

How Can I Improve My Pronunciation Skills? Suggestions for Language Learners

Do you need to focus on pronunciation learning? Here are some telltale signs that you need to focus on improving your pronunciation of your new language:

- you stumble or hesitate when pronouncing certain consonants, vowels, combinations of consonants and/or vowels, tones (if applicable), stress patterns, intonation patterns
- teachers, tutors, helpers and/or others point out problems with your pronunciation
- you struggle to pronounce words, phrases and/or sentences clearly enough to be understood by native speakers of your new language
- when listening to native speakers of your new language, you can understand isolated words, but you find it difficult to understand the stream of speech
- native speakers have to speak especially slowly so that you can process their language, even though you can readily understand the same sentences when you read them

If any of these telltale signs describe your pronunciation of your new language (called your *target language*), be assured that you are normal. Most adults find good pronunciation of a second language to be challenging, and even the best of second language learners can profit from some pointers along the way. With practice, however, nearly everyone can bring their pronunciation skills to an acceptable level so that communication is not seriously impeded.

Steps in Pronunciation Improvement

A. Set realistic goals

You may be wondering about how “good” your pronunciation needs to be. From the experiences of others, we know that very few adults ever achieve pronunciation of a second language that is totally native-like, although some can come very close. As a minimum, you should be “comfortably intelligible,” which means that speakers of your new language will be able to understand what you are saying without having to focus excessively hard on figuring out your intended message. Likewise, you want to be able to understand a variety of native speakers (especially those you need to interact with daily) without having to ask them to repeat what they have said. If you will be teaching or speaking regularly in your new language, you will want to give a great deal of attention to this aspect of language learning, aiming for pronunciation that is as accurate as you can achieve, so that your listeners will not “tune you out.”

While nearly everyone can achieve an acceptable level of pronunciation, this degree of competence does not come quickly for most people. This means that you need to be realistic about your rate of progress, keeping in mind that you may need to focus on pronunciation learning for several months or even longer.

B. Determine problem areas

If you are a beginning learner, try to discover the kinds of pronunciation difficulties other speakers of your native language have had when learning to speak your target language. To gather this information, you can talk with others, but you may also be able to find books, articles and/or learning materials with the information you need. While your difficulties may not be identical to those of other speakers, you will probably find a great deal of overlap.

If you are already making progress in your new language, you may have a list of your problem areas. This is a good place to begin. Another approach is to have a native speaker check the accuracy of your pronunciation in each of the areas where you are most likely to have difficulty. (These are the areas where other speakers of your native language have had problems, and/or areas you have read about in books, articles or learning materials.) This is often called a *mistake analysis* or *diagnostic testing*, and it can be very helpful in getting a more complete picture of your pronunciation learning needs, which will, in turn, determine where you put your focus. We suggest you (or someone else) tape record your mistake analysis. This is helpful for getting an accurate picture of the areas that are easy for you and need little or no attention as well as the areas where you will need focused practice. In addition, if you compare this audiotape with one you make a few months later, you will probably be greatly encouraged by your progress.

C. Plan for effective learning experiences

Here are some general pointers for tackling your pronunciation challenges:

1. Focus more heavily on pronunciation at the beginning of language learning instead of leaving it for later on. With an early focus, you can't completely avoid acquiring "bad habits" but you can help to minimize the transfer of pronunciation features from your native language to your new language.
2. Dedicate some time each day or every other day specifically to pronunciation learning. You will find that pronunciation improvement comes more easily as a result of concentrated practice, rather than merely asking someone to correct your pronunciation as you are speaking or when you are focusing on learning other aspects of the language. Usually, the latter two approaches are of much less value, and they may even interfere with communication and learning.

The amount of time you spend each day or week on this skill will depend upon a number of factors such as the intensity of your overall program and the difficulty of the pronunciation system of your new language. However, beginning learners often need to focus a minimum of an hour per week on pronunciation. (See #3 below.)

3. Work on pronunciation for short time periods of 10 or 15 minutes. You will usually make more progress in short time periods interspersed throughout the week rather than working for a single period of an hour or two.
4. Generally focus on more important problems before those that are less important. Those that are more important may be those that occur frequently (e.g., the two different "r" sounds in Spanish), those that make your pronunciation especially difficult to understand (e.g., using English sentence melody [overall pattern of stress, intonation and timing] instead of Spanish sentence melody), and those that native speakers identify as particularly troublesome or even annoying.

5. Focus on one problem area at a time. For example, let's say that you are learning Spanish and you have identified the following consonant and vowel problems as top priority:
- substitution of English "r" for Spanish "r" (*pero, por, carta*)
 - substitution of English "r" for Spanish "rr" (*perro, rico, Enrique*)
 - substitution of English "g" (*get*) for Spanish "g" (*lago, algo, iglesia*)
 - substitution of English "o" for Spanish "o" (*como, poco, coro*)
 - substitution of English schwa (the "uh" sound) for Spanish "a," "e," "o," "i," "u" in unstressed syllables (underlined) (*camino, necesidad, inocente, piquete, suspenso)*
 - pronunciation of two separate vowels that should be fused into one (underlined) in Spanish speech (*la amiga, está aquí, de ella*)

Don't try to work on all of these areas simultaneously. Instead, choose only one area for concentrated focus, such as the substitution of English schwa ("uh"), leaving the other challenges for later. If you need to focus on two related areas, such as the Spanish "r" and "rr" consonants, first work on the one, then the other, and then combine the two. (See #8 below.)

6. When contrasting two sounds, stress patterns or intonation patterns, be sure they are ones that you confuse with one another. For example, you are likely to confuse Spanish "r" in *pero* with "rr" in *perro*, but you are not likely to confuse Spanish "r" with Spanish "n" and, therefore, you do not need any exercises that contrast "r" with "n."
7. Generally begin with developing your listening skills (hearing the target sounds; identification of the sounds, stress and intonation patterns as well as discrimination between those sounds, stress and intonation patterns that your ear tells you are nearly identical) before you give you attention to production skills (actual pronunciation of the target features in mimicry, reading or speaking). (See Appendix 1 for samples of listening and production exercises.)
8. Generally proceed from easy to difficult (See Appendix 1 for a sample exercises that become progressively more difficult.)
- Single-focus before multiple-focus. It's easier to give attention to only one problem sound (e.g., the "r" of Spanish *pero*) before giving attention to two similar sounds (e.g., contrasting the "r" of *pero* with the "rr" of *perro*).
 - Word level before phrase level before sentence level before longer stretches of speech. It's easier to give attention to the target sound in words than in short phrases, and it's easier to give attention to the target sound in short phrases than in longer sentences and finally in even longer stretches of speech.
9. If your helper is constructing practice exercises for you, ask him/her to use common words that you now use or will need to use soon in your everyday speaking. Also, as a general rule, avoid using nonsense syllables, as it's much more interesting as well as useful to focus on real language that you can use immediately.
10. If your helper is writing phrases and sentences, ask him/her to make sure that the phrases and sentences are not overly packed with the target sound and are as natural sounding as possible. A good place to look for phrases and sentences is in the language you now use, your current and past lesson material, and the material you plan to use soon. Here are some sentences for the "th" sound in English that you would *not* want in your pronunciation materials:

- a. Beth Thorn spent \$3000 for 33 items at a thrift store in Athens.

For most learners, this sentence has far too many “th” sounds, making it almost a tongue twister. While it’s a sentence that someone could actually say, it’s not an “everyday sentence” and is not as useful as phrases like “thanks a lot,” “think about it,” or “Do you like math?”

- b. Thatcher thoroughly thrashed out his theory about why thistles thrive in thickets.

While this obvious tongue twister might be fun for an advanced student, it doesn’t sound like natural speech but rather a sentence contrived for pronunciation practice. For most learners, sentences of this type are far too difficult and are not the type that hold the learner’s attention. Also, it’s clearly not a sentence that anyone would actually use in real speech and is, therefore, not very useful.

11. If the writing system of your target language reflects the pronunciation of the language quite well (e.g., Spanish), you may not need to use phonetic transcription or you may want to use it only occasionally when it’s helpful to do so. However, if the writing system of your language is particularly difficult (e.g. Chinese) or there is not a close fit between the writing system and the pronunciation, you may want to use phonetic transcription or a simplified writing system for much longer.
12. Generally, correction is more effective if you have your helper correct only the target focus of a particular pronunciation exercise. For example, if you are focusing on Spanish “r” in words like *pero*, have your helper correct only for this one consonant, rather than correcting for additional errors in your pronunciation. However, if you are making good progress, you may want your helper to also correct for pronunciation areas that you have recently focused on.
13. Have your helper make audiotapes of at least some of the pronunciation exercises. This can extend your practice opportunities, and it will give you tapes to share with other learners.
14. When you are listening to the speech of native speakers (e.g., radio, television), listen for the pronunciation features you have been focusing on with your helper. You’ll be surprised at how often and how clearly you hear a pronunciation feature once you have focused on it in practice with your helper.
15. Make your pronunciation learning an enjoyable experience. This can help to keep your motivation high and will thus improve learning. Have fun!

For more information on pronunciation learning, including sample pronunciation exercises, see the ICCT Web site (<http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/icct/>), SLA Resources and Links, FAQs: “How Can I Improve My Pronunciation Skills?”

For more *ICCT Coachnotes*
and information on Language Coach Workshops,
go to <http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/icct/>