AN ESL TEACHERS' GUIDE TO PRONUNCIATION TEACHING USING ONLINE RESOURCES

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ESL students view the teaching of pronunciation as an important part of their English language education, yet research has shown it is granted relatively little attention in the ESL classroom. Although many ESL teachers agree with students on the importance of pronunciation teaching, they often do not feel qualified to teach pronunciation due to insufficient training in this area. Unfortunately, time constraints and other obstacles often keep practicing ESL teachers from obtaining the pronunciation-instruction preparation they need to fulfill students' needs. These factors have led to the development of an online guide (at www.englishpronunciationguide.weebly.com) to ESL pronunciation-teaching resources. This website is designed to help teachers with inadequate pronunciation training quickly access existing pronunciation-teaching videos online. Teachers can then use these resources to educate themselves and teach specific aspects of English pronunciation to their students with greater competence and increased confidence.

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation plays a key role in ESL learners' successful communication in English and their perceived ability in doing so (Bakar & Abdullah, 2015). Some students who have had the opportunity to take a pronunciation course have described benefits that included enhanced awareness of their own pronunciation weaknesses, increased confidence, refined listening skills, and personal tools to improve their pronunciation throughout their lives (Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1998; Henrichsen & Stephens, 2015). However, too few students receive pronunciation instruction, let alone pronunciation courses, as part of their English language training. Consequently, ESL learners without specific pronunciation training may suffer from the consequences of poor English pronunciation. For example, the strong non-native accents of ESL learners often cause undesirable social interactions that include discrimination in employment and even harassment (Franklin, 2016). For this reason, ESL students typically view pronunciation as being very important and a priority (Willing, 1988) in their language education. Many ESL students continue to struggle with English pronunciation even after studying and learning the language for years (Gilakjani, 2011). This unfortunate outcome could be the result of the low priority given to explicit pronunciation teaching (Algahazo, 2015) in many ESL classes or programs. Even with students expressing their desires for pronunciation instruction, it is often included only as a minor component in speaking classes (Munro & Derwing, 2006). Yet, research shows that pronunciation should be considered an integral component of classroom activities (Gilakjani, 2011). In brief, the teaching of pronunciation—although important—

remains largely neglected in the field of English language teaching (Foote, Trofimovich, Collins, & Urzúa, 2013; Gilakjani, 2011; MacDonald, 2002; Munro & Derwing, 2006).

THE PROBLEM

One reason pronunciation teaching is not given adequate attention is that some teachers do not feel it is a necessary skill. A survey done by Grim & Sturm (2016) found that foreign language teachers did not view pronunciation as a fundamental skill to acquire and rated it as the least important when compared to other language skills. In contrast, *students* rated pronunciation as the third most important language skill, behind culture and grammar.

Another reason pronunciation teaching is neglected stems from teachers' feelings of inadequacy. Many ESL teachers do not feel qualified to teach pronunciation due to their lack of formal pronunciation training (Derwing, Diepenbroek, & Foote, 2012). The limitations felt by many teachers regarding pronunciation teaching have been documented in various contexts—by Fraser (2000) in Australia; Burgess and Spencer (2000) in the UK; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing (2011) in Canada; and Derwing (2008) in the USA. MacDonald (2002) cites several studies in Australia indicating that many teachers do not teach pronunciation because they do not feel competent to do so. Such teachers want to provide their students with the education they need to be efficient communicators, yet they lack the training themselves. For this reason, some teachers have expressed a desire for training in pronunciation teaching (Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011) even though their time for professional development is limited.

If teachers do not provide pronunciation instruction, students are left on their own, and this can lead to incorrect assessment and misguided actions. For example, students tend to perceive segmentals, rather than suprasegmentals, as the area where they need to improve (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002). Nevertheless, since suprasegmentals have been shown to be the most beneficial in improving intelligibility and comprehensibility (Derwing & Munro, 2009), focusing on segmentals limits learners' progress toward intelligibility. Some teachers also overlook this key element in pronunciation teaching. A study of three instructors involved in 92 pronunciation episodes (covering 400 hours of instruction) found not even one episode of suprasegmental teaching. Teachers' overall lack of knowledge and confidence may account for this void (Burgess & Spencer, 2000). Segmental sounds represented by letters of the alphabet are easier to identify and address, and that may be one reason for students' and teachers' overlooking important prosodic features. Another reason is that it is easier to correct a single phoneme rather than the multiple words that many suprasegmentals involve (Foote, Trofimovich, Collins, & Urzúa, 2013).

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Three possible solutions to the problems described above will be discussed here. The first solution is obvious—pronunciation pedagogy needs to become part of ESL teacher-preparation curricula. TESOL teacher-education programs need to be "firmly rooted in existing research" about pronunciation teaching and learning (Derwing & Munro, 2005, p. 392). This action will ensure that teachers-in-training will realize the need to teach pronunciation and through their

TESOL program become prepared to do so. However, improving ESL teacher-preparation programs still does not address the needs of the thousands of practicing teachers, most of whom are extremely busy with preparing and teaching their classes. For them, engaging in university-based teacher development related to pronunciation instruction is not a high priority or even a possibility.

A second possible solution is utilizing CAPT (Computer Assisted Pronunciation Teaching) programs that allow students to study pronunciation on their own. CAPT seems promising because it allows teachers to provide pronunciation lessons beyond their own instructional abilities (Levis, 2007). Nevertheless, there are weaknesses in most current CAPT programs. For one, computer language programs tend to exploit the strengths of the computer rather than address the real needs of L2 pronunciation learners (Neri, Cucchiarini, Strik, & Boves, 2002). These programs need to be rooted in research-based models of L2 pronunciation learning and teaching (Pennington, 1999). In addition, teachers need to be trained to use CAPT programs, which takes time that could be used to train them in pronunciation pedagogy. Furthermore, some teachers use CAPT ineffectively because of a lack of training in pronunciation *and* technology (Levis, 2007). Finally, research shows that L2 pronunciation learners progress most from recasts and prompts from an interlocutor, which computers cannot do (Gooch, Saito, & Lyster, 2016).

A third possible solution is to help teachers use existing pronunciation-teaching resources. In this regard, MacDonald (2002) urged,

> Promote existing materials. It is recommended that existing materials be promoted and made available to teachers.…To do this, they need resources and direction on how best this can be done. The recommendations thus made have been made with the view to overcoming teacher reluctance in the area of pronunciation teaching and encouraging teachers…to teach pronunciation confidently, effectively, and more often. (p.14)

To summarize thus far, this overview of relevant research literature shows that teachers generally want to help their students reach their pronunciation improvement goals but often lack the knowledge to feel confident in helping L2 learners with their pronunciation struggles (Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011). Several potential solutions to this problem exist.

OUR SOLUTION

Following the recommendation to use existing materials (MacDonald, 2002) and knowing teachers' time constraints, we felt that a logical solution would be to utilize the multitude of ESL-pronunciation videos available online, focusing *not* on the thousands of online pronunciation videos for students to learn from but rather on videos that show *teachers* how to teach pronunciation to students.

Because of the multitude of English-pronunciation videos available online, choosing the best or most appropriate ones can be a daunting task for teachers who are not trained in ESL pronunciation instruction and have little time available to hunt for videos online. Therefore, we have developed a website titled *ESL Teacher's Guide to Pronunciation Teaching* (available at www.englishpronunciationguide.weebly.com) that not only links to videos designed for English

pronunciation teachers but also organizes these video links into simple, logical categories to make them easily accessible. In addition, we have previewed and pre-selected all the videos available through this website so that teachers coming to it will be led to only those videos that meet certain criteria.

DEVELOPMENT: CRITERIA FOR SELECTING VIDEOS

After viewing and evaluating close to 300 online pronunciation-teaching videos, we chose 67 that we found to be the most helpful, according to criteria explained here. First, we looked for videos designed to show teachers how to teach pronunciation to students, rather than those intended for language-learners to use on their own to improve their pronunciation. In addition, we chose videos presenting lessons on English segmentals and suprasegmentals that carry the highest functional load (Catford, 1987). We also limited our focus to those categories of English pronunciation where improvements produce the greatest gains in intelligibility (Avery & Ehlrich, 1992). Another guiding consideration was to favor videos that addressed the pronunciation difficulties experienced by the largest L1 English-learner groups—namely speakers of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, and Spanish. Suprasegmentals were given special attention due to their importance in ESL learners' intelligibility, but online videos designed to help teachers teach commonly mispronounced English vowels and consonants were also included. In brief, the videos we chose met as many of the following criteria as possible:

- ❖ Fit with widely recognized categories of ESL learners' pronunciation difficulties, as described in *Teaching American English Pronunciation* (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992)
- ❖ Address pronunciation features with high functional load (Catford, 1987)
- ❖ Focus on areas of difficulty associated with many ESL learners' L1s (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish)
- ❖ Are quick and easy for non-linguistic teachers to understand (not overly technical)
- ❖ Are interesting, even entertaining
- ❖ Feature a variety of presenters
- ❖ Provide visual support showing articulatory positions and movements (mouth, tongue, etc.)
- ❖ Use a speech rate targeted towards teachers, not L2 learners
- ❖ Provide viewer involvement—things to learn and DO, not just watch
- ❖ Run from one to ten minutes in length (although some longer exceptions were allowed because of strengths in other criterion areas)
- ❖ Give the "biggest bang for the buck" (i.e., present highly useful pedagogical skills for the targeted pronunciation feature in a short amount of time)
- ❖ Utilize a variety of approaches to teaching the desired pronunciation goals so as to fit different teachers' teaching styles and reach ESL learners with varied learning styles.

APPLICATION

The purpose of the videos that our *ESL Teacher's Guide to Pronunciation Teaching* website (at www.englishpronunciationguide.weebly.com) links users to is to give "non-pronunciation teachers" (with little or no training, experience, skill, or confidence in ESL pronunciation

instruction) the instructional models, guidance, and encouragement they need in order to gain the competence and confidence that so many ESL teachers state they lack (Yates, 2001).

Our intent is that after teachers have recognized their students' pronunciation needs, they will search our website to find online videos related to those needs. At the website, they will select, link to, and watch several videos, and then incorporate the instructional models and content into their own teaching. Ideally, teachers will feel inspired to combine techniques as appropriate and develop pronunciation lessons that help students improve their pronunciation. Put more systematically and in greater detail, we envision teachers following these steps:

1. Notice and identify their ESL student's pronunciation needs.
2. Go to the website: www.englishpronunciationguide.weebly.com (see Figure 1).
3. Choose the "Segmentals" or "Suprasegmentals" section (see Figure 2), whichever corresponds with the needs of their students.
4. Choose from three to eight videos in their pronunciation target area (see Figure 3) to view and learn from.
5. Practice and prepare their own lessons based on the models and content they have learned about in the videos they selected and viewed.
6. Implement their lessons in the classroom with creativity and confidence.
7. Try variations of the methods presented in the videos to reach students with different learning styles.
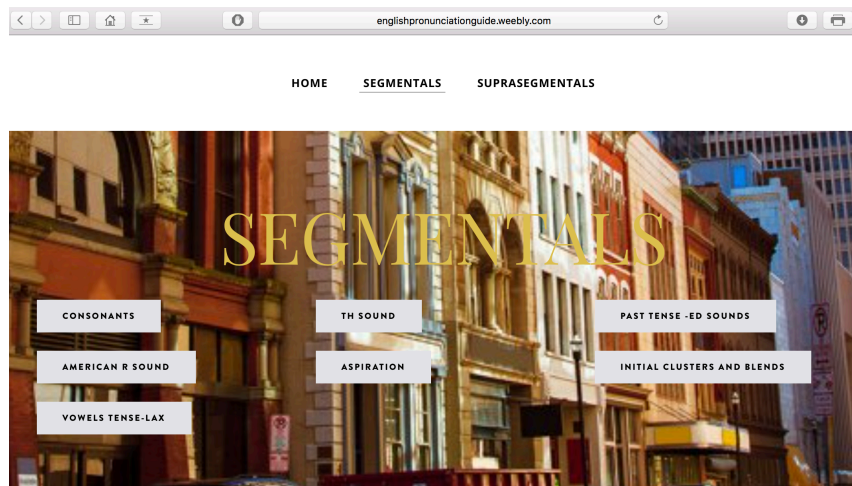

Figure 1. Home page of website.
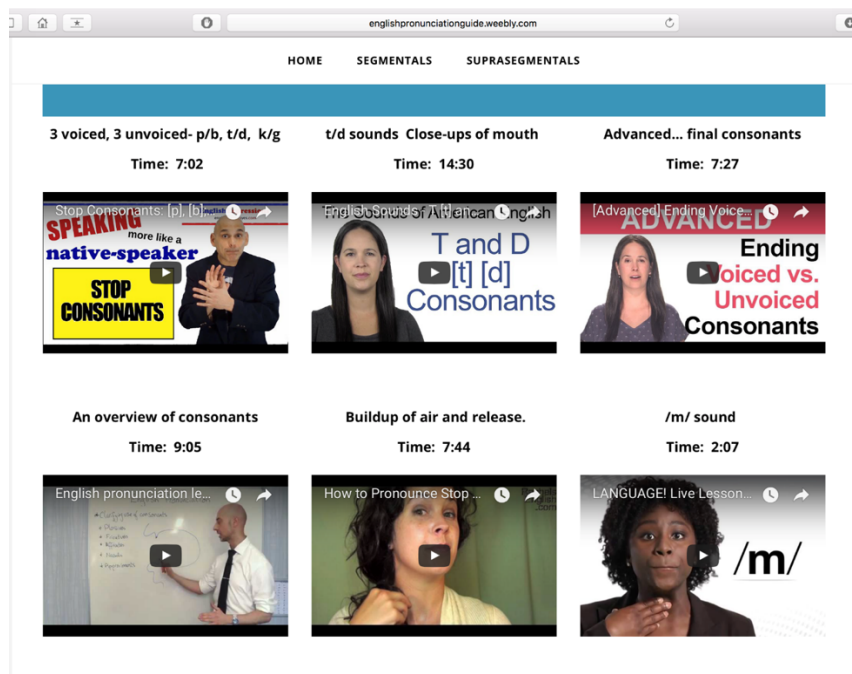
Figure 2. Segmentals directory page.

Figure 3. Segmentals video selection page.

CONCLUSION

Our hope is that teachers who use this online guide to English pronunciation teaching will feel empowered by the quality, directness, and ease of teaching high-functional-load sounds and prosody that the video models provide. We feel that giving users a reduced number of pre-selected, high-quality pronunciation-teaching videos to choose from will eliminate the overwhelming task of sorting through the countless videos online by themselves. The fact that our pre-selected videos are organized into clear, problem-oriented categories makes finding the right instructional model and correct linguistic content even easier, boosting teachers' motivation to view the pre-selected videos. Implementing what they learn from the video models will, in turn, allow "non-pronunciation teachers" to teach the needed pronunciation lessons in their classrooms with better instructional procedures, greater confidence, and increased effectiveness.

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