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## TEACHING TIPS

### PEER-TUTORING PRONUNCIATION CONTRASTS: A FUN, EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM PROCEDURE

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Teachers with heterolinguistic ESL classes are sometimes reluctant to teach pronunciation because their students come from a variety of L1 backgrounds and have different pronunciation problems. Even when all students in a foreign language class speak the same L1, whole-class instruction is difficult because students are seldom equal in their ability to discriminate and/or produce contrasting English segmentals or suprasegmentals. This Teaching Tip report describes a peer-tutoring procedure that not only overcomes these challenges but actually thrives on them. In addition, it provides links to YouTube® videos that were shown in the PSLLT Teaching Tips session. Experience has shown that this procedure has many advantages: a game-like format that enlivens the classroom atmosphere, immediate feedback, individualization, automatic random sequencing, contextualization, and variation in student roles. Additionally, it provides students with persuasive evidence that correct pronunciation is important to meaningful communication.

## INTRODUCTION

ESL teachers whose students speak various native languages sometimes hesitate to teach English pronunciation because these students have different pronunciation problems to overcome. For instance, an Arabic L1 speakers' usual pronunciation challenges (e.g., /p/-/b/) are quite different from those of most Japanese L1 speakers (e.g., /l/-/r/. Even when all students in a foreign language class speak the same L1, they are seldom equal in their L2 pronunciation ability. For example, some Japanese L1 speakers may have already mastered the English /l/-/r/ contrast, while other Japanese speakers still struggle with it. These differences in students' pronunciation challenges make whole-class pronunciation instruction and practice difficult because focusing on one group's pronunciation challenges leaves the other groups bored or feeling like their time is being wasted. Other problems with many traditional, whole-class pronunciation teaching and practice activities are that (1) they frequently tend to be very teacher-centered and (2) procedures that involve merely repeating after or imitating the teacher can often be boring. As Bowen stated many years ago, "Production is an individual matter, and if meaningful guidance to students is to be offered, choral practice has serious limitations" (1972, p. 90).

This teaching tip presentation describes and demonstrates an instructional procedure that not only overcomes the challenges described above but actually thrives on them. In other words, it is especially useful when course members come from different L1 backgrounds and have different strengths and weaknesses in their pronunciations of English. Further, it involves students in

active, peer-to-peer interactions that are quite different from traditional whole-class, listen-and-repeat instruction.

Peer-tutoring activities in general have been used for decades in the development of many different skills with various types of learners (Newton, 2010). As Goodlad and Hirst (1989, p. 1) explain, "Peer tutoring is the system of instruction in which learners help each other and learn by teaching. Tutoring schemes have been used in a variety of contexts—with students teaching students, students teaching school pupils, non-professional adults teaching adults and children, and pupils teaching pupils." By their very nature, peer-tutoring activities offer an efficient and effective way of providing individualized instruction (Ehly, 1980).

Peer-interaction pronunciation-improvement activities, when used correctly, can also make the pronunciation class more student-centered, individualized, interactive, and lively. Advocated by Bowen (1975, p. 16), they were later utilized in textbooks such as Gilbert's *Clear Speech* (1993, 2001, see Figure 1) and to a lesser degree in Grant's *Well Said* (2001, see Figure 2). They are still recommended by Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010, pp. 322-323).

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***Pair practice***

Student 1 says sentence (a) or (b). Student 2 says the correct answer.

1. a. He wants peas.	Not carrots?
b. He wants peace.	Not war?
2. a. There's something in my eyes!	Call a doctor!
b. There's something in my ice!	Call a waiter.
3. a. What does "seize" mean?	To capture.
b. What does "cease" mean?	To stop.
4. a. Isn't this a good prize?	Yes, did you win it?
b. Isn't this a good price?	Yes, it's really cheap.
5. a. How do you spell "trace"?	T R A C E
b. How do you spell "trays"?	T R A Y S
6. a. Lies are terrible.	Yes, the truth is better.
b. Lice are terrible.	Awful bugs!
7. a. How did you like the plays?	They were great!
b. How did you like the place?	It was beautiful!
8. a. What does "Miss" mean?	An unmarried woman.
b. What does "Ms." mean?	A woman.

Figure 1. Pair practice activity in *Clear Speech* (Gilbert, 2001, p. 46).

**Rules and Practices 1: Syllables and -s Endings**
37



**Part B:** Say the statements and responses with the speakers on tape or practice with a partner as follows: Student 1 covers the responses and says statement a or b. Student 2 covers the statements and gives the correct response. Switch roles and repeat.

STATEMENTS (STUDENT 1)	RESPONSES (STUDENT 2)
1. <b>a.</b> She had a big <i>part</i> .	She did most of the research.
<b>b.</b> She had a big <i>party</i> .	She invited sixty people.
2. <b>a.</b> I helped the <i>hosts</i> .	They needed it.
<b>b.</b> I helped the <i>hostess</i> .	She needed it.
3. <b>a.</b> He <i>let</i> me borrow his car.	Last week.
<b>b.</b> She <i>lets</i> me borrow her car.	Regularly.
4. <b>a.</b> Do you have the <i>date</i> ?	It's on my calendar.
<b>b.</b> Do you have the <i>data</i> ?	It's still being processed.
5. <b>a.</b> He missed his <i>chance</i> to make up the test.	And he had only one.
<b>b.</b> He missed his <i>chances</i> to make up the test.	And he had three!
6. <b>a.</b> The airline found your <i>suitcase</i> .	Where was it?
<b>b.</b> The airline found your <i>suitcases</i> .	Where were they?
7. <b>a.</b> Her name is <i>Miss</i> Smith.	She's single?
<b>b.</b> Her name is <i>Mrs.</i> Smith.	She's married?
8. <b>a.</b> What do I owe you for the <i>ticket</i> ?	It was \$15.00.
<b>b.</b> What do I owe you for the <i>tickets</i> ?	They were \$60.00.
9. <b>a.</b> He lost his <i>folks</i> .	In the airport.
<b>b.</b> He lost his <i>focus</i> .	On the project.
10. <b>a.</b> I got an <i>eight</i> dollar fine.	Not bad!
<b>b.</b> I got an <i>eighty</i> dollar fine.	Too bad!

Figure 2. Pair practice activity in *Well Said* (Grant, 2001, p. 37).

In my instructional efforts to help English language learners improve their pronunciation, I have been using my own particular variety of peer-interaction activities for pronunciation practice (which this Teaching Tip explains) for nearly 40 years (Henrichsen, 1978; Henrichsen, 1980).

### GENERAL PROCEDURE AND STUDENT/TEACHER ROLES

The particular peer-interaction pronunciation-practice procedure that I use and advocate involves putting students in groups of two (or more) based on their English pronunciation strengths and weaknesses, and then having them tutor each other on various target contrasts. A student who is

“strong” in one area (e.g., an Arabic L1 speaker who has no trouble with the /l/-/r/ contrast) tutors another student who is “weak” in that area (e.g., a Japanese L1 speaker who has trouble even hearing the difference between /l/ and /r/). Later, they can reverse roles, with the Japanese speaker tutoring the Arabic speaker on /p/-/b/, which is a difficult contrast for the Arabic speaker but not for the Japanese speaker. While students work in dyads of this sort, the teacher circulates to keep students on task, answer questions, and adjudicate when students disagree.

## **MATERIALS**

Key to this procedure are sets of *Pronunciation Matters* peer-practice cards (Henrichsen, Green, Nishitani, & Bagley, 1999) or similar cards of your own making. The [Pronunciation Matters website](#) provides blackline card masters for 241 contrasting sound pairs (for vowels, consonants, consonant clusters, reduction and blending, word stress, sentence stress, intonation, and segmentation) that can be easily duplicated on a photocopy machine. Of course, independently minded teachers can make their own masters and cards.

Each set consists of twenty cards, ten that show one picture and sentence (e.g., for a word-stress contrast, a panting dog and *Look at that hot dóg.*) and ten that show a corresponding picture and sentence (e.g., a frankfurter in a bun and *Look at that hót dog*). These cards, with their pictures and minimal-pair sentences, provide structure for student tutors, as well as visual support of both the sentences’ meaning and of students’ progress.

## **LISTENING DISCRIMINATION PRACTICE**

Many previous writers (Chan, 2001; Flege & Eefting, 1987; Ingram & Park, 1997; Kissling, 2014; Schneiderman, Bourdages, & Champagne, 1988) have argued that in learning new sounds in a new language, perception generally precedes production. In other words, speech perception plays an important role in the acquisition of L2 pronunciation. Therefore, in this peer-tutoring pronunciation activity, listening discrimination comes first.

In each student dyad, the student who has difficulty with the target contrast (e.g., the Arabic L1 student who cannot distinguish /p/ and /b/) works on listening discrimination first. The student for whom the target contrast is not challenging (e.g., a Japanese L1 student who has no difficulty with the /p/-/b/ contrast) serves as the tutor. The two students sit facing each other with two cards (one for each sentence in the contrasting pair) lying face-up on the desk or table between them. The tutoring student shuffles the remainder of the cards and holds them in a deck where the other student cannot see the face of the top card. The tutor then looks at that card and says (i.e., reads aloud) the sentence written on it.

The other student must then point to the card on the table that corresponds to the sentence the tutor just said. The tutor then shows the face of the card (with the picture and written sentence) to the learner. If it matches the one the learner pointed to, the tutor gives it to the learner and then goes on to say the sentence on the next card. Thus, when the learner correctly points to the card that corresponds to the sentence the tutor said, the learner is immediately rewarded by receiving the card. As the activity proceeds, the learner’s increasingly large deck of cards provides continuing motivation and a feeling of growing mastery.

If the cards don't match, however, (i.e., the learner's perception was wrong), the tutor shows the learner the card and then puts it back in the deck. This "recycling" procedure results in extra practice for learners who experience difficulty perceiving the difference in the contrasting sentences. A learner may get well over 20 experiences with the 20 cards in the deck as they are recycled in this way. When the struggling learner finally receives the last card, his/her sense of accomplishment may be even greater than usual.

### **SPEAKING PRACTICE**

After the learner receives the entire deck of practice cards via listening mode, he/she is usually ready to move into speaking mode (see Figure 3 and link to related video). In this mode, the learner follows essentially the same procedure that the tutor followed before, with the tutor pointing to the card whose sentence the learner speaks. In other words, the student who was previously the listener now becomes the speaker and tries to give the cards away. After all the cards are in the hand of the tutor, the desired level of mastery over the contrast in speaking mode is considered to have been demonstrated (although some students may want to go back and practice more). Then the two students move on to the next step.

### **ROLE REVERSAL**

After a round of listening and then speaking practice, when the desired level of mastery has been accomplished, the two students reverse roles, and focus on a different contrast that is difficult for the student who was previously the tutor. In other words, the former learner becomes the new tutor of a different pronunciation contrast chosen because of its difficulties for the former tutor (e.g., the Arabic speaker tutors the Japanese speaker on a pronunciation challenge like word-final /r/ and /l/).



*Figure 3.* Students in pair practice with cards [bale-veil](#).

## COMPETITION IN TRIADS

For even more fun, students may work in triads, with one speaker and two (or more) listeners. The listener who points to the correct card first wins it (see Figure 4 as well as this video of three students competing in [bus-boss](#) and four students in competing [ghost-coast](#)). In this case, the competition to be the first listener to point to the correct card and “win it” adds an additional, game-like element to classroom practice. In my experience, this variation can be lively and enjoyable for the participants as they compete to earn as many cards as they can.



*Figure 4.* Students in triads compete in listening activity with cards.

## CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE

When the whole class is practicing in pairs or triads, the classroom dynamic is radically different from that of a traditional teacher-centered, repeat-after-me pronunciation class. As Figure 5 illustrates, students are all busily working on their own, different problems time pertinent to their strengths/weaknesses in English pronunciation at the same time. The related video clip shows the desirable classroom “buzz” that results from many students busily working simultaneously on different things in the same classroom. The atmosphere is more like that in a busy workshop or laboratory, which is a welcome change from the traditional, teacher-centered, whole-class, lock-step pattern.



Figure 5. [Whole class practicing different contrasts at the same time](#)

## ADVANTAGES

This procedure has many advantages, several of which have already been alluded to. First and foremost, a large class of students can work on many different pronunciation challenges that are pertinent to them individually, all at the same time. In other words, they can work on exactly the English pronunciation contrasts they find challenging and not waste time on those that are not difficult for them.

When they work as tutors, students' self esteem receives a boost, as they get to demonstrate their relative strengths in sound perception and production. This boost is comforting for students who may otherwise focus only on their pronunciation problems and begin to feel negative or discouraged.

Working in pairs, students receive immediate feedback on their pronunciation from their peer-tutor. In addition, the game-like format improves class atmosphere. Further, variation in roles as students take turns practicing listening and then speaking and alternate between being a learner and being a tutor enlivens the instructional process.

The cards—when shuffled properly—provide for automatic random sequencing in the presentation of particular practice words. Recycling the cards when learners mistakenly point to the wrong one results in a sort of automatic adjustment in the amount of practice students receive (as computer-adaptive software does) when they struggle with a difficult sound

Further, the target words are always presented in sentences on the cards. These sentences (and the accompanying complete stories, if learners are using a complete *Pronunciation Matters* unit) provide valuable contextualization that helps fill in any gaps in meaning.

Finally, the fact that the person who cannot understand a student's pronunciation of the target sound (in speaking practice mode) is a fellow student—not the “picky teacher”—provides persuasive evidence for students that (1) their pronunciation of the target sounds really is problematic and (2) correct pronunciation is important to meaningful communication.

## CONCLUSION AND CAUTIONS

Although this activity involves primarily student-to-student peer-tutoring, a teacher's involvement is still very important. Sometimes student pairs come up with spurious, incorrect ways of distinguishing the two members of a target contrast (e.g., using sentence stress or intonation to distinguish a pair of utterances that actually differ only in vowel quality). Also, sometimes students do not trust the pronunciation of their student partner who is tutoring them. In such cases, the teacher must be available to intervene, check, and if necessary, set things right. In other words, while students are practicing in pairs, the teacher (and/or additional teacher aides if they are available) must constantly circulate and listen to the students as they practice with each other.

Finally, despite its many advantages, the peer-tutoring activity described in this Teaching Tip should not be used as a steady diet. As is the case with any classroom activity—even a fun one—over-use can lead to boredom. In my pronunciation classes, I use this pair-practice activity in conjunction with a variety of other whole-class pronunciation improvement procedures that focus on challenges that are more general and apply to the entire class. We usually break into pair-practice mode only once or twice a week, and usually in the latter part of a class session that has involved other instructional and practice activities. Then, students welcome the chance to work on their individual pronunciation challenges in pair-practice mode with a fellow student.

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Lynn Henrichsen (Ed.D., University of Hawaii) teaches TESOL methods, materials development, and research methods, as well as ESL pronunciation and phonetics/phonology courses, in the Linguistics and English Language Department at Brigham Young University (Provo, Utah). During his TESOL career, he has taught, trained teachers, and/or conducted research in Mexico, Spain, Samoa, Brazil, Hawaii, Japan, Taiwan, China, Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, and Mozambique. He is the author of a dozen books and over 70 journal articles.

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