

Pronunciation for Teachers.com/ Teaching Techniques

Teaching Pronunciation to Second Language English-Speaking Actors

Actors' unique pronunciation demands

Unlike other second language learners of English, actors face pressure from North American directors, writers, and producers to sound like a native speaker in performance (Schiffman, 2004). In fact, many actors have reported losing job opportunities because their English pronunciation did not sound natively (Fine, 1999). Unfortunately, until Hollywood reflects the diversity of North American speech, many actors will depend on comprehensive pronunciation instruction to help them sound like native speakers of English, in the hopes of increasing their job opportunities. While the goal of achieving natively like speech is unrealistic for most adult second language speakers (Scovel, 2000), actors work in a unique context where they speak words that are memorized and studied, not spontaneous, possibly making it easier for them to speak with more target-like pronunciation (Ding, 2007).

Approaching pronunciation for acting purposes

Since actors often use their five senses in the process of acting (Hagen, 1991), drawing their attention to how a sound feels within the vocal tract could be beneficial (Cerreta & Trofimovich, in press). One warm-up exercise that we often use to perceive how the sounds of English feel is speaking Omnish. Omnish was developed by Dudley Knight (1997) and is a fake, spontaneous version of a language's sound system. For example, students mimic the non-lexical aspects of how English sounds, producing the retroflex /r/ sound, the elongated vowels and diphthongs, and the rhythm and intonation patterns in an exaggerated way. This is a way of "playing" with the sounds of English without focusing on vocabulary or grammar. After speaking the Omnish version of English, students are asked to point out any articulatory differences from their first language that they experienced during the exercise. Next, students participate in vocal warm-ups. Vocal warm-ups serve to work out the muscles in the vocal tract, while drawing students' attention to the relationship between the moveable and immovable articulators in an exaggerated way (Hardison & Sonchaeng, 2005). Moreover, some studies have suggested that exaggerated articulation could aid in more comprehensible speech (Bradlow, Torretta & Pisoni, 1996). Some vocal warm-up exercises include deep breathing, exploring the range of motion of the lips and tongue, and practicing voiced and voiceless stops (e.g., /p/, /t/, /k/, /b/, /d/, /g/).

After warming up the vocal tract and the voice, actors approach their text by applying concepts from second language pronunciation research that aid in more intelligible speech (Derwing, Munro & Wiebe, 1998), i.e., stress, intonation, and connected speech; however, actors adapt these concepts to fit their goal of natively like speech and use of the language (e.g., dramatic context). For example, actors separate their dialogue or monologue into thought groups or intonation groups and indicate the words in each thought group that should be emphasized or stressed. They practice the stressed words in each thought group by physicalizing the emphasis, using a rubber band or physical gesture to feel the expansion and contraction of stressed syllables and words, as well as the intonation shifts (Cerreta & Trofimovich, in press; Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010). Additionally, actors merge the qualities of stress, (elongated vowels,

added articulation, pitch change, or volume change) with their intention or tactic within the scene (e.g., in response to the other character within the scene) so that their emphasis helps add dimension to the story they are trying to tell and the character they are portraying.

Pronunciation specific to sounding nativelike

In order to focus on nativelike pronunciation, actors must also pay attention to individual sounds, more specifically, sounds that can be challenging because of their first language and their level of proficiency in speaking English (Cerreta & Trofimovich, in press). For example, most second language learners do not need to pronounce an accurate /θ/ or /ð/ (as in ‘think’ or ‘there’), because (a) these sounds do not carry a high functional load with regard to comprehensibility (Munro & Derwing, 2006), (b) are difficult to acquire (Flege, Munro & MacKay, 1996) and (c) if replaced by a /t/ or /d/ would still, most likely, be comprehensible (Brown, 1991). Actors, however, must acquire these sounds and blend them into connected speech so they sound effortless. Specifically, the presence of /t/, /d/, and /θ/ or /ð/ in a thought group is difficult for first language speakers of romance languages (Méli, 2013), as many actors overgeneralize the use of /θ/ and /ð/, causing them to put it in words that should begin with /t/ and /d/, (e.g., ‘thake those’ instead of ‘take those’). To address this problem, actors practice sentence drills, taken from authentic TV and film scripts, that contain the challenging consonant combinations in different environments, and practice, for example, changing the position of the tongue to be closer to the top front teeth when gliding from a word final /d/ to a word initial /ð/, drawing their attention to how the tongue feels moving from one sound to the other.

Anecdotally, working with many actors in Quebec, where French is the first language, there is a tendency for a greater emphasis on consonant articulation over vowel elongation when performing dramatic texts in English. Producing delicate consonants (e.g., without added force or aspiration, with lighter tapping of the tongue to the alveolar ridge or hard palate) while elongating vowels and diphthongs can help actors sound more like a native speaker of North American English in practiced performance.

The Omnish exercise (Taken from Cerreta & Trofimovich, in press)

- 1) Find a private or semi-private space in the room.
- 2) Close your eyes, if you feel more comfortable, and begin to exaggerate your impression of how English sounds. Remember not to use words, but your perception of the sounds you hear in English. For example, recall sounds you may hear in TV or film.
- 3) After one minute, stop and reflect on what you feel. Where is your tongue? How do your lips feel? What positions of the mouth or muscles that you used feel different from how you usually speak? What feels the same? Do your articulators work harder in some places than others?

- 4) Make a list of the main positions of the mouth that you found in the Omnish exercise. Add to that list any sound qualities that you found important or new, i.e., long (vowel) sounds, more pitch variation.

Example of vocal warm-ups

The following warm-up was designed specifically for second language French Canadian speakers of English; however, it can be applied in any second language context.

- 1) Massage jaw –
 - a. Lightly massage the notches of the jaw, while relaxing the jaw open
 - b. Lightly massage the muscle above the temples of the head
 - c. Lightly massage the muscles around the ears
- 2) Breathing exercise 1 – Repeat 3 - 5 times
 - a. Place your hands on your back below your ribcage
 - b. Exhale your air, feeling the contraction and your hands moving toward the spine
 - c. Inhale as though you are breathing the air into your hands on your back, feeling your hands expand across your back
- 3) Breathing exercise 2 – Vacuum breath – Repeat 3-5 times
 - a. Exhale your air completely
 - b. Pump the belly 3-5 times while leaning over with your hands on your knees
 - c. Inhale as you stand up, feeling the lungs expanding more and more each time
- 4) Open your face and mouth as wide as you can / scrunch up your face as small as you can – Repeat 3-5 times
- 5) Chew with the lips closed in an exaggerated way, as though you were chewing a lot of gum
- 6) Lips –
 - a. With the lips pursed together as though in a kiss, extend the lips straight out from the face, keeping the jaw still – Repeat 3-5 times
 - b. In the same pursed position, circle the lips around in one direction, and then the other, keeping the jaw still
- 7) Tongue –
 - a. Extend the tongue straight out and then relax it back into the mouth– Repeat 3-5 times
 - b. Circle the tongue in one direction and then the other – Repeat 3-5 times
- 8) Home voice – Find your ideal speaking range each day by finding the most resonant pitches
 - a. Place one hand on the bridge of the nose and one hand flat on the chest
 - b. Begin humming on an /m/ sound
 - c. Start at the lowest pitch that you can for that day and begin raising your pitch slowly
 - d. When you feel equal resonance in the nose and the chest, you have found an ideal pitch for you that day
 - e. Explore the range around that pitch to find the highest and lowest notes within that range where the nose and chest still vibrate
- 9) Stretch the face and add sound – Pronounce the following 3-5 times each

- a. WEE WAW WOAHA (wi wə woə)
- b. Putting the tip of the tongue behind the lower front teeth, open the jaw for the first word in the series, then just unglute the tongue forward, rubbing the sides of the tongue along the upper side teeth – 3-5 times YEAH YEAH YEAH
YEAH YEAH
- c. PAY DAY TRAY CLAY
- d. MY TIE NYE SHY CRY
- e. BOY CHOY TOY COY
- f. BO NO DOE SHOW JOE GO
- g. POW DOW CHOW COW NOW
- h. PING SING TING RING KING
- i. PRYING FLYING SIGHING TRYING CRYING
- j. Practice the voiceless and voiced stop plosives in the following tongue twister by adding a bit more /h/ after a voiceless stop (e.g., /t/, /p/, /k/) and eliminating pre-voicing before a voiced stop (e.g., /b/, /d/, /g/)
 - i. TOPEKA TOPEKA TOPEKA
 - ii. BODEGA BODEGA BODEGA
 - iii. TOPEKA TOPEKA TOPEKA
 - iv. BODEGA BODEGA BODEGA
- k. Practice the following consonants by delicately tapping the tip of the tongue on the alveolar ridge or hard palate – then blend the /t/ and /d/ into the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds
 - i. T – T – T – T – T – T – T
 - ii. D – D – D – D – D – D – D
 - iii. T – TH – T – TH – T – TH – T – TH – T – TH
 - iv. D – TH – D – TH – D – TH – D – TH – D – TH
- l. Practice feeling the glide from the upper gum line when making /t/, /d/, /n/, /k/, and /l/ sounds into the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds –
 - i. And then; Don't throw those; Tried those
 - ii. Take them; Plan things; Call them

Vocal warmups can be adapted to suit second language classes of any age group. These exercises can also be done out of order or to prepare students for role-play exercises. It is best to do vocal warm-ups standing up, as this fosters an ensemble feel to the classroom.

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