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info.eltireland@gmail.com @ELTIreland

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3 Reasons Why I Teach Phonetics

by Marianne Jordan (TEFL, Pronunciation.club)

Hello, my name is Marianne. For nearly half my life my name has been incorrectly pronounced as two words - Mary Ann. It was only through phonetics that someone, outside of Ireland and England, finally said my name correctly. This is one of three reasons why I now teach phonetics in every pronunciation class and include phonetics in all pronunciation materials I write. I hope this article will encourage you to as well. I also have a lot of materials I am happy to share with you.

If you are anything like me, the thought of teaching phonetics was the last thing on your to do list when you first started teaching EFL. Yes, I was taught the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) on various TEFL courses. I first thought it was quite alien to any of the Latin language alphabets I had studied. I used to think that it was not necessary to teach it at all. Hey - I'm a native speaker. I say something and they can repeat it. Easy!

I went to primary school in Canada. I was called 'Mary Ann' for the first 10 years of my life in school but called 'Marianne', at home, by my Irish parents.

Now there is nothing wrong with the name Mary Ann. It's just not my name!

As an adult I went to live in New Zealand. They also pronounced my name as 'Mary Ann'. For the full 15 years I spent there I just could not get through to the locals that my name was Marianne, not Mary Ann. No matter how many times I said my name, carefully sounding out the sounds and syllables, they still called me Mary Ann.

At the Polytechnic where I worked, a new tutor, Mario, of Italian descent, joined our staff. They all had no problem saying his name. I then explained that my name was similar to his - Mari...o, Mari...anne. They still didn't get it! The sound Mary was firmly tattooed in their brains and no amount of explaining was going to change it.

The Power of Phonetics

When I did the CELTA course I was taught the IPA phonetic chart. Our teacher then got each of us to write our names phonetically on the board. When it came to my turn to write my name I carefully wrote each phonetic sound and even included the stress mark! Marianne /mæri:'æn/

I then turned around and saw a very puzzled expression on my teacher's face. I immediately thought I had made a mistake and could feel my cheeks blazing red. Then she slowly said: So... is your name... Marianne?

I couldn't believe my ears. Finally someone was able to pronounce my name correctly! I was sold!

However, it took me a while longer to start teaching the full phonetic alphabet. I started with some of the most commonly mispronounced sounds for the letters 'th' /θ/ and /ð/. I then added some of the more difficult vowel sounds /ɪ/, /ʌ/ and /ə/.

This was going fine until I had a class full of Chinese nurses one year. On the first day I wrote the new medical vocabulary on the board. When I went around the classroom, to check their work individually, I noticed that they were not only copying all the words perfectly but writing the words in full phonetic symbols as well. I was quite impressed - and suddenly very embarrassed that I could not do the same!

Good grief! We can't have students knowing more than us teachers! That night I started revising my CELTA notes and I learned every single one of those symbols inside out. I was well prepared in sheer fear of being asked how to pronounce one of them the next day.

I have to admit I struggled considerably with the sounds at the beginning. I had a Northern Irish mother and an Irish/English/American father. My father was an airline pilot so I went to school in many different English-speaking countries including Canada, West Africa, Northern Ireland and New Zealand. I had a mixed assortment of sounds in my head. However, the IPA is so easy because each symbol has only one sound and that sound never changes.

"Listen and Repeat" doesn't always work.

The next task was to help them with their pronunciation problems. Even though they could write the phonetic symbols (blindfolded!), it was hard to understand them when they spoke. They struggled with the "Listen and Repeat" method (which I preferred, like many of my colleagues). I then remembered trying to teach native English speakers, in New Zealand, how to say my name. I had used the same listen and repeat method for many years, which hadn't worked. So I decided to dust off my full CELTA notes, yet again, and revise the different types of VAK learners for inspiration. (Visual, Auditory, Kinaesthetic)

I wanted a more visual way of explaining sounds like why the letters 'ch' are completely different in the words Chicago, chaos, children and yacht. There are not always nice easy rules to help us out. However there is the IPA which clearly shows exactly how every word is pronounced (Chicago /tʃ/, chaos /k/, children /tʃ/ and yacht /-/-/ silent!) The English language is not a phonetic language. A phonetic language means that every letter of the alphabet has only one sound. The letter 'A' in English has seven different sounds! No wonder our students have problems with pronunciation. The phonetic alphabet will always tell them which of those 7 sounds to use for the letter 'A' in each word it is in.



That's not my name:
Spelling doesn't help
with pronunciation

Pic by author

I also wanted to be able to explain how to form the sounds of English easily and effectively. Most of our students just want to be able to be understood when they speak. They are not studying for a Masters in Phonology. The simpler you explain it, the more relaxed they are, the easier they learn.

So starting writing and designing, visual exercises, charts showing the position of your tongue and lips, phonetic flashcards, various worksheets they could do to help them learn the correct pronunciation for each of the symbols etc

This was mostly to get my own head around it all, to be honest, plus I needed to help the visual learners who were struggling with many of the sounds not found in their own language. As my knowledge and teaching materials grew, so did my confidence.

The students learned much faster by including the full VAK approach than only using the auditory method of "Listen and Repeat". Personally, I was becoming less embarrassed and more confident with each class from then on.

The "Listen and Repeat" method can work - eventually. This is how each of us learned our own languages as babies. However, it took us a full year to be able to say our first word! Adults do not have the luxury of time in this day and age. They want to speak like native speakers in as little time as possible.

As we know, not all learners are aural learners. Most of us need visuals as well. Then doing it (speaking practice) is what really helps us to learn effectively.

V - The phonetic symbols are a visual way to show the sounds of English.

A - The auditory "Listen and Repeat" method works but it can be slow.

K - The kinesthetic "Speaking Practice" method and showing them how to make the sound is vital for all learners.

Adding visual and kinaesthetic exercises to the lessons helped them to learn the symbols a lot faster. As well as saying the sound, it is also important to explain how the word is formed inside their mouth paying attention to the shape of the lips (wide or round) , the position of the tongue (front or back, down or up) and if the sound is voiced or unvoiced. Explaining to Asian students that the sound /l/ is made in the front of your mouth with your tongue forward and the /r/ sound is made at the back of your mouth with your tongue pulled back, can greatly help them to improve these two sounds they find very difficult to say.

“The simpler you explain it, the more relaxed they are, the easier they learn.”



Helping a student who is struggling to pronounce a problem sound, showing them how the sound is formed inside their mouth, patiently working with them to help them, then hearing them reproduce the sound correctly and, best of all, seeing their delighted look of achievement is ... the joy of what teaching is all about.

Since then I have been including the phonetic symbols in all exercises with all my students from all over the world. I will never go back to the Listen and Repeat method only. My belief in phonetics has grown. My confidence in teaching phonetics has grown. The results in my students' confidence, understanding and speaking have grown.

Now if a student says a word incorrectly, I may just have to write or point to the correct sound symbol and you can see the light

bulb go off inside their heads and they self-correct! How good is that?

There is no doubt about it: when you teach the phonetic symbols with a positive attitude the students take to them like ducks to water.

If you believe in phonetics.....your students will too.

If you use phoneticsyour students will too.

If you are positive about phonetics.....your students will be too.

Once sound in the difference: Building up understanding of phonetics, one sound at a time.

Pic by Phonetics Builder

There are only around 45 symbols to learn. In contrast, there is a lot more grammar to cope with! I highly recommend that you learn the symbols and start using them in your classes and see how much faster your students learn the sounds of English.

Many of my students have even suggested that English should be written in the IPA instead of the Latin alphabet and I tend to agree!

I am so convinced phonetics work I have made a lot of my materials available for you to download to use in your own classrooms, to help you and to help your students. I have made flashcards, lesson plans and PowerPoint slides with audio buttons so you can just click on them if you are not sure how to pronounce them. Online sound boards will also make life easy for you. Contact me for the download links or with any questions you may have and I will be /veri/ happy to help.

θæŋk ju: ænd best wɪfɪs, məri:??