

## TOOLS FOR TEACHING PRONUNCIATION

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Learning a foreign language has often erroneously meant undue emphasis on grammar in the form of paradigms, and vocabulary in the form of memorized lists of new words and their equivalents in the native language of the learner. Unfortunately, pronunciation is given only a mention in the preface of many texts, and the actual problem of teaching pronunciation often rests with a teacher who may lack the tools and the training to teach it effectively. The English Language Institute at the University of Michigan, with its goal of teaching oral proficiency in English to students of other language backgrounds, has incorporated into its teaching material a number of tools for teaching pronunciation: a special alphabet, a vowel chart, and a facial diagram. A brief description of each of these tools may be of help to teachers in need of pronunciation materials that the students can see and work with in and out of class. It is extremely difficult for a student to hear and reproduce correctly significant sounds in a new language which do not occur in the sound patterns of his own language. With the teaching materials to be presented here, the teacher can explain and illustrate the proper way to pronounce these new sounds.

**THE SPECIAL ALPHABET** In English the same sound is often spelled in a variety of ways. The underlined letters in the following words are all pronounced the same way: bee, me, key, people, speak, quay. The sound which we may represent as [i], in other words, is spelled ee, e, ey, eo, ea, and uay. On the other hand, words which are spelled similarly are often pronounced in a number of different ways: cough, hiccough, through, enough, drought. It can be seen that it would be of great help to a teacher of pronunciation to have an alphabet in which a sound in a particular language is always represented by the same symbol and each symbol represents only one significant sound in that language. The following special alphabet used by the English Language Institute includes all the distinctive sounds of English and is based on the principle 1 sound ← → 1 symbol.

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### THE SPECIAL ALPHABET

#### CONSONANTS

|     |        |             |      |          |                |
|-----|--------|-------------|------|----------|----------------|
| [b] | [bɪ]   | <u>be</u>   | [v]  | [vaʊəl]  | <u>vowel</u>   |
| [d] | [dʊ]   | <u>do</u>   | [w]  | [wɪ]     | <u>we</u>      |
| [f] | [fɛs]  | <u>face</u> | [y]  | [yʊ]     | <u>you</u>     |
| [g] | [gɔ]   | <u>go</u>   | [z]  | [ˈziro]  | <u>zero</u>    |
| [h] | [hi]   | <u>he</u>   | [ŋ]  | [sɪŋ]    | <u>sing</u>    |
| [k] | [kaʊ]  | <u>cow</u>  | [θ]  | [θɪŋk]   | <u>think</u>   |
| [l] | [let]  | <u>late</u> | [ð]  | [ðeɪ]    | <u>they</u>    |
| [m] | [mæn]  | <u>man</u>  | [ʒ]  | [ˈmɛʒəʃ] | <u>measure</u> |
| [n] | [no]   | <u>no</u>   | [dʒ] | [dʒok]   | <u>joke</u>    |
| [p] | [peɪ]  | <u>pay</u>  | [hw] | [hwaɪ]   | <u>why</u>     |
| [r] | [rɪd]  | <u>read</u> | [tʃ] | [tʃɜrtʃ] | <u>church</u>  |
| [s] | [seɪ]  | <u>say</u>  | [ʃ]  | [ʃi]     | <u>she</u>     |
| [t] | [taɪm] | <u>time</u> |      |          |                |

#### VOWELS

|     |       |             |      |          |              |
|-----|-------|-------------|------|----------|--------------|
| [a] | [nat] | <u>not</u>  | [æ]  | [æd]     | <u>add</u>   |
| [e] | [seɪ] | <u>say</u>  | [ə]  | [kəʊm]   | <u>come</u>  |
| [ɛ] | [sɛz] | <u>says</u> | [ɔ]  | [əˈbəʊv] | <u>above</u> |
| [i] | [ɪt]  | <u>eat</u>  | [ɔg] | [dɔg]    | <u>dog</u>   |
| [ɪ] | [ɪz]  | <u>is</u>   | [aɪ] | [aɪ]     | <u>I</u>     |
| [o] | [nɔ]  | <u>know</u> | [aʊ] | [naʊn]   | <u>noun</u>  |
| [u] | [sʊn] | <u>soon</u> | [ɔɪ] | [bɔɪ]    | <u>boy</u>   |
| [ʊ] | [fʊ]  | <u>full</u> | [ˈ]  |          | stress mark  |

The teacher of pronunciation uses the special alphabet in this way: on the first day of class, the special alphabet is presented and all the significant sounds in English are pronounced in words by the teachers, imitated as correctly as possible by the students, and illustrated on the black-board with the proper symbol. The students are given some practice in writing simple words in the special alphabet. The aim is not to teach the alphabet as such, but to familiarize the students with the symbols so that they may be used during the course as a convenient way of teaching

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pronunciation. When the students are sufficiently acquainted with the symbols, each significant sound segment is then taught individually, always in the context of useful words. When a student approaches the teacher with the familiar question, "How is this word pronounced?", the word can be pronounced for him to imitate and then written in the special alphabet for him.

**THE VOWEL CHART** Although the conventional English alphabet has only five vowel letters, a, e, i, o, and u, there are in reality eleven different vowel sounds that these five letters represent. (See special alphabet above.) The special alphabet, therefore, needs eleven symbols to represent these eleven vowel sounds. The proper pronunciation of vowels in English depends on the position of the jaw and the level of different parts of the tongue when the sound is articulated. The various positions of the jaw can be relatively described as high, mid, and low, and the elevated part of the tongue in the pronunciation of the different vowels can be relatively described as front, central, and back. The vowels can then be arranged conveniently on a chart, which can be used to help the students remember the jaw and tongue positions used in pronouncing the vowels.

|      | Front | Central | Back |
|------|-------|---------|------|
| High | i I   |         | u u  |
| Mid  | e ε   | ə       | o    |
| Low  | æ     | a       | ɔ    |

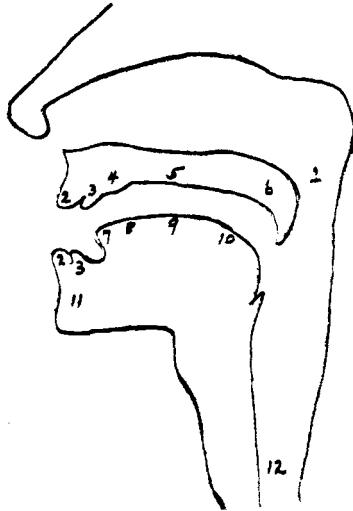
Therefore, [i] can be said to be a high front vowel, meaning that the jaw is high and the front part of the tongue is higher than the rest of the tongue when this vowel is pronounced. If each student uses a small mirror when he pronounces the vowels in class, he can see the position of his jaw and tongue and imitate the teacher's pronunciation more accurately. It may also be noted that all the back vowels are round, that is, the pronunciation is accompanied by a rounding of the lips, and that all the other vowels are unround, that is, the articulation is not accompanied by such

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a rounding of the lips.

Using this chart as a basis for description, the teacher can correct a student who is not pronouncing a vowel properly by saying, "The jaw must be a little higher," or, "The tongue should be raised further back in the mouth." This way the student can be told to do something specific to correct his pronunciation and not told simply to pronounce more like the teacher, when he probably cannot hear exactly what the teacher is pronouncing.

**THE FACIAL DIAGRAM** Just as the vowel chart is useful in describing the position of the tongue and jaw in pronouncing vowels, the facial diagram can also be used to illustrate the position of the various organs of speech when individual sounds are produced. The following diagram with a simple explanation of its parts is presented to the students and then used to illustrate the significant sounds of English. It has certain limitations, and not all features of sounds can be illustrated with it, but it is of great help when used in conjunction with the special alphabet, the vowel chart, and imitation of the teacher's pronunciation.



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|------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Nasal passage | 7. Tip of the tongue    |
| 2. Lips          | 8. Front of the tongue  |
| 3. Teeth         | 9. Middle of the tongue |
| 4. Tooth ridge   | 10. Back of the tongue  |
| 5. Palate        | 11. Jaw                 |
| 6. Velum         | 12. Vocal cords         |

The diagram can be drawn to show that the tip of the tongue is placed against the tooth ridge to pronounce English [t] (in comparison with Spanish [t], for example, which is pronounced with the tip of the tongue against the back of the upper teeth.) The velum can be drawn to close the passage into the mouth, showing that the air stream escapes through the nose in the nasal sounds [m], [n], and [ŋ]. With the facial diagram as a guide, the student can move his tongue up and down or back and forward to approximate the position drawn for him by the teacher.

None of these pronunciation tools is of any value without the actual pronunciation of the teacher for the students to imitate. The special alphabet, the vowel chart, and the facial diagram merely facilitate the teaching of the individual sounds and provide a convenient way of handling some of the problems that arise in teaching the pronunciation of English as a foreign language.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For a fuller explanation of these teaching tools and examples and exercises in which they are used, refer to An Intensive Course in English for Latin-American Students, English Language Institute, University of Michigan, Volumes I-IV.