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How to use a chart and pointer for teaching pronunciation

Roslyn Young

I started using a phonemic chart in my classes in 1978, when Caleb Gattegno first made his design available. Since then, I have taught English and French pronunciation this way, and trained many other teachers to use such charts effectively. I have also worked on the design of charts for many different languages. I have therefore drawn from extensive experience in writing this article. I describe some techniques for animating a chart with a pointer, how to introduce a chart and how to involve students in pointing activities.

TECHNIQUE

Choosing a pointer

It is best to use telescopic metal pointers¹, although bamboo rods about 75 cm long (bought in a Garden Centre) can be used too. A finger or pen is too short because the teacher's arm covers part of the chart and is distracting. Be aware that a pointer can be too long: it doesn't always have to be fully extended.



Avoid pointers with cylindrical tips. These have a hard lip which can cause wear on a chart over time. Pointers with smooth, bullet-type tips are better. If you are using coloured charts (with a black background), choose pointers which have a silver or white tip rather than a black one. You will want several pointers because you will

¹ E.g. the Wedo 236 11: <http://wedo.de/Telescopic Pointer Pen 90 cm chrome plated>

sometimes ask more than one student to come out and work on a problem, and each of the students should ideally have his own pointer when standing at the chart.

Pointers will bend if mishandled. They are tools, not toys. Don't let students play with them.

Where to stand

The person pointing should stand to one side of the chart so that their body does not obscure what is being pointed at. And you should never forget to set a good example in this! You will be familiar with the layout of the chart you use and will know what you are about to point, so you only need to have an oblique view of the chart to be sure that you are pointing accurately. If you are right-handed, you can stand on the right-hand side of the chart with your body open to the room, which allows you to remain aware of the class while pointing.



Pointing on a PronSci British English colour chart while remaining open to the class

Right-handed students will find it most natural to stand to the left of the chart; students need to be able to look at it carefully while they are pointing.

Preparing yourself to point

Pointing at rectangles on a piece of paper on your desk or picking out rectangles on your computer screen is not the same as standing to one side of a chart and using a 75 cm pointer, with the class watching. Before you use a chart with students, put it

on a wall, stand to one side and point words and phrases. Vary what you do: speed up and slow down; shorten and lengthen your pointer; move closer to the chart, and further away; point from the other side. Work until you can handle any word or phrase with confidence.

How to point

If students are to 'read' a sequence, your pointing must be precise. The tip of the pointer touches the rectangle cleanly, then the pointer is lifted off the surface and moved smoothly to the next rectangle. It should not skid on a rectangle and it should not be waved around between touches. Notice that I use the word 'touch' not 'tap'. The pointer is not used to hit the chart. The concept of a 'touch' is that the tip of the pointer comes to a perceptible stop on a rectangle before the teacher moves it on. For larger classes, the time one needs to remain on a rectangle will have to increase slightly.

To signal that you are about to start pointing a sequence, it can be helpful to tap the wall audibly a couple of times with the pointer to draw the students' attention to the new activity. Sometimes you will hesitate in the middle of pointing a sequence, unsure of which rectangle to touch. When this happens (and it happens to everyone), move the pointer off the chart completely until you decide which rectangle to touch next. It is then often best to complete the sequence, 'apologise', and indicate that you will point the whole sequence again from the start.

INTRODUCING A CHART

In this section I describe some dedicated work on pronunciation that I would do at the beginning of any English course. I begin with pronunciation for two main reasons. Firstly, unlike grammar and vocabulary, all of pronunciation is potentially required from the start, thus all its elements should be made available to students early and then improved during the course, rather than being added one-by-one as the course unfolds. Secondly, pronunciation is a motor skill which benefits from having as much practice as possible in the presence of a teacher who provides their expert evaluation and feedback. It is worth giving students the full time of a course for this practice.

Starting with sounds and sequences of sounds

It would be a mistake to teach all the sounds on a chart before starting to create sequences of sounds. To do so would be to 'teach the chart' rather than teaching the language. It is best to work with sequences as early as possible, even when only a

few sounds are in circulation, for at least three reasons (which I discuss in more detail in a companion article, linked at the end of this one):

1. It shows the students what the motor learning task for a sound is actually going to be: not only to say the sound in isolation but to explore, practise and master its various articulations as these appear in combination with the various articulations of other sounds.
2. It allows the teacher to integrate the learning of other aspects of L2 pronunciation with the learning of sounds. These other phenomena typically manifest themselves over stretches of speech that are longer than a single sound. For the learning of a complex motor skill like pronunciation, there has to be a regular interplay from the start between the production of sounds *per se* and their production within a fuller context. Students intuitively understand the need for this, and enjoy exploring the other aspects of L2 even with a very limited palette of sounds.
3. It reduces the pressure students feel to memorise the chart. To begin working with a chart, start by introducing a few vowels. Choose vowels which are likely to be easy for your students, because you want them to enter the activity of speaking L2 with some confidence and early success. You can then start adding consonants one by one, combining each in as many potentially useful ways as possible with the sounds already in circulation before introducing a new sound. I borrow the terminology of 'ringing the changes' to describe this.² So, for example, for English:

/i:/, /a:/, /i:t/, /a:t/, /ti:/, /ta:/, /ti:t/, /ta:t/, /ɔ:/, /tɔ:t/, etc.

Start with common vowels and consonants so that you can easily create sequences which grow in length while the number of sounds used remains limited:

tea, team, steam, steamer, a steamer.

elle, belle, elle est belle, qu'elle est belle ! Mais qu'elle est belle !

sí, así, es así, no es así, y no es así.

Just as mayonnaise is made by stirring continuously and adding the oil a few drops at a time, sounds are best taught by starting with a small set of vowels and

² For those unfamiliar with this phrase, it derives from the practice of ringing a set of church bells. Each order of striking the bells is called a 'change'. In order to 'ring the changes', all the variations of striking patterns are rung, bringing the peal back to its starting point. Of course, in teaching, one should never be as mechanical as this.

consonants and varying the ways of arranging them. You can then start inviting students to come to the chart and point; this reveals how they are doing, and therefore how you are doing. Working this way, students are happy to spend a couple of hours or more being introduced to the pronunciation of L2 through the chart.

This work does not have to leave students with more than an initial practical understanding of what the pronunciation of each sound will require of them. They will not yet be at ease with difficult sounds and their combinations. This will come in time.

Don't lose sight of what a chart is for

When introducing a chart, keep in mind that your task is not to teach the association of sounds and rectangles. Your task is to help your students to develop the pronunciation of sounds, and then sequences of sounds, in L2. The associations will happen of their own accord, as the students become acquainted with the chart.

GETTING STUDENTS TO POINT

Why is it useful for a student to point?

Getting a student to point makes him think more deeply about pronunciation. Standing at the chart, they have to consider the choices available to them (selection of sounds, pattern of stress and reduction, pitch levels, tones, etc.). The other students in the class work on the same problem, and will make it obvious if they think the student who is pointing has made a mistake or if they do not understand his choices. Like any activity where performance is required, pointing forces students to develop criteria for correctness.

Here are some common situations where the teacher might get a student to point:

- The student has a question, and pointing allows you to get them to work on the answer. E.g., they ask how to pronounce *heart*, and rather than modelling you ask them to point how they think it might be pronounced. This forces them to examine their criteria and also involves the rest of the class in the problem: other students can be invited to give their answers.
- A student makes a mistake and you want to discover what caused it: typically it will be that (1) they do not know how a word is pronounced, (2) they think they know, but are mistaken or (3) they are unable to pronounce the sounds they know to be correct. When they point the sequence on the chart, the nature of their problem becomes clear to everyone. Again, this can involve the whole class.

- When a sequence you have pointed has been too long for some of the students to follow, but others think they could point it. Invite one of them to try.
- You want to stop presenting new material and instead to consolidate what has already been introduced. Getting the more confident students to point sequences gives them a challenge while the other students have time to gain in confidence, following sequences which will be pointed more slowly than when you yourself point them. The class is kept together.

When a student is pointing rather than the teacher, the atmosphere in the class often becomes more collegial. Some students feel freed to participate more. For the teacher, student pointing and speaking is very revealing of her students' present competence.

When should students start to point?

Students can be invited to point on the chart very early in a course. When a chart is first being worked on, this might be after just seven or eight rectangles have been introduced, at the moment when attempts to memorise the chart become a danger and work that promotes learning by acquaintance is helpful.

Whenever you want students to point, you can hold out the handle end of a pointer, offering it to the class or to a particular student. Getting students to point early also sends a positive signal about participation and taking responsibility for one's own learning.

When a student is struggling with pointing

Remember that pointing and reading pointed sequences are different activities.³ Even confident students can find pointing difficult when they are close enough to a chart to point on it. If a student is struggling to find rectangles that you think they know, ask them to step back a few paces so that they see the view of the chart that they are more familiar with. As a second step, you can invite another student (and even a third) to come up to the chart to help someone point a sequence. Give them their own pointers. Interesting questions often emerge when this is done.

³ As the teacher, you will soon realise that you are better at pointing sequences than reading them, and your students are better at reading than pointing. To experience this, go to the back of the room and do what you don't normally do: follow a good student pointing a long sequence and try to read it. You will find this more difficult than you might expect.



Keeping things orderly

Discourage other students from calling out instructions to the person who is pointing. You might invite one of them to come up to help, offering them their own pointer.

The first time a student points untidily, you should indicate that better is required. For example, you might let your body and arm go limp and slap the pointer here and there on the chart to show how unsatisfactory it is to point imprecisely. Students quickly get the message.

When you point, you don't speak. You should expect the students to read the sequence silently or under their breath while you are pointing, and to say it out loud only once you have finished.

When a student points, it may be appropriate for him to speak as he does so, or it may not. Similarly, it may be appropriate for the class to read aloud as he points, or to have to wait until he has finished before saying the phrase, or even to remain silent. There are no hard and fast rules. It depends on what you want the student(s) to achieve.

Note

Piers Messum has written separately about the reasons for using a chart and pointer for teaching pronunciation. Together, we have written about other aspects of this approach, including further advice on technique, pointing longer sequences, more on the reasons for introducing sounds gradually and about pointing on other types of charts. These can be downloaded from <https://www.pronsci.com/links>.

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