

# Horses for courses

**Robin Walker matches goals, priorities and models to learners' needs.**

In Issue 90 of *ETp*, I tried to show why pronunciation matters. Of course, with so many things to fit into our already tight teaching programmes, we have to identify the priorities. In this article, I want to look at what these might be, and also to discuss the different models that we can use for working on our priorities. But in order to do this, we first need to look at our goals.

## Goals

It would seem reasonable to assume that the goal of learning a language is to sound like a native speaker and, until relatively recently, this was the unspoken goal of pronunciation teaching in ELT. Teachers had to decide whether the native speaker was from the US or the UK, but the goal was either the standard British accent, RP (Received Pronunciation), or the standard American accent, GA (General American).

With the arrival of Communicative Language Teaching in the early 1980s, the goal of sounding like a native speaker was called into question. Partly, this was a reaction to the over-emphasis that the Audio-Lingual Method had placed on individual sounds. Essentially, however, sounding like a native speaker was increasingly seen as an unrealistic goal, both in terms of the time required to achieve it, and in terms of the chances of success. Pronunciation experts now widely acknowledge that most students will never reach this goal and, in failing to do so, can lose interest in pronunciation: an outcome that nobody wants.

In the place of 'native speakerness', it was argued that learners' pronunciation only needed to be, as Joanne Kenworthy put it, 'comfortably intelligible'. That is to say, they would still have some degree of 'foreign' accent, but not so much as to require a native-speaker listener to have to make too much effort to follow them.

Today, with English operating as a language for global communication, there is a third goal. As I explained when I first wrote about international intelligibility in *ETp* Issue 21, many learners use their English in business, academic, sports and leisure environments in which the vast majority of people they talk to are not native speakers. Of course, users of English as a *lingua franca*, which is how we now refer to this situation, still want to be comfortably intelligible, but the judges of who is or isn't intelligible are fellow non-native speakers.

We have, then, three legitimate goals for pronunciation teaching:

- **Goal 1** – a native-speaker accent
- **Goal 2** – comfortable intelligibility for native-speaker listeners
- **Goal 3** – international intelligibility

Learners who have emigrated to an English-speaking country and are using English as a second language (ESL) often express interest in Goal 1.

Learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) are usually drawn to Goals 1 and 2, whilst Goal 3 is suited to learners who will be using English as a *lingua franca* (ELF). Whichever goal is appropriate, it is only after it has been chosen that we can go on to determine our priorities.

## Glossary

**clusters** – groups of two or more consonants (eg /ns/ or /nts/ in the word *consonants*)

**nuclear stress** – the highlighting of one word in a group of words spoken together (often incorrectly referred to as ‘sentence stress’)

**segmental** – the part of pronunciation that deals with the perception and production of individual consonant and vowels sounds

**schwa** – /ə/ a very weak vowel sound that is only found in unstressed syllables in spoken English

**suprasegmental** – the features of pronunciation beyond the level of the individual sound; typical suprasegmental features of English are word and sentence stress, rhythm and intonation

**voiced** – sounds that are made accompanied by vibration in the vocal chords (eg /z/ or /v/)

**voiceless** – sounds that are made with no accompanying vibration of the vocal chords (eg /s/ or /f/)

**weak forms** – words such as prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns or auxiliary verbs, which have two pronunciations in English, a strong form and a weak form; the weak form of the words *and* and *to*, for example, are /ənd/ and /tə/

## Priorities

A great deal has been written about priorities in pronunciation teaching. Sadly, most of the discussion has not been made generally available to English language teachers, despite the fact that it is essential to have a clear idea of our priorities if we want to optimise work on pronunciation. The simplest situation with respect to priorities is that of sounding like a native speaker. To do this, learners need to be equally good at each and every feature of pronunciation, from individual sounds through to suprasegmental features such as rhythm and intonation. That is to say, everything has the same priority, and it is only a question of deciding the teaching sequence.

The priorities for Goal 2 are less straightforward. In the discussions that have taken place over the last 30 years, it

was initially suggested that suprasegmental features were significantly more important than individual sounds for intelligibility. Today, a more even balance between segmentals and suprasegmentals seems to have been established, though with the emphasis still firmly on suprasegmentals.

The situation for Goal 3 is less complicated, and priorities here focus on achieving competence in the four areas of pronunciation that have been shown to have the greatest impact on international intelligibility. Essentially, these are:

- the consonant sounds, except for the voiced and voiceless ‘th’ sounds and dark ‘l’;

- the length of the vowels, including the shortening effect of voiceless consonants that follow a vowel (eg in *back* and *bag*, where the vowel is shorter in *back*);
- consonant clusters, especially at the beginning of words. The addition of a small vowel is acceptable, but deletion of one of the consonants is not (eg *spoon* is acceptable, but *soon* is not);
- nuclear stress (eg I LOVE speaking English / I love SPEAKING English).

The table below compares priorities for Goals 2 and 3 across nine different aspects of teaching pronunciation. In general, we can see that both goals broadly coincide with respect to the

## Teaching priorities for Goals 2 and 3

	Goal 2 – Comfortable intelligibility (NS listeners)	Goal 3 – International intelligibility (NNS listeners)
<b>1 Consonants</b>	All 24 consonant sounds are given equal importance. Some importance is given to the aspiration of word-initial /p, t, k/.	All consonant sounds, except for the dental fricatives, /θ, ð/ and dark ‘l’. Aspiration of word-initial /p, t, k/ is very important.
<b>2 Vowels</b>	Vowel length as a characteristic of each vowel. Quality of all pure vowels and diphthongs as close as possible to the chosen native-speaker standard accent.	Vowel length is very important, especially the shortening effect of voiceless consonants. Variation in vowel quality is acceptable if the quality is consistent for a given speaker.
<b>3 Clusters</b>	Important in all positions, especially if poor pronunciation of clusters affects rhythm.	Very important at the beginning and in the middle of words. Deletion of consonants in word endings is not so important.
<b>4 Sentence stress</b>	Very important.	Very important.
<b>5 Word stress</b>	Very important.	Not important.
<b>6 Stress-timing</b>	Very important.	Not important.
<b>7 Weak forms</b>	Very important for rhythm and sentence stress.	Not desirable. Can reduce intelligibility.
<b>8 Schwa</b>	Very important for good word stress and rhythm.	Not desirable. Can reduce intelligibility.
<b>9 Tones</b>	Very important for communicating grammar and attitude.	Not important.

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priority areas of Goal 3, with certain exceptions, such as the voiced and voiceless 'th' consonants, the importance of the aspiration of /p, t, k/, or the importance given to the length of vowels followed by a voiceless consonant.

Where the two sets of priorities differ most, and here they differ a great deal, is in the importance Goal 2 gives to the suprasegmental features of English pronunciation. Recent studies, including those by Tracey Derwing and Murray Munro, continue to indicate that native-speaker listeners do rely significantly on rhythm and intonation when judging how intelligible a non-native speaker is. In contrast, these same features are either not important for Goal 3, international intelligibility, or can even be harmful to it. Weak forms and schwa, for example, which are the basis of native-speaker rhythm in English, are probably detrimental to intelligibility when the listener is another non-native speaker.

## Models

If the goal is where learners hope to get to with their pronunciation, the *model* is the 'lighthouse' that guides them in the right direction. In pronunciation, the model is usually a speaker with the accent the learners are aiming at, and so is different for different goals.

For Goal 1, the model is exclusively the relevant native-speaker accent. In a British English learning environment, this will be RP, and in a US environment, it will be GA. Both accents are very widely available in commercial ELT materials. However, to get learners sounding like a native speaker, the *teacher* should ideally speak English with this accent. It is very hard to teach your learners to sound American if you are from the UK, Australia, Spain or China.

For Goal 2, teachers use standard accents such as RP, GA or standard Australian or New Zealand accents. However, in class they need to be able to recognise when a learner's production of a particular aspect of pronunciation will be 'comfortably intelligible' to native-speaker ears, even when it is not identical to the model. Their own experience of using English should guide them here. If a

learner can do what the teacher does, and if the teacher knows that she or he is intelligible to native speakers, then logically the learner will also be intelligible. This is true for non-native-speaker teachers of English, and for native-speaker teachers with non-standard accents.

With Goal 3, the choice of model is a little more complicated because there are no 'standard' ELF accents. By definition, ELF is spoken with a huge range of accents. In terms of classroom practice, however, the choice of model can be brought down to one of two options:

- **A standard native-speaker accent**  
Many features of native-speaker accents are also features of ELF accents, so until ELF-specific materials come onto the market, teachers can use existing RP- or GA-based materials. However, they need to avoid working on those areas that have been identified as either not being helpful, or as being potentially damaging, to international intelligibility (see the table on page 9).

- **The teacher's accent**  
As with Goal 2, teachers who know from personal experience that their pronunciation is intelligible in ELF contexts can confidently act as a model for their learners. Again, this is true regardless of whether the teacher is a native speaker of English or not, although as I indicated in *ETp* Issue 21, non-native-speaker teachers may have a slight advantage over native-speaker teachers as models for Goal 3.



Pronunciation really does matter, as we saw in *ETp* Issue 90, and choosing the right goal also matters, because it is only after we have chosen a goal or, better still, after we have negotiated an appropriate goal with our students, that we can then go on to determine our teaching priorities and the right model to use in class. But teaching pronunciation is more than just goals, models and priorities. We also need to think about the learners' age(s) and about teaching techniques, and I'll be looking at these matters in future articles. **ETp**

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