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Intelligibility and comprehensibility: helping higher level adults improve pronunciation

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About me

Jeremy Beacock, British Council

CELTA

DELTA
Pg Cert Linguistics (Nottingham)

MAPDLE (NILE) ongoing

- Study of pronunciation learning and teaching with IELTS students and teachers in Taiwan

About you

- **What languages do your students use regularly?**

- **What purposes do your students have in learning English?**

- **What level are they?**

- **How would you describe your teaching stage?**
  - Early
  - Mid stage
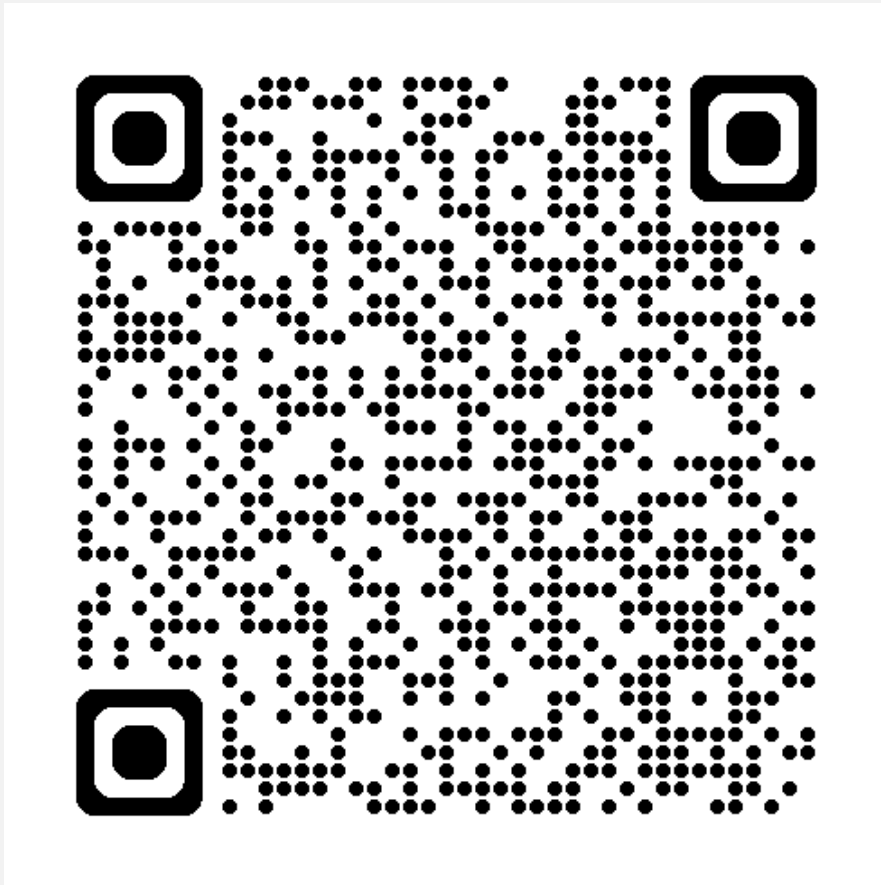 - Wait, how did I get here?

Today we will...

- **Discuss who we are trying to help and what they need**
  - The IELTS and CEFR pronunciation frameworks
  - Accentedness, intelligibility, and comprehensibility

- **Talk about what problems these students have**
  - Compare within and across languages
  - Think about individual or systematic differences.

- **Workshop what we can do to help them**
  - **over to you**

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Who are we trying to help?
What do they need?

Please open one (or both)

IELTS Descriptors

CEFR, p 134
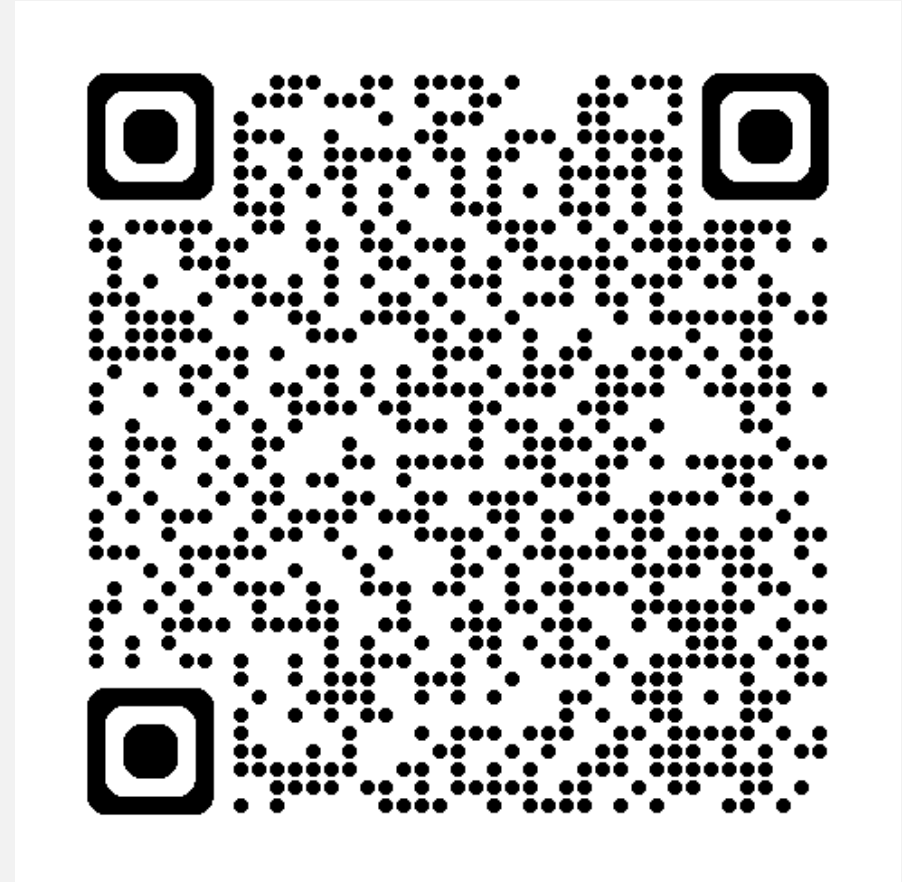
IELTS Pronunciation Descriptors

4	5	6	7	8
Uses some acceptable phonological features, but the range is limited. Produces some acceptable chunking, but there are frequent lapses in overall rhythm. Attempts to use intonation and stress, but control is limited. Individual words or phonemes are frequently mispronounced, causing lack of clarity. Understanding requires some effort and there may be patches of speech that cannot be understood.		Uses a range of phonological features, but control is variable. Chunking is generally appropriate, but rhythm may be affected by a lack of stress-timing and/or a rapid speech rate. Some effective use of intonation and stress, but this is not sustained. Individual words or phonemes may be mispronounced but this causes only occasional lack of clarity. Can generally be understood throughout without much effort.		Uses a wide range of phonological features to convey precise and/or subtle meaning. Can sustain appropriate rhythm. Flexible use of stress and intonation across long utterances, despite occasional lapses. Can be easily understood throughout. Accent has minimal effect on intelligibility.

CEFR

	Phonological control		
	Overall phonological control	**Sound articulation**	**Prosodic features**
C1	Can employ the full range of phonological features in the target language with sufficient control to ensure intelligibility throughout. Can articulate virtually all the sounds of the target language; some features of accent(s) retained from other language(s) may be noticeable, but they do not affect intelligibility.	Can articulate virtually all the sounds of the target language with a high degree of control. They can usually self-correct if they noticeably mispronounce a sound.	Can produce smooth, intelligible spoken discourse with only occasional lapses in control of stress, rhythm and/or intonation, which do not affect intelligibility or effectiveness. Can vary intonation and place stress correctly in order to express precisely what they mean to say.
B2	Can generally use appropriate intonation, place stress correctly and articulate individual sounds clearly; accent tends to be influenced by the other language(s) they speak, but has little or no effect on intelligibility.	Can articulate a high proportion of the sounds in the target language clearly in extended stretches of production; is intelligible throughout, despite a few systematic mispronunciations. Can generalise from their repertoire to predict the phonological features of most unfamiliar words (e.g. word stress) with reasonable accuracy (e.g. while reading).	Can employ prosodic features (e.g. stress, intonation, rhythm) to support the message they intend to convey, though with some influence from the other languages they speak.
B1	Pronunciation is generally intelligible; intonation and stress at both utterance and word levels do not prevent understanding of the message. Accent is usually influenced by the other language(s) they speak.	Is generally intelligible throughout, despite regular mispronunciation of individual sounds and words they are less familiar with.	Can convey their message in an intelligible way in spite of a strong influence on stress, intonation and/or rhythm from the other language(s) they speak.

Council of Europe. (2020).

3 important (?) constructs

Accentedness

"A listener's perception of how different a speaker's accent is from that of the LI community."

Intelligibility

"The extent to which a listener actually understands an utterance."

Comprehensibility

"The listener's perception of the ease or difficulty in understanding an utterance"

Celce-Murcia, M., et al. 2013, p. 32

Intelligibility

.... should be less of an issue for most learners at this stage.

However, some errors are worth paying attention to:

      Errors with a high functional load

      Potentially embarrassing/socially difficult errors

Functional load

Brown's (1988)

Functional Load table

10 is the most significant.

Represents sounds which are frequent AND occur at similar rates.

WILL vary by English accent considered.

futureofenglish.britishcouncil.org/iatefl

TABLE 2

Rank Ordering of RP Phoneme Pairs Commonly Conflated by Learners

	Vowels		Consonants
10	/e, æ/	10	/p, b/
	/æ, ʌ/		/p, f/
	/æ, ɒ/		/m, n/
	/ʌ, ɒ/		/n, l/
	/ɔ:, əʊ/		/l, r/
9	/e, ɪ/	9	/f, h/
	/e, eɪ/		/t, d/
	/ɑ:, aɪ/		/k, g/
	/ɜ:, əʊ/	8	/w, v/
8	/i:, ɪ/		/s, z/
7	—	7	/b, v/
			/f, v/
6	/ɔ:, ɜ:/		/ð, z/
	/ɒ, əʊ/		/s, ʃ/
5	/ɑ:, ʌ/	6	/v, ð/
	/ɔ:, ɒ/		/s, ʒ/
	/ɜ:, ʌ/	5	/θ, ð/
4	/e, eə/		/θ, s/
	/æ, ɑ:/		/ð, d/
	/ɑ:, ɒ/		/z, dʒ/
	/ɔ:, ʊ/		/n, ŋ/
	/ɜ:, e/	4	/θ, t/
3	/i:, ɪə/	3	/tʃ, dʒ/
	/ɑ:, aʊ/	2	/tʃ, ʃ/
	/u:, ʊ/		/ʃ, ʒ/
2	/ɪə, eə/		/j, ʒ/
1	/ɔ:, ɔɪ/		
	/u:, ʊə/	1	/f, θ/
			/dʒ, j/

Comprehensibility

Composed of multiple segmental, supra-segmental features – and beyond!

It was only high FL consonant substitutions (e.g. mispronunciation of /l/ as /r/ or /v/ as /b/) that negatively impacted on native listeners' comprehensibility judgments.

Suzikida and Saito, 2019

Their findings showed that word stress (prosody) distinguished speakers of low, mid and high levels of comprehensibility, while speech rate (fluency) discriminated between low and intermediate levels, and vowel and consonant errors (segmental accuracy) distinguished intermediate from high levels.
Isaacs and Trofimovich (2012), reported in Isaacs, 2018

{Comprehensibility is] commonly associated with a set of underlying linguistic dimensions (grammatical accuracy, breakdown fluency, and pronunciation)

Suzuki and Kormos, 2019

Speakers … [need] …to have not only good vocabulary and oral fluency, but also proficiency in grammar and discourse-level organization.

Thomson, 2018

The real definition of comprehensibility?

E2: Somebody told me when I started doing this, a person who is '7' is someone you could have dinner with. And you're not thinking, oh this is a foreigner, you're able to talk to them, they're making mistakes it doesn't matter but you're at ease, it's comfortable.

Examining the linguistic aspects of speech that most efficiently discriminate between upper levels of the revised IELTS Pronunciation scale
Isaacs et al. (2015) p. 27

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What problems do our students face?

Discussion

What intelligibility issues do your students still face?

What comprehensibility issues do they have?

Which of these intelligibility & comprehensibility issues are important?

What do they generally do well?

What do your *students* think are the most important issues?

Discussion

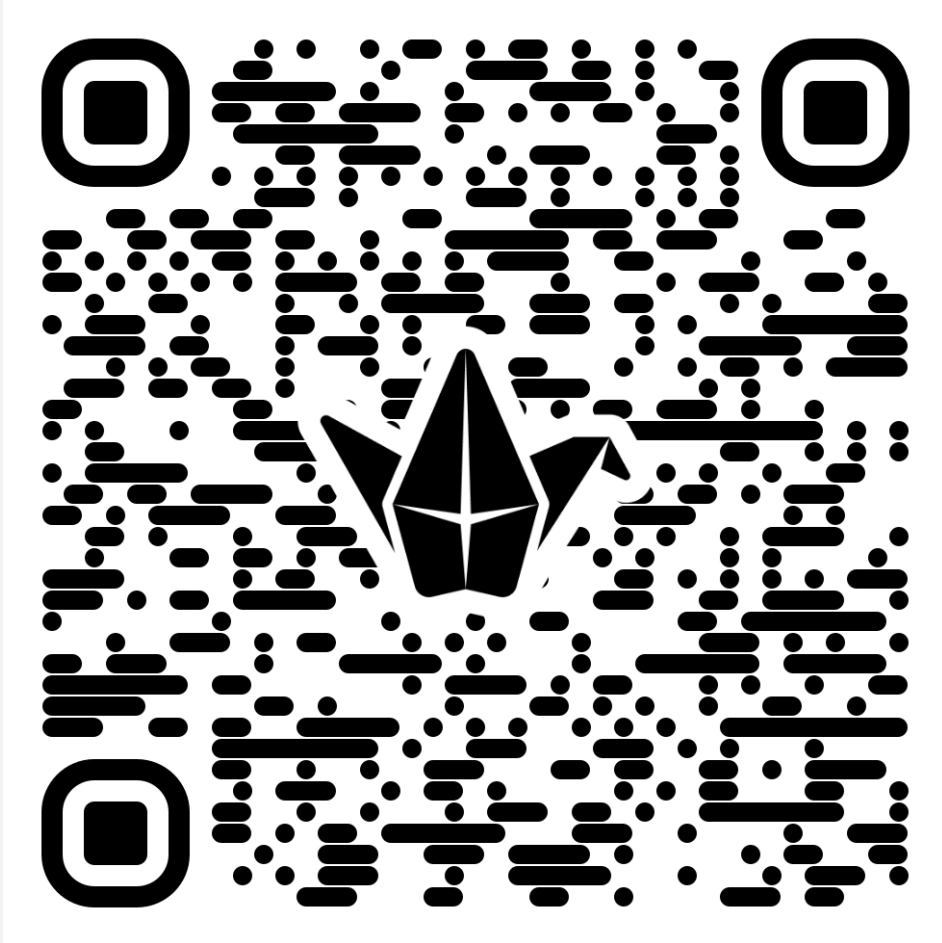Do all students from the same language background necessarily have the same issues?

Were there any common issues shared among students from different languages?

How much do students share the same pronunciation development patterns?

What can we do to help students?

Techniques and tips

How do you help students?

With a partner or small group, add suggestions, tips, and techniques for improving pronunciation at this level.

Techniques and tips

Things I and my colleagues use:

Meta language explanation

Build a library of examples and analogies

Emphasise real world importance

Examples; student reflection

Shadowing

Youglish, voicetube, relevant materials

Phrase and sentence drilling

Relevant to purpose; exaggerated

Correction and feedback

Teacher feedback; self/peer evaluation using rubrics; recordings

Actively teaching discourse markers and set phrases

2 key tips

Integrate into other areas of practice

Be aware of teachable moments

Be aware of the underlying functions of activities and how pronunciation supports this

Be aware of the contribution vocabulary and grammar and especially discourse organisation and fluency make.

Listening

Listening, listening, listening

Different accents, different purposes, different emotional states

Questions and comments?

Other resources

Elina Banzina researches some of the micro elements that make up successful oral communication, and her research is directly relevant to students.

Exploring phonetic cues to persuasive oral presentation: A study with British English speakers and English L2 learners

Elina Banzina iD
Stockholm School of Economics in Riga, Latvia

Other resources

Leandro Paladino is conducting research into teaching B1+ students, and is collecting data from both teachers and students. The research covers pronunciation as well as other elements.

You can join the research by clicking [here](#) or following the QR code.

Contact Leandro for more information and a summary of his research – address on the survey page.
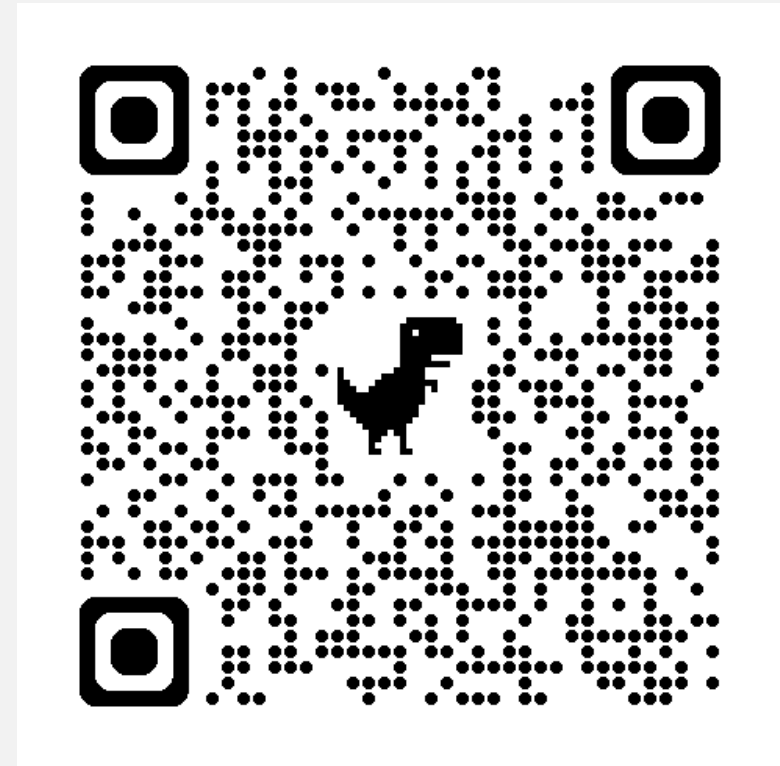
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Thank you for coming

We would love your feedback

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