

The Pronunciation Conference

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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.

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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

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