

TEACHING PRONUNCIATION THROUGH SONGS

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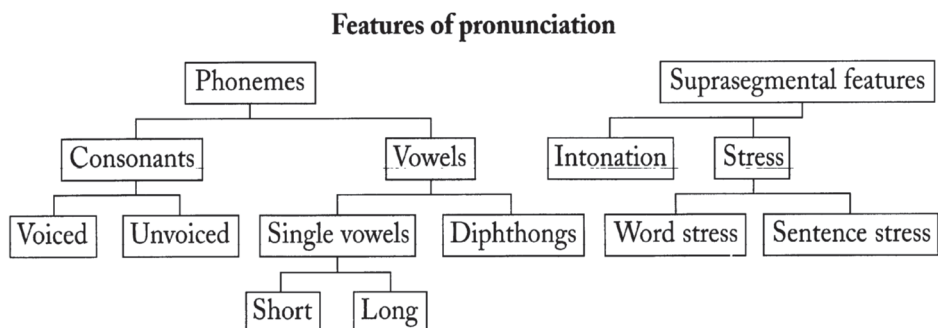
Abstract: *Little emphasis is placed on teaching pronunciation in English language classes even though a person with good pronunciation is more likely to be understood than a person whose grammar is perfect but whose pronunciation is difficult to understand. The syllabus does not include the teaching of pronunciation features and the communicative approach to language teaching encourages the acquisition of these aspects of the language rather than their learning. Songs can be used to focus on different aspects of pronunciation. They can be used to focus on sounds, to focus on words or to focus on connected speech. We have presented some example of activities using music to improve students' pronunciation.*

Keywords: *pronunciation, music, sounds, teaching activities*

1. What is pronunciation?

Pronunciation refers to the production of sounds that we use to make meaning. It includes the particular sounds of a language (segments) and the aspects of speech such as intonation, stress, rhythm (suprasegmental aspects). (AMEP, 2002)

The following diagram (Kelly, 2000) shows the main features of pronunciation:



The sound system of English is made up of phonemes, or individual sounds, and these may be vowels (which can be short or long), diphthongs (combinations of two vowel sounds), or consonants. Consonants are usually described in terms of: where the sound is made in the mouth (place of articulation), how the sound is made (the manner of articulation) and whether or not the vocal cords vibrate (voicing).

The term stress refers to the prominence given to certain syllables within words, and to certain syllables or words within utterances. It is signaled by volume, force, pitch change, and syllable length. Stress is important at two different levels: the word level (multisyllabic words have one or more syllables that are stressed) and the sentence level (those words which are more important for communicating the speaker's meaning, usually the content words, tend to be stressed, while those which are less important, usually the grammatical words, are unstressed).

Intonation can be defined as the variation of pitch of the voice when speaking. Intonation, or change of pitch, is used to signal speaker meaning, to convey some ideas or concepts, for example, surprise, irony, etc. or to change a statement to a question. (AMEP, 2002)

Another feature of pronunciation is connected speech. Connected speech can be defined as the natural way people speak, linking together and emphasizing certain words, rather than each word standing alone. It includes aspects like weak forms, assimilation, elision, or linking. Contractions (two words forming one) are an extreme example of connected speech, to the extent that the written form is affected too.

2. Why teach pronunciation through songs?

Teachers usually place little emphasis on teaching pronunciation in English language classes even though a person with good pronunciation is more likely to be understood than a person whose grammar is perfect but whose pronunciation is difficult to understand. The syllabus does not include the teaching of pronunciation features and the communicative approach to language teaching encourages the acquisition of these aspects of the language rather than their learning.

There are several reasons to use music in pronunciation classes. To begin with, the listening support provided during the English classes usually consists of Standard English and sometimes regional British while in their free time (when watching TV or listening to music) the students are exposed to is usually American English. However, it is not of utmost importance for students to sound like native speakers. They should be able to communicate in English and music helps them to become familiar with different kinds of English such as "standard" English, regional American and British, and many other varieties of English from around the world.

Music also offers a great way to look at contractions, elisions and other aspects of connected speech. These are features of spoken language and recognizing them enables students to better understand the language they hear. What is more, simply exposing students to these features is enough since students will naturally acquire and incorporate them into their own speech.

Another reason for using music in class is the fact that students often express anxiety about their pronunciation and this can contribute to a fear of speaking. Some students are acutely self-aware and are reluctant to experiment with sounds for fear of getting them 'wrong', which makes them lack fluency. Music can be an effective tool for lowering their affective filter (i.e. reduce stress and anxiety) and facilitating learning. Singing along can also increase students' confidence in their ability to pronounce words in English.

On the other hand, singing distorts the stress and intonation of spoken words and phrases. As a result, it is not advisable to use songs to draw students' attention on these pronunciation features.

3. Activities

Songs can be used to focus on different aspects of pronunciation. They can be used to focus on sounds, to focus on words or to focus on connected speech.

A. Using songs to focus on sounds

As languages differ in their range of sounds, students have to learn to 'physically' produce certain sounds previously unknown to them. Incorrectly pronounced sounds strain communication, sometimes even changing a phrase's meaning. Songs are authentic and easily accessible examples of spoken English. The rhymes in songs provide listeners with repetition of similar sounds.

b. focus on particular sounds

To focus learners on particular sounds, we create activities based on song rhymes.

Activity

Some of the rhymes in the song are replaced with a gap. Students listen and fill the gaps, using the song to guide them. Students can then categorize the words according to sounds.

/eə/	/ɔ:/
Pear	paw
Beware	raw
	claw
	pawpaw

Now when you pick a pawpaw
Or a prickly pear
And you prick a raw paw
Next time beware
Don't pick the prickly pear by the paw
When you pick a pear
Try to use the claw
But you don't need to use the claw
When you pick a pear of the big pawpaw
Have I given you a clue ?
(‘The Bare Necessities’ from Disney – ‘The Jungle Book’)

The song can be used as a tongue twister to exercise the pronunciation of the sounds /p/ and /p:/, to practice minimal pairs – paw/raw; pear/bear, homophones (words which have the same pronunciation but different spelling): bare/ bear, or even to focus on differences in pronunciation between British and American English.

Activity

The students are given lyrics with all the regular past verbs underlined. Students listen and decide whether the endings are pronounced /t/, /d/ or /ɪd/

/t/	/d/	/ɪd/
Packed	Turned	waited
kissed	Died	
crashed		

An old man turned ninety-eight
He won the lottery and died the next day
[...]Mr. Play It Safe was afraid to fly
He packed his suitcase and kissed his kids good-bye
He waited his whole damn life to take that flight
And as the plane crashed down he thought[...]
(Alanis Morissette – ‘Ironic’)

c. minimal pairs

Alternatively, the differences between sounds can be highlighted by using the lyrics to show how changing one sound can alter meaning (minimal pairs).

Activity

The students are asked to choose the correct answer:

Imagine there's no hidden/Heaven (/ɪ/ versus /e/)

It's easy if you try/ tree (/aɪ/ versus /i:/)

No hell below us

Above us only sky

(John Lennon - 'Imagine')

B. Using songs to focus on words

Words are sequences of sounds that convey meaning. A word is uttered in syllables, usually one emphasized syllable (the stress) and the rest weak (unstressed). An accent shift can change the meaning of a word as in the example: 'PRES-ent' is a noun, referring to a gift, where as 'pre-SENT' is a verb, meaning to give or offer. Even when the same words exist in both languages, the number of syllables is not always identical. Words in songs fit the music, helping learners associate the number of syllables / stress in these words, with memorable rhythms.

Activity

The students are given lyrics and have to guess the number of syllables in each verse,. Students then listen, checking their predictions.

Many, many years ago when I was twenty-three, - ___ (13)

I was married to a widow who was pretty as could be. - ___ (15)

The widow had a grown-up daughter who had hair of red; - ___ (14)

my father fell in love with her, and soon they too were wed. - ___

(14)

(Ray Stevens - 'I'm My Own Grandpa')

Students can be asked underlining the stressed syllable while listening, then drill these words and sing or chant the whole song through.

In written language, there are convenient white spaces between words. On the other hand, spoken language is a continuous stream of sound and students should be trained to distinguish the words in order to understand the meaning.

Activity

The students are given the lyrics of a song with no spaces between the words. They are asked to listen to the song and separate the words:

Welleastcoastgirlsarehip
Ireallydighosestylestheywear
Andthesoutherngirlswiththewaytheytalk
TheyknockmeoutwhenImdownthere
(Beach Boys – ‘California Girls’)

C. Using songs to focus on connected speech

Students normally learn words individually and, especially at lower levels, tend to pronounce each word separately. They frequently misconceive contractions as being 'incorrect', only used in 'slang'. Songs, and especially the chorus, provide real and 'catchy' examples of how whole phrases are pronounced often to the extent that students find it difficult to pick out individual words. The music further emphasizes the 'flow' of words. Songs, like other spoken texts, are full of contractions. Students can be keen to reproduce this, in order to sing the song as they hear it.

Songs can be used to teach:

- a. **Assimilation** (when a sound is modified by the sounds before and after it)
It is usually dealt with only with a few specific examples such as don'tuyou/
didn'tuyou - /tʃ/, coulduyou - /dʒ/, etc. which are easier to notice.

Activity

The students listen to the song and focus on the pronunciation of the words would you (the sounds /d/ and /j/ combine to form /dʒ/)
Would you know my name
If I saw you in Heaven [...]
(Eric Clapton – ‘Tears in heaven’)

Assimilation can create confusions when interpreting the lyrics. Kelly (2000) gives a famous example of misheard lyrics from the Jimmy Hendrix song ‘Purple Haze’, where the line ‘*Scuse me while I kiss the sky*’ was heard as ‘*Scuse me while I kiss this guy*’ due to the assimilation of the /k/ in sky to a /g/.

- b. **Elision** (omission of a sound in pronunciation)
- c.

Activity

The show must go on (elision of /t/ between /s/ and /g/)
My soul is painted like the wings of butterflies (elision of /v/
before the consonant /b/) as compared to
Fairy tales of yesterday, will grow but never die (pronounced
/əv/)
(Queen – ‘The Show Must Go On’)
(The song can also be used to focus on linking sounds such as
/w/ in ‘go on’.)

d. **Weak forms** (certain sounds are less stressed in some words) such as the ones used in ‘Where is the love’ by The Black eyed Peas: ‘I think thə whole world’s addicted tə thə drama’.

e. **Contractions** (when two words combine to the extent that the two are pronounced as one word, one syllable such as would’ve, can’t, you’re) or **reduced forms** (the informal forms wanna, gonna, gotta, etc.)

Activity

The students are asked to find the contractions and the reduced forms and write them using the standard spelling.

It’sgonna take a lotta love

To change the way things are.

It’sgonna take a lotta love

Or we won’t get too far.

(Nicolette Larson – ‘A Lotta Love’)

Contractions are given the most amount of attention of all the features of connected speech because they are represented differently in writing from their full form and also because students avoid reading the contracted form and tend read the words separately.

Conclusion:

There are no 'standard' songs for teaching pronunciation. Any song can be an example of different pronunciation aspects. However, the song chosen should be clear, not too fast, memorable, likely to appeal to our learners (possibly songs they already know) and easy to create activities for, depending on the area of pronunciation we are focusing on.

References

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