

Stumbling Blocks to Stepping Stones:
Shortcuts to Intelligible Pronunciation

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What should be a learner's primary goal? Native-like pronunciation? Or better intelligibility? Should we encourage learners to pronounce some sounds differently from native speakers, if it improves their overall comprehensibility? This paper explores "shortcut" techniques for pronunciation – techniques that exaggerate, distort, or substitute for the articulation used by native speakers, but which may help learners be better understood. These techniques draw on the author's experience teaching ESL pronunciation in classroom and individual settings to adults, including graduate and undergraduate university students, international teaching assistants, community college students at all levels, IEP students, and basic-level adult-ed students. The techniques presented here may be especially useful to those who teach native speakers of Spanish, Mandarin, Korean, Japanese, Portuguese, German, Turkish, Russian and Vietnamese.

As I use the term in this paper, a "pronunciation shortcut" is any substitution, distortion, or exaggeration of native-like articulation that we can teach as a temporary means to the improvement of a student's intelligibility and/or comprehensibility. In other words, suppose a learner has difficulty mastering a certain consonant or vowel sound. It may take weeks, months, or even years of training and practice before he or she can master a native-speaker-like articulation of that sound. But it may be possible to introduce an intermediate solution, one which will be easier to teach and easier to learn, which, while it does not exactly duplicate native-speaker articulation, will sound close enough to improve intelligibility.

It is important to consider that this technique essentially *encourages certain nonstandard pronunciations*. In this regard I side with Toth (2005) whose observations suggest that pronunciation instruction can over-emphasize certain standard

pronunciations with too little consideration for how difficult they are for students to master, and “the level to which intelligibility is diminished if an item is mispronounced.”

Before going into examples of pronunciation shortcuts, it will be useful to understand what is meant by “intelligibility” and “comprehensibility.” John Field (2005) remarks that “Intelligibility is measured by the ability of judges to transcribe the actual words of an utterance, comprehensibility by an overall rating of how easy it is to understand a given speaker.” Following this practice, intelligibility depends more directly on pronunciation, or “features of the speech signal,” and it “forms part of a wider construct of comprehensibility.”

To give an example of a pronunciation shortcut, it is well known that many speakers of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and other languages difficulty have a hard time producing a good English /l/ sounds, as in *mall* and *fall*. Especially at the ends of words (really the ends of syllables), an /l/ may come out sounding too much like an /r/ (especially in the case of the Japanese speaker) or like /o/ (especially by some Chinese speakers). Among native speakers, part of what distinguishes /l/ from both /r/ and /o/ is that it’s articulated as an alveolar consonant; that is, with the tip of the tongue firmly planted behind the top front teeth. Following the “shortcut” approach, however, the learner with a problematic syllable-final /l/ should be encouraged to place the tongue tip not behind, but *between* the teeth, in what could aptly be called an “interdental” /l/. As with a standard /l/, the sides of the tongue are retracted or lowered away from the sides of the mouth; this action is responsible for what we hear as the characteristic sound of /l/, the so-called “lateral liquid.” Thus, the interdental /l/ has a visual effect more like that of /θ/ (as in *math*) but sounds close enough to, if not identical to, the alveolar /l/.

This shortcut has several benefits: For one, the shortcut articulation is easier to learn than the standard. Students can more easily find the teeth with their tongue tip than they can the alveolar ridge, and they can more easily self-correct for tongue tip placement using a mirror for visual feedback or simply by their own sense of touch. For another, the interdental /l/ sounds clearly different from /r/, a fact that will be important to learners whose /l/ is something intermediate between these two liquid consonants. On the other hand, the interdental /l/ shortcut will not guarantee that the learner will correctly lower or retract the sides of the tongue for an adequate sound. Nor will it improve the quality of /r/. But it is likely to improve the intelligibility of words ending with the /l/ sound.

Here follow several more examples of pronunciation shortcuts. The list is by no means intended to be exhaustive or even extensive. The reader is encouraged not only to try introducing these techniques to the appropriate learners, but also to apply the entire concept and develop new shortcuts whenever and however they seem useful.

Shortcut 1: Consonant Devoicing

Languages: German, Russian, et al.

Problem: [b, d, g, v, z], etc. (voiced consonants)

→ [p, t, k, f, s], etc. (voiceless consonants)

Where: At ends of words

Shortcut: Exaggerate the length of the preceding vowel (as in Dauer 1992).

Examples: *hid* not: hit but: hih-it

cub not: cup but: cuh-up

Activity for shortcut 1

A

His car looked like a bat car.

The mother was looking for her cup.

The mother hit her boy in the back of the car.

B

His car looked like a baa-at car (a *bad* car).The mother was looking for her cuh-up (her *cub*).The mother hih-it her boy in the back of the car (*hid* her boy).

Shortcut 2: Weakening of Voiced Stops

Language: Spanish

Problem: [b, d, g] (voiced stops) → [β, ð, γ] (homorganic fricatives)

Where: At ends of words; between vowels

Shortcut: Substitute b → p, d → t, g → k, *and* lengthen the preceding vowel

(But do not lengthen unstressed schwa)

(robe) not: rove but: row-ope

(bad) not: bath but: baa-at

(read) not: wreath but: ree-eat

(about)not: avout but: a-pout

Activity for shortcut 2

A

Jerry tried to find his rove.

It was a bath night.

She said she was going to wreath.

What are you talking about.

B

Jerry tried to find his row-ope (his *robe*)

It was a baa-at night (a *bad* night)

She said she was going to ree-eat (to *read*)

What are you talking a-pout.

Shortcut 3: Tense and Lax Vowels

Languages: most

Problem: [i ≈ I] (heat, hit), [e ≈ ε] (shade, shed), [u ≈ U] (shoed, should)

(i.e., no contrast between homorganic tense and lax vowels)

Where: Everywhere

Shortcut: Add an exaggerated schwa off-glide to lax vowels

Examples: (sin) not: scene but: see-in

(Ken) not: Kane but: kay-un

(pen) not: pain but pay-un

Activity for shortcut 3

A

The movie was full of scenes.

My teacher's name is Kane.

The teacher told us we can write in pain.

B

The movie was full of see-ins (*sins*).

My teacher's name is Kay-un (*Ken*).

The teacher told us we can write in pay-un (in *pen*).

Shortcut 4: Weakening of the Voiced Alveo-Palatal Fricative

Language: Chinese

Problem: [ʒ] → [y]

Where: Between vowels

Shortcut: Substitute [ʒ] → [š]

Examples: *persuasion* not: persway-yun but: persway-shun

supervision not: supervee-yun but: supervee-shun

Activity for shortcut 4

A

She used a lot of persway-yun.

She gave me a lot of good supervee-yun.

B

She used a lot of persway-shun.

She gave me a lot of good supervee-shun.

References

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