Acquiring and teaching pronunciation (part 1)

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Language conveys meanings from one person to another through
• spoken sounds
• written letters
• gestures

Speakers know how to pronounce:
• the words
• sentences
• Utterances

of their native language.

They can tell the difference in pronunciation between 'drain' and 'train'.

At the suprasegmental (higher) level they know the difference between
• 'Fine', 'Fine?' and 'Fine!'- the intonation patterns change as the voice rises and falls.

4.1 Phonemes and second language acquisition

Focusing questions
• What do you think are the crucial sounds in your first language?
• How do you think you learnt them?

Keywords
phonemes: the sounds of a language that are systematically distinguished from each other, for example, /v/ from /i/ in 'same' and 'tame'
allophones: different forms of the phoneme in particular contexts, for example, the aspirate /p/ (with a puff of air) in 'piff' versus the unaspirated /p/ (without a puff of air) in 'pip'
distinctive feature: the minimal difference that may distinguish phonemes, such as voice and aspiration in 'gin' and 'tin'
voice onset time (VOT): the moment when voicing starts during the production of a consonant
First cause: the Great Vowel Shift

Second cause: letterpress printing

Third cause: the northern cities vowel shift + predictable difficulty

Examples – the Great Vowel Shift –

Before the Great Vowel Shift After the Great Vowel Shift

• name [naːm] → [neɪm]
• feel [feːl][feːl] → [fiːl]
• time [tiːm] → [taɪm]
• home [hoːm] → [hoʊm]
• now [nuː] → [nəʊ]

Letterpress printing was invented = spellings were settled

1400s 1450 1700s

The Great vowel shift = sounds continued to change

The Great Vowel Shift

Letterpress Printing

• Johannes Gutenberg invented (1450)
• Spellings were settled

Northern cities vowel shift
Acquiring and teaching a new writing system

Focusing questions

- Which words do you have trouble spelling? Why? What do you do to improve your spelling?
- What spelling mistakes do your students make? Why? What do you do to improve your students' spelling?

The big division in the writing systems of the world is between those based on meaning and those based on sounds, as seen in Figure 5.1.

- The Chinese character-based system of writing links a written sign to a meaning; the character 人 means a person, the sign 象 an elephant; it is not necessary to know how 人 is pronounced or even to know what the Chinese spoken word actually is in order to read it.

- A Chinese-English dictionary does not tell you the spoken form: 口 is simply given as ’mouth’.

- Hence speakers of different dialects of Chinese can communicate in writing even when they cannot understand each other’s speech.

The other main type of writing system in the world links the written sign to its spoken form rather than its meaning.

- The English word <table> corresponds to the spoken form /teibl/; the meaning is reached via the spoken form.

- Knowing the written form of the word tells you how it is pronounced, but knowing that ‘table’ is pronounced /teibl/ gives you no idea what it means.

Though these routes between writing and meaning are distinct in principle, in practice they are often mixed.

- Numbers function like a meaning-based system regardless of the language involved.

- ‘1, 2, 3...’ have the same meaning in most languages, so that you do not have to know Greek to know what ‘1’ means on an airport departure board in Greece.
Indeed, both the meaning-based and sound-based writing routes are used by everybody to some extent, whichever their language.

Try the e-deletion test in Box 5.1 to test this.

**Box 5.1 Exercise: spot the e’s**

Here is the opening of Charles Dickens’ The Pickwick Papers (1837). Read through it quickly and cross out all the letter <e>s.

The first ray of light which illuminates the gloom, and converts into a dazzling brilliance that obscurity in which the earlier history of the public career of the immortal Pickwick would appear to be involved, is derived from the peculiarities of the following entry in the Transactions of the Pickwick Club, which the editor of these papers feels the highest pleasure in laying before his readers, as a proof of the careful attention, indefatigable industry, and nice discrimination, with which his search among the multifarious documents confided to him has been conducted.

Now check your copy against page 103 at the end of the chapter.

The sound-based route is nevertheless always available: given new words like ‘Hushidh’, ‘Zdorab’ or ‘Umene’ (characters in a science fiction novel), we can always have a stab at reading them aloud, despite never having seen them before, using the sound-based route.

Nevertheless, very common words such as ‘the’ or ‘of’, or idiosyncratic words like ‘yacht’ /yɒt/ or ‘colonel’ /kərnl/ (in British English) have to be remembered as individual word shapes.

English writing is not just sound-based but uses the meaning-based route as well.

Frequent English words such as ‘the’ and ‘are’ take the meaning-based route as wholes, rather than being converted to sounds letter by letter.

Other words go through the sound-based route.

Usually, with tests like this, most native speakers fail to delete all 50 <e>s, mostly because they do not ‘see’ the <e> in ‘the’ (13 examples), only the whole word <the>.

In fact, non-natives are better at crossing out this <e> than natives – one of the few cases where non-native speakers beat natives because they have had less practice.

• Sound-based writing systems have many variations.

Some use written signs for whole syllables; for example, the Japanese hiragana system uses た to correspond to the whole syllable ‘ta’.

Other systems use written signs only for spoken consonants, so that Hebrew gives the consonants ‘d’ and ‘t’ (in a right-to-left direction), and the reader has to work out whether this corresponds to the word pronounced /diʁ/ (stable) or to /daʁ/ (mother-of-pearl).

• Many languages use the alphabetic system in which a written sign stands for a phoneme in principle, even if there are different alphabets in Urdu, Russian and Spanish.

• Languages vary, however, in how straightforwardly they apply the alphabetic system.

• If a language has one-to-one links between letters and sounds, it is called ‘transparent’, popularly ‘phonetic’.

• Italian or Finnish, for example, have highly transparent writing systems.

• But even in Italian <e> corresponds to two different sounds depending on which vowel comes next, /k/ in ‘caffé’ or /ʃ/ in ‘cento’.
• English is much less transparent and has complicated rules for connecting letters and sounds.

• The diphthong /ei/ can be spelt in at least twelve ways: 'lake', 'aid', 'foyer', 'gauge', 'stay', 'café', 'steak', 'weigh', 'ballet', 'matinée', 'sundae' and 'they'.

• In reverse, the letter <a> can be pronounced in at least eleven ways: 'age' /eɪdʒ/, 'arm' /aːm/, 'about' /əboʊt/, 'beat' /bɪt/, 'many' /mæni/, 'aisle' /aɪl/, 'coat' /koʊt/, 'ball' /bɔːl/, 'canal' /kænəl/, 'beauty' /bjuːtɪ/, 'cauliflower' /ˈkɔːliˌflɔːr/.

• The rules for connecting letters to sounds and vice versa are known as correspondence rules.

• In a sense, Chinese and Japanese characters are least transparent of all as they have little connection to their pronunciation, particularly in Japanese.

• Even the ways in which people make the marks on the page vary from language to language.

• In some countries children are told to form letters by making horizontal strokes first and vertical strokes second; in others the reverse.

• The direction that writing takes on the page is also important.

• Some writing systems use columns, for instance, traditional Chinese and Japanese writing; others use lines, say French, Cherokee and Persian.

• Within those writing systems that use lines, there is a choice between the right-to-left direction found in Arabic and Urdu, and the left-to-right direction found in Roman and Devanagari scripts.

• While this does not seem to create major problems for L2 learners, students have told Cook about Arabic/English bilingual children who try to write Arabic from left-to-right.

• Sassoon (1995) found a Japanese child who wrote English on alternate lines from right-to-left and from left-to-right, a system called boustrophedon, now known only from ancient scripts.

Spelling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focusing questions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you think English spelling is a ‘near optimal system’ as Noam Chomsky calls it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you remember any spelling rules for English?</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keywords</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>orthographic regularities: rules that govern how letters behave in English, such as &lt;ck&gt; corresponding to /k/ occurring at the ends of syllables 'back', &lt;c&gt; at the beginning 'cab'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>silent letter: a letter that does not correspond directly to a speech sound but often has indirect effects, for example, silent &lt;c&gt; 'fat' versus ' fate', and silent &lt;u&gt; 'guest' versus 'gesture'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• The major problem with English for many students, however, is the correspondence rules that govern how letters are arranged in words, in other words, spelling.

• English is far from having a straightforward, transparent system in which one letter stands for one sound.

• The letter <h>, for example, plays an important role in consonant pairs such as <th>, <sh>, <gh>, <ph>, <ch>, <wh>, without being pronounced as /h/ in any of them.

• English is far from transparent.

• It additionally involves not only a system of linking whole items to meanings, as in ‘of’ and ‘yacht’, but also a system of orthographic regularities, such as <wh> only occurring initially, as in ‘white’ and ‘when’.

• Hence it should not be forgotten that native speakers of English also have problems with spelling, some the same as L2 users, some different.

• The charge of being unsystematic ignores the many rules of English spelling, only some of which we are aware of.

• The one spelling rule that any native speaker claims to know is ‘i before e except after c’, which explains the spelling of ‘receive’. There are exceptions to this rule, such as plurals ‘currencies’ and when <> corresponds to /ʃ/, as in ‘sufficient’.

• Nevertheless, there are rules that do work better for English.

• One set is the structure word rules, given in Box 5.3.

• Teachers are usually aware how structure words such as ‘of’ and ‘the’ behave in English sentences compared to content words such as ‘oven’ and ‘drive’, how they are pronounced in specific ways.

• The sound /ʃ/ is usually spelled <ch> with two letters at the beginning of words as in ‘chap’, but <ch> with three letters at the end as in ‘patch’.

• The extra letter gives people the impression that there are more sounds in ‘patch’ than in ‘chap’.

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| C    | can, cell, chef, choir, chief, ocean, scissors (silent) |
| D    | bad, badger, watched, sandwich (silent) |
| G    | got, grape, sabotage, gnat (silent) |
| H    | left, colonel, folk (silent) |
| S    | see, die, sugar, illusion, island (silent) |
| T    | stop, them, theory, catch, nation, equation, buffet (silent) |
| U    | but, fruit, bynn, we, full, guest (silent) |
| W    | wind, who, wrire (silent) |
| X    | sex, xena, exist |
| Y    | yes, martyr, ratify, nylon, funny |
The three-letter rule describes how only structure words can consist of a single letter – ‘I’ and ‘a’ – or two letters – ‘an’ and ‘no’; content words have three letters or more.

If a content word could be spelt with one or two letters, extra letters have to be added to make it up to three or more – ‘eye’, ‘Ann’, ‘know’.

While this three-letter rule seems perfectly obvious once it has been explained, most people have no idea it exists.

The ‘th’ rule for structure words similarly reflects the fact that the only spoken English words that start with /θ/ are structure words like ‘these’ and ‘them’; hence the spelling rule that in structure words alone initial <th> corresponds to /θ/, all the rest have /ð/.

The exceptions are, on the one hand, a small group of words in which initial <th> corresponds to /t/ such as ‘Thai’ and ‘Thames’, on the other, the unique structure word ‘through’ in which <th> corresponds to /θ/.

The third rule of spelling that affects structure words is the titles rule.

This affects the use of capital letters in titles of books, songs, and so on, where content words are given initial capitals but structure words are not, as in *Context and Culture in Language Learning*.

This convention is not always adhered to and some book lists avoid all capitals in book titles.

Perhaps the most complex set of spelling rules in English are the vowel correspondence rules, from which Box 5.4 gives a small selection.

As RP English has 5 vowel letters and about 20 vowel phonemes, considerable ingenuity has been devoted over the centuries to telling the reader how vowel letters are said.
• The silent ‘e’ rule gives the sound correspondence of the preceding vowel.

• If there is a silent <e> following a single consonant, the preceding vowel is ‘long’: the letter <a> will correspond to /e/ ‘Dan’, <e> to /i/ ‘Pet’, <i> to /ai/ ‘fine’, <o> to /ao/ ‘tote’, <u> to /ju/ ‘dun’.

• If there is no <e>, the vowel is ‘short’: <a> corresponds to /æ/ ‘Dan’, <e> to /æ/ ‘pet’, <i> to /i/ ‘fin’, <o> to /ɔ/ ‘tot’, <u> to /ʌ/ ‘dun’.

• The terms ‘short’ and ‘long’ vowels do not have the same meaning here as in phonetics, since three of the so-called ‘long’ vowels are in fact diphthongs.

• For this reason, some people prefer to call the five short vowels ‘checked’, the five long vowels ‘free’.

• This rule has become known as the Fairy E rule, after the way that it is explained to children: ‘Fairy E waves its wand and makes the preceding vowel say its name’; the long vowel sounds here happen to be the same as the names for the five vowel letters.

• People who attack silent <e>, like the <e> in ‘fate’ /feɪt/, as being useless are missing the point: the silent <e> letter acts as a marker showing that the preceding <a> is said /e/ not /æ/, that is, it is different from the <a> in ‘fat’.

• The same relationship between long and short vowels underlies the consonant doubling rule in Box 5.4.

• A doubled consonant in writing, say <tt> in ‘bitter’ or <nn> in ‘running’, has nothing to do with saying the consonant twice, but shows that the correspondence of the preceding vowel is short.

• The <pp> in ‘supper’ shows that the preceding <u> corresponds to /u/, the <pp> in ‘super’ that <u> is the long /u:/.

• This version of the doubling rule is highly simplified and ignores the fact that some consonants never double, <h>, <j>, or rarely double, <v> and <k> (‘rewing’ and ‘trekker’), and that British and North American spelling styles are slightly different, as we see below.

• “In English, there is a particular issue with the letter-sound correspondences for unstressed spoken vowels.

• In many words, unstressed vowels are pronounced as schwa /a/ despite being spelled with ‘a’ in ‘relevant’, ‘e’ ‘independent’, ‘i’ ‘definite’, ‘o’ ‘person’ or ‘u’ ‘ultimatum’.

• The reader has to remember how the unstressed vowel is written in each word, calling up a visual memory of the individual word rather than applying a correspondence rule linking letters and sounds.”