Teaching American English Pronunciation:
Key Focus Areas for AEI Tutors

General Formula: model the sounds clearly, include brief explanation & visual and/or kinesthetic support as needed, and allow much repetition and production (starting with sound in isolation and then in various environments and longer utterances).

THE SEGMENTALS

Vowels:
1. /iy/ beat 2. /i/ bit 3. /e/ bet 4. /ey/ bait 5. /æ/ bat 6. /a/ bought 7. /ɑ/ but

Consonants:
10. /n/ new 11. /ŋ/ sing 12. /ɻ/ law 13. /r/ red
21. /ʃ/ church

To do:
a) Notice how vowel sounds lengthen when followed by a voiced consonant. Change the last sound of each of the sample words in the vowels section above from /t/ to /d/. Switch back and forth. What’s different in pronunciation? The final consonant sound or the length of the vowel? Or both? Many of our learners do not lengthen vowels when required.

b) Minimal Pairs: One way to practice a sound is to have the student say it in contrast via a minimal pair (two words that are identical except that one sound is different) such as “ship” and “sheep”. Write 3 examples of minimal pairs here:

c) What is a sound one of your students struggles with? Write down sample words with this sound, starting out very simply and moving into more challenging examples.

d) Sometimes what seems like a pronunciation error is really a reading/spelling error. Can you think of an example of how an English spelling creates a mispronunciation for your learners?

e) Prioritize: Does the student need to master the sound to be intelligible? What sounds might not need as much attention as others?

Recommended Resources

University of Iowa Phonetics http://soundsofspeech.uiowa.edu/english/english.html
The Color Vowel Chart http://ells.solutions/color-vowel-chart/
Pronunciation Pairs by Baker & Goldstein
Focus on Pronunciation by Lane
Pronunciation Made Simple by Dale & Poms
THE SUPRASEGMENTALS

**Word Stress** (or Syllable Stress)

Listen to the following words. How many syllables does each have? Which syllable is stressed (louder, longer, clearer, higher than the other syllables)?

1. dessert 2. desert 3. personal 4. personnel 5. photo 6. photography 7. photographic

How can your students know which syllable to stress? How can you help them?

Related: What is the most common vowel sound in English?

**Sentence Stress (the “rhythm” of English)**

Cats chase mice
The cats chase the mice.
The cats have chased the mice.
The cats have been chasing the mice.

What do the above sentences tell you about English stress and rhythm?
We stress “content words” (nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs, numbers, negatives, etc) and reduce “function” words (pronouns, prepositions, articles, helping verbs, etc)

**Prominence**

Look back at the cat sentences above. Which word in each sentence has more stress than the others? Why?
We tend to place “extra stress” on the last content word of a phrase or sentence, but this can shift according to meaning.

What is the difference between the following two sentences?

“John, said the boss, is a thief.”
“John said the boss is a thief.”

**Intonation**

Notice the difference at the end of the following questions:

Is it time to go? (rising at the end)
When is it time to go? (rising and then falling at the end)

Write a list of your favorite activities. Then read it aloud. How do you use intonation with your list? (rise on each item and then fall on the last one)

**FINAL TASK**

Task: Diagnose the speaker on the video. What pronunciation points might you consider working on with her? How would you prioritize these according to intelligibility? What instruction would you offer her?

Highly recommended: You can find the whole video (30 minutes in length) on Yamada’s Virtual Lab [https://babel.uoregon.edu/helpme/virtual-language-lab](https://babel.uoregon.edu/helpme/virtual-language-lab)
Search the English materials there. You’ll see it listed as AEI Tutor Training “Teacher Training”