



SPEAK OUT!

JOURNAL OF THE IATEFL PRONUNCIATION SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

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February 2018 Issue 58

Price £5.00

Free for PronSIG members

ISSN 2313:7703

www.iatefl.org

Why we should use a chart and a pointer for teaching pronunciation

Piers Messum

New teachers soon become aware that simply asking students to copy models of L2 rarely leads to good pronunciation. Pronunciation doesn't take care of itself, and has to be both taught and learnt. Getting students to be able to produce sounds and words well requires tools, and in my view the one indispensable tool is a good phonemic chart, designed to be hung on the classroom wall so that both teacher and students can use it often and easily. In this article I describe the advantages of such an approach. In the next issue of Speak Out! Roslyn Young will continue the discussion, describing the approach she takes when she introduces the chart and some techniques for animating it with a pointer.

With languages like English and French, whose writing systems do not reliably reveal the pronunciation of words, it is necessary for textbooks and the teacher to supplement the information that the standard written form provides. In class, the teacher needs to be able to ask students to pronounce a sound, a word or a phrase correctly and to identify individual sounds so that they can be worked on.

This is usually done by representing sounds in one of four ways:

1. by using symbols, usually drawn from those provided by the IPA;
2. by using 'pronunciation respellings' of the sounds of the language (e.g. in English, <ay> for the diphthong /eɪ/) making use of the letters available from either the L1 or L2 writing systems;
3. by referring to sounds via keywords, which exemplify a sound within a simple context (e.g. 'day' for /eɪ/ in English);
4. by using colour, setting up colour-to-phoneme correspondences, as seen most notably in Caleb Gattegno's 'Silent Way' materials and now in the colour versions of the PronSci charts.¹

¹ Colour is beneficial when the colour-coding is extended into spelling and word charts, as briefly described in the companion article to this one on the PronSci website. Gattegno's choice of colours was arbitrary, and he used the set he chose across many languages. Other people have experimented with

The first two of these are probably most common, and lend themselves to the pronunciation of words being presented ‘phonetically’ in textbooks and by the teacher writing on the board.

However, the transcription of a word in a book is first perceived as an entity, and only then examined in its parts, or not. The same, to some extent, is true of a transcription written on the board. They both persist, and can be re-read and re-examined at will.

In contrast, pointing at sounds on a chart is a process that both unfolds in time and whose results are ephemeral (the students cannot revisit what has gone by). These two differences, which might appear to be disadvantages at first sight, turn out to make pointing the more effective pedagogical procedure.



Figure 1. Using a British English phonemic chart and a pointer in class

I explain this and describe other advantages below, but I note here three overarching points that I can make from many years of classroom experience, my own and that of many other teachers:

- that the recurring use of a tool dedicated to pronunciation – a tool that is always in sight on the classroom wall – helps to give the spoken form of the language a prominent place within the language skills that are being learnt;

choosing colours that supposedly have a synesthetic significance, or whose names can be keywords in a particular language, e.g. the word and the colour ‘green’ for /i:/ in English.

- that, as in the learning of so many other things, students find it helpful to be able to work on detail within a framework that encompasses the whole, i.e. an analysis within a synthesis;
- that students find the various challenges of working with a chart enjoyable: they enjoy following the teacher pointing, they enjoy pointing themselves, and they enjoy pointing vicariously, when a fellow student is at the chart.

Note that when I use the expression 'phonemic chart' I am referring to a chart which uses any of the ways of representing sounds described above, i.e. by a phonetic symbol or other written form shown in a cell, or by a coloured cell. I call both of these types of cell 'rectangles' because this is the shape we use on our own charts.

The advantages of using a chart and a pointer

Greater presence to the task

To know the pronunciation of a word in their L2, a student has to know what speech sounds it is made up of. Presenting a transcription of the word in a textbook or written on the board does not make a sufficient demand on many students. They only read the transcription to the point of basic recognition, while in fact they need to be moving their articulators while they read: vocalising the phonetic symbols or sub-vocalising them (articulating them under their breath). Many do not make the effort this requires.

In contrast to presenting the sounds of a word in writing, pointing to the sounds of a word on a chart is a process that unfolds in time, with the following advantages:

- Pointing keeps the students present to the task (i.e. it stops their attention from wandering) because of the healthy tension that pointing creates. The pointer is revealing the word sound by sound, and at every step, can trigger a question or reaction in the student's mind. Sometimes this will be, 'What sound comes next?' sometimes, 'Will the next sound be what I expect?' sometimes, 'I don't believe that!' and, sometimes, at the end, 'How can I have been so wrong?'
- As a result, students take proper account of every element of the string; nothing is skipped.
- There is time for every element to be sub-vocalised.

Greater retention

Written symbols are (semi-)permanent. In contrast, the activity of pointing produces results that are ephemeral: as soon as the pointer has moved from one sound to the next, and so on, a student has no way of retrieving the previous sounds unless he has mentally noted what they were.

This has an important consequence: it enhances retention, because the students know they have to mark² what is being pointed at in order to be able to evoke the whole string once the pointing has finished.

Students' heads are up

When students are looking at a textbook they are, to some extent, isolated from the other people in the classroom. Looking at a book creates a 'private space' for each student, who then has the freedom to be distracted from the task in hand.

In contrast, if the teacher uses a chart to present material, students have to keep their heads up to follow what is being pointed at. There is a high level of shared attention in the class, and everybody is 'speech ready'. The shared attention and readiness to speak create a likelihood of participation and a potential for spontaneous interaction between the students once the pointing has finished.

Another advantage of heads being up is that the teacher can see the students' faces and what they reveal about each student's learning.

Using a chart is better than writing on the board

Pointing has several pedagogical advantages over writing on the board:

- Rather than having her³ back to the class while writing, the teacher can point while half-facing the class and so remain aware of her students.
- When a teacher or a student is writing on the board, the hand and body of the writer often obscures what is being written, creating a lull between the writing and the reading during which the class loses energy. In contrast, pointing has the class involved in the activity from the moment it starts until it finishes.

² John Mason (2002, p. 33) points out that there are different levels of energy that we can commit to the act of noticing. When we 'mark' something, we are able to subsequently evoke what was noticed; to make a 're-mark'.

³ Note that for convenience in the use of pronouns in this article I refer to a female teacher and male students.

- This is especially true when two or more students are writing at the front of the class. When they are pointing, they stand either side of the chart and the rest of the class can see what is being done.
- When a student is pointing, if the teacher wishes to assist she can use her pointer to do so from the other side of the chart, without impinging on the student's space. This minimises the disturbance to the student's sense of independent work. But to intervene on a whiteboard, she always has to move closer to centre-stage, and often displaces the student.

Pointing also has two practical advantages over writing on the board:

- What the class sees is neater. Most students, and some teachers, don't find it easy to write legibly and attractively on a board.
- Many people, students and teachers, dislike chalk and everyone dislikes the ink that whiteboard markers can leave on their fingers. Pointing on a chart avoids the use of both.

Managing the focus of the class

Over the course of a lesson, the teacher will have to keep changing the focus of the work: from grammar to spelling to pronunciation to word choice, back to spelling, and so on. Signalling such shifts reliably to everyone in the class is not always as successful as we might hope. Sometimes students only appreciate the teacher's change of focus some time after she has started some new work.

The physical movement of going to the chart unambiguously signals that the teacher is about to start work on pronunciation, and this signal cannot be missed by anyone. When she starts, everyone knows that they will be working on pronunciation, and is primed for the task she now proposes.

TV programmes have opening titles to establish an appropriate mindset in viewers for what is going to follow, and moving to a chart has the same effect on students.

Seeing the 'big picture': the wood as well as the trees

Although it can be much more than this, a phonemic chart is an inventory of all the sounds in a language. Seeing and interacting with such a chart brings several benefits:

- The student can start to properly and confidently sort the multitude of sounds he hears in speech into a limited number of phonemes.⁴
- Students cannot fail to notice the existence of all the distinctive sounds in the language. (I am shocked by the number of students I meet who discover they have completely missed one or more of the sounds of English, despite having learnt it in school and then spoken it for many years.)
- When pointing at the sounds in a word, a student sees all the possibilities in front of him. He must always ask himself which one he can or must choose. This sharpens the learner's awareness of sounds.
- A student soon comes to know which sounds he has mastered and which he has still to work on. His ongoing challenge is clear to him.

Phonetic symbols: the benefits without the drawbacks

For some students, there are advantages to the teacher using phonetic symbols rather than other ways of representing sounds described earlier. The symbols are more standard than idiosyncratic respelling or keyword systems, and they are used in many coursebooks and the better dictionaries. But students who do not need to know the symbols for an examination may resent learning them as a new system of writing, and often resist doing so.

When, on the other hand, a teacher uses a phonemic chart with IPA symbols, neither she nor her students ever need to write phonetic symbols on the board. Symbols on a chart only need to be recognised. So students get the benefits of using them without having to learn to write them, and are soon at ease with the symbols.

When the syllabus does require students to know how to transcribe words, we would still teach pronunciation with a chart, so that students develop their sensitivity to sounds in speech as part of learning to pronounce well. The danger of teaching this sensitivity through transcription is that, for some students, the form of the work can lead to intellectual understanding but not always to better pronunciation: knowledge rather than know-how.

⁴ Don Cherry (2017, personal communication) expresses this as follows: 'Up until the point where I could actually pin down and count the exact number of sounds, French to me was something that really could not be pronounced because it was difficult, mysterious, and could possibly have more than one million sounds to it. The rectangle chart slew that dragon and pinned it to an A2 piece of paper.'

Using a chart as a diagnostic tool

There are two different aspects to pointing. If the teacher points, she is showing the students what she wants them to say.

However, she can also get a student to point. When she does, she can discover to what extent he knows the pronunciation of a word or phrase and exactly where his problems lie, but also something about his inner climate, revealed by his demeanour and the way he moves the pointer – smoothly or chaotically, in a well-thought-out sequence or in a series of tentative taps, etc.

I know of no other diagnostic technique which even approaches the sensitivity of student pointing. The teacher can make a precise response, and the whole class benefits from the work done. Student pointing can be used from the very start of any course.

Use of a chart by students to ask questions

Once students understand how a chart presents the spoken language, they can and do use it to ask questions by initiating pointing activities themselves:

- They check their pronunciation with the teacher.
- They explore alternatives to a given sequence. These often reveal different registers or rates of speech.
- They ask questions about things they have heard in natural speech which puzzle them (the result of contractions, the use of weak forms, liaisons, etc.).

To work on these questions efficiently without a chart, students would have to know how to write phonetic symbols. With a chart, they only need to point to the sounds, a much easier thing to do. This lowers the barrier to asking these kinds of questions. It contributes to work on pronunciation being a recurring focus in class.

Using a chart to avoid modelling

If a teacher wishes to teach pronunciation without modelling sounds and words for students to imitate, a chart allows her to animate a class for this purpose. On working as a ‘silent’ teacher, Don Cherry (2017, personal communication) says, ‘I sometimes think of the chart as providing wind for the students’ sails. By getting them to say anything at all, their sails fill and I can take whatever they say, “wrong” or “right”, and get the wind moving in the class.’



This is not the place to explain the advantages of not modelling (see (Messum, 2012) and other articles at <https://www.pronsci.com/downloads>), but the so-called Articulatory Approach stands in contrast to the conventional Imitative-Intuitive and Analytic-Linguistic approaches described by Celce-Murcia et al. (2010), both of which rely primarily on developing listening as the way to improving pronunciation. The Articulatory Approach has production as its starting point.

Note

Roslyn Young has written separately about how to use a chart and pointer for teaching pronunciation. Together, we have written about other aspects of this approach, including advice on technique and a discussion of the design principles for a successful chart. This can be downloaded from <https://www.pronsci.com/links>.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to my colleague Roslyn Young. Some of the ideas in this article were originally hers, and it has benefited from her close attention.

I am also grateful to my colleagues Don Cherry, James Coady, Glenys Hanson, Robert Jeannard, Cédric Lefebvre, Eric Lepoint and Luisa Piemontese for their comments and suggestions, and to Caren Lumley for agreeing to be photographed in action.

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