

The ISAASE NAME PRONUNCIATION GUIDE *for* TEACHERS



Pronouncing names correctly is a big deal.

"[It] always started with my name. The majority of my teachers made no effort to learn to pronounce it until they called roll for the first time. Inevitably they would publically butcher it. My first experience in virtually every classroom was some classmates snickering about my name."

— Fazia Rizvi, actress

You care about your students, and you would never want to do anything that contributes to a student feeling shame and embarrassment that leads them to distance themselves from their families, languages, and cultures. But if you're not putting in the necessary effort to pronounce their names correctly, that might be exactly what you're doing.

These are the findings from a 2012 study called "Teachers, Please Learn Our Names!: Racial Microaggressions and the K-12 Classrooms," by Rita Kohli and Daniel Solorzano. Kohli and Solorzano report: Students' socioemotional well-being and worldview can, in fact, be negatively impacted by teachers' failure to pronounce names properly, and can even lead students to feel embarrassment and shame which results in their shying away from their cultures and families.

In a [2014 post](#), "How We Pronounce Student Names, and Why it Matters," Jennifer Gonzalez puts it best: Mutilating someone's name is a tiny act of bigotry. Whether you intend to or not, what you're communicating is this: Your name is different. Foreign. Weird. It's not worth my time to get it right. It can lead to the student feeling marginalized.

In a 2016 Project Bronx video, teacher Adam Levine-Peres says failing to get a student's name right fails to establish an environment of trust, sends the message that perseverance is not important, and shows a lack of common courtesy that communicates disrespect.

"Mutilating someone's name is a tiny act of bigotry. Whether you intend to or not, what you're communicating is this: Your name is different. Foreign. Weird. It's not worth my time to get it right."

— Jennifer Gonzalez

Even the National Education Association reports that minimizing the significance of trying to get a name right is a kind of microaggression (a brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or not, that communicates hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights toward people of color).

All of this is to say: Pronouncing names correctly is a big deal.

So what's a teacher to do during pre-service week, when she or he is handed a roster of difficult-to-pronounce names? And for the secondary education set -- who are responsible for over a hundred students -- *multiple* rosters of difficult-to-pronounce names? Teachers are being tasked with quickly learning how to correctly pronounce (and then remember how to pronounce) many (often, very diverse) names; this is a guide to pronouncing names. This guide was developed over time and includes existing ideas and resources. Some of the ideas, you may already be implementing, but others might be new. Please read this guide with an open mind, and share it with other teachers.

PRACTICE PRONUNCIATION BEFORE DAY 1

If there are names that already look like they might be a challenge for you, try to learn how to pronounce them before you even meet students. I recommend the [Pronounce Names website](#) (which now offers an Android app) or Voice of America's "[VOA's Pro-nounce Guide](#)" to become familiar with the names of the students you will interact with on a daily basis.

ON THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS

From Day 1, make sure you learn how to pronounce students' names correctly. You can put your roster of names on an overhead projector or smartboard for the whole class to see and have each student pronounce their names for you. Practice saying them in response, and write them out phonetically on your own copy of your roster for future reference.

MAKE IT PRIVATE

You can privately ask students who use a Westernized pronunciation if they prefer to go by a pronunciation that their own families might use. Keep in mind, however, that many students aren't offering the pronunciation for your benefit, but for their own comfort (it's complicated!), so listen carefully to what they prefer. For those students who have had their own names repeatedly mispronounced, it can become preferable to default to offering a more pronounceable version—in which case, it is *that* much more critical to make your best effort to say it correctly.



Pro Tip: Some South Asian American students, may already be giving you a Westernized or Americanized pronunciation. In a private setting -- and *if* you suspect this is the case -- you can ask if they prefer an alternate pronunciation. (And don't say "what's the *real* way to say it?" -- instead ask if there's an "alternate" pronunciation, or ask how their own families might say it). If they offer one, and you're able to pronounce it to *their* liking, offer to use that pronunciation. Keep in mind, however, that many students aren't offering the Westernized pronunciation for your benefit, but for their own comfort (it's complicated!), so proceed with caution and respect, and use your student's preferences to guide you here.

[Rita Kohli describes](#) her brother's experience of having his name mispronounced for his entire academic career -- something that can lead a person to feel they have checked a part of their identity at the door. For those South Asian American students who have had their own names repeatedly mispronounced again, and again, and again, it can sometimes

become preferable to offer a Westernized or Americanized pronunciation (rather than the real pronunciation) by default. In some cases, this can be for your benefit, but in many cases, it can be tied to their sense of identity. *Especially* if you're being offered an already "watered-down" version of their name, it is critical to make your best effort to learn how to say it correctly. In either case, put in the effort.

CALL-AND-RESPONSE NAME GAME ICEBREAKER

Have each student pronounce their own names as you go down the roster while other students repeat the name back (until everyone's got it). Put whatever spin on this you'd like, but don't set the game up so that students whose names somehow look more complicated or foreign are the only ones who have to participate.

CELEBRATE NAMES AND IDENTITIES

Think about ways to celebrate your students' names. The Santa Clara County Office of Education in San Jose, CA started the [My Name, My Identity campaign](#) with the mission of improving teachers' pronunciation of student names, which, as the office states, is key for "healthy social, psychological, and educational outcomes."

Think about how you can celebrate students' names, family traditions, and cultural backgrounds in a way that also connects to the curriculum. For example, I've had students develop a "Coat of Arms" as part of a lesson related to the Middle Ages and heraldry, or design a flag with symbols that represent their names and backgrounds during lessons related to cultures of the world. In my English classes, I've had students write personal essays that delve into the meaning or stories of their names at the beginning of the year. If you give assignments that celebrate students' identities early in the year, you also have the added advantage of getting to know them early on.

EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS

Become familiar with common sounds and names from different cultures. This can happen naturally by purposefully consuming more diverse literature and media. In an effort to support teachers in diversifying the [book lists](#) in their own classrooms, ISAASE launched the [Brown Books Project](#). Increasing exposure to students' diverse experiences, cultures, and voices helps them become culturally proficient.

BE RESPECTFUL, AND CONTINUE FINE-TUNING

There are three types of name-mispronouncers, according to Gonzalez: 1) those who fumble over the names, seem apologetic, and feel at fault for mispronouncing, but ultimately still fail to get the name right; 2) those who barge ahead with their pronunciation even after being corrected; and 3) those who recognize that getting a name correct will require effort and continue to fine-tune their pronunciation of a name as time goes on. (The third group is the one you want to be in!) And remember, there are a variety of "difficult" Anglo names that we as a collective society have learned to say right (e.g. Arnold *Schwarzenegger*, Renée *Zellweger*, Zach *Galifianakis*); there is no excuse not to try.

LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES

Mistakes are acceptable, and they will happen. The important thing is to make an effort to learn from them. As any dedicated teacher knows, good teaching is not about doing everything perfectly, but about constantly striving to improve our own pedagogy and compassion for our students.