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# **16 TRICKS**

to Practice your Pronunciation

by Dr. Paul Pimsleur



## WORDS OF WISDOM FROM THE PROFESSOR

While it has been over 40 years since Paul Pimsleur died suddenly while teaching at the Sorbonne in Paris, his research and techniques for language learning remain as relevant as ever. This article is excerpted from his book, "How to Learn a Foreign Language," reissued in 2013 by Simon & Schuster.

Danny Kaye\* in his comedy routines used to rattle off a chain of sounds with a foreign accent and foreign gestures. The audience was convinced he was talking French when he was actually saying only nonsense syllables, pronounced with a heavy French accent. He could do this in several languages.

The music of a foreign language is different from the words. If you know even a few words of a foreign language, it is possible to rattle them off with such a beautiful accent that you might be mistaken for a native. The right kind of practice, done in the right frame of mind, can put a near-native accent within anyone's grasp.

### #1 THINK SOUNDS, NOT LETTERS

Probably the biggest impediment to good pronunciation is picturing how a word is written while saying it. The written letters are associated in our minds with English sounds. Consequently, these English sounds rise automatically to our lips instead of the foreign ones, and we must spend part of our energy in combatting this tendency. There is nothing hard about saying the French word for "son," which is pronounced "feess"—until you see it written down: *fils*.

### #2 NEVER LOOK AT THE LETTER "R"

In English, this sound is pronounced differently from other languages. Our tongues curl up more than for a Spanish or Italian "r," and in quite the opposite direction from a French or German "r."

Looking at the written word while saying it makes the tongue instinctively take the English r position and thereby makes learning the foreign sound more difficult.

### #3 THE CORRECT LEARNING SEQUENCE

The correct learning sequence is this: listen carefully to get the sound firmly planted in your ear; then gradually imitate it with your tongue. Do not use your eye till you have the pronunciation down pat.

### #4 THE LONGER A WORD, THE HARDER

The Spanish word for nationality is *nacionalidad*. It has five syllables (*na-cio-na-li-dad*), none of them particularly difficult to pronounce alone. But the attempt to rattle off this five-syllable word can twist a beginner's tongue. The solution is to break it down into smaller parts and master it piece by piece. However ...

\* Danny Kaye was a versatile comedian, actor and dancer; wildly popular in the early days of television and movies, and well-known for his improvisational foreign "language" skits, which are widely available on YouTube.



### #5 START FROM THE END

Instead of saying *na-*, then *-cio-*, and so on, you should begin at the end instead. Say *-dad*, then *-lidad*, etc. You will retain the natural intonation of the word this way, and won't risk swallowing the ending. Try it both ways and see.

### #6 WORK WITH A MODEL

Pronunciation deteriorates easily, so the longer you go without checking yours against a native, the more likely you are to revert to English speech habits. Check your pronunciation often until good speech habits are firmly established in the new language.



### #7 EVERY SOUND IS IMPORTANT

The wife of a friend of ours, eager to improve her French, located a Frenchwoman and made an appointment to go to her apartment for conversation lessons. She began her first visit by explaining that her French was weak because she had not studied much French grammar. To her surprise, the French lady started to question her about her grandmother. Our friend's wife

was mystified, but the conversation continued, and it was not until after the lesson, reflecting on how it had gone, that she realized she must have said *grand'mère* (grandmother) when she meant *grammaire* (grammar). Different as they look on paper, these two French words are only one sound away from being pronounced identically, and she had said the wrong sound.

It is often difficult for people studying a language to understand why their teacher insists on seemingly trivial nuances of pronunciation. If two sounds are so nearly alike that one can hardly hear the difference, why bother learning to distinguish them? It is because, alike as they may seem to a foreigner, each sound is totally different from every other sound to a native speaker of the language; he cannot even imagine how someone can fail to perceive the difference. Did you ever think that "it" could be confused with "eat," or "ship" with "sheep"? Probably not, yet to many foreigners studying English, this distinction seems so faint as to be nearly impossible to master. Many never do master it and so we have the comic book caricature of a foreigner as someone who says, "Geev me theess" for, "Give me this."

### #8 SHOOT ALL PROBLEMS ON SIGHT

An amusing anecdote will help me make my point. During the 1950s, I traveled to Europe on a Dutch student ship. It was an ex-troopship from World War II, and for \$150 you could get a bunk in a dormitory.





During the thirteen-day trip, we passengers got to know some of the Dutch crew fairly well. The one we saw most often was a mess steward whose job was to circulate among the passengers three times a day, at mealtimes, ringing a set of chimes built like a child's xylophone. It had four notes—bong, bong, BONG, bong.

The ship was so full that the passengers had to be fed in two sittings, which doubled the mess steward's work. To announce the noon meal, for example, he would walk around at 12:30, calling out, "First sitting ... first sitting." He would come again at 1:30, calling out, "Second sitting .... second sitting."

The point of the story is that there is no distinction in the Dutch language between the sound s and sh—if you see what I mean.

For thirteen days, the students on board never tired of teasing him. They pretended to misunderstand so that he would repeat, always with unfailing good humor, calling out the word even louder than before.

If the steward had seriously wanted to learn English, this incident would have happened only once. He would have noticed the merriment his pronunciation was producing, tracked down the reason for it, and practiced until it disappeared. For him, however, there may have been more reward in getting along cheerfully with the passengers than in perfecting his accent, so he did not do so.

### #9 DON'T PRACTICE SINGLE SOUNDS

One should not attempt to practice sounds in isolation. To pronounce a French *r* all alone, for example, is not only excessively difficult, it is also unrealistic. When does one ever say a sound all by itself, except for "Oh!" to convey surprise and "Ah!" to indicate admiration?

Always practice sounds in a specific setting. The French *r*, reputedly a very difficult sound, is easier to pronounce in the word *Paris* than in *rouge*, and needs to be practiced in both. The Spanish *r*, too, is harder to pronounce at the beginning of a word (*rojo*, "red") than in the middle (*duro*, "hard"), and in fact is slightly different in each of the following words, depending on the sounds that surround it: *rio*, *por*, *para*, *padre*, *Francisco*, *tren*.



### #10 THINK IN SOUND-CLUSTERS

Each sound is a little different depending on its setting, because of the way the tongue must glide from one sound to the next. In the French expression *J'en ai un* ("I've got one"), or the



Spanish sentence *Voy a hacerlo* ("I'll do it"), you might say each word authentically and yet be unable to glide them together with a native-like accent. One must practice the glide as well as the sounds.



## #11 PRACTICE WHOLE PHRASES, NOT WORDS

In real life, a string of words like "I don't know" or "Not on your life" is said as though it were a single word, in one breath-group, without pausing. Similarly, if you stop to take a breath in the middle of a foreign phrase that should be said in a single burst, you are not saying it correctly; you even risk being incomprehensible. Most people think of language as a collection of single words, perhaps because dictionaries are arranged in one-word entries. But what is convenient in a dictionary actually does violence to the reality of language. In practicing pronunciation, it is best to think in terms of wordclusters and to practice the language that way.

## #12 MASTERING A DIFFICULT SOUND

Not long after World War II, I was a student at the Sorbonne and lived in a hotel in the Latin Quarter. I got to know several French students who also lived there, including a young actor and a girl of violent left-wing opinions. The three of us used to get together in the evening, and I was sometimes able to treat them to a rare delicacy like hot chocolate or coffee out of my mother's latest "care" package. Over the drink I would trot out the new words I had learned that day to check whether I understood their meaning and was pronouncing them correctly. I had been in France less than three months, and French was very painful and laborious for me.

One of my hardest sounds was the French *u*. At first I could not say it right at all. Then I grew able to pronounce it in words like *du* and *pure*, but I was still a very long way from saying other words—*rue*, for instance—like a Frenchman. There is an ad in the Paris Herald Tribune that instructs the reader how to get to Harry's Bar. It says: "Tell the taxi driver, *SANK ROO DOE NOO*" (5 rue Daunou). My pronunciation was little better than that, yet I couldn't avoid the word *rue*, for I needed it practically every day to ask directions or exchange addresses with people.

Trying to master the word *rue*, I would walk around repeating it to myself at odd moments, generally aloud—*rue, rue, rue*. In the evening I would ask my two friends if now it was right—and they would say "no" and patiently show me for the millionth time how it ought to sound.





Finally, in desperation, I stumbled onto the “discrimination” method for mastering a really difficult foreign sound. I began to keep careful track of when my friends thought I was closer and when they thought I was further away from the correct pronunciation. (To me it sounded the same all the time, of course.) At last I noticed that when I accidentally produced a kind of high-pitched whistling sound in saying the word, they would say, “There, that’s better.” From then on it was a matter of training myself to give it this whistling quality all the time. Although I would sometimes backslide out of fatigue, I knew that if I took the trouble I could say it correctly. The important thing in mastering a difficult sound is to listen very intently, trying to discover what gives it its distinctive quality. Good pronunciation, as I have tried to explain, begins not in the mouth but in the ear.

### **#13 INVITE A FRIEND TO MAKE FUN OF YOU**

When you have trouble hearing the difference between what you are saying and what you ought to say, ask an acquaintance who is a native (or who sounds like one) to imitate your pronunciation followed by the right one. Wrong-right, wrong-right, just like this: *roo/ rue . . . roo/rue . . .* over and over. Just listen and try to seize where the difference lies. Don’t try saying it yourself prematurely; you risk becoming discouraged easily at this point. Keep listening until you feel the difference penetrating you, and the urge to say it yourself becomes strong. Most likely, you will be in a trance of

concentration at that moment, from focusing so hard on a slim difference in sound. Then begin a drill in which you say the word or phrase yourself, with your friend telling you each time whether you are saying it well or badly. Do this for a number of tries, until the “wells” become much more frequent than the “badlys”; but ...



### **#14 IF YOU BLOCK, STOP**

It is possible to become so drugged with repetitions that the foreign phrase loses all meaning; one becomes transfixed and temporarily unable to go on. If this happens, stop at once and resume your practice at a later time, after a complete change of activity.

### **#15 DIFFICULT SOUNDS IN EACH LANGUAGE ARE FEW IN NUMBER**

I knew a real estate saleswoman in California who felt that her Russian accent was interfering with her business. She told me she was desperately eager to do something about it. I analyzed her speech and found that in point of fact she was making only three or four



pronunciation errors. With modest application, she could have eliminated or at least improved them all. But whenever I identified a specific problem for her, she suddenly “lost interest,” claiming it was too much trouble to think about correcting it.

Many people react this way. When the discussion of a speech problem becomes too specific, they become psychologically “blocked,” and tune out. It might help if they could be convinced that speech problems are not endless, as they often seem, but actually quite few in number, and definitely fixable.



#### **#16 WHEN TO SAY “THE HELL WITH IT”**

Pronunciation is important enough that one should try conscientiously to master the authentic foreign accent. One shows respect for foreign people by not making a caricature of their language. Moreover, one is never sure when a pronunciation problem may lead to a misunderstanding, or even to your becoming ludicrous, as the Dutch steward did.

However, there is considerably more to a language than pronunciation. We all know people who immigrated to the United States and have functioned successfully here despite a noticeable foreign accent. Past the age of eighteen, the odds, frankly, are poor that one will ever completely lose the foreign accent. A person’s minimal goals should be:

1. to learn all the sounds of the foreign language so as not to risk saying one word for another,

and

2. to speak the language with an inoffensive accent. Beyond that, the desire to possess a perfect accent must be weighed against the amount of practice and attention needed to obtain it.



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