Kinesthetic-Figurative Methods for Coaching Pronunciation

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Many instructors who have taught pronunciation know how difficult it can be to teach certain sounds, particularly those that are articulated in places out of sight or require complicated muscular movements. It is fairly easy to model /b/, exaggerating lip movements, but comparatively difficult to model /r/ and tell a student what she is doing incorrectly.

For their part, pronunciation materials have gotten more sophisticated in their methodology over the last ten years. No more reliance on boring minimal pair drills: video and software packages provide instruction in full motion. Most current textbooks will include drawings of the head and mouth. Additionally, they provide detailed written instructions to the student, describing place and manner of articulation quite fully.

Still, as a teacher of pronunciation with such resources at my disposal, this writer has seen certain sounds continue to elude my students. When coaching /r/, I can tell them, "Move your tongue back and make it tense. Don't curl it up – air should flow over the tip. The back sides of your tongue should be pressing against your upper back teeth." I can point to the drawing in the book. But… still, no luck. For such unfamiliar and invisible muscular movements, visual and spoken instruction fall short.

It was while using the textbook by Sue F. Miller, *Targeting Pronunciation*, that I tried a new teaching method that produced surprising results. In the chapter on /r/, the book presented a little two-step drawing of a hand. In the first drawing, the hand was clenched in a fist; in the second drawing, the hand flew open in an open-palm gesture. It was a kinesthetic way of symbolizing the tenseness of /r/. Students were to say the word "ray," while using their hand: "Rrrrrr (clench)....aaaaay (release)." This little gesture seemed to "click" in some students' minds, and their /r/ audibly improved.

Inspired by this breakthrough, other ways of using the hands and body sprang to mind. To further convey how /r/ requires tongue pressure on the upper back teeth, I told students to tense their bent arms at their sides and push, as if pushing out the sides of a box around them. "Rrrrr….ah!" they would say, pushing to each side at the release of the sound. Making the physical movement at the same time as the sound seemed to help.

Perhaps best of all, it when I became frustrated with pointing at a drawing, I began using my arm and hand as a model, as in Figure 1.
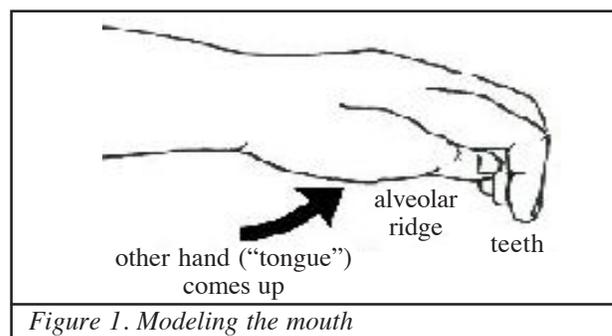

Figure 1. Modeling the mouth

When teaching /Ɵ/, I could bring my right hand (tongue) up to tap the tips of the left-hand fingers (teeth). For /l/, the right hand (tongue) came up to press the middle of the left palm (alveolar ridge). For /v/, I curled my fingers (teeth) to press against my other hand (lower lip).

While some sounds cannot be modeled kinesthetically, the method can be helpful for several. Creativity is the order of the day – you never know how an unconventional method of teaching may connect with your students.

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