

## Teaching Pronunciation TRANSCRIPT

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Peter Roach talks about how a knowledge of phonetics and phonology can help teachers to understand their learners’ difficulties with pronunciation. He then discusses the dilemma of the teacher who does not speak with a BBC accent, but who is using this model to teach pronunciation.

AL This is Anna Linthe from Cambridge University Press and I’m here talking to Peter Roach. Now your book *English Phonetics and Phonology* has guidelines and tips for teachers as well as learners, and I wanted to ask you about the importance of phonetics and phonology for teachers. Why is it important for teachers to learn about phonetics and phonology?

PR Well, I think we can start by acknowledging the fact that teachers can perfectly well teach pronunciation without knowing about phonetics and phonology, because we know for a fact that lots of teachers don’t have that knowledge, but do manage to get their pupils to perform reasonably well. I think it is really a matter of the importance of having some background knowledge that helps you to understand the learners’ problems. There’s no exact parallel in other fields, but, for example, if you think of medical diagnosis – if somebody came to you and asked for advice because they were getting headaches, or they were getting persistent pains in their knees or something, you could think of some homely advice that you would give them and it might well result in them improving. But it’s not the same as knowing how the body works, and the nature of human illnesses and that kind of thing. You might look for an analogy with cars – you can be a perfectly good driver without the faintest idea what’s happening under the bonnet, but if the car were to start going wrong, or you found that the car wasn’t performing the way you wanted it to, knowing how the car works is quite a big help. Actually modern cars don’t really go wrong anymore, but if you go

back to the sort of cars that were around when I was young, having some mechanical knowledge was really a big help for all the things that were likely to go wrong. So I think that's it – it's background knowledge giving you a deeper understanding of what's going on. You're not on the same level of ignorance as your pupils.

AL And what would you say to teachers who were worried about teaching an accent, such as BBC English, which they don't speak themselves?

PR Yes, that's a very important question, but it's one that needs breaking down I think. You have to look at what you find in the case of a native speaker of English who has an accent that's radically different from the one described in the book, for example. But you also have the problem which is I think often a more serious problem – what happens if you have a teacher who is not a native speaker of English, who really can't manage a very good pronunciation of English – what are they doing to their pupils? And how do the pupils react to the fact that what they're hearing from their teacher doesn't sound at all like what they're hearing on recorded exercises. If we look at the native speaker problem, I think it's often exaggerated. I think that it's not usually something that really causes a block between a teacher and the pupils. If you get a case that's really quite extreme, like someone with a strong Scottish accent teaching, let's say, pupils in the south of England, the fact has to be acknowledged in the classroom I think that the teacher is not speaking the way the book says. I always remember a sort of principle that software designers often quote, which is that if you have something wrong with your programme – if you have a fault – the best thing is to label it as a feature. So if you say 'you're going to have something really specially interesting here, because you're going to hear two different accents of English – you can hear my Scottish accent and you can also hear the BBC accent that you get in the recordings'. And I think in that way you can actually generate a bit of interest, because you can almost challenge the pupils to observe the difference. When it comes to regional English accents, I think that very often the teacher is likely to be concentrating on individual vowels and consonants and at

that point most of them will – reluctantly perhaps – force themselves to use the RP/BBC pronunciation; though when they're speaking continuously in a normal conversational way, they'll revert to their own accent. Again, there's no reason why the learners shouldn't be asked to observe that. But there a lot depends on the level that you're teaching and the age that you're teaching and whether, for example, you're in a situation where the requirements of discipline means you don't want to invite the learners to get too critical of the way you speak. As regards foreign teachers trying to cope in the classroom – this is what is actually happening in most of the world of course. You get a lot of teachers who are extremely good teachers but, however hard they try, their pronunciation really isn't really anything like a native accent of English. And of course in that sort of context, let's imagine you have a native speaker of Spanish teaching children who are native speakers of Spanish – all of them are trying to cope with English. The fact is, there is no real need for the pupils in the class to try to sound like little English speakers – as long as they are intelligible to the people that they're going to use English with, the fact that they sound Spanish is not necessarily a disadvantage, it can be a very good thing. So you have to consider what your goals are. If the goal is to reach a point where your pupils can communicate well in the world at large, all you need to do is eradicate the most difficult, the most overpowering aspects of their pronunciation that might be obstacles, and you've really solved the problem. The big hurdle that always has to be borne in mind is the examination system. If you've got a fairly liberal examination system, then you'll get examiners who are quite tolerant about someone who speaks fluently and intelligibly but with a foreign accent. But in other cases you will simply get a bad mark if you don't sound as though you're aiming at RP or BBC. And once you get into an educational system which is so conservative that you get bad marks if you don't sound English, there is nothing that the teacher can do, nothing that the textbook writer can do – you're just stuck with something that's effectively Ministry of Education policy.