

ELT



Ireland bulletin

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Possible Solutions to Rise to the Pronunciation Challenge, Come On Board!

By Carol Gonçalves (coordinator of BRAZ-TESOL Pron SIG, SBCI)

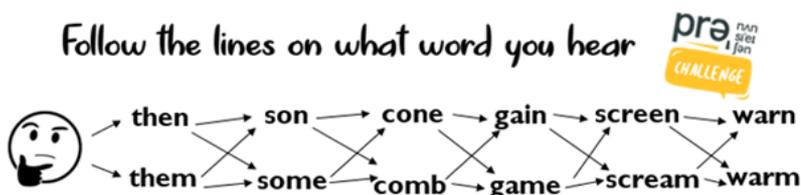
How do you see yourself, your classes and your students when you come to think of teaching pronunciation? If we consider the approach to pronunciation in coursebooks, there is usually a pronunciation box the teacher should work with students, some repetition exercises and that is all. Therefore, I decided to think of how I could improve the pronunciation activities, develop possible solutions to make it more relevant and not to take it for granted. Because nobody puts pronunciation in a corner!

Based on what I have revised, learned and discussed at the postgraduate course in English Teaching that I took at UFMG and inspired by the activities from PronPack 1-4 (2017) by Mark Hancock, I came up with the idea of Pronunciation Challenge. John Wells (2005) claims that teachers of English to speakers of other languages must teach the pronunciation of each word as well as its spelling, which implies teaching the use of phonetic symbols, at least passively for reference.

Besides, since one of John Wells's (2005) prioritizing recommendations for the teaching of English pronunciation in an EFL context is to concentrate on the matters that most impede intelligibility; while encouraging fluency and confidence, I thought of making pronunciation more appealing and useful to students from different levels and also through activities in which they will have the chance to learn and practice some critical sounds in English.

Based on my experience, the ones I have thought of working with so far are: the long and short vowels (work with some minimal pairs to highlight the difference); voiced and voiceless consonants; call students' attention to how Brazilian students tend to pronounce the final /m/ (also discuss about the interference of L1 when it comes to nasal consonants); how they usually add vowels in the beginning and by the end of the words and why they do it; the plural form, present (3rd person), past and past participle regular forms; sound to spelling correspondences/ inconsistencies.

When it comes to the activities I have already developed, I would like to share three of them: Getting in the Mood, Listening Maze and Englishes Time. As a warm-up and to familiarize students with some phonetic symbols, through Getting in the Mood students try to guess some words based on their phonetics transcription, first in Portuguese and then in English. It has been quite productive, and students have felt pretty excited at the idea of guessing the words and trying to associate the sounds they find in different words.



As for the Listening Maze the teacher should select some sounds to work, contrast and practice with students, for instance, /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ as in chip/ship, cheap/ sheep; /m/ and /n/ as in them/then, team/tin; or /r/ and /h/ as in rat/hat, red/head, etc. This is one possibility to work with minimal pairs and for this activity teacher must organize the words selected beforehand in two "lines". Then, link them with all possible arrows. The first line shows the words with similar sounds and the line below the contrast sound words. As there are some possibilities, the teacher should first choose all the six words to dictate. Look at the example below to practice /m/ and /n/:

Original image by Author Icon: Flaticon

Artwork: Milla Gonçalves @blessedesign

The idea is for students to circle the correct word they hear. The teacher should say each word twice to help them identify those. After that, students might compare their answers and then the teacher shows the correct path they should have taken. It would be even more challenging to invite students to choose the words to dictate themselves and work in pairs to do so. Empowering students and boosting self-confidence might be another way to promote a learning environment, because students who are more confident in their abilities try harder (GOLEMAN, 1998).

At first, when I thought of Listening Maze, I was not teaching remotely. Therefore, I used to make the slips of paper with the words available to each student. Nowadays, I invite students to make a table and write down the words before I start dictating them. As you can see in the photo on the following page.

I believe that having the chance to include some of the activities described here or adapting some of them to the students' reality and level, might be useful and worthwhile in order to improve the approach to teaching pronunciation in English language classrooms.

Walker (2010) claims that the goal for pronunciation teaching is international intelligibility rather than proximity to a native speaker accent. Furthermore, as I have always been fond of accents and had the chance to develop some activities in terms of pronunciation, why not discuss it and expose students to different accents? Crystal (2013) affirms that the more you expose people to a variety of accents and listening comprehension, the more confident they're going to be when they encounter the realities of English.

then	son	cone	gain	screen	warn
them	some	comb	game	scream	warm

Original image by Author

Icons: Flaticon

So, I have been trying to expose my students to these varieties (Englishes Time) by working with IDEA (The International Dialects of English Archive - <https://www.dialectsarchive.com>). An archive of primary-source recordings of English-language dialects and accents as heard around the world. I have already asked them to listen to people from different parts of the world while speaking English and check if they can recognize their accents and what different Englishes they know, I have also asked them to try to mimic different accents. It is worth mentioning that such accents are likely to be stereotypes, but closely to be recognizable.

In addition, I have also showed them some scenes from films, for instance, Shall we Dance (1937) in which Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers sing Let's call the Whole Thing Off; scenes from different TV series, such as The Big Bang Theory (Howard's Indian accent), Modern family (Gloria's Colombian accent), One Day At A Time (Lydia's Cuban accent); a video from the beginning of lockdown in which people from around the world unite to share their hopes and fears concerning life in lockdown (<https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2020/04/09/life-in-lockdown-around-the-globe-coronavirus-lc-lon-orig.cnn>); and also a scene from My Fair Lady when Eliza has some lessons with Professor Higgins to sound like a cultured member from high society.

Walker questions the assumptions of adopting a native-speaker (NS) target in English language learning and the role of accents in the expression of one's identity, asserting that there is no such thing as 'good English', and presuming that a prestigious variety is suitable for all contexts represents a failure to understand the sociolinguistic reality.

Having said that, I usually take the opportunity to discuss with students what they think their accent says about them, how they feel about their accent while speaking English, if they would like to sound like a native speaker and why (not), and if they agree or not that our accents define us, identify us with a certain region, and sometimes even stereotype us.

To be honest, having the chance to work with pronunciation in a more meaningful and engaging way and also discuss accents (which I absolutely love, in Portuguese as well) has motivated me to come up with more ideas for activities. Not only do I feel thrilled to bits with Pronunciation Challenge, but I am also looking forward to sharing it with other teachers, listening to suggestions, and incorporating feedback. Although I have already had the chance to participate in BRAZ-TESOL events and conferences, BrELT on the Road and ELTed Dublin Webinar to talk a little bit about it (and I truly enjoyed the experience!), I can't wait to share it with more people. And I believe that my students and I will rise to the challenge together. Join us!

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