



Finding your voice in your second language

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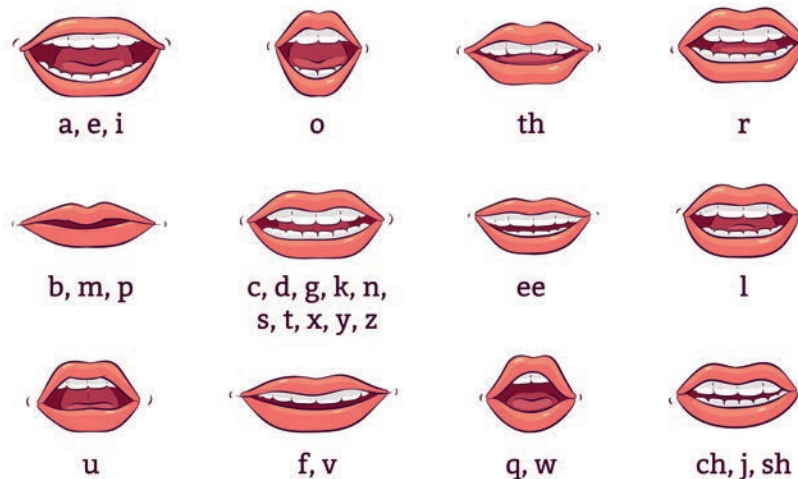
looks at learning and teaching pronunciation.

My first English teacher was an unusual one: he was a former RAF pilot who'd picked up some English during the war. I was sent to him for extracurricular lessons aged ten, as in those days Russian was the only available foreign language in Polish schools. When my school introduced English as a subject, we listened to lots of recordings which we had to repeat – it was the audiolingual method at its best. Our teachers rarely used English to speak to us; they mainly explained grammar and gave us sentences to translate. Pronunciation wasn't a priority.

One day, my great uncle came to visit. He had also spent some time in England after the war. My grandma asked me to read a passage from my coursebook for him to check how my English was. I did, and he commented that my accent was good. I don't think it was and I don't think my great uncle was in a position to assess it, but it'd been the first time I realised there was such a thing as accent and that it could be good or bad.

The first L1 English language speaker I met was at university where I studied English philology. One of the first-year courses was phonetics, and I remember I was so excited that finally someone would teach me how to speak in English. But sadly, it was purely theoretical. They taught us how different sounds are pronounced and we were tested on where in your mouth they were made, which we had to mark on a graph. So I knew that 't' is alveolar but 'k' is velar and that they are both plosives, but I had little idea how to pronounce them properly. We were expected to reach L1-like pronunciation – and received pronunciation (RP) English was the model. That was also our dream. We had tapes to listen to, but no practical guidance. It was more a go-and-find-out approach to teaching students then, however, the only place to go to was a library, which wasn't much help when it comes to learning pronunciation. My grades were much lower now than in secondary school, and I felt it had been so because my pronunciation was not good enough. The fact that I knew grammar or vocabulary couldn't compensate for my lack of confidence when it came to speaking.

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When I was choosing my studies it wasn't with the aim of becoming an English teacher, but in those days it was the only option, so I ended up teaching in a secondary school. I started learning with my students: I felt like the best in class who had done the lesson before coming to school. But I must have been a lousy teacher. At first I was afraid to speak English for fear of making mistakes that my students would pick up on. Then I realised they wouldn't notice and if I wanted them to speak, I had to set a good example. But still, I was afraid to be a role model. I felt this person needed to be perfect and I knew that I wasn't. It took some more time for me to gain confidence and to understand that the only way to learn to speak is through speaking and, as the old saying goes, you don't need to be perfect to start, but you need to start to be perfect.

I got a job in a language school and the requirement there was to run the lesson in English. I had no choice. I used the fake-it-till-you-make-it approach. I was only hoping that none of my students would have better pronunciation than me. I was preparing my lessons carefully, paying a lot of attention to what and how I was going to speak to them. Gradually, I became more comfortable using English, although I still didn't have many chances to confirm it with L1 speakers or foreigners.

In 1997 I started to work for a British Council/Polish Ministry of Education in-service teacher training (INSETT) project and was sent to Cambridge for my first teacher development course abroad. One of the course participants, from Vietnam I believe, told me he prefers to listen to me speaking English than to

our L1 speaker trainers because he understood me better and struggled to understand them. This made me think about who the English language belongs to in the contemporary world. And it was a great confidence booster for me, so much so that I started running sessions as a teacher trainer myself.

Soon my confidence was shaken again. When I was doubting if my English was good enough to become a teacher trainer, my English friend, partly as a joke, said: 'Your English is not bad. It's your pronunciation that is sometimes funny'. On a positive note, it made me check every single word I wasn't 100% sure how to pronounce and I rehearsed my training sessions before I delivered them.

The more I worked in English – delivering sessions, communicating with people, taking part in discussions, asking questions at conferences – the more my obsession with pronunciation faded away. I feel very flattered when someone compliments my pronunciation, and I still feel those stings of anxiety when I can't get my message across with L1 speakers. I'm much more resistant to communication problems with L2 speakers as I understand we all come from different backgrounds.

On the other hand, when someone you've just met says 'Your English is very good' they usually say so because they find your pronunciation easy to follow. I believe pronunciation is such a sensitive



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subject because it's more personal, more like part of your identity than any other area of language, like grammar or vocab. Incorrect pronunciation makes you vulnerable and you can easily become an object of ridicule. It's also the first thing that comes across when you start a conversation, and a good indicator of other skills. As an examiner, I observe that if someone's pronunciation is good, other skills are usually at a high level as well. It's unlikely that a student with good pronunciation will have poor grammar or vocab, but it happens the other way round quite frequently.

Because of my own experiences as a teacher, I think I can understand my teachers better as a teacher trainer. I try to get my philosophy across: first, confidence, then a lot of practice (listening and speaking in all possible contexts). And I tell my teachers: 'If you don't feel confident, learn with your students.' The more time you spend with them practising pronunciation, the better you and they will become. The worst option is denial and withdrawal, it leads nowhere.

When it comes to pronunciation, the role of motivation and engagement cannot be underestimated. Once I went with a group of Italian teachers to visit a primary school in the Norwich area. The teachers' English was

B1/B2, the students were L1 speakers. It wasn't easy for them to understand each other at first but they really wanted to communicate and had a common context which helped. After a few first awkward minutes, I saw little groups or pairs standing close to each other, heads bent down or tilted, talking, asking for clarification, checking understanding and enjoying the whole process immensely.

Every model appears perfect and unattainable before you start mastering the skill, no matter what. That's what the model is for. When you go to the gym and see a very fit person, it can also discourage you. And it takes a lot of motivation to try and follow them, but that's the only way to become similar. There's no hegemony of one 'right' model anymore, unlike the RP when I was a student, and this is a natural consequence of globalisation, social media, availability of tourism and generally the world becoming a global village. On the other hand, because of easy access to L1 speakers, many teenagers may want to speak like their idols. It's not always a realistic expectation; that's why focusing on the core features seems to be a good method to follow.

Teaching pronunciation needs to stop being an elephant in the room. But it can't be taught separately; it permeates all other teaching and should be taught accordingly, right from the word go. Assessing pronunciation is a very sensitive area and so is feedback, as pronunciation feels like part of your personal characteristics rather than something you can learn from a book. Projects like Erasmus or eTwinning are so popular, because giving learners a chance to actually use the language for communication with other speakers of English, L1 or L2, is a motivating factor and encourages learners to try harder to practise their own pronunciation and to be sensitive and tolerant to the pronunciation of other speakers. It is accepted that grammar is difficult, but people somehow expect you to be able to pronounce words in a correct way. This makes learning and teaching pronunciation so special and different to teaching other skills.



Małgosia Tetiurka is an English teacher, teacher trainer, materials writer, and conference presenter. She has been teaching English for more than thirty years, covering every age and level, but she has always particularly enjoyed teaching children. Nowadays, she mainly shares her experience as an in-service teacher trainer. She has worked with teachers in various countries, including Croatia, Lithuania, Russia, Estonia, Ireland, Kazakhstan and China. Additionally, she serves as a Cambridge ESOL Oral Examiner for all proficiency levels. Małgosia has authored teaching materials for Oxford University Press and Pearson, as well as online materials for Cambridge English Language Assessment.