Back-chaining: Teaching Pronunciation that Sticks

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Summary: This article discusses the importance of pronunciation as a skill and reminds teachers the use of back-chaining as a strategy. This article connects how back-chaining helps with unlearning "broken words" and potential mistakes in the linguistic transfer that happens with many learners. The author also reflects on how it helps to highlight pronunciation roadblocks in students. Back-chaining works by retraining the brain, developing new muscle memory, and making English less intimidating by breaking it up.

Keywords: pronunciation, back-chaining, linguistic transfer, muscle memory, multilingual classrooms

Pronunciation is crucial. If an individual struggles greatly with pronunciation, it is hard for the listener to know if it's an issue of the correct word, grammar, tone, or so on. In other words, if pronunciation impedes the understanding, it is difficult to help progress the learner. Alongside the production of language, coherent understanding of pronunciation helps new learners grasp language more quickly. Gabriel Wyner said on his handbook to language fluency, "The more accurately we learn its pronunciation, the better we'll remember it" (2014, p.22). This means that pronunciation isn't just important for language production, but also for language comprehension.

I have only taught two monolingual classes: a Cantonese group and a Spanish group. Other than those two classrooms, most of my experiences have been language-diverse with a mix of nationalities, cultures, accents, languages, and so on. A multilingual class allows students to practice their English more, instead of being in a monolingual group where they can talk to each other in their L1 (first language). On the other hand, in a monolingual classroom it may be easier to focus on improving pronunciation. This is often because there are shared pronunciation obstacles in their shared language. In my Cantonese group, I quickly learned that /l/ and /r/ need extra attention. With the Spanish speaking group, most struggled with the difference between /v/ and /b/. In both situations, I was able to craft lessons and multiple moments into tackling these obstacles with them. With my other classrooms, it has been difficult when students are coming from varying languages and their unique obstacles related to a sound. This is because with each accent comes a different obstacle. It gets particularly difficult as an educator to help all students improve on their pronunciation simultaneously. There is only so much a photo of mouth placement and face mirroring one can do. We must do more than just "listen" and "repeat".

A difficult habit to break is unlearning broken words. A broken word happens when you think a word is pronounced one way, when it is actually pronounced a different way. When this happens, the broken word gets imbedded into our memory. It can live there for months, or even years, before the learner later tries to unlearn it and learn the correct pronunciation. An example of this is when I first learned the word "enfermo" in Spanish. The broken word – incorrect pronunciation – that lives in my head is with an extra vowel, as if it was spelled "enfiermo" (incorrect spelling). I misheard it years ago when I first started learning Spanish, and even as I understand the correct pronunciation, my brain first grasps for the broken word before the corrected one. It's important to teach accurate pronunciation that sticks so that students can understand, so they can remember and connect better with the language, and so they do not have to hunt down broken words (Wyner, 2014).

So, how do we teach a class with different language obstacles a pronunciation strategy that can do all of this? A unifying technique that has been practiced in classrooms for many years is the practice of back-chaining. Back-chaining is a speaking drill targeted to help learners pronounce challenging sound groups, words, or phrases (Backchaining). It is different from other English pronunciation strategies because it involves saying the word from back to front. It has been so successful historically that actors, singers, public speakers, and others have used it while singing and talking in languages unknown to them. Additionally, speech pathologists often use this method (Learn English with Rebecca, 2017). As someone who went to speech therapy for seven years, back-chaining has helped me improve my own personal pronunciation in English (my native language).

As I teach back-chaining, I follow the advice of "How to Better Pronounce Long Words" with their three-step process. Step one is "Break It Up" (2017). Many educators and learners are familiar with this strategy. Breaking up the word means to

chop it into small pieces. If it is a multisyllabic word, it is often separated by syllable. Multisyllabic means that it is a word that has more than one syllable. An example of a multisyllabic word is "refrigerator", which could be broken up hypothetically as "re-frig-er-a-tor". Back-chaining is often talked about for multisyllabic words, which is why the first step is to break it up. If smaller words need pronunciation help, chopping it up by the isolated sounds is also useful. There is no limit to back-chaining, as the central key is to make these complicated words – may it be a long word or a short word– less complicated in smaller steps. It can be used for multisyllabic words like "refrigerator" or the monosyllabic "run".

Step two is "Forget About Spelling" (How To Better Pronounce Long Words, 2017). This is where I have a slight deviation in the method. Agreeably, for pronunciation we should not follow the rules of spelling. That is the classic devilish behavior of English. The similarly spelled words of "tough", "though", "through" and "thorough" with their differing phonetic rules haunt students of all language abilities. English has been referred to as "not a phonetic language" because the words are not pronounced how they are spelled (Sousa, 2011, p. 62). But in truth, we shall never completely forget about spelling. My slight divergence on this step is that regardless of the pronunciation, teachers shouldn't misspell a word on the board. Even if you instruct students not to copy, one or two may still copy. It has the potential of accidently teaching a misspelled word. It could also confuse students in that they may think you are teaching two different words. Teachers can, instead, write the correct spelling and the "sound spelling" above it. Try using different colored markers for absolute division. Some teachers teach the phonetic alphabet, while other teachers prefer to spell out how it sounds. The international phonetic alphabet (IPA) takes a long time to teach, even though it is an incredible tool we could all refer back to. I don't teach the IPA. With a word like "talkative", I have spelled out the "a" like /uh/ above the true spelling. The /uh/ is the most accurate way to pronounce that medial "a" in the accent of our surrounding environment, so it makes the most sense to teach the class that. It isn't a perfect system, but it does help affirm any confusion from the student's perspective. Because English pronunciation is hardly consistent, I recommend you practice the technique with target words before you do it in front of your students. I first did this wrong with "talkative". My native English brain knew the "a" is the /uh/ sound, but when I chopped it up and had them repeat, I said aloud the short /a/ sound. Regrettably, my students repeated after me once before I realized my mistake. I am regrettably wondering if I taught them a broken word.

Step three is what makes back-chaining unique "Start From the End" (How To Better Pronounce Long Words, 2017). This is where the back in back-chaining comes from. This is also the part that helps re-train the brain. We can understand the need to re-train aspects of our learning while noting linguistic transfer. Linguistic transfer is the process of applying language rules or thought from one's native language to one's new language. This happens negatively at times, and that is called negative transfer. (Sabbah, 2015). An example of this is when a student's L1 has the adjective after the noun, while in English the adjectives come before a noun. In this situation, a common language transfer is when the student mistakenly keeps putting the adjective after the noun. This happens a lot because many languages have adjectives following nouns. For example, in Spanish it would be "camisa verde" which translates to "shirt green". In English, adjectives come before nouns. So, it is "green shirt". Linguistic transfer is profound in pronunciation, and it delays learning if not interrupted. Besides that possibility, with pronunciation, it is often that a student does not have that phonetic sound in their L1. This makes it difficult for their mouth to produce a new sound. Their linguistic memory will often grab the phonetic ability closest the target phonetic sound. This is when pronunciation really needs extra special focus, and how back-chaining aids in the unlearning and re-training of both the brain and muscle memory of our mouths. Developing strong muscle memory with back-chaining is especially important in English as it is a language spoken with notable stress. The English language stresses hard on some syllables while none on others. These variations in word stress make it particularly difficult to understand and produce accurate, consistent pronunciation (Sousa, 2011).

Back-chaining has notably been used as a method for pronouncing long, multisyllable words, but as I mentioned earlier, I use it for monosyllable words. This has been helpful for the pesky dual consonants, as well as hard stops. There are certain words that are notoriously challenging for most new learners, like words that end in "x". Let's look at the word, "fix". When I practice back-chaining here, I will focus on the "x" which makes the sound of /ks/ together. The class does not move on until we have that "x" down well. After, I'll slide over to the short /i/ sound. Finally, we'll begin with the "f". By beginning from the back to front, this helps the speaker not get lost along the way. By then, their tongue and lingual memory have more confidence, so there isn't an accidently wrong turn on the pronunciation route. It creates confidence in their language learning, encouraging them to speak more. This is especially important because those who struggle most with pronunciation may feel too intimidated to speak or open their mouth, even though they understand. We must make language more "bite-sized" and less intimidating.

Why I use back-chaining is because of its invaluable process in highlighting a tricky phonetic roadblock for others. Often, students realize they aren't pronouncing things as accurate as they want. By being able to break down a word into bite-sized pieces, it helps dial in exactly what needs to be improved. Just this past week, the word "thorough" terrorized my intermediate class. After my students realized they could confidently say "oh" and "or" (which are the third and second syllable sounding parts of the word), all that was left was the /th/. It was a clear way for me to see that this part of the word needed practice most for the students. Luckily,

I have a strategy that helps with /th/ pronunciation development. All that's needed are lightweight, thin objects that can be moved with subtle air. I like to use sticky notes. After modeling what the mouth should look like to form /th/, place the sticky note upward and near the mouth. With lightweight sticky notes, my students practiced their /th/ by blowing air through their teeth and tongue. If the sticky note didn't move, there was an obstruction. That obstruction was then identified and corrected. For most of my students, the obstruction was impeding their correct use of /th/. Practicing the voiced and voiceless "th" is always a norm in my classes, as it's one of many tricky pronunciation obstacles. But, without the practice of back-chaining, the students may not have realized the importance of why we had to practice the "th" sounds. It helped them have a clearer understanding of what was hard about a word and then realize that the pronunciation can be done by the back-chaining method. It wasn't such a monstrous thing to overcome once broken down. This doesn't solve pronunciation obstacles overnight, but it does give a firmer starting point.

With the longer words that are taught at the higher levels, back-chaining remains important. It is also a good time to introduce students to suffixes, infixes, and prefixes may come of use. Back-chaining with all the affixes helps students understand both pronunciation and vocabulary comprehension. Whether affixes are addressed or not, back-chaining with multisyllabic words come naturally. To practice back-chaining as an instructor, try to remember steps one through three and pause on where you discover the flaw in the word production from your student(s). It's true: "If you split long, difficult words into small, easy chunks, you'll find that your tongue is capable of remarkable acrobatic feats" (Wyner, 2014, p. 70). More importantly, your students realize this.

This article concludes that in every level and every class, there should be focused work on pronunciation. At times, I have felt like I'm not doing enough in the pronunciation practices. In my search for showing up better for my students, I discovered back-chaining. Back-chaining and its unraveling nature to showcase the problematic portion of a word has made multilingual classrooms feel more unified with pronunciation practice.

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