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Lend me your ears for the kids pronunciation class

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Pronunciation is one of the building blocks of learning languages. It is essential for listening and speaking, and it has its remarkable benefits in the realms of reading and writing. If it is so vital, why do many EFL teachers fear teaching pronunciation?

When I started teaching, I didn't feel confident, or skilled enough, and I knew that even though I realized that children learnt happily through games, songs and stories. I felt there was something missing. I later discovered what this might be.

One of the reasons why teachers are not very confident when teaching pronunciation has to do with all the meta-language associated with it. We are taught to master the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), a thorough description of vowels and consonants, the organs of speech and so forth. The problem appears when we it comes to teaching: we simply cannot transfer all this knowledge in the same way to our EFL class. We know that every time we teach vocabulary or grammar the pronunciation of words should be taught as well and usually, young learners are spontaneously aware that English feels and sounds different from their mother tongue. To act on our learners' suspicions, we show them how to articulate a sound by saying: "Put the tip of the tongue on the little mountain that is behind the teeth and say /d/. It is not like Spanish." Moreover, we want children to keep a record of that new sound after this explanation, or even use the IPA alphabet to illustrate that sound. Through this technique, our learners cannot be any farther from the acquisition of any sound. Their brains quickly become overloaded and blocked when we use meta-language to teach young learners. It is more than they can take.

Now that we know so much about the brain, we know that when the brain is "jammed", a chemical called cortisol is released, acting as a major learning blocker. Hence, using meta-language to describe sounds is definitely a "no-no" in children's classes. Intuitively, we know that children learn in a different way by making sense through experience, and games provide that context. So if children do not learn in the way we teach,

we should teach in the way they learn. Children love games such as 'I spy.' For instance, if the teacher says: "I spy with my little eye something beginning with a voiced alveolar plosive," young learners would not profit from those words at all: that is definite a "no-no" in this context, as it is definitely not going to work. Young learners are not going to join the game because it is an overwhelming talk about language, not a game to play. How about a teacher saying: "I spy with my little eye something beginning with d d d." What would you expect children to say?



The objective of this task is to work with the consonant /d/. It is effective only when students can pronounce the alveolar /d/ sound. And this is difficult, especially when the tendency is to associate non-existent sounds with the nearest sound in the mother tongue (Jenkins, 2000), so /d/ will be /θ/ for Spanish speakers. Consequently, if young learners are taught a word like 'day' learners will say 'they'. The question is how to approach the sound if describing or showing the place of articulation is not effective to young learners (Palavecino, 2021b).

'I Spy' can be indeed simple. Teachers are usually under some degree of pressure, so there is no need to devote whole lessons to pronunciation. It may be advisable to integrate this activity to the lesson plan, after teaching new vocabulary or grammar. There is little preparation and they can focus on sounds at the beginning, at the ending of a word, and within the middle of the word. But the joy of any game can be lost in the quicksand of meta-language. Although 'I Spy' can be a seemingly perfect game, making children practise sounds that they cannot produce, or that they produce incorrectly, is pointless and even misleading, even if the context is a game. They may have fun, but they will not learn.

Another typical pronunciation task maybe the 'minimal pairs' practice. Learners benefit from developing phonological awareness of the sounds in contrast (Schmidt, 1993). We know it is important to distinguish /i:/ from /ɪ/ because it also brings about disruption in communication. In some languages like Spanish, there is no distinction between "long" and "short" vowels (Jenkins, 2000). So unless you work on the sounds in contrast, learners will not develop phonological awareness. Furthermore, the typical 'Listen and Circle the word you hear' will not work with young learners.

We can explore other formats to practise minimal pairs with children and get a good result: 'Noughts and Crosses' in motion. Teachers can add movement to this task. The teacher divides the class in two groups. She or he draws a grid on the floor and places flashcards that contain long or short vowels in each square. She or he reads a sentence containing a word such as 'bins' or 'beans'. The first student to jump on to the right square stays there. The winner is the group that can make a line of three children in a row (Palavecino, 2021a).

Children learn because they are physically active, their brains release hormones like dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins which can improve concentration and focus. Additionally, physical activity helps to form neural connections in the brain that improve memory, language, and problem-solving skills (Palavecino, 2021a). After exploring some activities we can come up with a list of do's and don'ts when teaching young learners, and this can help us shape the way we teach, which can be seen in the following figure:

The do's and don'ts of pronunciation learning	
Children learn when they..	
Do's 	Don'ts 
Make sense of tasks they are doing (Piaget)	Use meta-language
Play <u>games</u>	Blind repetition
Motivate learners to be part of the tasks	Read and write/answer etc
Connect their cognitive and physical development	Foster Cognitive development
Foster multisensory tasks	Perform tasks independently

If children acquire the wanted sounds in this way, we need to follow an approach that is compatible with the way they learn when we teach pronunciation. It is at this point when Phonics seems to fit in, as it trains learners to hear sounds in words without resorting to any

form of metalanguage. So the letter 'A' is /æ/ and not /eɪ/ and so on. Letters are called in accordance with the way they sound and not by their name in the alphabet. So when children are learning a new word, they can sound it out. Reading and writing develops easily when children are phonologically aware of the relationship between sounds and letter shapes. Little by little, teachers train young learners to hear sounds in words. And these sounds are given names of characters that are part of a story. Phonics could be the most appropriate approach to teach pronunciation and spelling to young learners because it works with stories, fantasy characters that makes the sound-spelling relationship memorable, as well as songs and games. Yet there is a downside to it: this technique has been created for native speakers of English; hence these songs and games of course include sounds through characters, but these young native speakers of English already know how to produce these sounds.

Young learners —who are learning English as a foreign language— may fully grasp the sound-spelling relationship as they work, for example, through a character such as 'Vicky Violet'. The major problem for non-native speakers is that they need to acquire the targeted sounds first. A Spanish speaker will make no distinction V or B. So >Very< will be >Berry<, and here stands the much-needed "missing link". Phonics for the non-native speaker is another pointless procedure if it is conducted in the way it is presented to native speakers of the language. It logically follows that a child will simply not develop any phonological awareness if s/he keeps saying 'Ban' instead of 'Van', or 'Berry' for 'Very'.

This is what I suggest doing: If stories are so powerful, because they connect the narrative to emotions, we might as well use stories not only to make the sound spelling noticeable, but also to teach a new sound that non-native speakers do not have. Let me introduce the reader to 'Emopron stories', which I look upon as the "missing link" (Palavecino, 2022a). This entails the use of a teaching tool that fosters acquisition of new sounds naturally. Children will remember what is anchored in laughter, fun and emotion. For example, the /v/ sound can be introduced through a story called 'The Elves' magic Moves' (Palavecino, 2023). Through fantasy characters, children learn to make magic moves. By hugging the upper teeth with the lower lip, the Elves make magic moves to bring people

together magically. The conflict is presented when the villain Dwarfs make the Elves fall and lose their upper teeth: the magic is lost. The magic move ‘vat a vat, vet a vet, vest a vet’ turns into ‘bat a bat, bet a bet, best a best’. In the story, the Tooth Fairy works his magic and sends the teeth back to the Elves’ mouth, and the magic is back. The Elves’ magic moves make more people join the move and they are happy. In the end, they forgive the villains and end up making the V moves all together. In this way, not only will children notice and remember naturally the place of articulation of both /v/ and /b/, but they will also remember the basic distinction in the minimal pair (/b/ vs. /v/). After the acquisition of a new sound, teachers can go on with the activities to relate sound to spelling, such as the ones introduced by phonics. But the “missing link” has been unveiled.

Our job as teachers is to find a path to teaching pronunciation effectively, and our learners’ job is to enjoy the path and learn. If learners cannot stay on the path to the teaching goal that we have created, we need to build a new path for them to safely arrive at the desired linguistic destination. Interestingly, our brain is framed for storytelling. Stories are powerful because they create an emotional bond with the audience. Our brain is prepared to remember things that are connected to emotions. It will remember what rests on emotion, laughter, and whatever may cause surprise. Why not use stories as a “memorable” strategy to teach new sounds? (Palavecino, 2021a).

Personally, I consider Emopron stories to be a new stage in the teaching of pronunciation for the EFL young learner (Palavecino, 2022a; 2022b; 2022c; 2023). We may take for granted that the EFL learner learns how to pronounce a sound through our sole description of it and our jump into practice: this procedure can be fun but children simply will not learn. My presentation is based on the exploration of various examples of Emopron stories which will foster the successful acquisition of new sounds by the non-native speaker of English.

References

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