we can usually understand what *de book* is.

Sometimes the placement of a sound makes it difficult for a learner to say the sound. Many Asian learners have difficulty with consonant sounds at the ends of words and often drop them off. For example, the word eight may sound like *ay*. This makes it REALLY difficult for listeners.

Teaching Tips:

- ◆ Always use a natural stress and intonation pattern when speaking to your learners. Do not say one word at a time. Do not use baby-talk, such as “Me go store.”
- ◆ Always have learners repeat new words and phrases 4 or 5 times. Say the word several times and have learners just listen. Then, say the word and have them repeat it several times. Then say the word in a phrase or sentence depending on their level and have them repeat it using the correct stress and intonation.
- ◆ For longer words or phrases, try backward build-up. Break the word or phrase into smaller chunks and have the learners repeat the last piece first after your model. Then add the next to last piece and have the learners repeat this new unit several times. Keeping adding a piece until they are saying the whole word or phrase.

Example

For *apartment* have learners repeat:

ment, ment, ment.

Then have them repeat

PARTment, PARTment, PARTment.

Then have learners say

aPARTment; aPARTment, aPARTment

For *I'd like an appointment with Dr. Brown* have learners repeat:
with Dr. Brown, with Dr. Brown, with Dr. Brown

Then have them repeat:

an appointment with Dr. Brown, an appointment with Dr. Brown, an appointment with Dr. Brown

Finally have them repeat the whole sentence several times:

I'd like an appointment with Dr. Brown. I'd like an appointment with Dr. Brown. I'd like an appointment with Dr. Brown.

- ◆ Help learners develop natural sounding intonation by addressing *reductions*, which are created when people eliminate certain sounds or syllables in words when they speak naturally. When we speak naturally, we slide from the end of one in word into some others. Some learners think they need to say each word separately, but they are wrong. For example, when one word ends with a consonant sound and the next word begins with a vowel sound, we usually link the final consonant sound to the front of the next word. We don't say *get off*, we say *ge –toff*. We don't say *want to*. We say *wanna*.
- ◆ To pronounce one syllable words correctly, learners must stretch out the vowel sound. We don't say *dog*; we say *DAW ug* (but there is not break in the vowel sound.) To help them learn to draw out the vowel sound, many teachers have learners hold a heavy rubber band and stretch the band open as they say the word.
- ◆ To help learners say last consonant sounds on words, it sometimes helps to add a syllable *uh*. If a learner always says *CA* instead of *CAT*, have them try to say *CATuh*. Then, little by little have them make the *uh* quieter and quieter until it is gone.
- ◆ Some learners like to add an extra syllable that isn't there after digraphs, such as *ch*, *sh*, *th*. To help these learners, have them try to draw out the digraph sound until they run out of air.

Example: *fish* sounds like *fi shhhhhhhhh*

Have them do that many times and then begin to shorten the digraph until it is being held for an almost normal length of time.

There are many useful pronunciation resources in the ALT Branch Resource Collection and many, many useful pronunciation web sites that are easy to find on the internet with a search engine, such as Google.

Glossary

Blends

Two or more letters that are combined but still keep their individual characteristics, such as *bl* in *blend*, *sch* in *school*

Consonant

All the letter of the alphabet, except *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*. We make the sound of consonants by using our lips or tongues to stop or partially stop the air coming from our mouths.

Digraph	Two or more letters that blend to make one sound, such as <i>th, sh, ch</i> or the <i>ea</i> in <i>bread</i>
Diphthong	A vowel sound that glides from one sound to another, such as the sound <i>oy</i> in <i>boy</i> , <i>ee</i> in <i>tree</i> , <i>ou</i> in <i>shout</i> .
Intonation	The rise and fall or <i>music</i> of the voice when we speak
Reduction	Occurs when people eliminate certain sounds or syllables in words when they speak naturally, such as <i>wanna</i> for <i>want to</i> , <i>gonna</i> for <i>going to</i>
Segmental	Sound of individual vowels, consonants, digraphs, diphthongs and blends
Stress	Prominence given to a syllable of a word or sentence by making it louder and longer
Suprasegmental	Sound that impacts units of language, such as stress, intonation
Vowel	The letters <i>a, e, i, o, u</i> , and sometimes <i>y</i> and <i>w</i> . We make the sounds of these letters with an open or partially open mouth.