

Professional Development Programme

Enriching Knowledge Series: (3) Improving English Pronunciation and Speaking Skills

Workshop designed and conducted by Andrew Sewell,
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1a) Self-introduction

- Associate Professor, Department of English, Lingnan University
- Teaching experience: mainly tertiary level (English phonetics and phonology), experience of TEFL/TESOL, TEYL, teacher training and language testing (IELTS)
- Research interests: second language pronunciation, World Englishes (e.g. Hong Kong English), intelligibility in English communication, language testing

1b) Introduction: workshop aims

A) heighten teachers' awareness of common pronunciation problems of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Hong Kong; and

B) refresh and enrich their knowledge of English phonology and pronunciation to enhance their speaking proficiency

1c) Introduction & discussion of learner problems

1) Watch the video of an LPF assessment task. What are the main strengths and weaknesses for each speaker? Refer to the transcript in the **Workshop Booklet** for any notes.

2) Introduce yourself to your neighbour(s) and discuss:

- i) What are the main pronunciation problems you noted in the videos?
- ii) What other problems have you noticed with your own learners?

1d) Introduction: workshop contents and structure

- 1) Introduction
- 2) Guiding principles: prioritizing learners' problems
- 3) English vowels
- 4) English consonants and consonant clusters
(Break)
- 5) English prosody / suprasegmental features (connected speech)
- 6) Review and consolidation

2a) Guiding principles: prioritizing learners' problems

- The problem with pronunciation 'problems': where to begin?
- Problems can be defined and prioritized for remedial instruction based on their effects on intelligibility (i.e. the target is intelligibility, not nativeness; see Levis 2005)
- *Teachers should also determine the relative gravity of various pronunciation errors and set up a system of teaching priorities. We believe that pronunciation errors which affect intelligibility or create communication problems should be given priority (Chan & Li 2000: 83; see also Jenkins 2000)*

2b) 'Accuracy' in the LPF and HKDSE

Speaking - ATM 8

Speaking English accurately and fluently, and with a high degree of appropriateness in the use of stress, rhythm and intonation

	I. Pronunciation & delivery
7	Projects the voice appropriately. Pronounces all sounds/sound clusters and words clearly and accurately. Speaks fluently and naturally, with very little hesitation using intonation with some sophistication to enhance communication.

NB1 'accurately' is hard to define; does not mean 'according to British or US norms'

(NB2: no speaker of English pronounces ALL sounds and sound clusters!)

3) English vowels

- a. Classification and parameters: 6 short vowels (+ schwa /ə/), 5 long vowels, 8 diphthongs (see [Interactive phonemic chart](#); [Adrian Underhill's phonemic chart in Workshop Booklet](#))
- b. HK learner problems
- c. Cantonese vs English vowel systems
- d. Teaching vowels

3a) Classification: vowel chart shows relative position of tongue

+ lip position: e.g. /i:/ =
front close unrounded
(lip-spreading) vowel;
/ɑ:/ = back open
rounded vowel; see
[Interactive phonemic
chart](#))

3b) Vowels: problems for HK learners

- i) /ɪ/ vs. /i:/, e.g. *bit/beat, live/leave, hill/heel*, etc.
- ii) /æ/ vs. /e/, e.g. *sand/send, bad/bed, cattle/kettle*
- iii) Diphthong shortening: *fake /feɪk/* as 'fek' (or 'fik', or 'fig'),
claim /kleɪm/ as 'clem', *game* as 'gem', etc.

'a small plastic _____'



3c) Cantonese and English vowel systems

Source: Chan & Li (2000)

For a full interactive IPA vowel chart try:

https://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/IPAcharts/inter_chart_2018/IPA_2018.html

3d)i Teaching vowels: Underhill's 'muscle buttons' (Underhill 2005)

- 1) Lip position: e.g. 'slide' from /i:/ to /u:/
- 2) Front/back: e.g. from /i:/ to /u:/
- 3) Close/open: e.g. from /i:/ to /æ/ (both tongue and jaw are involved)

3d)ii Teaching vowels: classroom techniques and activities

- Demonstration and explanation
- Minimal pair practice: from listening to speaking, and from whole-class to pair practice (see Pronunciation Journey in **Workshop Booklet**; for lists of minimal pairs see <https://www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/minimal-pairs.php>)
- Sound-spelling and spelling-sound relationships: word list dictation, word sort; can also use pseudowords e.g, *stip*, *scraff*, *epple*
- NB when practicing words in isolation, make sure the final consonant is released

Pronunciation is physical!

The learning value of all activities is enhanced when you pay attention to two things:

1. Sensing which **muscles** you are moving and how much effort you are using.
2. Listening to the small changes in the **acoustic vowel sound** that these muscular changes produce.

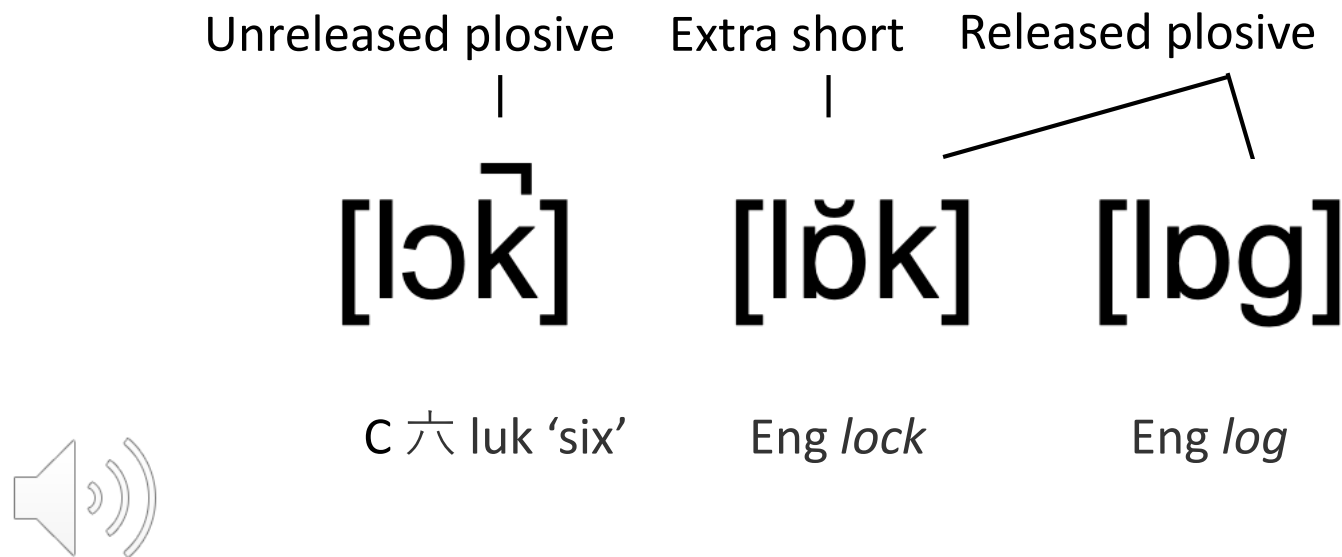
(Adrian Underhill; see <https://www.onestopenglish.com/support-for-teaching-speaking/pronunciation-skills-monophthongs-using-mime-gesture-and-inner-imaging/555048.article>)

4) Consonants and consonant clusters

- Another 'rule of three': voice, place, manner (see <https://www.internationalphoneticalphabet.org/ipa-sounds/ipa-chart-with-sounds/#ipachartstart>)
- E.g. /p/ = voiceless bilabial plosive; /z/ = voiced alveolar fricative
- Many English consonants occur in voiceless and voiced pairs (/p, b/, /f, v/, etc.); see the **phonemic chart**. NB 'voiceless' does not mean 'silent')
- Main problems for HK learners: voiced/voiceless plosives in final position (*rope/robe, mate/made*); consonant clusters
- NB these really are 'problems' as consonant errors are thought to affect intelligibility more than vowel errors

4a) Consonants (plosives) : learner problems

Voiced/voiceless plosives in final position (*rope/robe, mate/made*): Two interrelated problems: i) not voicing voiced final consonants, ii) not releasing final consonants (as in Cantonese). A bilingual comparison:



...and a big toy _____

4b) Consonants (fricatives): learner problems

- Voiced labiodental /v/: often produced as voiceless /f/ in final position (*five* as */faɪf/) or as /w/ in initial position (*very* as */weri/)
- Voiced alveolar /z/: often produced as /s/ (*design* /dɪ'zain/ may sound like *decide*; see HKDSE video 1)
- Interdental fricatives /ð/ and /θ/ pronounced as /d/ and /f/



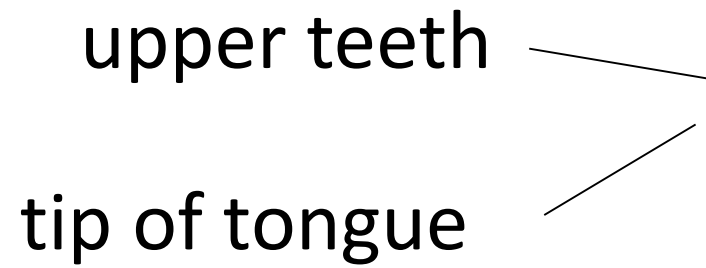
4c) Other consonants: learner problems

- /l/ in final position ('dark L'): often sounds like a vowel (*feel* as */fiu/ with unnecessary lip rounding). Not usually a problem, but (e.g.) *feel* may sound like *view*
- Silent letters: identify them in these words and names:
would, campaign, honest, half, lamb, Bonham, fasten, sword
would, campaign, honest, half, lamb, Bonham, fasten, sword

4d) Consonants: teaching techniques and activities

- Demonstration and explanation: e.g. /ffffvvvvffffvvvv/, *fan/van*
- Minimal pair practice: from listening to speaking, and from whole-class to pair practice
- Student – student dictations: focuses attention on intelligibility problems (why certain words were hard to hear)
- Again, pronunciation is physical: e.g. the tongue must touch the teeth to make a dental fricative:

4d)i Example of explanation: interdental fricatives



NB the tongue does not need to protrude beyond the upper teeth as here, but there must be some dental contact. Otherwise it sounds like dis. Don't just fink about it, try it!

/θ/ thin /ð/ this

4e) Consonant clusters: initial position

- Initial consonant cluster problems: the deletion and substitution of /l/ and /r/ is a serious problem for intelligibility:
- Deletion: *place* /pleɪs/ as 'pace', *present* /prɪ'zent/ (v.) as /pɪsen/, *clothing* /kləʊðɪŋ/ as /kəʊðɪŋ/ etc.
- Substitution: *bring* as 'bling', *slabs* as *'snabs' etc.

4f) Final consonant clusters and grammar

The case of *slabs* raises the issue of plural and past participle forms, many of which involve final consonant clusters:

- Plurals:

After voiceless final sounds: /s/	After voiced final sounds and vowels: /z/	After /s, z, ʃ, ʒ, tʃ, dʒ /: /ɪz/
cat + s = /kæts/	dog + s = /dɒgz/ tree + s = /tri:z/	bus + es = /'bʌsɪz/

- Past participle forms:

After voiceless final sounds: /t/	After voiced final sounds and vowels: /d/	After /t, d/ etc.: /ɪd/
walk + ed = /wɔ:kt/	enjoy + ed = /ɪn'dʒɔɪd/	start + ed = /'stɑ:tɪd/

4g) Final clusters: learner problems

The (apparent) lack of grammatical morphemes is often noticed by examiners. Learner problems include deleting or devoicing the final consonant of the stem (*cats* as ‘cass’, *cards* as ‘carts’). The consonant in these cases is unreleased, but it is not deleted (phonemic and phonetic transcription):

/kæts/ [kæts̚]

Another problem is over-emphasizing the –ed suffix (‘spelling pronunciation’): *enjoy* as ‘enjoyded’.

Apart from grammatical morphemes, common words with final clusters are also prone to deletion: *cold* as /kəʊd/ ‘code’, *list* as /lɪs/

4h) Listening practice: what do you hear?
What is/are the problem(s)?

i) 

4h) Listening practice: what do you hear?
What is/are the problem(s)?



4h) Listening practice: what do you hear?
What is/are the problem(s)?

iii)



4h) Listening practice: what do you hear?
What is/are the problem(s)?






iv) 

4h) Listening practice: what do you hear?
What is/are the problem(s)?

v)



Answers

- i)  'ask her to bring' (final cluster deletion of /k/ in *ask*, initial cluster substitution of /l/ for /r/ in *bring*)
- ii)  'for the kids' (final cluster deletion of /d/ in *kids*, /ð/ as /d/ in *the*)
- iii)  'big toy frog' (initial cluster deletion of /r/ in *frog*, devoicing of /g/ also in *frog*)
- iv)  'five thick slabs' (initial cluster substitution of /n/ for /l/ in *slabs*; sounds like 'snabs')
- v)  'five thick slabs' (devoicing of final /bz/ cluster to /ps/; sounds like 'slaps')

4i) Reflection: teaching segmental features (vowels, consonants and consonant clusters)

Discuss with your neighbour(s):

- What other teaching techniques, activities or resources have you used or heard of?
- Apart from those mentioned here, are there any other problems you have noticed in HK?
- Do you have any other observations or experiences to share?

les 'teɪk ə 'breɪk

5) Prosodic/suprasegmental features

- a. Word stress
- b. Schwa /ə/ in weak syllables and weak forms
- c. Sentence stress and rhythm
- d. Linking between words: consonant-vowel (C-V) sequences (catenation), vowel-vowel (V-V) sequences ('intrusion')
- e. Elision (the deletion of sounds)
- f. Assimilation (sounds becoming more similar to each other)
- g. Intonation

5a)i Tools for teachers and more advanced learners: word stress in the Cambridge dictionary

e.g. *present* (verb):

/pri'zent/

primary stress

(should be /ɪ/)

presentation

'weak schwa' (may even disappear)

/,prez.ə'n'teɪ.ʃən/

primary stress

secondary stress

syllable boundary (no effect on pronunciation)

Source: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/>

5a)ii Stress in other multisyllabic words

Underline the syllable you think has primary stress (mark here or use **Workshop Booklet**):

- a) mischievous
- b) consideration
- c) advantageous
- d) engineer
- e) indicative

Answers

- a) mischievous (mischievous is becoming more common)
- b) consideration
- c) advantageous
- d) engineer
- e) indicative

5a)iii Stress in word class pairs

Underline the syllable you think has primary stress (mark here or use **Workshop Booklet**):

a) increase (noun)

b) present (verb)

c) export (noun)

d) survey (noun)

e) rebel (verb)

Answers

a) increase (n.)

b) present (v.)

c) export (n.)

d) survey (n.)

e) rebel (v.)

5b)i Prosodic/suprasegmental features: schwa /ə/ and weak syllables (unstressed syllables)

Underline/circle the schwas in this sentence (use **Workshop Booklet**):

At the end of the presentation I'll give you an outline of the major areas that we've covered today

At the end of the presentation I'll give you an
outline of the major areas that we've covered
today (12!)

5b)ii Prosodic/suprasegmental features: schwa /ə/ and weak syllables (weak form words)

Note that several of these schwa /ə/ sounds occur in the weak (unstressed) forms of articles, auxiliary verbs, etc.: *at, of, the, an, that*

These are called weak forms; for more examples see

<https://www.englishclub.com/efl/tefl/pronunciation/weak-forms/>

Consonant/vowel differences in some cases:

the (before consonants) = /ðə/ (*the banana*)

the (before vowels) = /ði/ (*the apple*)

5b)iii Resources: weak forms in the Cambridge dictionary

at

preposition

UK  strong /æt/ weak /ət/

that

conjunction

UK  strong /ðæt/ weak /ðət/

to

preposition

UK  strong /tu:/ weak /tʊ/ weak /tu/

of

preposition

UK weak /əv/ UK  strong /ɒv/

See also <https://tophonetics.com/> for transcriptions and recordings

5c) Prosodic/suprasegmental features: sentence stress

Underline the syllables (not words) that you think should be stressed
use **Workshop Booklet**):

At the end of the presentation I'll give you an
outline of the major areas that we've covered
today

5d)i Prosodic/suprasegmental features:
consonant-vowel (CV) linking (catenation)

CV linking or catenation is an important feature of spoken English:

Not  *at*  *all* | sounds more like 'nota tall'

Mark the CV linking in this sentence (use **Workshop Booklet**):

At the end of the presentation I'll give you an outline of
the major areas that we've covered today

5d)ii Prosodic/suprasegmental features: vowel-vowel (VV) linking ('intrusion')

When a word ending with a vowel sound is followed by a word beginning with a vowel sound (V-V sequence) there are three kinds of linking in British English:

i) Linking /w/ after rounded vowels, e.g. /u:/ in *blue eyes*

/blu: aɪz/ blue^w eyes

ii) Linking /j/ after lip-spreading vowels, e.g. /eɪ/ in *they aren't*

/ðeɪ ɑ:nt/ they^j aren't

iii) Linking /r/ in British English, e.g. /r/ in *there aren't* /ðeə ɑ:nt/

/ðeər ɑ:nt/

NB Cambridge Dictionary *there*: /ðeə^r/

5d)iii Prosodic/suprasegmental features:
vowel-vowel (VV) linking ('intrusion')

Mark the VV linking in this sentence (**Workshop Booklet**):

At the end of the presentation I'll give you an outline of
the major areas that we've covered today

Answers

5c) Sentence stress:

At the end of the presentation I'll give you an outline of the major areas that we've covered today

NB *presentation* also has secondary stress: / ,prez.ə'n'tei.ʃən /

5d)i CV linking/catenation:

*At the end of the presentation I'll give you an outline of
the major areas that we've covered today*

(NB: not all of these linkings are equally likely)

Answers

5d)iii VV linking:

*At the jend of the presentation I'll give you w an
outline of the major r areas that we've covered today*

(NB in American English *major areas* is a case of CV linking; not all of these linkings are necessarily made)

5e)i Prosodic/suprasegmental features: elision

Elision (deletion of sounds) occurs in many final consonant clusters in English, especially when /t/ or /d/ sounds are 'sandwiched' between other consonants:

Within words: *sandwich* (!), *Christmas* (obligatory elision); *investment*, *facts* (variable but almost universal elision)

Between words: *nextt morning* (cf. *next evening*)

Note that when they occur before other consonants, plosives are often unreleased: *thatt we've covered*. This is not elision as a weakly articulated /t/ is present

5e)ii Unacceptable elision

All English speakers elide consonants, but elision becomes a problem when it interferes with intelligibility (from LPATE examiner comments); what were the intended utterances?

'Please die with me'

'I love to pain'

'to pose a letter'

'a glass of mill'

'a bow of rice'

'a rose chicken'

'a why animal'

5f) Prosodic/suprasegmental features:
assimilation

You may also notice assimilation (sounds changing to become more similar to their neighbours):

red bags /red bægz/ as 're**b** bags'

It happens automatically in rapid speech and in most cases will not be noticed or cause problems.

5g) Prosodic/suprasegmental features:
intonation

What is special about these stressed syllables:

At the end of the presentation I'll give you an outline of the major areas that we've covered today

They are tonic syllables (with tone movements) that help listeners to make sense of the phrase structure of spoken English. Mark the tone movement (falling or rising) of each tonic syllable (**Workshop Booklet**)

NB: all tonic syllables are stressed syllables, but not all stressed syllables are tonic syllables; compare with 5c

Intonation: answer

*At the ↘end of the presen↗tation I'll give
you an ↗outline of the ↗maior areas that
we've ↘covered today*

Falling tones: can signal 'new/important information'
or 'completion'

Rising tones: can signal 'incompleteness'

5h) Prosodic/suprasegmental features: prioritization in teaching

Studies of intelligibility suggest that with the exception of word stress, prosodic features are relatively less important for intelligibility. However, 'staccato' (unlinked, monotonous) speech is tiring to produce and listen to, and examiners often downgrade it.

Priorities: making sure all syllables of multisyllabic words are pronounced (i.e. avoiding unacceptable elision); general awareness of rhythm and connected speech (songs, poems/rhymes/limericks); encouraging learners to focus on 'thought groups' rather than individual words (*At the end of the presentation/I'll give you an outline/of the major areas/that we've covered today*)

Activities: learners can choose a speech/video extract, transcribe it (YouTube) and mark selected suprasegmental features

5i) Reflection: teaching prosodic & suprasegmental features

Discuss with your neighbour(s):

- What other teaching techniques, activities or resources have you used?
- Apart from those mentioned here, are there any other problems you have noticed in HK?
- Do you have any other observations or experiences to share?

6a) Review and practice/consolidation

Main problem areas covered today:

- Vowels: /ɪ, i:/, /æ, e/, diphthong shortening
- Consonants: final voiced plosives devoiced (*frog* as *frock*) and/or unreleased; devoicing of voiced fricatives (/v/ as /f/, /z/ as /s/, etc.); /v/ as /w/
- Consonant clusters: initial cluster deletion ('pomotion') or substitution (*bring* as *bling*); final cluster deletion in single words (*land* as **lan*, *list* as **lis*) and grammatical morphemes (*bags*, *walked*)
- Suprasegmentals: 'staccato' and/or monotonous rhythm; unacceptable elision, e.g. in consonant clusters

6b) Review and practice/consolidation:
listening

Listen to this HKDSE speaking test (Video 1) and read the automated transcript (complete with errors mainly caused by poor pronunciation!):

https://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/en/HKDSE/assessment/subject_information/category_a_subjects/eng_lang/sp/2024_Paper4.html##2024-Sample-ENG-Paper4-1

You should be able to hear many of the features on the previous slide. Let's focus on candidates C (level 2) and D (level 4). Make notes in the space in the **Workshop Booklet**.

6c)i Selected features in the recording

Candidate D (level 4)

asked 0:09: *final cluster deletion of /kt/*

project 0:10, *convinced* 0:49: *final cluster deletion of /t/*

advanced 0:34: *epenthetic /d/*: /əd'vɑ:nsdəd/*
instead of /əd'vɑ:nst/ (spelling pronunciation?)

view/viewing 4:10 etc.: *devoicing of /v/* (sounds like 'feel')

6c)ii Selected features in the recording

Candidate C (level 2)

*good*d 0:59: unreleased/devoiced final consonant; vowel shortening

technology 1:01, *website* 1:03: weakening/near-deletion of syllable-final /k/ and /b/ sounds

think 1:27, 3:08: deletion of /k/

museum 3:10: deletion of /j/ ('mooseum'; spelling pronunciation?)

next question 3:18: acceptable elision

viewing (?) 3:23: /v/ not clearly pronounced

Thank you for your participation!

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References and further reading

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