
Teaching Pronunciation: Going Beyond Mechanical Exercises

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In the last few years more and more ESL/EFL professionals have shown interest in teaching pronunciation, both segmental (vowels and consonants) and suprasegmental (linking, elision, reduction, etc.). However, the approaches employed tend to remain old-fashioned and mechanical. Indeed, in many classrooms students merely identify and repeat these sounds in isolation. They aren't given the opportunity to actually practice these features in real or meaningful conversations. As a result, students often find pronunciation exercises monotonous and boring. They also tend to "forget" what they have practiced when it comes to using it in actual conversations.

By following traditional mechanical pronunciation practice with exercises based on the communicative approach, classroom practice can be made more interesting, meaningful, and useful. Student-centered exercises can be created which allow students to use target pronunciation items in context for communicative purposes. Such exercises not only provide appropriate real-life application practice of the target segmental or suprasegmental, but also require students to understand and be understood by their partners, thus increasing their interest in pronunciation. Examples of such exercises include giving opinions, responding to pictures, choosing answers, and information gap activities.

Giving Opinions

When teaching elision of /t/ such as "best restaurant" "worst day" "most famous," etc., you could provide a list of statements for the students to complete as in the example shown below:

1. worst day of the week
2. best place for a vacation
3. funniest student in the class
4. best ramen

A: I think Monday is the worst day of the week.

B: Yeah. Monday is the worst day of the week. or

Really? I think Wednesday is the worst day of the week.

The first student completes the statement (e.g. "I think Monday is the worst day of the week) and his/her partner either agrees (e.g. "Yeah. Monday is the worst day of

week.”) or disagrees (e.g. “Really? I think Wednesday is the worst day of the week.”). Then students continue practicing elision of /t/ by using additional cues provided by the teacher.

Responding to Pictures

Photographs or pictures of famous people can be used when teaching weakening (e.g., personal pronouns) such as “his” /is/, “him” /im/, etc. One might provide question cues and a picture as follows:

1. Do you know ~~h~~im?
2. What’s ~~h~~is name?
3. Where does ~~h~~e live?
4. Have you ever seen ~~h~~im on TV?
5. Do you know ~~h~~is wife’s name?
6. Do you like ~~h~~im?

Example dialogue:

A: Do you know ~~h~~im?

B: Yeah, I know ~~h~~im.

A: What’s ~~h~~is name?

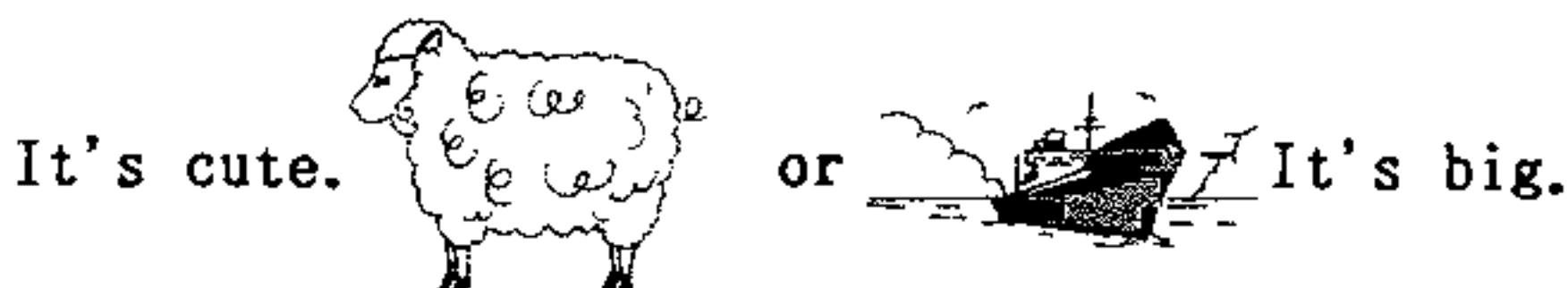
B: His name’s Eddie Murphy

One student uses the questions to ask about the person pictured and the other student answers in full sentences. After they have finished all the questions, they change roles and ask about a different person.

Choosing Answers

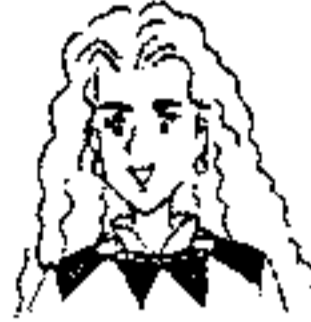
Illustrations are also useful when teaching minimal pairs, such as /i/ and /I/. Provide questions that contain the target sounds and answers accompanied by pictures as in the examples below:

1. What do you think of my sheep / ship?



2. Do you like Jean / gin?

No, I don't like her.



or



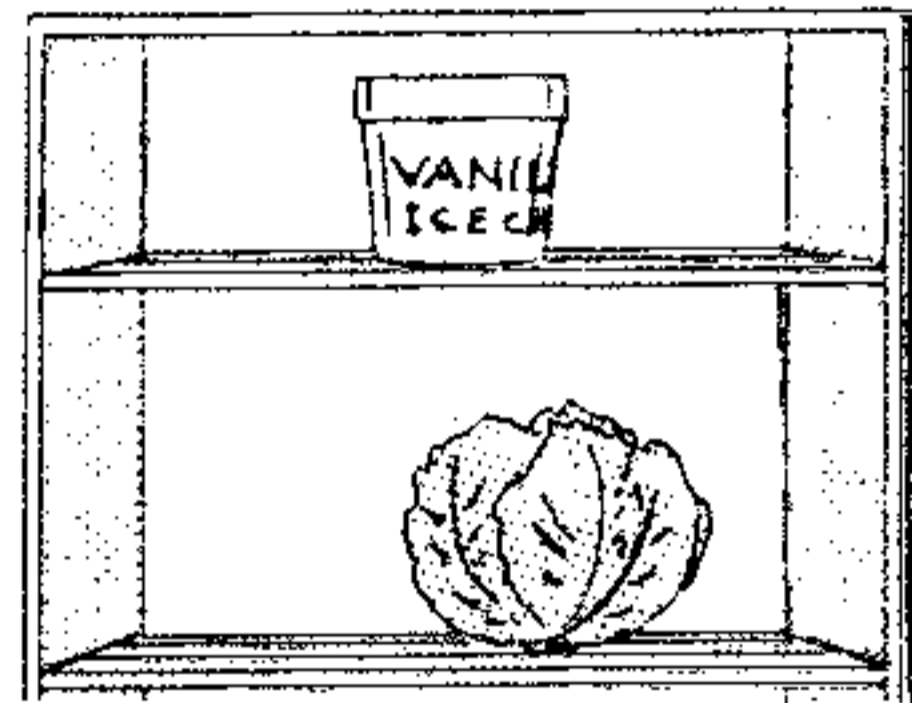
Yeah, I like it.

Students work in pairs with one student asking a question with either an /i/ or /I/ sound (e.g. "What do you think of my sheep?") and the other student answering appropriately (e.g. 'it's cute'). Having answer cues with pictures adds more meaning to the exercises and increases student interest.

Information Gap Activities

Another way to teach minimal pairs, for example /l/ and /r/, is to give two different sets of information to students as follows:

Shopping List	
<u>Vegetables</u>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	carrots
<input type="checkbox"/>	broccoli
<input type="checkbox"/>	lettuce



A: Do we need any carrots?

B: Yeah, we need some carrots. or No, we have enough _____.

One student sees a shopping list with different food items which contain /l/ and /r/ sounds (e.g. carrots, oranges, apples, milk, etc.). The other student sees a picture of a refrigerator with some food items such as lettuce, milk, apples, etc., inside. The student with the shopping list asks a question like: "Do we need any carrots?" The other student looks at the refrigerator and answers according to what he/she sees. The student with the shopping list checks off the items needed. This type of exercise works with virtually any segmental.

These example exercises have been designed for introductory-level students in Japan. They could, of course, be adapted to your own students' levels and needs. Through my experience I have found that student-centered communicative exercises offer a very effective way to teach pronunciation.

References

- Green, C., Bailey, M., and Tsuda, N. (1990). *Say it in English. Book 2*. Osaka: ECC Foreign Language Institute.
- Tsuda, N. and Bailey, M. (1990). *Play it by Ear Pronunciation Exercises*. Osaka: ECC Foreign Language Institute.

About the Author

Nobuo Tsuda received his M.A. TESOL from Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. He has produced pronunciation materials for ECC Foreign Language Institute in Japan, where he is currently employed.