

How to build confidence in Middle English pronunciation

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Be as breezy and carefree about speaking Middle English as you can.

As one teaching mentor describes it, “to successfully read Middle English aloud, there are really only two things you need to do. The first is to read it with the vowels of a cultivated Frenchman. The second is to read it with the confidence of a drunken Scotsman!”

Though there’s some good and deep research on historical phonology, we have no audio recordings from the Middle Ages (obviously!), and we’re not going to offend native speakers if we get it wrong. Also, Middle English was spoken in any number of dialects and accents, just like modern English. That’s all to say, don’t worry so much about making mistakes—just get it as accurate as you can manage, speak with bravura and confidence, and constantly encourage your students to do the same!

Speak aloud, speak loud, and speak often.

Incorporate a short aloud pronunciation exercise into each class -- this is a great way to make sure every student gets to hear their voice in the space of the classroom in every class, which can really boost participation. Give students a chance to work out the proper pronunciation of a single line of poetry, then have them yell it at you—funny, students get into yelling at their teachers once given permission! Using loud voices helps to override the tendency to overthink the language (and thus to mumble it haltingly) in an effort to ‘get it right.’ During class, always pronounce the text yourself in Middle English, and encourage your students to do the same. Praise them unequivocally for their efforts, even if they get it wrong. The point is less historical accuracy than bodily/vocal engagement!

Always drill vowels before a pronunciation exercise.

Students quickly catch on that all consonants get pronounced, but the vowel sounds take practice to learn by sight. Before any pronunciation exercise, quickly write out the list of basic vowels on the board: a/aa, e/ee, -e, i/y, o/oo, u/ou/ow, au/aw, ay/ei, ew/eu. Then point to each and have the class pronounce them out loud as a group. Confirm correct vowels, correct those that need correction, then set them to work. Accuracy improves significantly as a result!

To memorize or not to memorize?

One of the old chestnuts of teaching Middle English is memorizing and reciting the first sixteen lines of the General Prologue to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Opinions certainly vary on the value of this sort of memorization for its own sake, but recitation and memorization can be immensely useful tools when teaching medieval drama. These works were written to be memorized! Rhyme and alliteration aren’t just poetic devices: they’re mnemonic aides and elements of characterization.

That said, in some classes (particularly those at a more introductory level or ones without a performance component), it can be better to ask students to rehearse and recite without memorizing. Students who are new to Middle English are sometimes better able to deliver a stronger recitation—

one focused more on the particularities of diction, syntax, and pronunciation—when they aren't anxious about forgetting the lines.

If you can find a section of a play that has quick, snappy dialogue—one or two lines apiece exchanged between characters is a good goal—get students to rehearse (and memorize, if you like!) the dialogue. Get them out of their seats and encourage them to try out different ways of speaking the lines. Challenge them to get the Middle English to sound as natural and conversational as possible, then experiment with what happens when you make it formal and four-square.

In short, when you're working with medieval drama, play with the text as a script for performance, not just a literary object—and encourage your students to do the same!