

Teaching English: Creating Accents

online talk by Cynthia Grover on 3 December 2025

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Transcript:

Hello, everyone. I'm Cynthia Grover.

Slide 1

Today I'd like to open a can of worms, namely teaching the pronunciation of English. Teachers are uneasy about teaching pronunciation – some of them, at least. So, perhaps, if we shed light on these worms, we might lure teachers of English into teaching pronunciation more confidently. One of those worms is teaching accents.

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Accordingly, This talk is called *Teaching English: Creating Accents*.

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My main message today is:

Please, I beg you, please correct incomprehensible pronunciation.

Many of these slippery and secretive worms are in fact the nuts and bolts of teaching pronunciation. In this talk, I aim to give a feel for the nuts and bolts of teaching English abroad or in a multilingual environment.

- For example, in your third year as a Modern Languages student. I went to Germany. My! A great experience!
- Or if you're thinking of changing career to become an English teacher
- Or maybe you're an English teacher or a student learning English and you're looking for some new ideas.
- I would like to thank all the English teachers and students over the years who have shared their practices and concerns with me. They're the reason that I'm well enough informed to talk about this topic.

I'm a freelance English teacher teaching adults in an international environment. I'm in Brussels, Belgium.

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It's been repeatedly reported in the literature: some teachers are not confident about teaching pronunciation. I see the evidence all around me.

- Many of my adult students remark that their written English poses no trouble, but they bemoan the difficulty they have in conversation.

- The usual culprit? Their poor pronunciation makes their interlocutor work too hard to understand them.
- The result? Their communication often stumbles or fails.

Of course, the longer a habit is reinforced, the harder it is to eradicate it. Consequently, early correction of incomprehensible pronunciation is time well spent.

Now, let's consider student and teacher goals.

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Students want:

- To be comprehensible working in English. My goal for them is that they should be able to work anywhere on the planet. This means that the student wants a comfortable, comprehensible accent, perhaps unique.

An accent can be constructed from the individual student's way of pronouncing English speech sounds, guided by the teacher.

Consequently, we need to know what teachers want, that is:

- They want to teach pronunciation competently and confidently

So, what kinds of accents are we talking about? Let's listen to one.

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I'm going to play you a comprehensible, and I think, pleasant, non-native accent from an *International Express* CD.

You can hear that Stéphanie has French as her native language, but I think she's very comprehensible and she has a pleasant accent to my ear.

Listen for her pronunciation of 'th' and 'r'. She's had to work at those. Listen also to her pronunciation of 'o'. It's not Received Pronunciation [əʊ]. So here we go.

Yes of course. I'm from Belgium. I live in Laforêt, in the south of Belgium. I'm a lawyer. We have two daughters, Emily and Lara. They are three.

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So, how does a teacher encourage a comprehensible non-native accent?

Let's define some terms that are often not defined for teachers before they start to teach pronunciation. Those terms should be defined. It will help us. They're useful bolts.

Now — what is an accent? It's the collection of speech sounds that a speaker makes, plus the intonation, speech rhythm, duration, and loudness patterns of the speech stream in which those speech sounds are embedded.

- In a statement, you hear my pitch rise and fall.
- So, in that sentence, you hear the vowels of the words 'pitch' and 'rise': so, for example, [ɪ] and [aɪ], and you hear the consonants p, ch [tʃ], r, and z.
- The vowel in 'fall' will be extra long to signal the end of my utterance.

Now let's define comprehensible.

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Comprehensible pronunciation, in my view, means:

- First: A speech rate that is not so slow that the speaker's hesitation distracts — that would be 80 words a minute or less than that — and not so fast that the listener has to jump over mental hurdles to understand. That happens at around 130 words per minute.
- A second thing for comprehensibility is that the lexical or word stress needs to be placed on the correct syllable. *Cambridge Learner's Dictionary* will do this for you. They will play out a

word — it will play out a word — in a British or American accent. It shows the phonetic script, and the stress is indicated in the phonetic script.

- Thirdly, of course, we need to pronounce necessary speech sounds such that each is understandable to a range of native and non-native listeners.

Naturally, standards exist.

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I'm mostly concerned with the standards of tools and examiners.

Both accept a range of pronunciation as correct. For example:

- Cambridge examiners (of which I'm one) are instructed to accept comprehensible non-native accents as correct.
- Tools, such as automatic speech recognition systems, accept a range of pronunciation as well. Two examples are *SpeechAce* and exercises created by *ChatGPT*.

Some standards unfortunately set relatively fast speech rates, for example, 120 words a minute, as a measure of speaking success.

- Logically, students infer from this that they are more comprehensible when they speak fast. Argh!
- Many students admit that they race over hard words and hope that the listener will not notice their errors. Oh dear!

So, let's lower that speech rate. Speakers, both native and non-native, are easily comprehensible at 100 to 110 words per minute.

- This lower rate gives them more time to organise the movements for difficult sound combinations, such as the consonant clusters in 'world' or 'twelfth'.
- Moreover, a slower rate than 120 words a minute gives listeners more time to process non-native speech and mentally correct its errors.

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As I look back over the years, my most frequent advice to students to improve comprehensibility is so simple: slow down!

Now let's now consider the opposite concept: incomprehensibility. It is not random — therefore not as chaotic as one might fear.

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I observe that my students' incomprehensible pronunciation is mostly due to three things:

- Firstly, pronouncing English sounds the same way as they pronounce their native language sounds, thus creating interference from their native language in English.

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- A second major cause of incomprehensibility is not practicing speech movements, especially for making new sounds that their native language does not have. Practice is vital to integrate new movements into the movement patterns for syllables and phrases.

For example, for a French speaker, saying [h] or 'h' is only half the battle. Integrating that 'h' into speech requires that they have enough movement control to insert it only where it's needed, instead of inserting it before every word-initial vowel or else omitting it everywhere. 'I have a question' often is uttered as 'Hi have ha question' or 'I ave a question'.

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- The third major cause of incomprehensibility is lack of student motivation.

- Some adults remark that learning grammar and vocabulary is easy. In contrast, they say acquiring the motor skills for pronunciation is hard.
- On top of this, they are frustrated and confused, as we all are, with the irregularities of the EN spelling system.
- Lastly, accent is identity, for many speakers. They in fact want listeners to realize that they are a native speaker of their native language, not of English.

So, these points cover student behaviour. Now let's consider teachers' habits.

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Why are teachers uneasy about teaching pronunciation?

As I go through the reasons, I'll suggest what the teacher can do to make their own and the students' tasks easier.

- It's worth noting that teachers might not identify, either tacitly or explicitly, the causes of their own and their students' discomfort with pronunciation. Explicitly identifying teachers' and students' needs for teaching or learning pronunciation ultimately makes it easier to decide:
 - what pronunciation to teach,
 - how to teach it,
 - and then to explain that approach to the students.

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One concern of teachers is that correcting pronunciation hampers students' willingness to speak.

- Yes, if it's done too often, that's certainly true.
- It's indeed best to not interrupt student presentations. One can correct the main errors afterward.
- Here's a little rule of thumb: Correct an error that impedes comprehension on its third presentation across several students.
- We do need a few principles: always correct incomprehensible pronunciation — sooner or later, but do it at some point, I would say.

Frequently, incomprehensibility is due to misplacing lexical stress. The student may not know where the stress falls. Or their native language has a stress pattern of which they are not really aware, for example, French word-final and phrase-final stress.

- So, use those iambs (French: jambes = our legs). Walk around the classroom! Break up the monotony of a class!
 - So, we can do something like: [fingers walking on the hand; stressed syllables in capitals] PRES – en – TA – tion. PRES – en – TA – tion. We walk around the classroom as a group. PRES – en – TA – tion.

Or we can clap or tap. So, for example, we can say [clapping on the stressed syllables]:

A - na - LYSE, A - na - LYSE.

If the stress is going to shift, a tiny little pause before that novelty helps. So, for example":

A - na - LYSE, A - na - LYSE, tiny little pause, a – NA - ly – SIS, a – NA - ly - SIS. After more repetitions, students won't need the pause any more, and they will be very proud of this.

So: A - na - LYSE, A - na - LYSE, a – NA - ly – SIS, a – NA - ly - SIS. The novelty has been integrated into the speech stream.

You might not hear my clapping due to the noise settings for the microphone. It cancels out noise, but my clapping is actually making some noise.

- The little pause before a new movement pattern breaks the existing movement habit and integrates a new one into the speech stream.
- Lastly, always correct pronunciation that will embarrass the student. This will help students to trust you and build solidarity in the classroom. So, for example, students need to know that they must say the 'th', [θ], in 'third' and not say 'turd' with a 't'. There are some other student favourites: mispronouncing 'beach' and 'sheet' with the letter [Author's correction: should be 'with the sound'] [ɪ] instead of [i].

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A question many teachers have is 'What accent should I teach?'

- There's no official dialect of English in the country and there are many standard native English dialects to choose from. That's my situation in Belgium. There isn't an official dialect of English here.
- Further, teachers say: My accent is not the same as the accent in the course materials. What do I do?
 - Well, yes. These are very valid points. Absolutely! We need to be brave.
 - The teacher's accent is the model by default, native or not. That's what the students are going to copy. Adherence to a particular native English standard accent is not a priority. Comprehensibility is.

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One has to tell students that there are many dialects and accents in English, and therefore many correct ways of pronouncing some English sounds, especially the vowels.

- I learned this the hard way. My students in Germany went to London, and they came back so disappointed after their school trip! They could not understand the London bus drivers. Of course all their course materials had Received Pronunciation as the standard accent, and the bus drivers in London... Well, Cockneys and Pakistani accents, Indian accents... you name it! So, for me, live and learn!
- It does help to point out that students need to produce a given speech sound in only one way, although they will need to recognise a range of pronunciations. So, in fact, they can pick a way to pronounce a sound, within reason of course.

The whole topic of comprehensibility can be discussed in class. For example:

- Who are the students' target interlocutors? In Brussels, 80% of my students' interlocutors are non-native EN speakers.
- What are the students' goals? Comprehensibility? An identifiably native English accent? Or to not have a particular accent? My Italian students really don't want to have a stereotypically Italian accent. Or perhaps the students need to pass an exam?
- What most of my students want is a comprehensible accent, not a regional accent, and not one that identifies them as a member of a particular social class. In fact, they mostly want a neutral accent. And this covers the whole gamut of my students: jobseekers, hotel receptionists, members of the European Parliament, European diplomatic staff, and many, many more.

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A third reason for dismay can be the phonetic alphabets. Phonetic alphabets should be a great help in teaching pronunciation. However, teachers say that teaching a phonetic alphabet is too much trouble and that students have enough work learning the unreliable, many-to-one English spelling to sound correspondences.

- Yes, that's true. But an entire phonetic alphabet is not necessary! Between only five and eight phonetic symbols are really needed. I've put my favourites there in red font on screen. These are for the sounds that students don't produce or distinguish comprehensibly, for example, the vowels in 'chip' and 'cheap'.
- There are many sound charts and phonetic alphabets online and in texts. Mark Hancock's are very practical.
- I note that about half the phonetic alphabets in my UK English textbooks defeat the purpose of a phonetic alphabet in a small way. This, sadly but predictably, puts teachers off using them. Namely, the alphabet uses the same symbol, that letter 'e', the seventh one from the left on screen. It uses that letter 'e' for two sounds that have different qualities, in addition to their difference in length. So [ɛ] and [e(I)].
- This ambiguity terribly confuses teachers and students alike. Students logically think that lengthening the vowel in 'met', saying [mɛ ɛ ɛ t̬], will produce a comprehensible pronunciation of 'mate' (M-A-T-E). Well, no, that doesn't work.
- It's best, therefore, to use one symbol only for one sound only, one-to-one correspondence, even if this means deviating from given course materials. Accordingly, let's use two symbols for the sounds [e(I)] and [ɛ]: that little backwards three there to the left of the letter 'e' in the slide is that symbol for [ɛ]. Everybody will be more confident, and happier with a one-to-one correspondence.

This distinction has long been accepted in non-UK phonetic alphabets and by native UK English teachers, such as Mark Hancock.

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Now, although my focus is on error-prompted correction of pronunciation, there is one moment when it can help to be a bit proactive. Early on in a course, I usually guide the students through all the sounds of English and show the variety of spellings for each sound. The list on screen is from O'Grady and Dobrovolsky 1987. It also includes the phonetic symbols, but in fact, the point here is the variety in the spelling. The student can see that the vowel in 'book', that double 'oo' spelling [ʊ], can also be spelt as in 'should' and 'put'.

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Lastly, the fourth cause of teacher unease is what we might call the nuts of teaching pronunciation: practices and habits that secure the content (those bolts) that has been taught. The teacher asks: How should I teach pronunciation? Different students have different pronunciation problems. I don't have time to teach them all in class or to reinforce their learning.

- Yes. Students from different native language backgrounds will make different errors. Luckily, the book *Learner English* by Swan and Smith, 2001, states what pronunciation errors to expect based on one's mother tongue. Very efficient! Five to eight expected problematic speech sounds is so much more reassuring than an entire alphabet of challenges.
- Another one of those nuts is practicing out loud. Any practice is good practice, even if the mistakes aren't all ironed out yet.
- 15 minutes per two-hour class can be scheduled as talk time. Students talk to each other in groups of four or so. That way, they all have a chance to talk. The teacher can circulate to identify errors in pronunciation.

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Class time is useful for seeing, hearing, and feeling the speech sound.

- The BBC has wonderful videos that show how each speech sound is made.

- For some particularly difficult contrasts, I tell my students to bring a spoon to class. A spoon. I will put it against the middle of my tongue. Watch the spoon fall and hear the click as it hits my upper front teeth as my tongue rises for [i]. For this, I have to turn off noise cancellation, so please bear with me for a few seconds as I do that.
- [Spoon handle in mouth. Click.] [i], [click] [i], [click] [i]. [I], [i], [I]. [Click] [i], [click] [i]. There. I hope you could hear the little click. For more examples of that sort of demonstration, watch Mark Hancock's video on *Sound Charts and How to Teach 9 Key Concepts of Pronunciation*.

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My comical appearance at putting a spoon in my mouth builds solidarity with the students. It's a bit of clowning! I enjoy it! It opens the way for discussing with the class its fears about learning to pronounce English sounds. It builds an atmosphere of trust. Students need a safe space for clowning as they mimic sounds and the large pitch range of English, which some of them, such as Dutch speakers, find overly dramatic.

I have had students who assumed that they would absorb the proper pronunciation from my course by osmosis. Wouldn't that be nice! They've forgotten what it is like to be two years old and many of them would rather not feel like a child again. So they need that safe space.

Also, cultural norms, like not sticking out your tongue, inhibit some students from pronouncing T-H 'th'. It's wise to discuss this point openly to understand students' resistance.

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Very importantly, teachers and students alike don't necessarily realize that pronunciation is fundamentally a motor skill! It's useful to explain to students that they're in fact learning a new sport: English!

- By analogy: they know how to play tennis. Some tennis skills transfer usefully to badminton. But some sounds need to change, and this requires new motor skills. Can one successfully play badminton only by reading a book about badminton? I don't think so.
- Now — it takes 40 repetitions to start a habit. The students' expectations of 'first time right' for a new sound need to be explicitly lowered. Otherwise, they get very frustrated. Physical exercise, that is, practice out loud, is in their future, and once they realise this, they won't be quite so frustrated.

As with other forms of physical exercise, work on pronunciation in small doses and often.

- Tictactoe, that little grid on screen, provides consistent repetition, putting in those 40 repetitions for practice. You might know it as noughts and crosses or x's and o's. I use that little exercise first thing in every class. I ask the students to pronounce a word. I draw the little grid on the board, and I say 'Please pronounce ... (whatever word it is)'. If they get it right, they get to put an x wherever they want in the grid. If they get it wrong, well, I get to put an o in the grid. The goal of course is three in a row to win (or in a column, or diagonally). If they win, everybody is happy, including me! Especially me!

Now — it's hard to integrate new speech movement patterns into syllables and phrases. We native speakers have trouble with tongue-twisters. It's a related problem. She sells seashells by the seashore. Similarly, a student may find 'Is he on hold?' difficult if their native language does not contain 'h'.

- So we're going to use rhythm explicitly to integrate speech sounds into a stress pattern. Tapping, clapping, walking around the classroom. Rap chants work too.
- Backtracking is especially helpful because it takes the student's attention away from the meaning of words and puts it squarely on pronunciation. Moreover, a rhythmic structure helps organise a phrase. Starting at the end of the phrase avoids stumbling over and over at the beginning of the intended phrase. So let's go through an example.

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We're going to backchain that phrase 'Is he on hold?'

- Start at phrase end and add syllables or words on the left successively.
- A little pause just before a difficult sound helps. Let's go. So [clapping on the stressed syllables]:
- HOLD, HOLD, HOLD, HOLD. Once we get the 'h' right in that, we can now move to 'on hold', adding from the left.
- on HOLD, on HOLD, on HOLD, on HOLD. Now it gets more complicated.
- HE on HOLD. And we might need a little pause in there, for example, HE [pause] on HOLD. HE [pause] on HOLD, HE on HOLD. And lastly:
- is HE on HOLD, is HE on HOLD

Videos by Hadar Shemesch show students how to structure a session of practice for pronunciation and integrate new speech movements into syllables and phrases.

Another thing: Set speaking practice as homework: when walking the dog, or in the shower, one can practice! It only takes five minutes a day. The 40 repetitions go fast!

Speaking practice can also occur with tools for homework. Automatic speech recognition tools provide feedback that identifies and corrects incomprehensible pronunciation.

- Now we're going to see and hear some *SpeechAce* output. There are other tools, but *SpeechAce* is the one that I most often use.

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- The exercise is the phrase 'That was a funny joke'. First, you'll hear *SpeechAce*'s pronunciation of the phrase. Then you'll hear my first repetition of the phrase, which *SpeechAce* awarded a 97% score to. Then you'll hear my faulty repetition of the phrase, which received the score of 91%, as shown on screen. So let's hear it.

That was a funny joke [*SpeechAce* voice]

That was a funny joke [My voice recorded by *SpeechAce*]

That was funny joke [My voice recorded by *SpeechAce*]

So, if you click on the red font (that's the location of the error), *SpeechAce* gives you feedback about the error. I didn't have enough of a vowel for 'a'; I omitted it. *SpeechAce* has suggested that 'a' [pronounced [e(i)]] is missing, as in [e(i)] 'funny joke'. On other runs of this exercise, it said that schwa [ə] was missing, so 'a' as in [ə] 'funny joke'.

Another option, if you have specific phrases in mind, is *ChatGPT*. I have got it to write software programs for me that perform many of the functions of *SpeechAce* and, moreover, put the scores in a file that the student can send to me. Important proof of practice!

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Here are two more basic principles amongst those nuts and bolts for creating an accent.

- Crucially: All sounds and all minimal pairs must be comprehensible as English.
- Secondly, but this is my preference: Each sound should be pronounced as in at least one native dialect of English. That [o] that we heard from Stéphanie in the recording at the beginning of this talk — that [o] exists in Scottish English. It's closer to the [o] in many other languages than is the [əʊ] of Received Pronunciation.

Here's a further tip. Use the spelling to advantage, when possible. Encourage the correspondence of one spelling to one sound. [r] is an example here. A non-native listener who hears three sounds in 'far' — [f] [ɑ/a] [r] — is likely to deduce that the meaning 'far' is what's

intended, based on its correspondence to the spelling of the word, which the student knows. Most students I teach therefore prefer to explicitly pronounce [r] rather than pronounce 'far' as [fa:'].

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Finally, let's go over those nuts and bolts of teaching pronunciation and so help teachers teach more confidently, I hope.

1. Decide what five to eight sounds need to change in the student's pronunciation.
2. Decide how to teach speech sounds: pick your poison from phonetic alphabets.
3. Teach sounds as necessary for comprehensibility. Reactive correction or error-prompted correction is mainly what I use.
4. Use recorded comprehensible non-native accents as encouraging models.
5. Give the student feedback on their pronunciation. This can be done with automatic speech recognition tools as well as in class.
6. Practice, practice, practice! I'm like a broken record. Practice! 40 repetitions will start a habit. More repetitions are probably needed to automate the habit and put it in syllables and phrases.

So, that's it from me! I'll briefly flash through the slides of the references.

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So, my references in the slides are in order of mention.

[Author's correction: Accidentally omitted reference:

International Express Elementary. (2012). *Student's Book, Unit 1, 1.1* ([Multirom Compact Disk] *Track 02 C_1.1*). Oxford University Press.

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Slide 30

On this last slide, I've put my example *ChatGPT* exercise. It's on my website, along with the instructions that I gave to *ChatGPT*, so that you can see how easy it is to create exercises yourselves that use really very advanced tools.

So, thank you for listening. I'd be delighted to answer your questions and hear your comments. Thank you so much.