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TEACHING TIPS

TEACHING TALK, TELL-BACKS, AND A DECLARATIVE TO PROCEDURAL KNOWLEDGE INTERFACE

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Can explicit, declarative knowledge be converted to implicit, procedural knowledge? This Teaching Tip advocates the use of Teaching Talk, defined as succinct and therefore retrievable language of instruction, restated by learners as Tell-Backs for the purpose of internalizing pronunciation concepts to establish declarative knowledge. The intervening mechanism is prompted production, a form of error feedback that is achieved when the language of intervention matches the language of instruction that was used to introduce a target feature, and is in turn consistent with the tell-backs that learners use to internalize those features. Prompted production promotes self-monitoring and self-correction, and serves as an interface to bridge the declarative to procedural knowledge gap.

INTRODUCTION

Moyer (2014) identified cognitive, experiential, and psychological factors common to learners who were exceptional with respect to second language phonology. Levis (2015) investigated learners who were sufficiently proficient to engage in graduate study in English, but whose “beliefs made improvement in pronunciation difficult” (p. A42). According to Levis, the “largely fossilized” learners in his study had difficulties they did not know how to fix; that is, they “often did not have a clue how to improve” (p. A52).

This Teaching Tip takes one of the factors noted by Moyer to be common to nearly all the exceptional learners studied, a metacognitive approach to language learning (Moyer 2014, p. 7), to inform an instructional approach to improve the pronunciation of learners who do not know how to address their pronunciation deficiencies. By proposing an interface to bridge the explicit to implicit knowledge gap, this Teaching Tip promotes a metacognitive coaching approach to providing pronunciation feedback, and offers strategies for learner self-monitoring and conversion of conscious declarative knowledge to unconscious procedural knowledge.

As discovered by Derwing & Rossiter (2002) and confirmed by Foote, Holtby, & Derwing (2011), at early stages of acquisition, learners often don’t know what they don’t know. They are, in short, at the unconscious incompetence stage of development. They may be inadvertently mispronouncing individual segments, adding or deleting sounds in syllable onsets or codas, stressing incorrect syllables in multisyllabic words, phrases, or sentences, or misusing or entirely missing out on the pragmatic functions of intonation. As a result, even fairly fluent learners may be unconsciously incompetent at various aspects of segmental and/or suprasegmental phonology. Instruction must advance learners beyond awareness of their erroneous productions. The stages can be visualized using a model of learner progress proposed by Reed & Michaud (2005, 2010).

Table 1

Four Levels of Competence: Achieving Unconscious Competence

		<i>The Four Levels of Competence</i>	
		<i>Consciousness</i>	<i>Competence</i>
Level 4	Unconscious Competence	–	+
Level 3	Conscious Competence	+	+
Level 2	Conscious Incompetence	+	–
Level 1	Unconscious Incompetence	–	–

Since exposure to target language input is acknowledged to be insufficient to create changes in learner output (Flege & Hillenbrand, 1984; Flege, 1993; Strange, 1995; DeKeyser, 2005), alternative candidates for achieving target-like spontaneous production are needed. Can explicit knowledge - described variably as declarative, accessible, controlled, and conscious (Bialystok, 1982; DeKeyser, 2003; N. Ellis, 2005) be converted to implicit knowledge – described as procedural, inaccessible, automatic, and unconscious (Reber, 1993; Perruchet, 2008)? Consistent with DeKeyser’s (2007) transferability hypothesis, a pedagogical approach is proposed that converts learners’ conscious declarative knowledge to unconscious procedural knowledge. In the model of learner progress above, learners are guided from an initial stage where competence is lacking and errors are made unconsciously to the stage of automaticity, where targets are produced intelligibly without the learner having to stop and think about it.

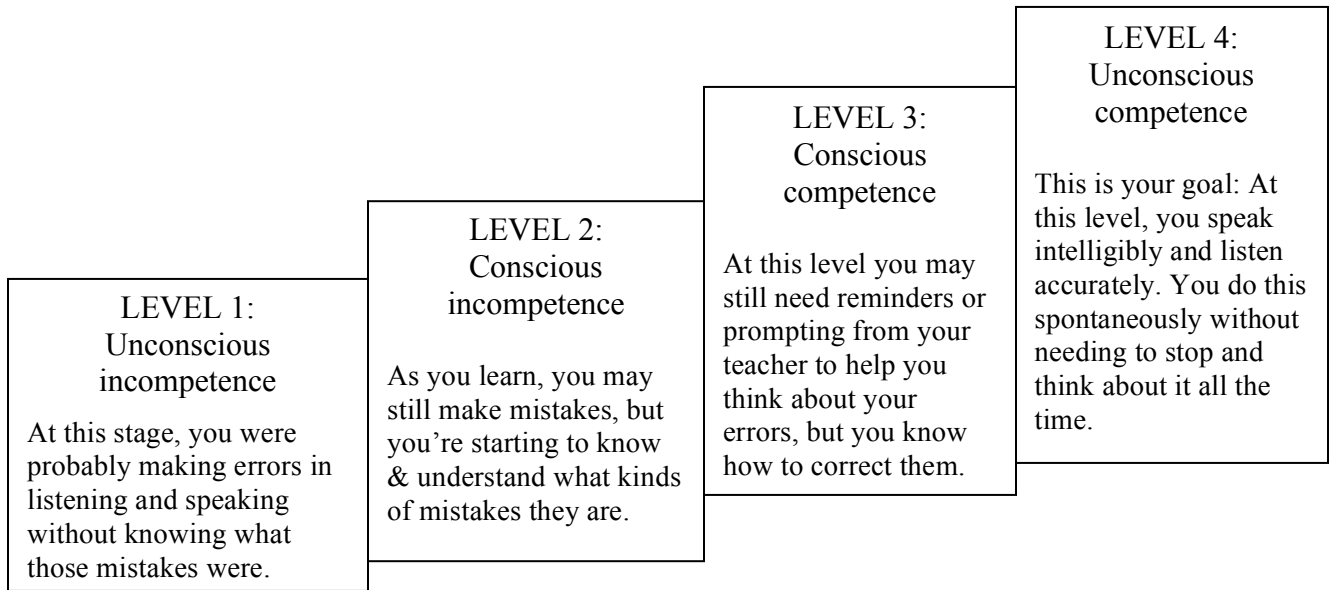


Figure 1. The Four Levels of Competence: Learner's Perspective.

The proposed approach advocates intervention in the form of metalinguistic feedback at Level 3, the stage when learners can produce pronunciation (as well as syntactic and morpho-syntactic) targets on demand but have yet to integrate them into their spontaneous production. Two key elements are recommended to help solidify new speech patterns for learners: Teaching Talk & student Tell-Backs. Teaching Talk is defined as the succinct language of instruction used to introduce segmental/ suprasegmental concepts. It consists of learner-friendly chunks that teachers can use to help learners build their declarative knowledge. It is characterized as a minimalist statement of the rule or concept, presented before and again after explanations and examples, allowing it to be re-stated and retained by the learner. By way of analogy, like the PB&J or meat & cheese sandwiched between layers of bread, explanations and examples are sandwiched between layers of succinct, minimalist Teaching Talk. This example, introducing the components of stress for vowels in multi-syllabic words, uses a stress pattern notation system adapted from a 2004 study by Murphy & Kandil. (For additional Tips on syllables and a Checklist for Learning New Words, see Reed 2014.)

Teaching Talk Sample:

Stressed syllables are longer, louder, higher, clearer.

In most English words with more than one syllable, the syllables are not equal.

When you learn a new word in English, you need to learn its stress pattern.

That's because in English, assignment of stressed syllables is not predictable.

For example, here are words for three musical instruments: piccolo, piano, violin.

Each word has three syllables, but the stress patterns are different:

piccolo – 3 syllables with stress on the first: 3-1

piano – 3 syllables with stress on the second: 3-2

violin – 3 syllables with stress on the third: 3-3

So, when learning new words in English, learn which syllable is stressed.
Stressed syllables are longer, louder, higher, clearer.

Tell-Backs, a term borrowed from the literature on reading instruction (Vanderwood & Nam, 2007), constitute the language that learners use to re-state their understanding of a concept or pattern. Tell-backs may be verbatim, but are often reformulated, reflecting internalization of the concept. To illustrate the former, if you find yourself repeatedly recasting mispronounced –ed endings on regular past tense/participle verbs, only to hear your learners incorrectly add an extra syllable to the same or other verbs, consider using this Checklist (Reed & Michaud, 2005).

Checklist:
How do you say the “-ed” ending on regular past tense verbs?

Look: Find the simple (root) form of a verb, without any endings.
Ask: What is the final sound (not letter)?
Is it: /t/ or /d/?

If *yes*. . . ✓
Add an extra syllable.
⇒ Say “-ed” as [ɪd].

If *no*. . .
Ask: Is the final sound unvoiced?

If *yes*. . . ✓
There is no extra syllable.
⇒ Say “-ed” as [t].

If *no*. . .
There is no extra syllable.
⇒ Say “-ed” as [d].

So, when saying the past tense ending:

1. **Voiced** sounds use **voiced** endings, [ɪd].
2. **Unvoiced** sounds use **unvoiced** endings, [t].
3. Sounds /t/ or /d/ use an **extra syllable**, [ɪd].

Figure 2. Pronouncing –ed Endings on Regular Verbs.

Teaching Talk can take many forms. In addition to a short, clear definition of a key term or concept, it may be in the form of a question, as in “Is the final sound /t/ or /d/?” to remind learners of the –ed ending checklist. Teaching Talk is proposed to work best when it matches the language of corrective feedback (CF), conceptualized here as coaching learners to recall and retrieve what they know and put it into practice. That is, whatever metalinguistic feedback teachers offer (“Make the stressed syllable longer, louder, higher, clearer” or “No /t/ or /d/: No Extra Syllable” etc.) when prompting learners in the classroom should be the same language used to teach the concept or pattern to begin with. Teaching Talk has these advantages:

- consistency across class meetings throughout a semester of instruction
- transparency for learners
- increased metacognition for learners as they use the prompts to recall previously learned material, mentally run through checklists or strategies, and take responsibility for supplying the target form.

Teaching Talk is most efficient when it matches the language teachers elicit from learners in the form of student ‘tell-backs,’ which serve, in turn, to help learners form new mental models and self-monitor for accuracy.

Table 2

Teachers’ Companion to the Four Levels of Competence

<i>Stages of Instruction</i>	<i>Stages of Progress</i>	<i>Mechanisms of Progress</i>	<i>Measurement of Progress</i>
Beginning Instruction	Level 1: – – Students make errors unwittingly/unconsciously	Initial diagnostics; Teachers gather baseline data	
After initial instruction	Level 2: + – Students gain conceptual grasp; still make errors	Teaching Talk Guided Practice Principled CF Coaching	Student Tell-Backs
After Instruction & Practice	Level 3: + + Students master specifics of target sounds/structures	Guided (scaffolded) Practice Principled CF Coaching	Teacher- or Peer-Prompted Production Student Self-Correction
After Scaffolded Practice	Level 4: – + New mental models Automatized knowledge	CF Coaching Prompted Production	Spontaneous target-like production

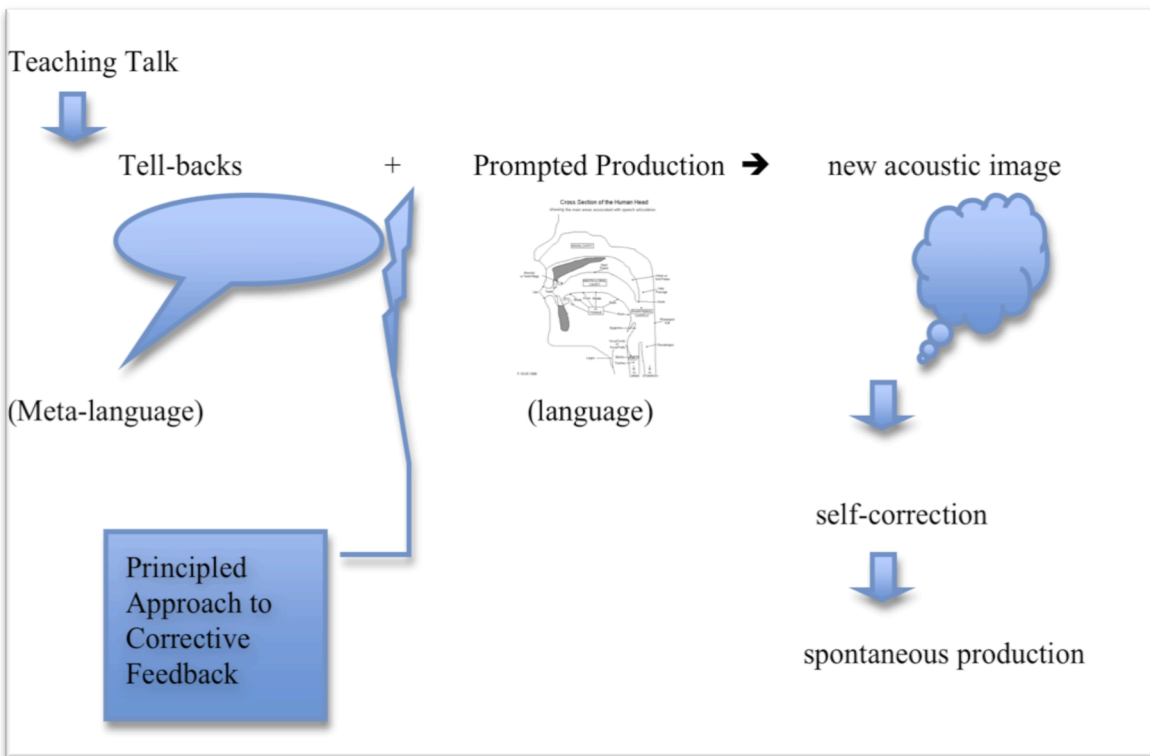


Figure 3. Teaching Talk, Tell Backs, and Prompted Production.

This metacognitive coaching process can be schematized in a flow chart (Reed & Michaud, 2010, p.35) highlighting the role of instructor-prompted production as a mediating interface between learners' declarative knowledge and their proceduralized target-like spontaneous production.

Whether, and if so how, learners can transfer their declarative knowledge (Level 2: what one knows consciously) to procedural knowledge (Level 4: what one can produce unconsciously) has long been a topic of debate. Contrasting views on explicit to implicit knowledge transfer can be found not only among scholars but even within the same model of acquisition. Krashen, for instance, took a non-interface position when proposing his acquisition versus learning distinction, claiming that learned knowledge can not be converted to acquired knowledge (1981; 1982, p. 83; 1985 pp. 42-3: "learning cannot turn into acquisition"). Yet the Monitor in his model (Krashen, 1985) allows for retrieval of knowledge learned in instructed settings under three conditions: time, focus on form, and rule knowledge. In his Transferability hypothesis, DeKeyser (2007) proposes a slightly overlapping set of conditions: time, meaningful practice, and sufficient input. In addition to ample input, output has also been suggested as facilitative. Larsen-Freeman (2003) points out that because of the synchronous nature of doing and learning, output practice does more than "simply serve to increase access to previously acquired knowledge" (p. 114). As noted by de Bot (1996), while output does not create completely new declarative knowledge, it "plays a direct role in enhancing fluency by turning declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge" (p. 553). Fluency, however, often consists of fossilized output, argued by Ellis (1989) to occur when learners have achieved communicative adequacy. To ensure that declarative knowledge is not by-passed during production, intervention is required to promote accuracy and intelligibility. Corrective feedback, conceptualized here as prompted production and delivered unobtrusively as pronunciation coaching, scaffolds practice and thus is empowering, rather than embarrassing for learners. Pronunciation coaching is achieved when the language of intervention matches the language of instruction used to introduce a target feature, and is in turn consistent with the tell-backs that learners use to internalize those features.

This Teaching Tip is intended to identify an interface between learners' declarative knowledge and their spontaneous procedural knowledge. The Teaching Tip proposes metalinguistic pronunciation coaching as an essential element in a metacognitive approach to bridge the gap between learners' explicit knowledge of a rule or feature of English and target-like spontaneous production. Three interface mechanisms are proposed to help learners achieve automaticity, or unconscious competence with the target materials:

- Teaching Talk: learner-friendly succinct form-focused Language of Instruction
 - Establishes explicit, declarative knowledge
- Tell-Backs: learner-generated restatements of the minimalist teaching talk chunks
 - Facilitates internalization of form-focused declarative knowledge
- Pronunciation Coaching: succinct, minimalist, learner-friendly Corrective Feedback
 - Matches Teaching Talk to Tell-Backs to prompt self-monitoring, self-correction

CONCLUSION

In summary, this Teaching Tip promotes the use of unobtrusive corrective feedback in the form of pronunciation prompting that uses language that is uniform, delivered as Teaching Talk to establish declarative knowledge and restated by learners as Tell-Backs for the purpose of internalizing the concepts and converting explicit to procedural knowledge.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marnie Reed is Associate Professor of Education and affiliated faculty in the Program in Applied Linguistics at Boston University. She is the director of the graduate program in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in the School of Education. The focus of Dr. Reed's research, publications, and conference presentations is second language acquisition, specifically in applied phonetics and phonology. Her current area of interest and research is in the role of metacognition in cross-linguistic awareness of the pragmatic functions of intonation. She is co-author (with Christina Michaud) of *Sound Concepts: An Integrated Pronunciation Course* (McGraw-Hill), and co-editor (with John Levis) and chapter contributor to the Wiley-Blackwell *Handbook of English Pronunciation*.

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