



English Pronunciation for Foreign Speakers

At many of the presentation skills courses which I run, there are often participants from other countries, whose first language is not English. One of their frequent requests is how to speak more clearly in English so they can be understood better. Often, when they are at the front of a group, they lack confidence about their ability to speak English or they are embarrassed by their accent or pronunciation. The usual effects of this shyness are two-fold:

- they speak more softly; and
- they tend to keep their lips & jaws quite close together.

Speaking softly means that the audience has a harder time to hear the speaker. Not opening the lips and jaw causes the speaker's voice to sound muffled, exactly as if they were mumbling. So, it is important for people whose native language is not English to speak loudly and let their jaw open & move fully. A good exercise is to practice speaking using exaggerated jaw movements. This practice feels "weird" to the speaker and they are sure everyone in the audience can notice. But based upon experience with numerous groups, the audience doesn't notice that the speaker is opening their mouth more, only that they are louder, clearer and easier to understand.

The other area where foreign speakers of English can make useful improvements is in their enunciation of the different "phonemes" or sounds of English. It is important to balance the different phonemes so that no particular class of sounds predominates. As examples, someone who doesn't enunciate consonants well so there is a relative excess of vowels will have a loud & melodic voice, but it will be difficult for the audience to distinguish individual words. On playback of a video or audio tape, the voice has a "wow-wow" sound. Alternatively, someone who emphasises "fricatives" (f, v, s, sh, th, z) tends to sound "hissy" when the tape is played back.

Six types of phonemes from English are relevant to this discussion:

1. Vowels

The vowels are the commonly recognised "a, e, i, o and u". These are the sounds that give our voices their power and pitch. The sound rides on a steady stream of air from the lungs and there is minimal obstruction to the air-flow. In a sense, these are "pure tones". The vowels are also grouped according to placement in the mouth:

- Front: as in "eve", "it", "hate", "at" and "met"
- Centre: as in "bird" and "up"
- Back: as in "father", "all", "obey", "foot" and "boot"

When you pronounce the words, notice where the sound is within your mouth.

2. Semi-vowels

The semi-vowels are "r" as in "reed", "l" as in "loft", "w" as in "we" and "y" as in "you". The characteristic of the semi-vowels is that they alter the air-flow but they neither stop it nor restrict it as much as fricatives.

3. Nasals

The nasals are "m" as in "me", "n" as in "no" and "ng" as in "sing". The key feature of nasals is the resonance within the nasal and sinus cavities.

4. Plosives

The plosives, which are also known as "stops" are consonants. Plosives involve the obstruction of the air-flow so that the pressure builds up and is then released with an explosive sound, hence the name. The blockage to the air-flow can either be with the lips ("puh"), or with the tongue on the palate ("tuh") or closing the back of the throat ("guh"). The key function of plosives is to create meaningful words by "chopping" up the pure tones of the vowels.

Plosives can either be "voiced" which means the vocal chords are vibrating at the same time or "unvoiced" where the vocal chords are not vibrating and there is simply the air-flow. Examples of voiced plosives are "bee", "day" and "go". Notice how the vocal chords are vibrating during each plosive. Examples of unvoiced plosives are "pay", "to" and "key". Notice how the vocal chords are not vibrating during each plosive and only begin to vibrate after the plosive.

5. Fricatives

In terms of sound characteristics, the fricatives are essentially "noise" which is why they sound "hissy" on playback of audio or video tapes. Fricatives are formed by tightly constricting the vocal pathway so that the air-stream has to flow at high speed past the constriction, generating the high-frequency hissing sound. As for plosives, fricatives can be either voiced or unvoiced. Examples of voiced fricatives are "vote", "then", "zoo", "azure" and "zebra". Examples of unvoiced fricatives are "for", "thin", "see" and "she".

6. Affricatives

These are related are a composite of the fricatives and plosives. Examples are "chew" and "judge".

Each person's native language will result in them having difficulty with certain sounds in English. What we do in the presentation skills course is:

- identify which sounds are in excess or deficiency;
- identify if any phonemes have been substituted by phonemes from the speaker's first language;
- practice pronunciation exercises to remedy the difficulty; and then
- notice the improved clarity afterwards.

In the absence of attending the course, the best advice I can give is to balance your vowels and consonants by

"f-u-l-l-y e-n-u-n-c-i-a-t-i-n-g e-v-e-r-y s-i-n-g-l-e l-e-t-t-e-r i-n e-v-e-r-y s-i-n-g-l-e w-o-r-d".

It can feel strange when you do it but the audience won't notice what you're doing, only that you're more clear and easier to understand.