

Hands-On Pronunciation Tricks

by Kim Nau

The fall semester equals new beginnings and, as with any new start, we need to proceed with a strong foundation. According to pronunciation expert Robin Walker (2014), competence in all four literacy skills is closely related to competence in pronunciation. Poor pronunciation not only affects students' spoken comprehensibility, but it can also negatively affect their writing because some students write the way they speak. For example, if the student writes, "I wheel feel up these cup," what he or she really means to write is "I will fill up this cup." This is not a writing error, but a pronunciation error. Students need to retrain their mouth muscles to create sounds specific to the English language.

Pronunciation is more than having students parrot, or repeat, after their language instructor because they may have difficulty hearing the nuances between similar sounds; it is therefore helpful to demonstrate how some sounds are produced. Below are eight hands-on, multi-sensory pronunciation tricks to help students improve their literacy skills.

Feather Trick—Students can hold a feather (or a tissue) in front of their mouth to help them visualize the plosive sounds. When they make the /b/ and /p/ sounds, the feather will move due to the pressure from the air escaping from the mouth.

Flyswatter Trick—This game can be used to teach listening discrimination skills using minimal pairs (words that vary by a single sound). Make two columns on the board and list minimal pairs that the class has been studying.

bad	bed
not	note
heel	hill

Then, give two students a flyswatter and invite them to come up to the board. Say one of words, and the students must swat the word they hear as correct.

Rainbow Trick—The Color Vowel Chart is a highly effective visual tool that was developed by Thompson and Taylor (2009). This chart illustrates that every word has a color based on its primary stress—for example, green tea, silver pin, black cat, or brown cow (stressed syllables are underlined and bolded). Visit www.colorvowelchart.org for downloadable resources and creative uses on how to implement this powerful tool in any English language classroom.

Rubber Band Trick—This is a simple way to assist tactile learners with word stress, and can be taught using the 50 states. Model how to pronounce the state names (which are challenging to many English language learners) and have the students use the rubber band to stretch out the stressed vowel sound in each state name. Here are some examples: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, and Arkansas (stressed syllables are underlined and bold). Students will hold the rubber band between their thumbs and stretch it every time they pronounce the stressed syllable, which is pronounced LOUDER, loooooonger, and with greater emphasis than the other syllables.

Straw Trick—Students can use a drinking straw to help them differentiate between the problematic /r/ and /l/ sounds. They place a straw horizontally between their lips and when they say the /r/ sound correctly, the straw will remain in place. Conversely, when they say the /l/ sound, the straw will fall out because of the tongue placement.

Tongue Twister Trick—Tongue twisters, the default pronunciation activity for many English language teachers, are sentences constructed with similar sounds. I believe that they can be effective if the purpose is to exercise the jaw and the mouth muscles to enable students to speak the target sound with ease. For a variation to having students simply repeat these nonsense constructions, have them create their own tongue twister with a partner. The activity can be scaffolded by having the tongue twisters answer the following questions:

Who?

What did he or she do?

Where?

When?

Why? (because . . .)

For example, Sara (who) sang a song (what) at the seaside (where) on the sixth of September (when) because she saw sunshine (why).

Toobaloo Trick—You can purchase a small plastic device, called a *Toobaloo*, to magnify students' voices and provide them with auditory feedback. They will speak into the device and hear themselves making the sound they are struggling with. It is also an effective self-monitoring tool for individual students. If you are unable to find a Toobaloo, you can also purchase inexpensive PVC pipe joints from a home improvement store, and they should work just as well.

Vibration Trick—When teaching the present tense, be sure to stress the difference between the ending sounds. For example, the present tense verb “walks” ends with an /s/ sound and “watches” ends with a /z/ sound. To help students understand the voiced and voiceless sounds, I have them gently place their finger on their neck. When they say the voiced /z/ sound, they will feel their vocal cords vibrating. When they correctly say the voiceless /s/ sound, they will not feel any vibrations.

I frequently remind my students that “perfect practice makes (almost) perfect.” Native-like pronunciation does not happen magically, but with the abovementioned tricks we can help students speak with more confidence, ease, and fluency.

References

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