

ELT Ireland bulletin



IN THIS EDITION

How I moved from ELT to EAP and what I learned along the way

by Stephen Bruce (Page 4)

Thoughts on digital re-entry

by Mary Shepherd (Page 5)

Being your own DoS

by Rob McComish (Page 7)

Film-making as student- centred learning environment

by Vanja Fazinic (Page 8)

Creative projects in the language classroom

by Colete Godkin (Page 11)

**Stepping Away From the Mirror:
Effective Approaches to Reflective Practice**

by Conor O'Reilly (Page 14)

ELT Burnout and what to do about it

by Stephen Cloak (Page 15)

Getting EAQUALS: A brief "How to"

by Nadine Early (Page 17)

When going through Delta ... keep going

by Damian Cunniffe (Page 19)

The Delta exam rollercoaster

by James Duggan (Page 21)

Teaching pronunciation in a brain-friendly way and how to cater for different learning preferences

by Darek Bukowski (Page 23)

We all make mistakes!

by John Ryan (Page 26)

Chunk it up in the ESL classroom!

by Touria Jouilla (Page 28)

No. 2

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ELT Ireland features (Pages 1-3)

Welcome to our Second Bulletin

by Dr. Lou McLaughlin

The Secrets of Membership by James Gaffney

Social Media Numbers by Joanne Mitten

Treasuring ELT Ireland by Liliana O'Reilly

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Teaching pronunciation in a brain-friendly way and how to cater for different learning preferences

by Darek Bukowski (ECM)

A Cinderella among other English language teaching components, such as grammar, vocabulary or language skills, pronunciation has often been left aside, neglected, devoid of the well-deserved status. One of the reasons that would explain the status quo is that some teachers may still find teaching pronunciation as a difficult and daunting area to deal with and so they either avoid it or do not give it as much attention as they should.

Clearly, this is a mistake considering the fact that achieving even an excellent command of grammar, or having extensive vocabulary and the ability to read and write well are not enough to be able to communicate successfully with other speakers of the language if the intended meaning is hindered due to the incomprehensibility caused by unintelligible pronunciation of words. In other words, the key to successful communication is the ability to produce the sounds of the L2 in an intelligible manner so that a desired message can be encoded and decoded between the interlocutors.

Thus, the aim of this article is to provide some ideas about teaching pronunciation in a student-focused environment, by trying to address the various needs and expectations of students who come from different linguistic backgrounds and also represent different learning preferences.

The approach I propose to follow is based on the findings of neuroscientists (Fletcher 2004, p. 8) about the functioning of the human brain – in other words, the techniques suggested here will fall under the category of “brain-friendly”, taking into consideration the nature of the learning process, and how the cognitive system acquires information and stores it for further use.

What is it that makes the learning process brain friendly? How can a teacher make sure that the content of the lesson and the activities are actually brain-friendly?

A simple technique that will facilitate the preparation of the lesson is to cross-reference the content against the following checklist.

Check one for left hemisphere: Will the students have enough opportunities to ask analytic questions? For example, a lot of students learn much better if they are given specific, technical information about the pronunciation of individual sounds in terms of the articulatory descriptions, the place and manner of articulation; they need to understand and see what happens with the organs of speech during the sound production, contrary to those who rely mainly on sounds imitation.

Check two for the right hemisphere: do the activities provide enough opportunities for students to see the holistic picture? Are they going to use colour for underlining or marking the items that we want them to notice and remember? An activity that exemplifies that would be the one in which the students are given a mix of groups of words containing certain combinations of letters which are pronounced as one and the same sound, for example ‘ur’, ‘ir’ and ‘er’, as in curve, purge, herd, serve, bird, stir , and asked to highlight the different letter combinations with the same colour to help them remember the correlation between spelling and pronunciation.

Check three for the reflex brain: will the students be given occasional breaks to stand up and stretch their bodies in order to increase the blood circulation and pump more oxygen into the brain? Are there activities that involve movement, changing places collecting material? A good example of such an activity would be the one in which students are asked to stand up and move around the classroom in order to do a matching activity. For example, when teaching the pronunciation of the Past Simple ‘ed’ suffix, a teacher puts cards with the three possible pronunciations of the suffix, /t/, /d/ and /ɪd/ on the walls and gives students cards with past simple regular verbs for them to walk around the class and stick the /t/, /d/, /ɪd/ cards on the correct verbs and, in this way, match the verbs with the corresponding phonetic symbol of the suffix. Another activity which works well here in my experience is to ask the students to stand up, take a deep breath and, while exhaling, repeat after the teacher individual vowel sounds such as /i:/, /a:/, /o:/ /u:/ , either in isolation or in words: leave, feel, car, far, more, four, food, mood.

Check four for the limbic system: since memory and emotions are closely connected, will the students be able to contribute their own ideas and receive the constructive feedback from the teacher and other classmates in pair or group work? According to Rebeca Oxford (1990, p. 148)and her taxonomy of meta-cognitive strategies, the social strategies – the interaction with other learners – play a very important role in improving language learning. Students benefit greatly

when they are provided with opportunities to do activities in pairs or groups, compare their answers and give one another feedback. For example, students are given a worksheet to complete a given task individually, having done that they work with a partner or partners to discuss their answers, listen to each other's comments and together decide on the final outcome – which, in turn, is followed by a whole class feedback from the teacher.

Check five for the neo-cortex (new brain): does the lesson provide opportunities for students to be creative by engaging in role-plays and cooperative games? I find this point particularly useful when teaching intonation, when students are assigned to perform different roles and asked to express different types of feelings or attitudes. In a role-play, they are given slips of paper outlining the 'new personality' they are supposed to assume, as in a haggling game, for example. One student has got an item to sell, the other is interested in the purchase. The seller quotes an exorbitant price to which the buyer reacts with a high rise intonation: "How much?, are you sure, are you crazy?" and switches to a low pitch intonation by saying: "I will give you 'so and so' for that ". A good example of a cooperative game is a Whisper Circle - the students are divided into groups of 7 to 10. Each group chooses a leader. The leaders receive the card which has the sentence "It takes about six seconds for something you drink to reach your stomach." He is asked to memorize the sentence, go back to his group and whisper what he has read on the card to the person on his right. Each person will whisper the sentence to the next person and the sentence can be said only once. The last person will say the sentence out loud. If the sentence is the same with the one written on the card, that group wins.

Check six for learning styles: do the activities cater for different learning preferences such as auditory, visual or kinaesthetic? It is very likely that the students we teach have different learning preferences, in other words, they acquire knowledge more effectively if the nature of an activity suits their preferred channel of perception – whether it is through the channel of hearing, seeing or movement. This problem is discussed in greater detail in the latter part of the text.

Learning preferences

The final point in the checklist mentioned above, corresponding to different learning preferences requires a more detailed explanation as a further guidance in the preparation of pronunciation training activities. The three learning styles or preferences refer to the channels of perception that would dominate over the others when people interact with reality and acquire new knowledge and new skills (Bukowski 2003, pp.11-29). The recognition of such a division may help the teacher to prepare an activity that will cater for a particular learning preference instead of focusing only on one, as is often the case with 'listen and repeat' pronunciation exercises, enjoyed mostly by auditory learners.

Visual learners: Even though our students can all see the material presented to them in class there are those who favour the visual channel of perception over the other two. Such learners benefit from ready made diagrams, charts, pictures, films and written directions. They have a strong sense of colour and may have artistic abilities.

An activity that I find quite successful is that of anchoring, or, in other words, creating an association, a link between a particular sound and a colour. The Taylor and Thompson Colour Vowel Chart (2005) is a good illustration of such a technique.

The vowel sound in the colour word can be now linked to other words with the same vowel to create an anchor that will facilitate the recollection of the sound and help with the pronunciation. For example, 'black cat' will combine with other /æ/ words, while 'green tea' will contain other /i:/ words 'rose coat' will include /əʊ/ words, 'red dress' will include the words with the /e/ sound, while 'turquoise toy' and 'blue moon'



The colour vowel chart.

From Taylor & Thompson (2005)

combine with /oi/ and /u:/ words correspondingly. As such this technique caters for visual learning preference but also for the right brain hemisphere which sees things in a holistic way and enjoys making mind-maps.

This is also an effective technique of monitoring and correcting the learners' production. Instead of interrupting the student with an oral correction, the teacher can simply flash a card and activate the memory association, for the student's self-correction.

Another type of activity that could be greatly enjoyed by visual learners is that of speech visualisation. Commonly accessible video platforms such as YouTube offer a variety of short video films in articulatory phonetics that illustrate the movement of the organs of speech in the production of sounds.

Kinaesthetic learners: As far as kinaesthetic students are concerned, their learning requires the engagement of the whole body. When they participate in a tactile/kinaesthetic activity, the two hemispheres of the brain are simultaneously engaged, which facilitates the retention of new information in long-term memory (Bukowski 2003, pp.11-29). Among a variety of strategies which kinaesthetic students favour, there are role-plays, dramatisations, cooperative games, simulations, creative movement and dance, manipulatives, props and hands-on projects. Thus the students will benefit from pronunciation activities in which they are active and performing.

An example of an activity that works very well with the kinaesthetic students is the recognition of the voiced / voiceless dichotomy, in such pairs of words like : feel vs veal - the voiceless /f/ juxtaposed with the voiced /v/ consonants or /p/ as in Paul compared with /b/ as in ball by pronouncing a given sound and touching the throat to feel for either the presence or absence of vibration of the vocal folds. This activity works especially well if students are asked to touch the throat and keep their eyes closed at the same time to shut off the visual channel and maximise the tactile sensation.

Another successful activity involves drama, or more specifically, acting out short poems, for example limericks, or tapping out the beat in rhythmical chants. Below are examples of poems written with a specific sound in mind: the first short poem is designed to practise the pronunciation of the /h/ sound, while the other one contains a combination of words with /dʒ/:

*A hairy hamster called Hugh
Once hid himself in a stew.
He had a horrible hunch
They might have him for lunch.*

*Sergeant Jones and General Ranger
Were once in genuine danger
When in the savage jungle they met
A strange Japanese jumbo jet.*

When acting out the limericks, the students can be put into teams and participate in the pronunciation competition with the teacher as a judge of whose pronunciation was the closest to the native standard one – prizes can be given as a reward.

Kinaesthetic learners benefit from using props in their learning. In teaching the correct pronunciation of the Present Simple suffix 's', they would enjoy a dynamic activity in which they are given the following materials:

A bag full of table-tennis balls with phonetic symbols /s/, /z/ and /iz/ written on them

Another bag of table-tennis balls with the base verb forms written on them

A tape script of the recording

Three plastic baskets marked /s/, /z/ and /iz/

All the balls are put in a box and students listen to a recording of sentences with the 's' suffix and are told to pick a verb and match it with the correct present tense allomorph which they then carry and place in the appropriate boxes marked /s/, /z/ and /iz/. Another option is to pick a ball with a verb and throw it to a partner while pronouncing loudly the verb in its 3rd form.

Auditory learners: These students, on the other hand, need to hear spoken utterances to acquire knowledge. They remember information by reading aloud or moving their lips while they read. They benefit from hearing audio recordings of samples of speech such as sounds, phrases, sentences or whole lectures (Bukowski 2003, pp.11-29). They also enjoy making their own recordings and comparing them with samples of native pronunciation. The way I do it in class with my students is to get them to listen to a short recording of either sentences in isolation or short dialogues and have the

students record their own rendering of samples of native speech and then listen to the two once again for comparison and corrections. Auditory learners rely mainly on what the ear registers and are capable of correct imitation of auditory input. As such, they will benefit from such activities as minimal pairs, where two words are juxtaposed to demonstrate the difference in the pronunciation of a pair of sounds, usually vowels, or they will use tongue twisters. They can be used to practise the pronunciation of either one or a group of sounds. Also, they lend themselves as a useful diagnostic tool, where a teacher can notice the mispronunciations of certain sounds incidentally to the pronunciation of the sounds that were intended in a given tongue twister.

It should be noted that modality, or the division into particular learning preferences discussed above, does not appear in isolation, in other words, a given modality is normally supported by another one. Thus a student whose main modality is visual will rely on the so called subsidiary one, either auditory or kinaesthetic. Such a combination makes a teacher's job easier in the sense that activities that have been prepared with one specific preference in mind will also prove beneficial to students with a different major modality.

Brain-friendly activities that cater for different learning preferences in learners in teaching pronunciation seem to offer a comprehensive solution for either novice teachers who may still lack the necessary experience and knowledge and consequently feel they are not well-prepared for the task of providing successful instruction in their pronunciation classes or they can be used by those teachers who are looking for innovative ideas to use with their students. The suggested activities involve both the left and the right brain hemispheres in that students at any point can ask the teacher for explanation or clarification or any other required feedback. They will apply techniques of using visuals such as mind-maps, diagrams, charts, or colouring. They will engage their bodies and apply different senses in the learning process. Finally, such pronunciation classes can be fun, and learning in a relaxed, low-anxiety context is considered to be much more effective and successful.

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We all make mistakes!

by John Ryan (English Hour)

Accuracy is obviously an important part of speaking a language. Some English teachers might say that not making mistakes is important, but at the same time students shouldn't worry too much about it as long as their mistakes don't affect understanding. After all, it's about communicating ideas primarily, and accuracy can always come a happy second. In my experience, though, students don't really accept this idea (they want to speak correctly!), and I think rightly so.

After all, people worry about the impressions they make. Whether it's a good impression in a first meeting or the impression you give people generally, we have an image of ourselves which we want to portray. We want to be seen as dynamic and/or successful people. We want to be seen as intelligent and educated people. We don't want to be seen as someone who makes mistakes.

went
 The last week I came to London
had a
 I took one coffee
is
 My friend has 19 years
everything
 Thanks for all teacher :-)

Red pen ready

Pic by author