

TEACHING TIPS

TEACHING PRONUNCIATION THROUGH HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS: THE METHOD OF iCPRS

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While many previous classroom-based research studies aim at teaching pronunciation in a classroom environment, there is not always time in a lesson plan to include in-class pronunciation instruction. This teaching tip therefore focuses on teaching pronunciation through homework-based assignments called *innovative Cued Pronunciation Readings* (iCPRs; see also Tanner & Landon, 2009). This computer-delivered method of pronunciation instruction employs easily accessible technology, Microsoft *PowerPoint*, and has been shown to be effective in improving learners' L2 pronunciation skills in a pilot study with 22 first semester learners of German (Martin, 2015). Each iCPR unit is designed to require about 10 minutes of work. There are two kinds of iCPR units: perception and production training units. Both types of units contain native-speaker recordings of individual words. Perception training units then consist of two tasks: an accentedness detection task and a sound discrimination task. Production training units start with explicit instruction on the targeted sound and progress to active practice, for which the learners have to repeat individual words after a native speaker recording. At the end of a production unit, the learners have to record all words they practiced with recording software like *Audacity* and upload their productions to a course management system dropbox.

INTRODUCTION

While pronunciation has been shown to play an important role in effective communication (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010) and many previous studies have found that teaching pronunciation in a classroom setting helps to improve pronunciation proficiency among students (see Thomson & Derwing, 2015, for a narrative review), L2 pronunciation training is still often neglected in the foreign language classroom. Frequently stated reasons for this shortcoming are that many teachers do not feel comfortable with or adequately prepared to teach pronunciation and that in a full curriculum and system of standardized tests, there is no time to address pronunciation in the classroom (Breitkreutz, Derwing, & Rossiter, 2001; Derwing, 2013; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011; O'Brien, 2004). Furthermore, when directly asking teachers why they do not include pronunciation training in their classrooms, they often mention that singling out a student for a pronunciation mistake is perceived as harsher than, for example, correcting a student's syntax, which in turn makes teachers hesitant to single out students in front of the class. In this teaching tip, I therefore want to present a method of teaching pronunciation through homework assignments. Providing pronunciation training through homework assignments solves the problems mentioned above: it does not take up valuable in-class time, students are not being singled out in front of the class but rather get to practice in the comfort of

their own home, and even those teachers that do not feel adequately prepared to teach pronunciation can assign the exercises as homework.

THE METHOD OF iCPRs

Background

The homework-based method of teaching pronunciation that I present in this teaching tip is called *innovative Cued Pronunciation Readings* (iCPRs). This method is computer-delivered, but uses easily accessible technology (i.e., Microsoft *PowerPoint*[®]) that every student can access from a home or library computer. The method is based on *Cued Pronunciation Readings*, which were first introduced by Tanner and Landon (2009). It differs from the original version in that Tanner and Landon addressed pronunciation only on the level of sentence melody and stress, whereas iCPRs more generally target any L2 sound or suprasegmental feature that has been shown to impede learners' intelligibility in classroom learning.

General Design

Each iCPR unit is designed to take about 10 minutes for students to complete. That means that the pronunciation homework does not have to be the only homework assigned on a given day, but that it can easily be combined with other, more traditional, homework assignments. Usually, I assign three iCPR units for one pronunciation focus, e.g. the acquisition of a new vowel or consonant. The first of these three units is always a perception unit (see below for a detailed description), followed by two units focusing on production skills. This order is based on previous research that has shown that perception may precede production in L2 pronunciation (see Thomson, 2011, for a review). This means that second language learners often first learn to correctly perceive an L2 speech sound before they can accurately produce it. Often, when hearing a nonnative speech sound, learners assimilate the sound's features to a sound that is part of their native phonetic inventory and therefore cannot hear the difference. By training them to perceive the difference, however, we lay the groundwork to allow them to produce the sound more accurately (Flege, 1995; Thomson, 2011).

Another key feature in the design of iCPR units is embedded native-speaker recordings that serve as models for learners to imitate. Ideally, these recordings should be completed by several native speakers to account for findings in high variability phonetic training (HVPT) (see e.g., Iverson & Evans, 2009; Lambacher et al., 2005; Nishi & Kewley-Port, 2007, 2008). HVPT is based on the assumption that training learners to perceive sounds that are produced by multiple speakers yields better results than listening training that only includes speech produced by one speaker (Thomson, 2012).

At the end of every production-based iCPR unit, the learners are prompted to upload a recording of their own pronunciation to a dropbox on the school's course management system, so that the teacher can check for homework completion. It is very crucial to point out, however, that the teachers do not need to listen to these recordings and provide feedback. Rather, the learners improve their pronunciation simply by working through the iCPR units, listening to native speaker models, and receiving automated feedback in the binary choice perception tasks. The teachers can, of course, choose to provide feedback, and it is possible that doing so will even

increase the learning benefits for the students. Yet, teachers do not always have time to provide individual feedback; thus, it is important for teachers to know that this method has been shown to be beneficial to learners even in the absence of feedback (Martin, 2015; Tanner & Landon, 2009).

Perception Units

As stated above, the first day of pronunciation training always starts with an iCPR unit targeting perception (i.e., listening) training. These perception units include two types of listening exercises: an accentedness detection task and a sound discrimination task. The accentedness detection task uses native-speaker recordings of German words, each of which has a sound that is problematic for American English speakers learning German. The goal is to examine the learners' ability to discern native from accented productions of problematic L2 speech sounds in words that contain these sounds. To this end, ten new vocabulary items are presented to the students one-by-one on a Microsoft *PowerPoint* slide. On each slide, the students see the written version of a German word and can then listen to two recordings for the same word. One recording is always spoken with Standard German pronunciation, while the other recordings is intentionally rendered with an American English accent of the German word. The learners can listen to the recordings as often as they wish and receive the solution on the following slide (see Figure 1).

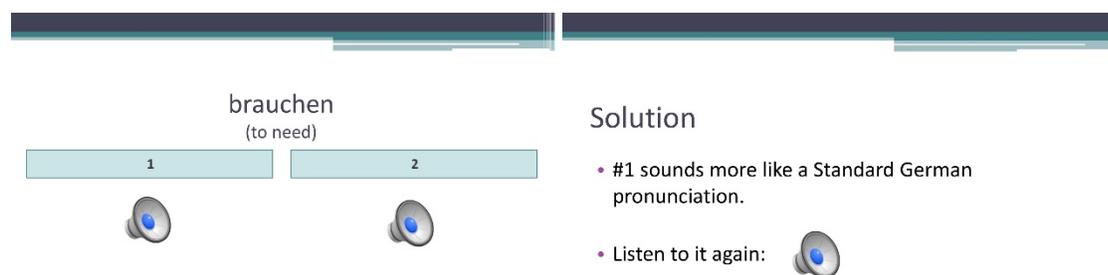


Figure 1. Sample slides for accentedness detection task in perception iCPR units.

The sound discrimination task then focuses on training the perception of problematic L2 speech sounds in contrast to similar sounds, which could easily be perceived as the targeted sound by an L2 speaker who is unfamiliar with the phonetic inventory of the L2. For example, when the focus is learning the German sound for the letter 'ü' (/y:/), the targeted sound would be contrasted with German 'i' (/i:/) and German 'u' (/u:/). For this exercise, the L2 speech sounds are embedded in nonsense words, that is invented words that are actually meaningless but have a sequence of sounds that is permissible in German. Nonsense words were chosen rather than real words so that listeners would focus entirely on the sound rather than the meaning of the word. Thus, based on the example above, learners would hear the targeted nonsense word 'püt' (/py:t/) contrasted with similar nonsense words like 'pit' (/pi:t/) and 'put' (/pu:t/). Just as in the first training block, students are presented with the nonsense words one by one on a Microsoft *PowerPoint* slide. This time, however, not the entire nonsense word is spelled out but only the orthographic correspondence of the targeted L2 speech sound (e.g. the letter 'ü' for the German sound /y:/). Again, there are two recordings given on each slide that students can listen to as often as they

wish before skipping to the next slide on which they receive feedback about the correct answer (see Figure 2).

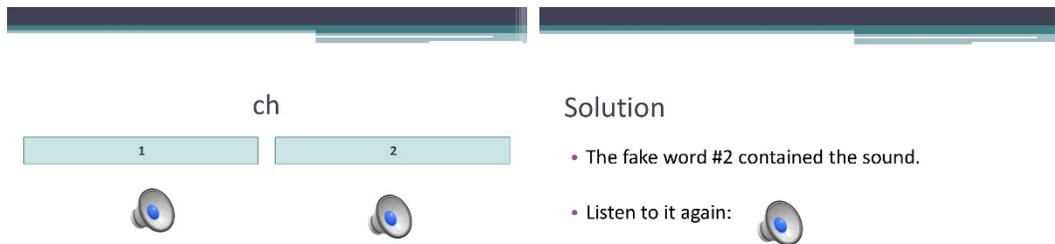


Figure 2. Sample slides for sound discrimination task in perception iCPR units.

Production Units

A day of listening activities is usually followed by two days of iCPR units focusing on production training. All production training starts with some explicit instruction delivered in the Microsoft *PowerPoint* presentation. When a new sound is introduced, for example, this means that learners read through some slides explaining what environments the sound is used in and how to configure the speech apparatus in order to produce the sound. This is followed by active practice. First, the learners repeat just the sound after a native speaker recording, then they progress to repeating entire words containing this sound. The practice phase consists of 10-15 individual words and the learners can listen to the native speaker recordings of each word as many times as they wish to practice. At the end of every unit, there is a *Practice Review* slide that contains a list of all words that were practiced in this iCPR unit and their corresponding recordings. This slide allows the learners to practice all words once more. The learners are then prompted to open recording software (e.g., *Audacity*, see next section) and to read all previously practiced words out loud (see Figure 3). The students upload these recordings to a dropbox on the school's course management system, so that the teacher can check for homework completion. I want to stress once more, however, that the teachers do not need to listen to these recordings and provide feedback.

Pronunciation of German <ü>

- The first important thing to know is that the sound Germans make when they say <ü> has no equivalent in English.
- That means, it is a new sound that you have to learn from scratch!
- For your mouth this means that it's not used to producing this sound and you need to actively control what your lips and tongue are doing to arrive at the right sound.

To produce this sound, say ee but pucker your lips as if you whistle.

Long German 'ü' is just like English 'ee' except that you round your lips!

This should sound something like:

Make sure you really round your lips a lot. You can even whistle a little first to make sure you really round your lips as much as you can.

No, you do not look silly! You are trying hard to get better at a foreign language. Two thumbs up for this from NPR!

Here is what is happening in your mouth when you produce 'ü':

- Your tongue is in the front of your mouth (go from saying oo as in who to saying ee as in he. You will feel how your tongue moves forward)
- The tip of your tongue is high in your mouth (go from saying ooh to saying ee. You will feel how your tongue goes up.)
- Your lips are really rounded.
- (When you say ee, your lips are spread. **Remember: the only difference between saying ee and ü is rounding your lips!**)

From English, you are not used to rounding your lips this much. But now you just have to practice doing it.

Okay, let's practice your best <ü>: just say 'ü' together with the recording.

Remember to pay attention to all your cues: tongue up and front, really rounded lips, think of saying ee.

Well done!

Practice Review

- überrachen
- Tür
- stöß
- grün
- Schüler
- Gürtel
- Spüle
- Füße
- müde
- drüben

Ok, now open your audacity program and record yourself saying the words from the list.

The entire list will be on the next slide.

Record yourself saying these words:

- überrachen
- Tür
- stöß
- grün
- Schüler
- Gürtel
- Spüle
- Füße
- müde
- drüben

Figure 3. Sample slides for production iCPR units.

Application Tips

A complete set of 30 iCPR units (i.e. ten weeks of pronunciation instruction) for novice learners of L2 German can be accessed here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/e3zolu9ffsr9x31/AABqiQKgxH1Xx8P2b56DkkYOa?dl=0>.

So far, iCPR units have only been designed for German, but they can easily be adapted for any other second language. I would recommend starting the design process by coming up with a list of L2 sounds or prosodic features, such as stress placement, that have been shown to impede the intelligibility of your learners. The next step would be to compile a list of words that contain the problematic sounds. This can easily be done by going through the vocabulary pages of the learners' textbook. These will constitute the word inventory that you include for practice in the iCPR units. The next step is to create a new *PowerPoint* presentation or to simply replace the words in the *PowerPoint* files that can be downloaded at the link provided above with your own words. It is very important that you provide a recording for each of the practice items. I recommend using *PowerPoint's* built-in recording feature. The recordings created with this feature are of good quality, very easy to record and insert on a slide, and, most importantly, many recordings can be embedded without increasing the overall file size too much. When embedding recordings that were recorded with another software or even a phone, the file size can quickly become too large, which makes it less convenient for your students to download the files onto their personal computers. As mentioned above, ideally, you would alternate between multiple native speakers when creating these recordings to account for findings on the value of HVPT. If you do not have access to several native speakers, however, this should not discourage you from creating iCPR units. Martin (2015) has found the method to be beneficial to first semester learners, even when all recordings in the iCPR units employed in this study were recorded by a single native speaker only. It might even be beneficial when having advanced L2 speakers serve as language models for the recordings; however, the use of nonnative pronunciation models in iCPR units has not been tested empirically.

As part of the production iCPR units, learners are prompted to record themselves and to upload their recordings to a dropbox on the school's course management system. The goal behind this step is not to provide individual feedback to each learner, but rather to ensure that the learners

complete the pronunciation homework exercises and that the teacher gets an overall impression of the learners' progress. For these recordings, I recommend *Audacity* recording software to my students (www.audacityteam.org). Audacity is a freeware program and very easy to use, and it is thus an easy solution for the learners.

Once the iCPR units for any language are created, they can easily be shared with colleagues at one's own school or at other schools. Just as with the creation of any effective teaching material, it certainly takes some time to create these units, but their design allows for them to be easily re-used and shared, which makes up for the time invested in their assembly. The design of three units per pronunciation topic further allows their flexible use as add-ons to an established curriculum. That is, if a teacher finds his/her students struggling only with some of the targeted sounds, s/he can always choose only to assign the problem-specific iCPR units as homework.

Distance Language Learning Environments

There has been a growth of learning environments over the past two decades, such as the development of online universities and hybrid courses, that is, on-campus classes with major online components. In light of these developments, it is important not only to think of language instruction in traditional face-to-face environments, but also in distance learning environments. Given that research on oral proficiency development, and particularly on pronunciation skills, in these new learning environments is still scarce (but see Blake, 2008; Blake, Wilson, Cetto, & Pardo-Ballester, 2008; Deutschmann, Panichi, & Molka-Danielsen, 2009; Isenberg, 2010), we currently do not know much about how to help distance learners improve their pronunciation skills in an L2. iCPR units, however, have great potential to be beneficial to online learners in this regard, as their design allows them to be integrated as an easy add-on in a distance learning environment.

CONCLUSION

Assigning pronunciation training as homework exercises by using iCPR units gives pronunciation training a place in every language curriculum without taking up valuable in-class time or singling out students in front of the class. The units employ easily accessible software, and once they are designed, they can be used by any teacher requiring no extra work or time commitment. Finally, iCPR units can also be used by teachers who do not feel adequately prepared to teach pronunciation in-class, allowing these teachers to give their students the additional benefit of pronunciation training without having to actively teach pronunciation in the classroom.

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