Accentuate the positive

Robin Walker encourages us to make the best of our learners' (m)other tongues.

If you ask teachers where their learners' mother tongue is most noticeable, most would say in their grammar and pronunciation. Interestingly, different studies question the extent to which the learner's first language is actually the cause of grammar mistakes, but similar studies confirm that a learner's first language pronunciation is, indeed, a major influence on their pronunciation of English.

To what extent should this worry us? That depends on our learners' goals. If they are aiming at a native-speaker accent (Goal 1 in my article 'Horses for courses' in ET*p* 91), then their first-language pronunciation will often be an obstacle that they will need to overcome. However, if our learners are aiming at comfortable intelligibility (Goal 2) or international intelligibility (Goal 3), then it is possible to view their first-language pronunciation in a more positive light – as a friend rather than a foe.

This different point of view is especially important for teachers who work in countries where English is neither the first language nor an official language. In such a context, English is not heard much outside the classroom, whilst inside the classroom all the learners share the same first language. As a result, their pronunciation in English will often tend to sound like their first-language pronunciation.

When speakers who share a common first language are involved in meaningful speaking activities, the desire to communicate can be so strong that their pronunciation in English gravitates towards the mother-tongue pronunciation. This shift makes them increasingly intelligible to each other in class, and so facilitates communication. However, the same shift invariably makes them unintelligible to anyone that they might meet outside their own country or who doesn't share the same mother tongue.

On the surface, this is not an encouraging panorama. But things are not as bad as they seem. As pronunciation expert Donna Brinton said many years ago, *'... the task of the EFL pronunciation teacher is simplified by the homogenous first language background of the learners since knowledge of this language can generally be brought to bear in constructing the pronunciation syllabus'*.

I would go further. I would say that the learners' first-language pronunciation 'can generally be brought to bear' not only on the syllabus, but also on the strategies and techniques that we use in class to teach pronunciation. It is to these that we now turn.

A lighter load, a tighter focus

With regards to the syllabus, the first thing that we can do is go through our coursebooks and eliminate all of the exercises that focus on features of English pronunciation that are the same or very similar in the learners' first language and English. Arabic speakers of English, for example, have equivalent or near-equivalent sounds for the English consonants /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /f/, /s/, /z/, /x/, /h/, /m/, /n/, /l/, /j/ and /w/. So any work we do on consonants should focus on what matters, which in this case is /p/, /v/, /ʒ/ and /ŋ/.

This simple 'filtering' process not only lightens the workload, it also allows us to produce materials with a focus that is specific to our learners' real needs, as opposed to the generic materials found in pronunciation coursebooks. Spanish speakers of English find the difference between /b/ and /v/ very difficult, for example, so this tongue twister by Mark Hancock is designed to practise this point:

A tailor-made tongue twister for Spanish speakers of English

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For Korean speakers of English, /f/ and /p/ are problematic, so Jennifer Jenkins turned a minimal pair activity into a communicative pairwork task designed to help with this problem:

Student A	Student B
1 (a) Can I make you a co**ff**ee?	Yes, black with two sugars.
1 (b) Can I make you a co**p**y?	Yes, please – I'll read it later.
2 (a) Your cat's **p**urr is lovely.	But it keeps me awake at night.
2 (b) Your cat's **f**ur is lovely.	Yes, I'm always stroking it.

A tailor-made minimal pair exercise for Korean speakers of English

Similar analyses can be done for other features of English pronunciation. Word grouping and the placement of sentence stress are similar in German and English, so this is an area that should not cause too many headaches for German-L1 speakers of English. In contrast, it is an area that needs constant attention for speakers whose first languages are Chinese, Japanese or Spanish, for example.

Making the best of our resources

Having a common mother-tongue background comes fully into its own when we make use of the mother-tongue pronunciation to teach our students to pronounce better in English. There are a number of ways we can do this.

1 The mother tongue as the starting point. The simplest way to make use of the learners' mother tongue is to use a feature that they already do in their first language as the foundation for a target feature in English.

Mandarin Chinese, for example, has /f/ but not /v/, so this sound can be a real problem for Chinese students learning English. But the only difference between the two sounds is the voicing of /v/, so to get our learners to make /v/ all we need to do is show them that it is the same as /f/ – which they *can* do because it is a sound from their first language – but with voicing. The same approach can be extended to teach /z/ starting from /s/, /ð/ from /θ/ or /ʒ/ from /ʃ/.

Other features of English pronunciation can also be accessed through identical features in the mother tongue, even though students are often unaware of these. Elision is the loss of a sound in connected speech that is fully pronounced if the word is said in isolation. For example, in English, the word *facts* is usually pronounced in normal speech as /fæks/, where the /t/ is not pronounced at all.

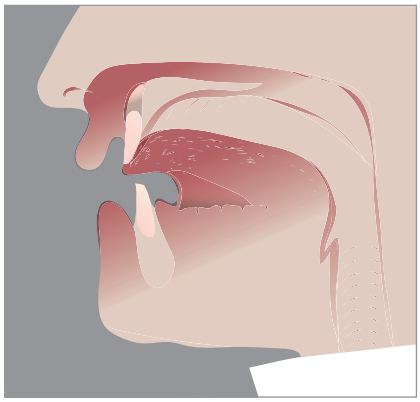
In Spanish, the *s* in the phrase *más rojo* (redder) is not actually pronounced in normal speech, and this fact can be used to introduce Spanish learners of English to the concept of elision. For Italian learners, this could be done through phrases like *l'uomo* (man), where the *o* of *lo* has been elided, or *dell'amica* (the friend's), where the *a* of *della* has been lost.

Another way of making direct use of the learners' first-language pronunciation is to demonstrate the way that certain target sounds or features of English pronunciation are 'hidden' features of their first language. The English phoneme /ŋ/, as in *thing*, is not 'officially' a sound in French. That is to say, /ŋ/ is not a phoneme of French. However, anybody with a good working knowledge of the pronunciation of French knows that the *n* in *en guarde* (on guard) or in *dingue* (crazy) is a very good approximation to the English /ŋ/.

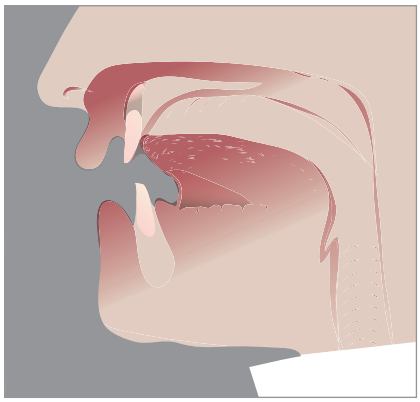
The same happens in Polish with the *n* in *tankowac* (to fill up a car), or in Spanish, where the *n* in words like *banco* (bank) or *tengo* (I have) is pronounced in the same way as the English /ŋ/ in *thing*. In class I use the Spanish word *nunca* (never) to guide my students towards the pronunciation of /ŋ/. The first *n* in *nunca* is pronounced as /n/, which is the same way as the *n* in *no*, but the second *n* is pronounced /ŋ/ because of the following letter *c*.

They key to all of the above is that we begin with what our students already do in their first language, and we use this to take one or two simple steps to reach what we want them to do in English. The result may not sound 100 percent native speaker, but it should be intelligible and it shouldn't prove too difficult for our learners to do.

2 Bilingual accents. In many languages, the consonants /t/ and /d/ are articulated in a slightly different way to English. In Spanish, for example, they are made with the tongue pressed against the back of the upper teeth, and with the tip of the tongue sometimes protruding from between the teeth. In English the tip of the tongue is raised to the alveolar ridge.



Spanish /t, d/



English /t, d/

Phillip Burrows

In order to make my students aware of this difference, I play with bilingual accents. First I pronounce some Spanish words with an English /t/ and /d/. Typically I use *tetera* (teapot) and *dedo* (finger). My English pronunciation of these Spanish words invariably produces laughter. I then ask my students if they can do the same – that is, speak Spanish with an English accent. Very few have any problems doing this, so I get them to focus on the position of the tip of their tongue when they do English-accented Spanish. If necessary, I show them the two face diagrams above, and most students quickly see which diagram represents the tongue position they have just been making.

Next I say *tea for two* and then *I did it*. First I do this with English (alveolar) /t/ and /d/, and then with Spanish (dental) /t/ and /d/. The difference is considerable, and most students realise that they have been using a Spanish dental /t/ and /d/ when speaking English,

and not the English alveolar ones.

Then, I say words or short phrases in English, sometimes with English articulation of /t/ and /d/, sometimes with the Spanish one. My students guess which accent I am using. To finish, I put my students into pairs or threes and get them to play at speaking English with an English or a Spanish accent with respect to /t/ and /d/.

By drawing on their ability to imitate an English person pronouncing Spanish badly, they are able to access the correct pronunciation of these two common English consonants. Obviously, the transition to the point at which the students automatically make an alveolar /t/ and /d/ is slow and requires constant practice, but they have an easy starting point thanks to this bilingual accent activity, and often it's enough for me to say *tetera* with an English accent for them to correct their own pronunciation in class.

3 Other accents. The principle behind this third technique is to take advantage of the accents or languages that are related to the learners' mother tongue, and that they are reasonably familiar with.

For example, neither /tʃ/ nor /dʒ/ are phonemes of Portuguese, so theoretically these two sounds could be problematic for Portuguese speakers of English. In practice, this is not the case if we refer to the pronunciation of the words *tía* or *día* that is typical of speakers with accents from the city of Sao Paulo. As I was able to confirm for myself in Sao Paulo some years ago, the accent there means that the *d* of *día* is actually pronounced as a /dʒ/ in phrases like *Bom día* (Good day). By getting the learners to imitate this accent, we get them to make the English /dʒ/ sound. A similar process using the Sao Paulo accent for *tía* (aunt) will allow learners to make the /tʃ/ sound.

First-language accents can be complemented by other languages spoken in our students' immediate environment. The sound /ʃ/ is not an phoneme of Castilian Spanish, but it is common in a number of the other languages spoken in Spain. By referring to one of these, and encouraging the learners to transfer this 'regional' sound to their English, it is relatively easy to get Castilian-Spanish speakers of English to make /ʃ/.

The 'other accents' strategy is quicker and more effective than explanation because it starts from something the learners can usually already do, thanks to their mother-tongue pronunciation environment. In addition, the strategy places real value on the learners' mother tongue, its accents and its related languages, openly showing these to be a powerful learner resource for pronunciation, and not a handicap. Finally, the 'other accents' technique is effective because it works affectively rather than cognitively.

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On the surface, monolingual groups might not look like the ideal situation for teaching pronunciation. In practice, they bring with them as many advantages as disadvantages and, on a more pragmatic level, they are the reality for the vast majority of teachers and learners around the world. However, a teacher with a good knowledge of the pronunciation of the learners' first language can use this as an invaluable teaching resource for the pronunciation of English. ETp

Brinton, D 'Integrating pronunciation in the language syllabus' *Speak Out!* 16 1995

Hancock, M 'Pronunciation materials as language play' *Speak Out!* 36 2006

Jenkins, J 'Community, currency and the Lingua Franca Core' *TESOL-SPAIN Newsletter* 27 2003

Walker, R *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca* OUP 2010

Robin Walker is a teacher, trainer and materials writer. He is editor of *Speak Out!* the newsletter of the IATEFL Pronunciation SIG, and is the author of *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca*, an OUP teacher's handbook. His website is *www.englishglobalcom.wordpress.com*.

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COMPETITION RESULTS

22 F	10 R	5 A	1 C	23 T	8 I	18 O	2 N	■	19 M	7 U	6 Z	6 Z	11 L	21 E
11 L	■	1 C	18 O	■	2 N	■	5 A	■	5 A	■	■	8 I	■	19 M
18 O	1 C	1 C	7 U	11 L	23 T	■	4 G	5 A	2 N	4 G	■	25 P	7 U	20 B
18 O	■	18 O	25 P	■	21 E	24 V	■	17 H	8 I	11 L	11 L	■	■	10 R
26 D	■	15 S	■	22 F	10 R	21 E	23 T	■	22 F	21 E	8 I	15 S	23 T	9 Y
8 I	2 N	23 T	8 I	19 M	5 A	23 T	21 E	■	21 E	2 N	24 V	9 Y	■	18 O
2 N	18 O	■	11 L	■	1 C	18 O	2 N	21 E	15 S	■	21 E	2 N	26 D	■
4 G	18 O	20 B	11 L	21 E	23 T	■	2 N	8 I	23 T	■	15 S	1 C	5 A	20 B
■	3 K	■	■	11 L	■	25 P	8 I	4 G	18 O	7 U	23 T	■	20 B	9 Y
21 E	15 S	23 T	5 A	20 B	11 L	8 I	15 S	17 H	■	10 R	18 O	21 E	■	6 Z
12 X	■	10 R	■	18 O	■	21 E	■	23 T	10 R	5 A	1 C	17 H	21 E	5 A
1 C	■	8 I	2 N	16 W	5 A	10 R	26 D	■	21 E	11 L	3 K	■	■	2 N
11 L	21 E	24 V	9 Y	■	■	1 C	■	■	14 J	■	■	4 G	21 E	23 T
7 U	■	8 I	1 C	18 O	2 N	8 I	1 C	■	21 E	12 X	5 A	19 M	■	8 I
26 D	■	5 A	■	22 F	■	2 N	■	■	1 C	■	15 S	■	■	2 N
21 E	1 C	11 L	5 A	23 T	■	4 G	10 R	18 O	23 T	21 E	15 S	13 Q	7 U	21 E

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1 C	2 N	3 K	4 G	5 A	6 Z	7 U	8 I	9 Y	10 R	11 L	12 X	13 Q
14 J	15 S	16 W	17 H	18 O	19 M	20 B	21 E	22 F	23 T	24 V	25 P	26 D

2 N	18 O	■	15 S	2 N	18 O	16 W	22 F	11 L	5 A	3 K	21 E	■	8 I	2 N	■	5 A	2 N
■	5 A	24 V	5 A	11 L	5 A	2 N	1 C	17 H	21 E	■	21 E	24 V	21 E	10 R	■	22 F	21 E
21 E	11 L	15 S	■	10 R	21 E	15 S	25 P	18 O	2 N	15 S	8 I	20 B	11 L	21 E	■	■	■

Stanisław Jerzy Lec