Engaging Adults toward Pronunciation Proficiency
by Ravneet Minhas and Tilla Alexander

Pronunciation involves far more than individual sounds. Word stress, sentence stress, intonation, and word linking all influence the sounds of spoken English, as well as the way we often slur words and phrases together in casual speech. English pronunciation contains too many complexities for learners to strive for a complete elimination of their accent, but improving pronunciation will boost self-esteem, facilitate communication, and possibly lead to a better job—or at least more respect in the workplace. Effective communication is of greatest importance to language learners, especially to those in the intermediate to advanced levels. Students also need to learn strategies for dealing with misunderstandings in communication that affect their lives. Many ESOL teachers and administrators, however, shy away from teaching pronunciation or fail to stress it as a major skill on which to focus in the classroom.

In our pronunciation workshop at NYS TESOL’s recent Annual Conference, we used resources from various authors, pronunciation websites, and successful activities we’ve come across and/or practiced with our students. We also discussed how different materials can be used in aiding the students with their pronunciation difficulties. In addition, we included a poster session depicting some of the techniques used in the Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center’s ESL 5/6 classes.

We used the following four questions as the basis of our presentation.
1. Why is pronunciation important in teaching?
2. Why do teachers neglect or shy away from teaching pronunciation?
3. Do you use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) in teaching pronunciation? Explain.
4. Do you have any classroom techniques you use to teach pronunciation?

Although we used resources from many educators, our primary resource was Judy Gilbert’s video from her presentation at the New School, entitled Seven Essential Concepts in Teaching Pronunciation, in which she focused on the above four items. We used a short excerpt to support the attendees’ explanations for the provided questions. After hearing their responses to each question, we provided Gilbert’s and our responses. Templates and practical applications in order to increase awareness and proficiency in teaching pronunciation were shown and described. We explained alternatives to using the IPA and demonstrated how the Color Vowel Chart created by Karen Taylor and Shirley S. Thompson can be effectively used. We showed how teachers can also use rubber bands, kazoos, clapping and movement to teach what Gilbert refers to as “prosody.” We also provided examples of games, songs, jazz chants, and limericks.

We gave the attendees an annotated list of useful websites. Some particularly good ones are listed below; the full list can be obtained by writing to Tilla Alexander at esltilla@gmail.com or Ravneetminhas@gmail.com.

Color Vowel Chart—http://colorvowelchart.org/
English Club Pronunciation Games—http://www.englishclub.com/esl-games/pronunciation/
Judy Gilbert’s video—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPmjGHdK5v8
Using Jazz Chants—
http://www.onestopenglish.com/skills/listening/jazz-chants/mp3-files-and-recording-scripts/
http://jazzchants.net/examples-with-teacher-notes?start=1
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