

# Thoughts and Ideas about Pronunciation

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Pronunciation is an often overlooked element of learning a language. It is regularly assumed that its importance falls far behind the importance of being competent in areas of comprehension and the ability to speak using correct grammar with a large base of vocabulary and expressions. It is also assumed by many that pronunciation is something that can't be changed much, that some of us are just destined to sound like "gringos" while others have some sort of innate ability to get closer to native like pronunciation patterns. There is of course truth in both of these ideas. Comprehension and the ability to use the language well are more important than pronunciation and some people do seem to have an easier time with "sounding native." But far too often these are used as an excuse to avoid working on something that everyone can improve at and in avoid it, we are choosing to be less than excellent in all that we do. It may help some of us to remove false expectations – sounding perfectly native is not the goal and probably shouldn't be a goal in your language learning journey. However, sounding better than you do now should always be a goal.

But how do we do this? I suggest that there are a number of things that we can do to help us all in improving our pronunciation. The first is to step into a new realm of flexibility and willingness to be uncomfortable. Dwight Gradin of the PILAT training program often said that *"the first thing you need to get used to is the idea that you are going to be the town clown."* This is certainly true with pronunciation. If you are trying to make a new sound or a new pattern of sounds that you don't have in your native language, it will feel weird, awkward and uncomfortable. In fact, if it doesn't feel weird, you are not saying it right.

The second thought we need to embrace is that language learning is a life long process – There is no finish line! Most of us want to take the two year course and then be done. But if we quit then, we will communicate like someone who took the two year course and then was done. Pronunciation is part of this journey. The focus it requires will of course diminish over time, but we should routinely be reflecting on our whole language learning journey – pronunciation included.

The final idea I want to suggest at the beginning of your time learning language (the first three or four years) is to separate pronunciation practice from all other parts of the language learning journey. I am generally someone who believes in a holistic approach to most things in life, but in this case, I think it can be helpful to set aside specific times to work on pronunciation exclusively. Pronunciation is often a major source of frustration and blockage in learning a new language. And at the beginning, while we do need our target language friends to help us with pronunciation, we all know the feeling of being constantly interrupted for correction. It can do a great deal of damage to our often fragile confidence. By separating pronunciation out, we can let ourselves off the hook so to speak and in many ways take a mental break from the arduous work of comprehension. When you set aside five to fifteen minutes to work on pronunciation, don't worry about comprehension or any other part of the language. Turn your mind off! The goal is to train your brain and your tongue to do things they are not used to doing. Here I will go to the basketball analogy. In middle school basketball, I hated doing left

handed lay-ups. But we did them every day. No defenders, just us and the open court leading up to the goal. I sent a lot of balls sailing off the backboard or the rim and sometimes I never even made it to the goal because the coach also wanted me to dribble with my left hand – perish the thought! It felt uncomfortable for weeks, but slowly and surely it became more natural and I began to make a higher percentage of lay-ups. Then, over time, I actually got good at left handed lay-ups. During these practice times though, the coach was not asking me to think about the new offense we were trying to learn or the defensive schemes we were using. Just dribble, run forward and shoot a lay-up.

In setting aside time for directed pronunciation practice, there is much that we need to do that is really just training our mouths, tongues and minds to do things they have never done before. And like basketball, there are hundreds of drills we can do to practice these new sounds and patterns. Below I will give you a few of the more popular drills. With all of these drills, you can greatly increase your ability to work on pronunciation if you use a recorder to record your sessions. This way you can go back and work through the points again when you don't have access to a native speaker. And speaking of native speakers, you can't really do any of these drills without one. You should try and find a native speaker that is considered by other native speakers to have "good" pronunciation. This will probably exclude minority members of the language community that speak the language fluently.

*The following lists of drills are taken from:*

*\*The PILAT Manual developed by Dwight and Barbara Gradin*

*and \*\* Teaching Pronunciation by Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin.*

*A great way to get the most out of all of these drills is to record them in the following pattern.*

*1. Language helper says the word. 2. You repeat the word. 3. Language helper says the word again. 4. Silence. Give enough time for you to say the word two or three times when you listen to the recording later. This pattern will allow you to hear each word pronounce correctly twice, a chance to compare your pronunciation to native pronunciation, and a chance to mimic the sound two to three times.*

**Record and Compare**\* Select words, phrases or short sentences that contain sounds you know you need to work on. Record your language helper saying them normally but not too fast. Go back and listen to them and practice with them, repeating after the recording. Next record again with your language helper, only this time record yourself saying them either before or after your language helper. Now go back and listen to the tape again to see where you stray from the model and work on correcting instances. (This has the added benefit of allowing your helper to see just how serious you are about working on pronunciation.)

**Single Sound Drill**\* Select the consonant or vowel with which you are struggling to pronounce well. Find or create with the help of a language helper, a list of words that have this sound in them. Group them according to where the sound is found in the word: at the beginning, middle or end of the word; before or after a consonant or vowel. Set up the drill so that you can practice listening to the correct pronunciation, mimicking and producing this sound. To do this, have your language helper say the first word. Listen then mimic the word. Have the language helper say it again and listen to the difference. Go through each list in this way.

**Sound Contrast Drill\*** The sound contrast drill is much like the single sound drill except that you will add a second contrasting sound to the mix. Find sounds that are similar, but that you are having trouble figuring out. Many languages have the /o/, /ö/ sounds, or the /u/, /ü/ sounds. These often pose great difficulty for English speakers. One way to begin to work on these is to first make or find a list of each sound with all the consonants of the alphabet. These are called *minimal pairs*. So your list would look a bit like this:

Bo	Bö	or	Bu	Bü
Co	Cö		Cu	Cü
Do	Dö		Du	Dü
Fo	Fö		Fu	Fü

Your language helper can then say the first column word and you repeat it. The language helper would then say the second contrasting sound word and you would repeat it. They are nonsense words, but allow you to really focus on the new sounds. The next step is to find or create similar columns of real words. A dictionary can be helpful here.

**Minimal Pair Bingo\*\*** Create a bingo board with minimal pair words. For example, if you were learning English you might use the words: sheep/ship, pet/pit, car/call, pot/put. This is a great game to play with a group of learners and a few native speakers. Make sure to choose lots of trouble words and sounds.

**Building Backwards\*** This is an activity that can really help you narrow in on the intonational characteristics of particular words and phrases. Longer words and phrases can be particularly difficult to master because our brains are still working through the first part of the utterance when the last part is already finished. So for example, when I was learning a Turkish phrase used to signal my desire to get off the bus, “Müsait bir yerde inebilirmiyim?” I was regularly still on the “Mü” by the time my helper was finished saying the word. Building backwards though helps to break the phrase up and somehow improves the ability to work through the whole phrase. So, you would have the helper say the word like this:

H: yim - you repeat  
H: miyim – you repeat  
H: bilirmiyim – repeat  
H: inebilirmiyim – repeat  
H: yerde inebilirmiyim – repeat  
H: bir yerde inebilirmiyim – repeat  
H: ait bir yerde inebilirmiyim – repeat  
H: Müsait bir yerde inebilirmiyim? – repeat

It may be helpful to practice the separate words of the phrase in this manner before putting them all together.

**Dictation** Dictation forces you to really listen and learn to discriminate the many new sounds of the target language. Have a native speaker read something slowly as you dictate what was said. It is better that these be phrases and sentences that you do not understand. A list of your languages idioms and proverbs can be useful here.

**Tongue Twisters** Every language has them and most native speakers know at least a few.

**Find out the Real Sounds** There is a tendency to see a letter in another language and pronounce it the way we would in English. But this doesn't always work. For example. Most of us know that Spanish has two 'R' sounds. One is the rolled or trilled 'R' sound. It sounds cool and is easily distinguished from the English 'R' sound. But I did not know that the other Spanish 'R' sounds was also distinctly different from the 'R' we use in English. The single 'R' is pronounced with a single flap of the tongue against the roof of mouth. The distinction is small and not one that many Spanish speakers would take the time to point out (Unless they happen to be your Bolivian cousin Erica who is tired of hearing her name pronounced "airika"). So do a little research and see where the differences are found.