

# **An Integrated Approach: Techniques for Teaching Pronunciation Skills and Communicating in the ESL Classroom**

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## **Abstract**

Our intention in contributing to this book chapter is to bring together some aspects of research and best practice in Oral Communication teaching in both the Arts and the Sciences and in so doing, apply a problem-solving approach to the teaching of successful Oral Communication to Second Language learners. We define successful Oral Communication as the process of giving and receiving a clear message. This process both weaves and is woven from our acculturated concepts of reality and involves not only all aspects of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, but also intention, and verbal and non-verbal language.

## **Introduction**

As qualified Second Language teachers, we are familiar with the linguistic theory of Oral Communication; some may be familiar with the latest research into what we should be teaching but are unsure of how to teach it and perhaps lack confidence in their own skills in this area. Pronunciation in the second language field has traditionally been taught on a theoretical level by isolating sounds, concentrating on weak forms, then moving on to syllable stress, followed by sentence stress and intonation. This approach has been predominantly reliant on auditory learning and taught discretely. Our approach is to concentrate from the outset on the supra-segmental level (that is, dealing with intonation and rhythm) with every English competency level. We do this by utilizing the learning styles and techniques used in both the Arts and Sciences approaches to Oral Communication and applying them in a holistic, culturally grounded problem-solving approach in the

second language classroom. The authors will henceforth draw on their individual experiences to share some techniques they find effective in the classroom.

The techniques I use in the second language classroom draw upon the various strands of my career as an Oral Communicator: my intensive training and subsequent practice as a professional Actor; as an Actor Trainer specializing in Voice and Speech; my professional association with Speech Pathologists and ENT consultants, and through my second language teaching and oral communication training of Overseas Trained Doctors. Working in the Arts taught me the skills of oral communication: to 'play' with the voice; to know that communication involves the whole body; to use problem solving techniques to identify and solve issues in Oral Communication, and above all to enjoy the process of communicating in the English language. From my work with Speech Pathologists and ENT consultants I learned about neurology, histology, anatomy, and the ability to understand the underlying pathology. My second language teaching and Masters of Linguistics has allowed me to look more deeply into the theory of Second Language Acquisition, the meaning and the structure of English and how to analyze from an academic and theoretical viewpoint.

As an oral communication practitioner in the Theatre Arts, my skills were influenced by practitioners such as Berry (1994), Linklater (1976, 1992) and Rodenburg (1992, 2002), and in the practical applications of Speech Pathology techniques by the evidence-based research, workshops and teaching of Alison Bagnall, Director Founder of Voicecraft International. As a second language teacher my work is underwritten by the conclusions (*see below*) of a series of research projects into an integrated approach to oral communication teaching by Dr Helen Fraser (2000, 2001, 2006), Senior Lecturer, School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics, University of New England

## **The Big Picture**

It is arguable that the discrete, 'abstract' phonemes that we traditionally introduce to our second language students at the outset do not exist in connected speech as these phonemes change depending on their position within the utterance and the intention of the message. As English speakers, what we actually and holistically identify when we listen to English is the number of syllables, the stressed syllables, i.e. rhythm and the punctuation (pausing and the intonation pattern of the voice). It is Dr Fraser's strong recommendation, which I wholly support, that this suprasegmental approach to oral communication should be integrated throughout the skills areas and taught from the outset in our classes (Fraser, 2001). In pursuit of this aim, Dr Fraser has produced an excellent CD-ROM for teachers who need to improve their skills in teaching pronunciation.

Best practice oral communication theatre training teaches that every accent, dialect or language involves the use of a completely different set of muscles and habits. (Linklater, 1976; Rodenburg, 1992). In the Theatre Arts, we begin at the outset to teach our students this vital cultural aspect of spoken languages. Speech Pathology works from the premise that in order to produce clear communication we need to be able to access the right muscle and then form the neural pathways in order to produce it habitually (i.e. we form and establish successful speech habits).

The second contribution to this chapter will focus on how we introduce these skills to our students in the classroom and includes both the giving and receiving of the message (i.e. both speaking and listening).

## **In the Classroom**

In a typical first session, using this approach with any level of English learner, we begin by asking our students to identify the habits they need to acquire to communicate successfully in English. This is achieved by asking them to work in groups to do a simple but

invaluable exercise. In a mixed language or monolingual class, the groups are given a simple set of instructions in language appropriate to the language level of the group, spoken in the normal rhythm of connected speech; to a Elementary level class, the phrases will be shorter than to a High Intermediate class thereby giving the information in digestible 'bite sized chunks'. Delivering shorter phrases is the same technique a good communicator uses with first language speakers in a large audience. We are simply modeling good presentation skills, keeping the rhythm, pace and intonation intact, aided by 'gesture' accessible language and visual clues.

The following example is based on a mixed language class of low Intermediate students:

*Part one*

- In a moment / Akiko / is going to tell us / in Japanese/ about her family /
- Everyone / is going to put **their** hands / over **their** ears / and **watch** Yuki / Look at her face, / her arms / and her body. Watch / what she shows / someone to do / to communicate well / in Japanese.
- When Akiko / stops speaking, / take your hands / away from your ears. / Talk to your group / and one person / in each group / write down / what Akiko does. / Copy / with your face and body / to help you to explain. /
- *Choose the writer in each group*
- (Akiko and teacher model the instructions of the exercise)
- Ready, / hands over ears, / Akiko begin!
- *Feedback onto board*

I usually repeat this with one volunteer from each language group. In a monolingual class, I ask one of the students to volunteer to tell us about

their family or their home town in their own language. I ask each group to talk for a few minutes, then to tell me and show me what we have to do to communicate in that language. Then we look at what we need to do to be good communicators in English. I ask them first to repeat the visual exercise by putting their fingers in their ears while I tell them about my home town, then discuss, and one person from each group in turn show or tell me one thing they noticed.

### *Part two*

In the second part of the exercise I tell the students that I'm going to talk to them for two to three minutes. I ask the students to listen to the sound of my voice; I tell them that on this occasion my words are not important and while I'm speaking they are to discuss with the rest of their group all the things they can see and hear me do with my voice and body to make my meaning clear. I tell them that I will help them to 'hear' by being the 'conductor' of an orchestra and hold an imaginary 'baton' between my thumb and fingers of both hands so they can 'see' as well as hear what my voice is doing. I ask them to feedback in the same way as in the previous exercise. By doing this I am asking them to identify the *skills* exercised in successful oral communication not to reiterate the theory; I am also asking them to 'feel' how English works, the rhythm and the dynamics of connected speech. If a student should give the word 'intonation' or 'stress' for example, I would ask them to explain what that means and show me what they heard. With the feedback on the board, we form 'rules' for communicating in English. This is a very enjoyable exercise as it is student-centered and group focused, engages all the senses, allows for all learning styles, gives the learners responsibility for their learning, engages the student in the 'cultural' experience of the spoken language, and validates each mother tongue in the classroom by making the speaker the expert and the teacher of their own language. It also allows the students and the teacher to 'experiment' in a safe environment while giving the teacher the opportunity of becoming the student and discovering new skills alongside the students. Above all, students enjoy the dynamics of

English and learn how to begin to enjoy communicating in the language.

This exercise works for students of any age, level, culture, language group, or life experience. The list of 'rules', with help with vocabulary from the teacher, will always include variations of the following:

- You make a lot of movement with your face
- The movement goes upwards and outwards
- Your mouth moves a lot
- You 'smile' with your eyes
- Your face moves upwards and outwards
- You look at us
- It's like singing
- Some sounds are long and some are short
- Some sounds are loud and some are soft
- It's like the waves in the sea/riding a horse (they show the movement)
- You speak in 'chunks'
- Each 'chunk' is like putting a comma or a full stop when you're writing.

We integrate this into our communication in every skills area on an ongoing basis; for example, as we are listening to a text, introducing new phrases, looking at the structure of a sentence (noun phrase, verb phrase, etc.), understanding and giving instructions or explanations.

### *Part three*

The next stage in the introduction process is to acquire the skill of identifying and producing the suprasegmentals, by integrating the above 'rules' through visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning. Native English speakers recognize a message by its rhythm, i.e. how many syllables, how long the syllables are, and which syllables are stressed. The techniques involved in this exercise are derived from Speech Pathology approaches and theatre training and can be introduced to any size of group.

The teacher becomes the conductor of the orchestra or the choirmaster and the students follow as they 'conduct' their own 'orchestra'. Each student takes the 'baton' between the thumb and the forefinger of both hands, as the hands and the batons lift to conduct the orchestra. This action, with the eyes open, lifts the face muscles into a gentle 'smile' upwards and outwards. If, at the same time, the mouth is opened slightly a little breath will automatically go in. The 'smile' is a necessary exaggeration for the students as the smile muscles allow the soft palate to rise and fall for the pitch glides necessary for intonation, while the shape inside the mouth created by the gentle smile creates the space towards the mid- to front section of mouth to allow enough space for the sounds of English to take place (Berry, 1994; Linklater, 1976; Rodenburg, 1992). It is important to enjoy the exercise, to make it bigger, to exaggerate in order to stimulate the right muscles to begin to form a habit. We can use the instructions we are giving at the time as our message. We write this on the board:

Smile//and/o/pen//your/mouth

(I prefer to underline the stressed syllables on the board as I feel it's a clearer signal –than marking above the syllable with ' )

The double slashes // represent the end of a phrase (a verb phrase, prepositional phrase or noun phrase for example). I make these phrases short at the beginning and then later give them the choice of where we put the pauses by deciding which phrases we will join together. The single slash / separates the syllables.

The conductors' batons follow the voice and the voice follows the batons. The students feel **seven** distinct movements of the baton – **six** for the number of syllables (marked / ) and the **seventh** making a 'full stop' for the finish of the unvoiced 'th' at the end of the one syllable word 'mouth'. The organs of articulation automatically follow the baton to produce the unvoiced 'th'. The students follow the teacher following the phrase. They feel the stressed syllables like a stick on a cymbal. We do not concentrate on the syllables containing weak forms – these syllables are tapped very lightly and treated like a tiny preparation with the baton for the next stressed syllable. They get very little actual 'attention' from the batons. The intonation pattern is marked by the batons as they follow the voice. The students themselves choose how the class will mark the flow of the intonation described by the batons over the written text. My students have described the feel of the intonation as 'the waves on the sea' and 'riding a horse over the jumps'. After the introductory session, I also give the students a choice of how they will 'use' their baton. The more confident and outgoing students very quickly feel comfortable with conducting a large orchestra. The more introverted might prefer to use a 'pencil baton' and describe the movement with the tip of the pencil or crayon on a large piece of paper thereby conducting a smaller orchestra. The most important consideration is that the students follow the principle conductor – the teacher – and work as a consolidated group – the orchestra. Each time the baton is lifted – simultaneously the face muscles follow and move upwards and outwards into the smile movement, the mouth opens and the breath goes in. We are teaching our students the skills of English pronunciation and stimulating the particular set of muscles necessary for communicating in English.

This is the introductory framework of the suprasegmentals. Once the framework has been established, it is integrated throughout the skills areas (see above). The 'baton' is used as a problem-solving tool for all areas of pronunciation in order to make the message clear. In addition



to the suprasegmentals, the 'baton' can describe, for example, a diphthong within a word or phrase, a short or long vowel, linking one sound to the next, forming a consonant cluster, ensuring the necessary amount of syllables are present, and finishing the syllable at the end of a phrase. It is as valuable a tool for acquiring listening skills as it is for speaking. Once the teacher is confident in his/her skills, it is a very enjoyable process transferring these skills to the students. In my workshops, I encourage my teachers to practice conducting the orchestra in front of a large mirror using any phrase that comes to mind.

#### *Part four*

### **Implementing Communication Activities in the Classroom**

We have discussed the 'what' and the 'why' of teaching oral skills in the classroom, now it is appropriate to concern ourselves with exactly 'how' to implement activities which will improve the oral skills of students. It is understood that any oral-based classroom must have clear guidelines established so the teacher can quickly and effectively deliver instructions or stop activities for a moment to clarify a point. It is also important that the teacher use a low tone when speaking, so students become accustomed to a reasonable level of speaking. They will naturally begin to imitate the teacher's voice level. In most oral activities thirty to fifty percent of the students may be speaking at any given time, therefore teachers need to be cognizant of overall noise level. Many of the activities included in this paper follow a format or structure that is used with only slight variations in complementary activities. It is important that the students are taught the processes and practice them before beginning any oral activity. These processes may include forming groups, moving furniture or making formations. A good teacher gives a specific name to each specific direction and has pre-taught the routine. Depending on the English level of your students and their age level, this teaching and explaining of the routine may take an hour or even extend over a couple of days. It is the foundation of all successful oral activities, so it is time well spent.

Proper training in formation routine makes for more successful oral activities and results.

### *Carouselling*

This formation has various names and it can be used successfully for teaching conversation techniques and/or question and answer dialogue strategies. The formation places half of the class in a circle on the perimeter of the classroom. It does not have to form a circle. Students might stand in each corner of the room or three along each side of the room, depending on the number of students in the group. Then the other half of the class each pairs up with a student in this outer ring and this second group is treated as the inner circle. The outer circle students never change location. The inner circle students rotate left to the next outer circle partner each time the teacher says "Change" (or rings a bell, or claps their hands and so on). It is important that the students practice this initial pair-up and rotation a couple of times before any actual oral activity is introduced. It can become a fun activity in itself as the teacher has the class sitting in seats and then says "Carousel" or "Circle Pairs" and times the class to see how quickly they can form the two circles. Once they know the routine then an activity such as the following can be introduced. Students receive a lesson or review on 'wh' questions. Then they are asked to write five questions they would like to ask a classmate. While they work the teacher moves around the classroom correcting each student's questions. When each student has five questions then the class moves into carousel position. Each pair then asks each other their questions and answers the others questions. The teacher moves between partners and as the first or second pair finishes, the teacher says 'change' or 'rotate' and the inner circle moves left to the next person. Then the new pairs begin again, asking each other their questions and responding. This continues until the people are back in the original pairs. This is a marvelous activity for large classes. The most important aspect is that fifty percent of the class is speaking at all times. It is actually a drill to perfect certain structures, but far more interesting than memorization. Below are some

topics that have been used successfully with carouselling with some creative thought the list could be infinite.

'wh' questions	introductions	small talk
specific verb tense practice e.g. What were you doing last night at 8 o'clock? I was eating dinner.	spelling peer drills Each student has five words and asks "How do you spell _____?" Partner spells the word.	vocabulary expansion Each student has five categories and says to their partner, "name three vegetables". The other student does so.

### ***Rotational Group Work:***

Divide the class into groups of three to four students (make one group with the extra member if the class size is not divisible by either number). Each group will work at a table and the teacher or the group chooses one student in each group to be Ms/Mr. X. Each table will have a large sheet of white paper, markers or coloured pencil and any other items the teacher may choose to add. As with carouselling this activity structure can work with any age level or English level. The group begins to work on an assigned topic or goal and works for five to ten minutes together. Then the teacher directs the X person to move to another group. Now each group has a new member. This new person tells the group what additions they can make from ideas she/he brings from the previous group or simply brings fresh ideas as discussion continues. The teacher rotates the 'floater X' every five or ten minutes until the groups are back to their original members. Now the groups complete their flow chart, graphs, labeled collages or whatever the teacher has directed or the activity generates. The final papers/boards are displayed and if the class is a higher English level, each group can present their work to the rest of the class. Below is a chart with some ideas that work well with rotational group work.

Vocabulary expansion Lexical groups: list as many as possible e.g. types of animals.	Mind-Mapping Brainstorming ideas for some type of plan e.g. invention, project	Flow Charts To expand on any idea e.g. steps to write an essay
Collage Groups must create a list of new words and draw pictures or cut pictures from magazines	Charts Create a chart together with any information they are asked to gather e.g. compare/contrast	Timelines Research or thought based e.g. history of the telephone/major events in an average person's life

### ***Pair Work:***

It is important in any pair work that the teacher attempts to ensure that English is spoken during the activity. Therefore the activities have to include 'controlled conversation' so that the point of the exercise entails speaking English to achieve the goals. Otherwise the teacher will find it impossible to monitor seven to twelve groups while they work simultaneously.

Pair work is successful if the partners are practicing some dialogue that they will record or perform for the class. All oral activities, but particularly pair work should have a quick pace and very specific time constraints. If the students are given an extended period of time to complete an activity that normally takes half the time, then superfluous chatter and unnecessary noise will take over the classroom. Some pair work activities that students enjoy and that improve oral skills are:

Prepare oral dialogue for recording	Prepare oral dialogue for performance in class	Write a dialogue together to submit or perform
Record as many words as possible in a specific category	Write a story together but students write alternative sentences	Create a survey together to ask the other students in class

### ***Memory Games:***

Standard and traditional memory games are very good if the teacher learns how to take them to another level and expand on them horizontally. Most readers know the oral activities such as having the class sit in a circle and make a story. The teacher begins the story with a first line, for example, "Last night I went to Dubai." The student to her right must repeat the teacher's statement and add the next sentence. E.g. "Last night I went to Dubai. I ate at a restaurant." The next student must repeat the two statements and add another, and so on. This in itself is a fine activity particularly for drilling a certain verb tense. The teacher makes corrections and the next students must make no errors. So all students are listening intently and trying to memorize each sentence. This type of activity can be taken a step further and can become as challenging as the class can handle. For example, if the students know the past tense, but often make pronoun errors, then the teacher can ask the students to change the pronouns as they repeat each sentence. E.g. Last night he went to Dubai. She ate in a nice restaurant. I went to a movie.

### **Conclusion**

All of the activities described in this paper have common denominators. They each follow a set structure that can be used often by the same teacher, but offer great variety because of the actual content. They can also be very easily adapted to any age group or language level. They also allow students of varying language levels to perform at their own level, speak often and listen for purpose to the words of others.

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