Chiwengo asked her 6th-grade teacher for a sheet of paper. Her penalty was serving detention.

Carlos told his 4th-grade classmates about going to the beach. A repeat offender, he was sent to the principal’s office.

Mei responded by saying thanks. This 8th-grader found herself awaiting a parent/teacher conference with the counselor.

Hamsa asked his kindergarten teacher about the vacuum cleaner. As punishment, he was kept in from recess.

Why were these children punished? Because they had made pronunciation errors. The teachers heard the children’s accented pronunciation of appropriate vocabulary (in bold) as inappropriate words.

The strong impact of hearing what appears to be inappropriate words in a classroom context can be closely replicated by the shock of seeing these words or their euphemisms in print: sheet/shit, beach/bitch, thanks/sex, vacuum/f--k. Some of us may be taken aback by reading these inappropriate or “bad” words. It is exactly this reaction that illustrates why four teachers imposed punishment before proving their students’ alleged guilt. In short, four children were punished not for what they had said, but for what their teachers had heard.

The intent of this article is to underscore why classroom teachers need to be aware of the pronunciation difficulties faced by English language learners (ELLs), to describe how communication breakdowns can occur, and to highlight what can be done to help. Although competent teachers are adept at handling such classroom management issues as profanity, they might be less informed about the processes involved with learning a new language. Unfortunately, what they do not know can hurt them and their students. While the four teachers in the opening scenarios reprimanded their students with good intentions, an opposite effect was achieved—that of placing a roadblock along an ELL’s path to learning English.

Chiwengo, Carlos, Mei, and Hamsa are among the five million ELLs in the United States—approximately 10.3% of the public school enrollment (Batalova, 2006)—who are learning a new language while also learning grade-level content. Although these four children speak different home languages (Swahili, Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic, respectively), all struggle with pronouncing English sounds. Their stories illustrate the complexity of challenges faced by ELLs and their teachers.

Chiwengo and Carlos: Coping With Interference From the First Language

Chiwengo said sheet but was punished for saying shit. For native speakers of English, these two words contain two totally different vowel sounds and are virtually impossible to confuse. However, for most ELLs, these two words appear to contain the same vowel sound. An ELL hears sheet and shit as homonyms. Chiwengo heard no difference in how sheet and shit sounded and thus pronounced both the same. Just as is true with “many of the world’s languages” (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992, p. 96), Swahili has only 5 vowel sounds. Yet, Chiwengo must learn to distinguish all 14 vowel sounds in the following English words: bit, beat, bait, bet, bat, pot, bought, boat, but, book, boot, boy, buy, bough (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992, pp. 33-34). Because of this difference in the sound inventories between Swahili and English, Chiwengo experienced a phenomenon called “interference” (Swan & Smith, 2001). It will likely take her several years to reach a high level of proficiency (Cummins, 1979).

It was this same interference that got Carlos into trouble. He said beach but was punished for saying bitch. Although born in the United States, this 4th-grader still heard and said the 14 vowel sounds of English as the 5 vowel sounds of Spanish (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992). As part of the language learning process, ELLs hear and say all English sounds through “the filter . . . of the native language” (p. xv). If not helped, they assume the survival strategy of avoiding
problem words. Rather than risk being punished again, Carlos simply skipped the word beach when reading aloud on his next DIBELS test. He preferred losing a point on his test score, even though the instructions indicated that “the student is not penalized for imperfect pronunciation due to dialect, articulation, or second language inferences [sic: interferences]” (Good & Kaminski, 2002, pp. 27-28).

Mei and Hamsa: Creating an Interlanguage Bridge

Mei faced a more complicated situation. She tried to say thanks but the teacher heard it as sex. Mei’s teacher and counselor wanted to inform her parents that their adolescent daughter might be getting herself into trouble. For Mei, three pronunciation issues converged in one word. First, the /th/ sound does not exist in Chinese, as is true for the first language of most ELLs (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992, p. 104). Consequently, Mei could neither hear nor say the /th/. As a Chinese speaker, she automatically used the sound /s/ to substitute for /th/. Secondly, the vowel sound /æ/ in thanks also does not exist in Chinese. Mei used the closest sound in her Chinese repertoire, one similar to the vowel sound in bet (p. 118). Third, as with many other languages, “Chinese has no consonant clusters” (p. 117). Mei pronounced the last two consonants of the triple cluster /nks/ in thanks. In doing so, she ended up saying something similar to sex, which was her interlanguage bridge to the target sounds in thanks. Interlanguage “is the version of English an ELL speaks” during the language learning process (Freeman & Freeman, 2001, p. 71). Despite her effort to pronounce thanks, an important yet difficult word, Mei was punished. Instead, she should have been reassured and encouraged.

Hamsa tried the more difficult task of saying a two-syllable word. Once again, three pronunciation difficulties converged in one word—vacuum. First, the sound /v/ does not exist in Arabic, Hamsa’s native language. As is common with Arabic speakers learning to speak English, Hamsa simply substituted an “/f/ for [the] /v/” (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992, p. 111). Secondly, the vowel sound /æ/ also does not exist in Arabic. However, with only three vowel sounds in Arabic, Hamsa had an even smaller vowel repertoire than did Chiwengo and Carlos. Consequently, Hamsa ended up uttering a vowel sound similar to the one in but (p. 113). Third, Hamsa was faced with the irregular stress pattern of multisyllabic English words (Gilbert, 2005). His easiest option was to just ignore the second syllable. Considering the pronunciation challenges in vacuum, Hamsa did considerably well in saying something similar to f--k. Had the kindergarten teacher recognized the teachable moment, Hamsa’s language development would have had a positive start. However, instead of receiving support for his inquisitive mind and for his effort at progressing beyond the silent period (Krashen, 2003), Hamsa was punished.

The next time you hear an ELL saying a seemingly inappropriate or bad word, think about Chiwengo, Carlos, Mei, and Hamsa. Because their accentuated pronunciation stemmed from first language interference (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992, p. 111), they should not have been punished. Nor should they and other ELLs be referred to special services for pronunciation issues. Instead, all teachers can help their ELLs by using poetry and chants (Graham, 2002), manipulatives (e.g., mirrors), multisensory experiences (e.g., placing hands on cheeks to feel smiling muscles in beach), reassurance and encouragement (Spezzini, 2006), and pronunciation websites (www.ed.uab.edu/esl/pronunciation.htm).

In closing, ELLs have unique pronunciation challenges that necessitate having insightful teachers who are aware, knowledgeable, and able to incorporate multiple strategies. The language-related punishments in these vignettes interfered with the ELLs' learning process by raising their affective filter (i.e., defense mechanism; Krashen, 2003). Memories of such unjust punishments may last for several years—perhaps even a lifetime (Villasenor, 2004). Therefore, before imposing a behavior management strategy, assume that the inappropriate word has resulted from a pronunciation error, one that can be overcome with understanding, patience, and support.

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References


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