

Pronunciationforteachers.com/ Key Concepts

Pronunciation Instruction: Important From the Very Beginning

Speaking in a way that is easy to understand is crucial for beginner-level L2 learners. It is important for their confidence and willingness to speak and interact with others, which can in turn influence how much L2 they speak day to day, and thus their opportunities for practice and further learning (Zielinski, 2012). Learners can be frustrated and disheartened when their pronunciation affects the comprehensibility of their L2 speech, and they may withdraw and avoid speaking in the L2 altogether (Yates, 2011).

Pronunciation is sometimes overlooked in beginner-level classrooms because other seemingly more important language skills take priority. However, if learners' pronunciation affects their intelligibility, they might not be understood even if all other aspects of their L2 are perfect. Having perfect grammar and correct vocabulary will not help if pronunciation makes the words impossible to understand. It therefore makes little sense to teach beginner-level learners how to speak a language without teaching pronunciation. (Of course, some learners may be understandable from the beginning, in which case, they will not need additional help.)

Research tells us that pronunciation instruction results in improvement (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Thomson & Derwing, 2014), and that beginner-level learners might not improve without it (Derwing, Thomson, & Munro, 2006). It is therefore important that beginners are given the opportunity to benefit from pronunciation instruction as a fundamental part of their language classes from day one. Unfortunately, despite its importance, teachers sometimes feel reluctant to teach pronunciation in beginner-level classrooms. Some feel that beginners are not ready to learn pronunciation so early on, or that it is something they can always learn later if need be. However, research has indicated that beginner-level learners want to improve their pronunciation and can improve with pronunciation instruction; they also enjoy working on their pronunciation in the language classroom (see Zielinski & Yates, 2014). Moreover, it appears that learners' greatest phonological shifts take place in their first six months of massive exposure, what Derwing and Munro (2015) have called the *Window of Maximal Opportunity*.

Integrating pronunciation into the language curriculum emphasizes its importance to learners and makes it a natural and essential part of learning to speak (Darcy, Ewert, & Lidster, 2012; Jones, 2016). Keenan (2017a) investigated best practice in pronunciation instruction for beginner-level L2 learners from a teacher's perspective. She concluded that explicit pronunciation instruction should be integrated into the L2 curriculum from the beginning, with contextualized pronunciation practice and appropriate, relevant feedback provided throughout. However, pronunciation instruction in a beginner-level classroom can be perceived as quite challenging because many activities used successfully with higher-level learners may not be suitable for beginner-level learners. This should not stop us from teaching pronunciation to beginner-level learners!

Zielinski and Yates (2014) outline a systematic approach to pronunciation instruction that allows beginner-level learners to work through a sequence of developmental stages (listening and awareness, control, practice and extension), such that learners practice at an achievable level before progressing to the next (see also Yates & Zielinski, 2009). There are also several activities that have been found to be successful with beginner-level learners. Keenan (2017b) reports on the success of activities she trialled from Jones (2016) with learners in her beginner-level classroom. She found activities that integrated pronunciation into listening and speaking, beginner-level grammar, and reading lessons both effective and engaging for the learners in her classes. Zielinski and Yates (2014) discuss successful activities used by an experienced teacher of beginner-level learners. These include tasks that focus on raising awareness; practice of various pronunciation features; and the introduction of simple metalanguage terms to help learners understand aspects of English pronunciation, such as *syllables*, *word stress*, *rhythm*, *vowels*, and *consonants*. Additional activities used by teachers of beginner-level learners of L2 English are available online (Yates, 2002; Yates & Zielinski, 2009).

Pronunciation instruction to improve comprehensibility is of utmost importance to beginner-level learners so they maintain their confidence and motivation to improve further. They want to improve and enjoy working on their pronunciation. It is therefore an essential part of learning to speak a language right from the beginning.

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