Explicit instruction of pronunciation is once again finding a solid place in the curriculum of many language institutes. Although much pronunciation instruction and practice can be successfully carried out in the classroom, one-on-one conferencing—whether 10 minutes or half an hour, every week or once a term—can provide the attention students need to start overcoming features contributing to comprehensibility difficulties. For teachers who feel uncomfortable conducting a pronunciation conference, here are a few tips based on my classroom experience.

Before the conference, I have the student record and submit a diagnostic consisting of a short reading passage and several questions about the student’s background and needs, including “What are your most serious pronunciation problems?” I listen and fill out a sheet identifying what I perceive to be the features most likely to be distracting to the listener. These often include stress and rhythm, intonation, syllable stress, vowel length, and/or segmentals. The “Speech Profile” section in Well Said provides some useful samples of these kinds of diagnostic tools.

If you’re comfortable making an immediate assessment, a diagnostic may instead be completed at the beginning of the conference. Be sure to mark a second copy of the reading, or if free speaking, take notes to refer to afterward. A classroom performance may also serve as a diagnostic. If you’re unsure of how to assess and prioritize pronunciation features, I highly recommend the Pronunciation for Success teacher training video. This provides numerous samples from students of various language backgrounds and explicit suggestions of what to focus on and how.

During the conference, I usually cover two or three pronunciation points. With each, I make sure the student can hear the point and then produce it. For materials, I use several student texts with easily accessible, clear samples such as Baker & Goldstein’s Pronunciation Pairs (for minimal pair work), Beisbier’s Sounds Great, and Miller’s Targeting Pronunciation. I also keep a small mirror handy so that the student can see how she is moving her mouth. After the student produces the point successfully, I make sure she can do it in various environments. With discrete sounds, this means in initial, medial, and final position.

If there is time, I move into less mechanical tasks, such as asking the student to tell me a story, describe a picture, or explain her position on a topic from her field. I then monitor how well the focus point is handled. Note: I tape record conferences, so the student can later refer to them for review and practice.

At the end of the conference, I help the student set up a plan for independent practice. I remind her that no improvement will take place without daily practice; the muscles and mind must be retrained. Focusing on the kind of language most useful to the student’s situation, we work together to formulate a practice plan that will work for her. This plan might include one or more of the following:

- The student makes her own list of words or phrases containing the feature to be practiced daily in front of a mirror and, if possible, recorded for self-monitoring.
- The student uses the dictionary to find and practice the correct syllable stress of key words needed for upcoming classroom presentations and discussions.
• The student mirrors lines from television shows or movies for rhythm and intonation practice.

• The student may work with online sources or software in a language lab.

The student leaves the conference with the following: a recording of the session, a copy of the diagnostic notes, photocopies of exercises from student texts, and a clear plan for daily practice and monitoring.

References


Trish Pashby teaches oral communication skills to international teaching assistants and other students at the American English Institute at the University of Oregon.

Announcing the
ORTESOL Fall Conference
"Opening doors to new frontiers"
November 4-5, 2005
St. Mary’s Academy, Portland

For more information, contact
Talisman Saunders
tal@tkbs.com

or visit the ORTESOL website
http://www.ortesol.org