

# How can we achieve quality and sustainability in pronunciation teaching?

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# Overview



- Some questions about and from teachers:
  - Do they teach pronunciation, and how?
  - Why do they do what they do?
  - What questions do they have? What questions do you have?
- Some theory and research-based answers to teachers' questions
- Relating theory and research to practice: Teaching word stress
- Relating practice to research and theory: Classroom-based research
- Interested in doing some research?



But first, an example of pronunciation teaching that is clearly not sustainable:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iz0IT4Uk2xQ>
- What is going on here?
  - Ineffective communication about pronunciation,
  - a failure to recognize the salient aspects of the target,
  - the learner does not have a number of English phonological concepts.

# Research into NZ pronunciation teaching

- The aim was to understand what teachers are doing in the classroom and why. The reasons for their actions are complex, featuring inter-related variables such as knowledge and beliefs, attitudes and perceptions, identities, learning and teaching experience, and the wider institutional and societal context in which all this plays out over time.
- In language teaching, we refer to such research as teacher cognition research.
- Participants: NZ EAL teachers, mainly of adults.
- Surveys (N=83)
- Interviews (N=19)
- Classroom observations (N=6) and follow-up discussions (Couper, 2016a, 2017a, 2019)
- I also did an earlier study with teachers in Uruguay (Couper, 2016b)

# Do they teach pronunciation, and how?

- Some more than others: greatest focus on phonemes and word level
- Ad hoc, often in response to errors
- Listen-and-repeat, may be enhanced with gestures
- Some explanations – but not sure about them
- Some other techniques and activities
- Most common is listen-and-repeat and reading aloud, dictation etc.
- Teach sound spelling relationships; in different ways
- Use symbols
- Raise awareness, some focus on perception: could use more.

# Why do they do what they do?

- They are often unsure, lack confidence, lack of training
- Don't get a chance because of time constraints or textbooks, curriculum
- Teach phonemes because they think of pronunciation as articulation of individual sounds – but of course that is a small part of it.
- Don't teach stress and intonation because they are seen as too complex: sometimes everything is too complicated.
- Teach words, as part of vocabulary: intuitively easier
- Listen-and-repeat is what they know and can do easily

# Today, I will address these specific questions

- How do I integrate pronunciation teaching? (diagnostics/goal setting)
- It's so complex, where do I start? (tell them how you hear it: talk about it, give the opportunity to compare and contrast)
- Why doesn't CF work?
- How do I make practice interesting and communicative?
- Some terms from my research:
  - SCM: Begin with learners' perceptions of TL phonological concepts and compare with teacher's perceptions. Through class discussion socially construct metalanguage which can be used for ongoing explanation and feedback. (Couper, 2011, 2013)
  - Critical Listening: comparing learners' easily understood productions with productions which cause difficulty for the listener. (Couper, 2011; Fraser, 2009)

# Diagnostics and goal-setting

- Before we start we need to know where the problem is: It can be quite surprising how unaware learners are of their pronunciation difficulties, especially those at the suprasegmental level.
- Diagnostics: Example of diagnostic [Diagnostic test.docx](#)
- <https://pronunciationteaching.wordpress.com>
- The learners can be given the task of developing their own goals based on the feedback they get from the diagnostic.
- The teachers will need to point them in the direction for useful resources.
- Teachers' goals based on common problems: especially around concepts.
- Once the goals are sorted teachers can integrate a pronunciation focus based on relevant examples in listening and speaking work: perhaps leading to pre-teaching activity or a communicative activity that gives lots of practice with a specific aspect of pronunciation.



# Where to start? With learners' current concepts.

- Concept formation: compare contrast discuss
- First as teachers we need to understand some things about pron:
  - Written words are formed by placing one letter after the other but spoken words are not formed by placing one phoneme after the other. /k/ /æ/ /t/ does not make cat.
  - The difficulty is not in being able to produce the sound (e.g. /r/ and /l/) but rather it is in controlling the difference in the right way.
  - Learners have to form new concepts that may involve reconfiguring category boundaries
  - From educational psychology we know a lot about concept formation processes: this knowledge can be applied to learning pronunciation: start with current concepts, compare and contrast with new concepts, give feedback and practice to reinforce new concepts and category boundaries.

# Learning concepts: Look at the stars



- The stars are real, but the lines between them are imaginary.
- Constellations are projections onto a continuous array of stars.
- How to teach someone a new constellation
- Direct the learner's attention to the right part of the sky.
- Establish several landmarks which both the teacher and learner can recognise. This takes a lot of negotiation to make sure both teacher and learner are referring to the same things.
- These landmarks can be used to describe the shape in a way that the learner will understand: requires ongoing dialogue.
- Next time you go out the sky will look different so it will take several lessons, and aids such as maps will be necessary. Eventually the constellation will become immediately obvious. Fraser (2010)

In a similar way, teachers have to go through the following process with their students

**1) There is a difference:** As a learner, you need to realise you are being misunderstood.

- I can explain this by saying how it sounds to me (e.g. drunk snail/drunker snail)

**2) Hearing the difference: understand precisely where it is**

- To make it clear where the problem is, I can write it on the board (drunk snail/drunkerer snail)

**3) Understanding what it is and learning how to say it**

- I can model and ask you to describe the difference (e.g. 'k' is louder). Then I can ask you to say the two words and I can tell you if they sound the same or different to me (and point to the one I hear) and give you feedback in terms of your perception (make the 'k' quieter/louder). Hopefully, you will now start to understand what the problem is.
- Another way to help you hear the difference is to get you to listen, record yourself and then listening to make sure there is a clear difference and that it is the same difference in the model.

**Because ways of thinking about sounds are deeply entrenched, it will take a great deal of practice and feedback to be able to automatically produce accurate pronunciation.**

# Why doesn't CF work? What helps it work?

- Remember the Pink Panther
- CF needs to build on some previous explicit teaching. (It also takes more time if there has been no prior instruction)
- Set goals and orient learners to specific problems at the beginning of the course.
- Students must have the concept to be able to fully understand and act on CF.
- Be systematic in the use of feedback cues.
- Efficiency and effectiveness of CF can be improved through planned lessons on tricky concepts such as syllables and stress.
- Elicit students' and peers' perceptions to help understand what the problem is.
- In deciding whether to attend to errors: one needs to judge how pressing the error is. If it is something you have already taught, a simple gesture may make for quick correction. Entrenched problems need to be the subject of a planned teaching intervention.

# How do I make practice interesting and communicative?

- Listening is a useful place to start: The aim is to begin by making learners aware of the difference between what they say and what they want to say: Critical Listening and Socially Constructed Metalanguage
- You may also start by practicing the actual communicative tasks they want to achieve and use what they produce as a basis for helping them to understand what is and is not comprehensible.
- Practice comparing and contrasting
- Controlled speaking practice with feedback
- Interactive/communicative activity that requires accurate pronunciation to achieve the goal. For example, the drunk snail game I designed for practice with epenthesis (see: <https://pronunciationteaching.wordpress.com/the-drunk-snail-game/> Couper, 2014) or the one I designed for the series of lessons I will describe next,

# A summary of some key guidelines

- Raise awareness of the nature of the problem; communicate explicitly and meaningfully about it (i.e. through SCM).
- Help form category boundaries by presenting contrasts between what the native speaker does and does not perceive as belonging to the category (i.e. through Critical Listening).
- Actively involve learners in the meaning making process (a broadly communicative approach).
- Practice: focus on forming concepts (i.e. compare and contrast, allow for feedback).
- Provide the right kind of corrective feedback (use SCM).
- Define instruction in terms of what helps learners to form and practice new concepts (e.g. SCM and CL). (Couper, 2015, 2017b)
- Other readings: Derwing and Munro (2015), Grant (2014), Reed and Levis (2015)

# Teaching word stress: The theory

- Word stress (seen as perhaps the most important aspect of pronunciation to focus on: or maybe most accessible)
- The most salient aspect of word stress in English (and where it differs from most other languages) is the de-stressing of the vowel in the unstressed syllables and the reduction to a shorter, often different, vowel.
- The stressed syllable is also highlighted through a combination of length, volume and pitch change (the way these combine is also different in different languages).
- The concept of word stress in English is specific to English
- Before we can learn the concept of word stress we must have the concept of the English syllable (also specific to English): So first check syllable concept.
- Teachers often think their students have these concepts (syllables, stress), and they do, but they don't always recognize that they have the concept in their L1 but not necessarily in their L2. (Couper, 2012)

# Teaching word stress: The research

- One class (N=20). Half got the teaching (N=10), In the second half of the semester the control group also got the teaching.
- So there was a pre-test, post-test, delayed (6 weeks) post-test.



# Teaching word stress: The practice/research

- First: a diagnostic test plus feedback (Words from Academic Word List) [Teacher Overview of C-PTEP study June 2018.docx](#)
- Speaking part: Read the word and then a sentence containing the word, e.g. **Constant**: Inflation is a **constant** threat to the economy. (20 sentences). Also a picture story.
- Listening part: Hear one word said twice (12 pairs)
  - Are they different/same/don't know?
  - If they are different, which one is better?
  - If you think one is better, explain why.



# The teaching: Teaching word stress in 2-syllable words

- 4 sessions of 50 minutes.
- Session 1: Trying to understand how learners perceive syllables and stress.
- Session 2: Critical listening based on diagnostics: Discussion of contrasting pairs (2-syllable examples: stress on first vs second syllable). Practice with two patterns and make recordings for critical listening in session 3.
- Session 3: Critical listening based on session 2 recordings: Discussion of contrasting pairs (2-syllable examples: stress on first syllable/second syllable)
- Session 4: Introduce a third stress pattern where there is no reduction or change to the vowel. Revision and card game.

# Session 1: Trying to understand how learners perceive syllables and stress.

- Part A: Introduce concept of syllable: [Session 1 Worksheet 1.docx](#)
  - Start with introduction. How many parts do you hear in my name “Graeme”? Elicits 2/3/4. Writes name on board. Underlines two syllables.
  - Same for Kereama. (different languages think about stress differently.)
  - Students’ names: Compare different perceptions.
  - Practice: Listen to words (see worksheet). How many syllables do you hear?
- Part B: Introduce concept of word stress: [Session 1 Worksheet 2.docx](#)
  - Return to Graeme: elicit difference between two parts (e.g. stronger, shorter)
  - Compare stress in English/Maori (circles on board – worksheet)
  - Learners work out stress in their names, explore different ideas about stress
  - Focus on the role of de-stressing and vowel change in forming stress

# Session 2: Critical Listening, stress on first/second syllable, recording.

- Whole class, students to listen to examples, write down what they hear, then discuss the different ways in which they heard the words (See worksheet) [Session 2 Worksheets ABC.docx](#)
- Stress on first syllable: Listen to the words and sentences. Now record the word on **Voice thread**, followed by the sentence. Listen again and decide if you have pronounced it correctly. Did you remember to reduce the second syllable? Make notes of any difficulties you had.
- Stress on second syllable: Same process.

# Session 3: Critical listening

- Critical Listening using student recordings of words where the stress should be on the first syllable. (Write if the words sound the same or different, describe any differences, which sounds better?) [Session 3 Worksheets AB.docx](#)
- Students record themselves, compare with model and their previous recordings
- The same process for words with stress on the second syllable.



Session 4: Introduce a third stress pattern where there is no reduction or change to the vowel. Revision and card game.

- See worksheet [Session 4 Worksheet A.docx](#)
- Although the real focus is on Types 1 (stress on first syllable) and 2 (stress on second syllable), Type 3 introduces a bit more of a challenge for the better students as well. See the description of the card game that follows.

# Getting stress

- Type One: Stress + reduced/very short vowel.  
(16 cards) Two examples:
- Type Two: Reduced/very short vowel + stress.  
(16 cards)
- Type Three: Stress + full vowel. E.g. access  
(8 cards)

3.

**Finite**

I have a finite  
amount of  
money.

3.

**Concept**

It is a difficult  
concept to  
understand.

1.

**Items**

I bought 12  
items from the  
shop.

1.

**Constant**

Some things are  
constant, others  
change.

2.

**Convinced**

She convinced  
me that she was  
right.

2.

**Obtained**

Somehow, he  
obtained the  
money.

# The Object

- To play this game you have to pronounce and hear these patterns correctly.
- You have five cards. Each one has a word, and the word in a sentence on it.
- The first one with no cards is the winner.

2.

**Conceived**

**I conceived the  
idea on the train.**

1.

**Constant**

**Some things are  
constant, others  
change.**

3.

**Comments**

**Write your  
comments in  
the book.**



# Rules

- Groups of four or five players.
- Player a: deal 5 cards to each player.
- Player b, to the left of the dealer: read out what is on one of your cards.
- Player c, to their left: If you have a card with the same stress pattern, read out the word and sentence. (If you don't, pick up a card. That is the end of your turn).
- Players b and c: Show each other your cards to check.
- The number in the top left-hand corner can be used to confirm the answer.

1.


**Constant**

**Some things are constant, others change.**

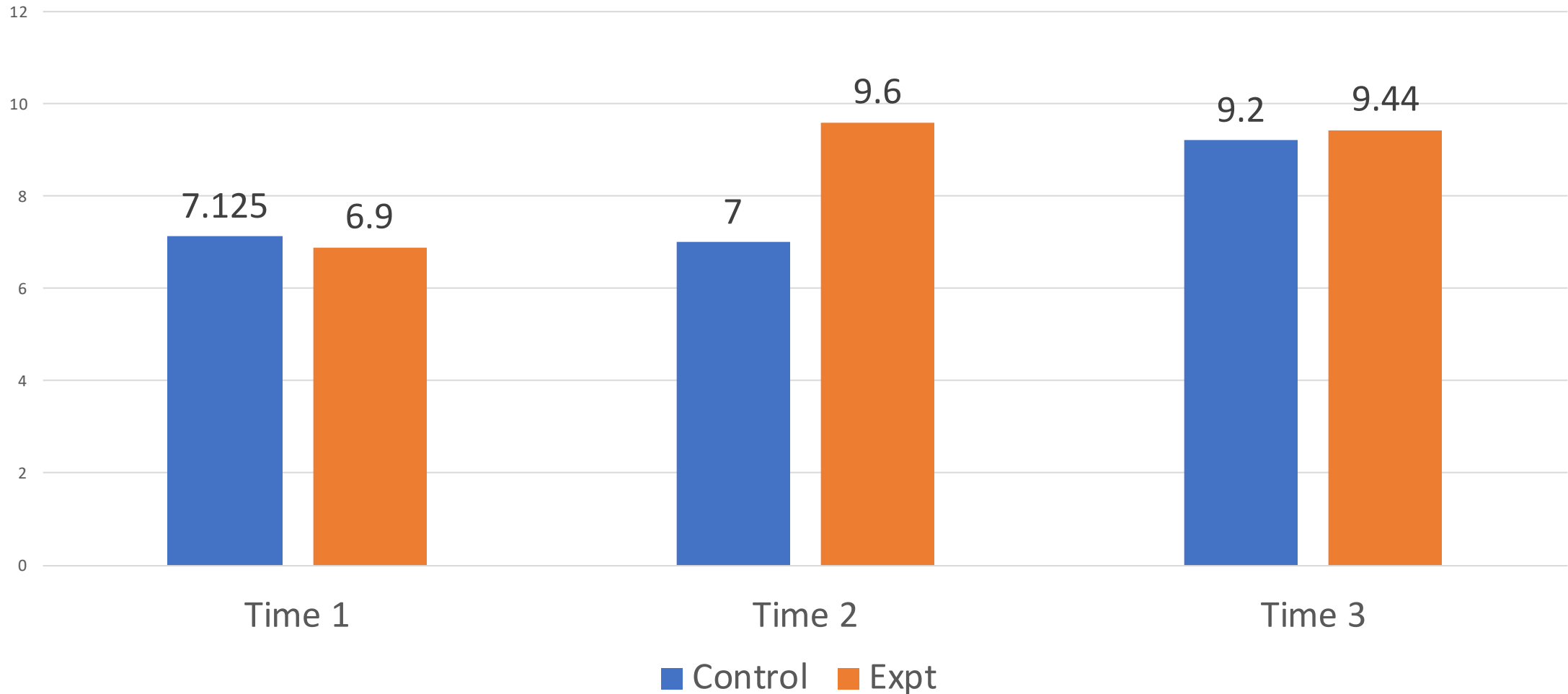
1.

**Instance**

**You are often right, but in this instance you are wrong.**

- 
- If they are correct, the two cards are put to one side.
  - If they are not correct, player c keeps both cards (or whoever used the wrong stress pattern)
  - Player c: Read out what is on one of your other cards.
  - Player d, to their left: If you have a card with the same stress pattern, read out the word and sentence...
  - And so on, until someone has no cards left.

## Summary of perception results: Score/12



- This chart shows the number of cases, out of 12, where participants could both hear a difference and identify the best version.
- $p=.017$  between control and experimental at T2. Control (N=5) received instruction between T2 and T3.

# Want to know more about research or become involved?

- See my blog. I have also posted this powerpoint here. <https://pronunciationteaching.wordpress.com>
- I would like to replicate the word stress study so if you might be interested in either inviting me to come and teach it in your class or teaching it yourself, then let me know: [graeme.couper@aut.ac.nz](mailto:graeme.couper@aut.ac.nz)
- Also, feel free to get in touch if you are interested in research into pronunciation generally, or if you are thinking about doing a Masters or a PhD.
- I am also the programme leader for our MPLS – a Masters in TESOL/Language Teaching. For more details get in touch with me or the programme administrator Cynthia D'Souza [cynthia.dsouza@aut.ac.nz](mailto:cynthia.dsouza@aut.ac.nz)
- Additional information about the papers can be found at [www.aut.ac.nz/mpls](http://www.aut.ac.nz/mpls)

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