TEACHING TIP:
INTELLIGIBLE ACCENTED SPEAKERS AS PRONUNCIATION MODELS

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Recent research has highlighted the benefits of choosing intelligible accented speakers as pronunciation models rather than native speakers of English. (Murphy, 2014). These models may be easier to imitate due to a variety of factors, such as slower speech rate, similarity in physical appearance, and models perceived as being attainable—not "perfect." Such models are particularly helpful for improvement in pausing, use of prominence, and use of non-verbal communication to portray confidence in speaking a second language. Finally, the skills learned by doing this project can be applied to more communicative situations in which the speakers will need to apply these pronunciation features, such as teaching, training, or other public speaking.

Goals of Teaching Tip

1. To help students identify pronunciation features in their own speech which prevent them from being effective communicators in speaking English.
2. To demonstrate the importance of choosing appropriate intelligible non-native speakers of English as pronunciation models.
3. To show the process of "mirroring" such a speaker, non-verbal language included, so that students can practice and apply those features to their own communicative context.

This teaching tip demonstrates how intelligible accented speakers of English can serve as successful models for L2 learners. The teaching tip moves students from awareness of their own pronunciation challenges, through identifying appropriate models, through the process of mirroring such a model to applying the skills they have learned to their own communicative setting. Tips for ensuring a successful project are also provided.

This teaching tip is an adaptation of projects done previously using native speakers as models. (Goodwin, 2004).

The particular example illustrated here is one in which the student needed to work on pausing for thought groups, prominence, and appropriate non-verbal communication. Thought groups correspond to grammatical units of speech and are marked by pausing and pitch changes. Prominence (or focus) in English is marked by pitch and length changes.

Prominence (also referred to as primary stress, nuclear stress, or focus) is a key feature in how well English speakers make sense of speech. Hahn (2004) looked at the use of prominence by international teaching assistants and she found that English-speaking listeners understood lectures better when prominence was correctly placed. Furthermore, the speakers who used correct prominence were evaluated more positively.

The speaker used to illustrate the process is a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese, preparing to work as a TA (teaching assistant) at the University of Minnesota. Several clips (Mary, Micro-teaching #1; Mary, Mirroring Project, Cold Version; Mary, Mirroring Project, Final Version) have been included to document the process (and progress) of moving from the beginning of the project to the end of it.

Step 1—Identify major pronunciation challenge

The first stage of this process is viewing the speaker communicating in an "authentic" environment. In this case, "Mary" (not her real name) was introducing herself and her class to her students on the first day of her MT (micro-teaching). As we can see, "Mary" has quite good control of her segmentals, but her suprasegmentals, in particular her use of thought groups, prominence and intonation are sorely lacking. Her speech sounds fairly monotonous, and without turning up the volume on the recording, hard to hear at times. In addition, if one considers the teaching context, "Mary" appears lacking in confidence as a teacher and rapport with her audience based on her lack of effective non-verbal communication, such as use of gestures, use of facial expression, and use of body movement. Rapport (Gorsuch, 2003) has been found to be one of the biggest and best predictors of success as a TA in the US.)

Step 2—Choose appropriate model.

The second step is to find an appropriate model, taking into consideration the challenge(s) identified in Step 1. In this case, "Mary" herself suggested Yang Lan, a non-native speaker of English and native Mandarin speaker who is known as the "Oprah of China."

Viewing Yang Lan, one can easily see why "Mary" chose her as the model. Yang Lan is expressive, charismatic, and confident. She speaks in clear thought groups with very good prominence. In addition, she engages her audience through her use of non-verbal communication, including expressive facial expressions, body movement, and hand gestures. Finally, her speech is told as a "story," making her topic even more engaging.

Step 3—Mark transcript for pronunciation feature(s) and non-verbal communication.

The next step is to transcribe the speech (if not already provided). A length of about 1 – 1.5 minutes (roughly speaking, 5 – 7 sentences or thought groups) is enough but not overwhelming. Less than this can be a waste of time; more can be too much and end up frustrating the students.

Many students choose speakers from Ted.com. There are several reasons, such as: 1) The speakers are well-known in their field, so they are highly articulate and express their ideas succinctly in English; 2) A transcript for each speech is provided—not only in English, but often in an array of other languages; and 3) One can click on the part of the speech under study to hear a particular sentence (or thought group) repeated over and over again. This last point makes the Ted.com recordings particularly well-suited to this type of project.

Many features of English pronunciation correspond to types of body language (Acton, 1984). Speakers will enunciate stressed syllables more clearly than unstressed ones. They will use hand or head movements to highlight prominent words, they will insert a short pause or "breath," when they want to move from one thought group to the next, and they often use eyebrow movements or facial expressions to underscore intonation patterns.

In this particular example, Yang Lan (Lan, 2011) uses several types of body language to highlight the words which she makes prominent, e.g., she raises her eyebrows when she says "final" and she stands tall and bends over, literally "mirroring" the intonation pattern of the phrase, "China's got talent show" to highlight it's in China (not America). Since the transcript was basically provided by Ted.com, "Mary's" job was to divide it into thought groups, locate the focus word (prominence) and then draw in by hand the body movement which corresponded to each focus word.

Step 4—"Mirror" the original recording one thought group at a time.

At this step, students need to familiarize themselves with both the spoken language AND the non-verbal language. Sitting at the computer, they play each thought group, pause and then mirror the phrase to the computer. They can do this in two stages: 1) focusing only on spoken language; and 2) adding the non-verbals to the spoken language.

Step 5—Practice using read, look up, and say technique.

Students already have their transcript from Step 3. At this point, they type the script in large font, one thought group per line. Then, they make the focus word bold. Finally, they draw in the non-verbal communication by hand.

Once this is done, they work in pairs. Each person goes one at a time. This first person will look down and read the first thought group, then look up and say the thought group to his/her partner. It's crucial at this step to actually make eye contact. This serves two purposes: 1) It forces students to incorporate a long enough pause to separate thought groups; and 2) It reminds students of how important eye contact is in speaking English to communicate sincerity and not just to robotically "parrot" words.

Step 6—Record "cold" version.

At this point, students should make a video-recording. They can either record during class or do so at home. The recording should be viewed, and students should be asked to identify places where they are doing well and areas which can be improved. They should document this in some way for the instructor. After that, the instructor can make additional comments. (At the University of Minnesota, we make use of Video Ant, an online program that allows users to insert markers at specific points on the recording and leave comments at each point marked.)

At this point, the recording may be good "technically," but it may lack emotion and/or the tone of the original recording. These aspects will be dealt with in the final step.

Step 7—Record "final" version with emotion.

Finally, a week or so later, students can make their final recording based on their self-assessment and feedback from their instructor. For this "final" recording, they should either memorize the script or write it in large font and put the paper somewhere they can see it easily. They can perform the script as many times as they wish, focusing on the "big picture" and not worrying if they make a simple mistake.   Other students may be present and can serve as "directors" or audience members. Students often really enjoy this task and can serve as enormous help to each other.

To help them get into the "mood" of the original recording, students should talk about what the person is feeling in the original. Is the speaker enthusiastic? Sad? Angry? What is the speaker trying to accomplish? Teach? Inspire? Entertain? All of this makes the final product much richer and more beneficial for students.

Once the "final" version is recorded, it can be saved for the speaker and/or other classmates to view and learn from.

Tips for Success

In addition to the benefits of using Ted.com speakers, there are a few more tips worth mentioning.

First of all, all choices should be vetted by the instructor. One student in our class chose a speaker whose rhythm and intonation patterns made her unintelligible. This was actually beneficial because we could show the student why her choice was not a good one.

Typing the transcript in large letters, one thought group per line, is an effective and efficient way to help students get into the script. If they have a small hand-written script, they may end up just reading without emotion.

Getting the emotion right can be daunting in a second language. One technique which I've used with some success is to ask students to think of a time when they experienced this emotion, e.g., one of my students was trying to convince some people to vote his way. Only when I told him to imagine he wanted to convince US immigration to grant him permission to return to China to visit his ailing mother did he really "get" it.

Finally, viewing the recording with the sound off is a great way for students to observe the interaction between non-verbal communication and stress/prominence in English. It also helps facilitate the identification of emotion and tone. Students are often amazed at how much they can tell about what is being communicated simply by observing body language.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colleen M. Meyers is a co-author of two of the most widely-used textbooks in the field of ITA education: Communicate: Strategies for International Teaching Assistants (1992, re-issued in 2007) and English Communication for International Teaching Assistants: Second Edition (2012). Colleen has presented both nationally and internationally at the Teachers of English to Speakers of Second Languages conferences, as well as at NAFSA, and the Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Technology Conference.   In 2007, Colleen was awarded a Senior Fulbright scholarship to do teacher-training (primarily pronunciation) at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey. Colleen's primary interests include how non-verbal communication serves to enhance English prosody in academic communication.

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