Two pronunciation lessons

Roslyn Young and Piers Messum

This year, International House created the Brita Haycraft scholarhip for Better Spoken English and invited entries on the theme of 'The best pronunciation class I ever taught'. It is hard to select one's very best class, but we each reported on recent classes that we were happy with.

Our accounts make reference to the Pronunciation Science charts that we have designed, based on Caleb Gattegno's original Silent Way charts. Since some people will be unfamiliar with these materials, we start by briefly describing them.

The PronSci wall charts

There are three types of chart: the Rectangle, Fidel and Word charts.

On the Rectangle chart (fig. 1), each of the sounds of English is given its own rectangle and distinctive colour. These colours are then used in the letters of the words on the Fidel and the Word charts.

The Rectangle chart is divided into three: the vowels are in the top section, the consonants in the middle and a set of dots are placed in the lowest section. The dots represent the weak 'vowel' sounds of English: schwa, schwi and schwu. In the American version, there is a dot for a fourth sound, a 'schwr', which is our name for the rhotacised schwa in the second syllable of 'better'.

These weak sounds are shown as small dots rather than rectangles to visually reinforce the fact that they are very different from the true vowels: they are produced with low energy and are typically very short. Their position at the bottom of the chart indicates that they are always unstressed. When the teacher points the sequence of sounds that makes up words using rectangles and dots arranged in this way, she makes the stress pattern of a word inescapably clear to her students.

The Rectangle chart provides a synthetic view of the English sound system, so that every time a student has to choose a sound, he sees all the possibilities in front of him. This very quickly sharpens the class's awareness of both the system of the sounds and the need to differentiate individual sounds. A student can be ignorant for the moment of the way he should go about saying a sound, but he cannot ignore the fact that it exists and that there is work for him to do on it.

Note that the dots are also found on the Word charts under all the words which have strong forms but which can be, and usually are, said with their reduced ones (e.g. /əv/ rather than /ɒv/ for 'of'). Indicating both the stressed and unstressed ways of saying these words informs the students of this aspect of English and demands that they develop criteria for choosing between them.

The Fidel (fig. 4) exhaustively displays all the spellings used in English for any given sound. The common spellings for any one sound are written with large letters, while the unusual spellings are in a smaller size, so they are available but not prominent. The Fidel allows students to undertake a detailed investigation of the complex relationship between sounds and spelling in English.

The 16 Word Charts (fig. 2 and 3) contain the functional vocabulary of English. Each word is colour-coded so it is only necessary to point a word for the class to be able to read it, say it and write it. As well as showing the weak forms of English, these charts show other areas where pronunciation varies according to function. For example, 'have' is shown separately from 'have to' and coloured differently from it, because the pronunciation of the latter becomes /hæf tə/ in phrases like "I have to go."

Using the charts

Whenever there is a problem with pronunciation, the teacher can deal with it in a micro-lesson using whichever of the charts is most appropriate. For example, vowel reduction in a familiar word might be worked on using the Rectangle chart, the pronunciation of a new word might be clarified on the Fidel, and the word order of a sentence might be shown using the Word charts.

The teacher uses a telescopic metal pointer to point out sound, spelling or word sequences. She will have more pointers available so that one or more students can take over when appropriate. Pointing on charts that are visible to all means that the whole class can follow and participate in the work that is done.

Pointing also means that the students have to hold in their minds whatever sequence is being pointed until it is finished. This is a great boon. As soon as the pointer leaves a sound or a word, the students cannot retrieve

what was touched unless they have actively noted it. This forces them to attend to what is being done.

The pointer also allows the teacher to introduce the dynamics of English into sentences. These dynamics include the system of stress and reduction, intonation and the way words are grouped. The movements of a pointer can illustrate all these things. And pointing strings of sounds and sequences of words, rather than using static written material, introduces an authentic ephemeral quality to any work on language.

Colour rather than symbols

The use of colour has the advantage of faithfully representing the sound system, while not introducing a new written code, the IPA symbols. Words are shown using their normal spellings, but with their pronunciation simultaneously indicated. This allows students to develop a sense of the correspondence between sounds and graphemes in English, a synthetic view of which is given by the Fidel.

Incidentally, the aim is not for the students to memorise the colours of the rectangles. Rather, it is for the colour distinctions to trigger the articulatory exploration that is needed to learn to pronounce English. The correspondence between the sounds and the colours is established by use and familiarity, not through memorization. In fact, it's not uncommon for a few students to never learn this correspondence; if they have done their mouth gymnastics satisfactorily, then the teacher, and they, will be very happy with their work.

The charts are suitable for working with students of all levels, allowing them to explore the pronunciation of English from whatever their starting point. The combination of three types of charts and a pointer allows a teacher to intervene at every level that might be necessary: sound, word, phrase, sentence, stress, intonation and so on.

Now, here are our two lessons.

Teaching stress and reduced forms using a fidel

Very recently I worked with a group of about 20 French adults who all had between five and seven years of school English. They said they had difficulty understanding English speakers.

I put the British English Fidel (fig. 4) on the wall. A fidel is a chart which groups together all the possible spellings for each sound, the different sounds being distinguished from each other using colour: all the spellings of /e/ in blue, those of /m/ in orange, etc. The vowel spellings are placed at the top of the chart in nineteen blocks of colour with the twenty-four consonant blocks underneath.

The PronSci Fidel adds a third section for English, the schwa family, consisting of schwa itself, schwi (found in 'happy' and the first syllable of 'between') and schwu (in the second syllable of 'influenza'). These sounds are placed at the bottom of the chart because they are produced with low energy. Seeing them, rather than just listening for them, helps students to learn to pronounce.

I wrote the word 'variety' on the board and asked them how many syllables it had. Most guessed three, since they don't hear the third syllable at all. One or two guessed four. I indicated that they were right and asked for a volunteer to come out and divide the word into four syllables using strokes, thus: va | ri | e | ty. Then someone else tried to point it on the Fidel. But she pointed all the vowels at the top of the chart, effectively putting a stress on every syllable, as French people so often do when they speak English.

I indicated the bottom section of the chart and she realised that she should find something down there. She pointed a schwi in the syllable 'ty'. I nodded, indicating that this was better than before, but gestured that I wanted more of them. She managed to add one schwa, then tentatively tried another, pointing the vowel sounds of the first, third and fourth syllables in the schwa family section. The pointer moved down, up, down, down, reflecting the energy used in each syllable. The class said the word as she had pointed it and I nodded.

What a shock! 'Variety' has three reduced vowels! They had been giving full value to the vowels in all the syllables. Now they realised why they couldn't understand native speakers!

They practised the word several times, getting the feel of it into their muscles. As we continued, looking at other words and sentences they found difficult in English, they learned how to use the schwa section of the chart and to speak accordingly. For example, "It's a quarter to seven," has seven syllables and uses the bottom of the chart five times. Another shock. But discoveries like these came to seem more natural as we continued to work.

In this lesson, the students properly engaged with the schwa family of sounds. They discovered what English speakers do, and that they could do it too.

Roslyn Young

How word pronunciation helps word grammar

There are some important words in English that cause any number of problems for learners because they're actually two words; with different pronunciations and meanings but – unfortunately – the same spelling. And they're very common. I used four of them in my first ten words above: 'there', 'some', 'that' and 'any'.

When these words come up in a class, a good way to clarify their meaning and grammar is to start the work with their pronunciation.

For example, I was recently teaching a class of migrants in London and one student missed an existential 'there' from the beginning of a sentence. His puzzlement about 'there' was quite general, and I felt that the class really had to sort out the different meanings of this word.

I use the PronSci charts in my teaching, and on the Word charts there are two words spelled <there> (fig. 2 and 3). However, the final <ere> of one of them, demonstrative 'there', is coloured blue and yellow showing it is pronounced with the diphthong /eə/, while the <ere> of existential 'there' is all yellow, showing the usual weak pronunciation of this word with schwa.

To start work, I set up a situation with Cuisenaire rods, and pointed, "There's a green rod here and a red one there," on the Word charts. This intrigued the students. Why was 'there' pointed in two different places in this sentence? We established a clear contrast in the meanings and pronunciations by using a pointing gesture to cement the meaning of the demonstrative 'there' while it was being said. Then another questions arose: do English speakers really pronounce the first 'there' in exactly the same way as they would say 'the'? Indeed they do.

When the students had sorted out this sentence, we were ready to change the situation. We worked on, "Now there are two red rods there," with the new difficulty of the weak pronunciation of 'are' and an r-liaison before it. On the charts, the letters of 'are' are coloured to show its strong form, but it has a yellow dot beneath it to indicate the much more common weak pronunciation with schwa.

This raised a question in the students: how do I choose one or the other? Driven by their own curiosity, they worked well on this problem while getting more practice with 'there'.

Then we went on to, "There are a few rods there." What joy! A sentence starting with three weak syllables in a row with two r-liaisons. When the students could say this well, they knew that they were speaking real English, with a rhythm that was as good as that of any native speaker.

The charts also show 'that' twice, distinguishing the two words by showing the <a> in the demonstrative in beige and the <a> in the conjunction/relative pronoun in the yellow schwa colour. For 'some' and 'any' there is a similar separation. /səm/, for example, can be given its own meaning – an amount that is appropriate in the circumstances in sentences like "Would you like some peas?" – no longer confused with the meaning of the 'some' of partition, as in, "Some of them are really tiny," which is always pronounced in the strong /sʌm/ form.

Piers Messum

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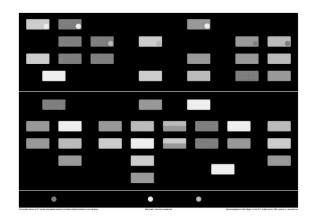

Fig. 1 British English Rectangle chart

Fig. 2 (above) Detail from Word chart 4, showing the pronunciation of 'there' with a final diphthong, when the word is used as a demonstrative.

Fig. 4 (below) British English Fidel, showing all the possible spellings for each sound. Each set of spellings/sound is given a different colour, and more common spellings are in the larger typeface. Full vowel sounds are at the top and reduced (or low energy) vowel sounds are at the bottom. The latter include, from left to right, schwi, schwa and schwu. In the American English fidel, there is also a 'schwr' – for the r-coloured sound at the end of a word like 'center', etc.

Fig 3 (above) Word chart 1, showing existential 'there' in the bottom right hand corner, with its weak pronunciation. The final <ere> is in the schwa colour.