

# Improving Pronunciation Skills with Native American Speeches

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Improving the pronunciation of ESOL students can be done effectively using notable speeches related to academic listening lectures.

## Introduction

Many academic speaking courses include a listening component that draws from academic lectures on a variety of subjects. Although these lectures are a valuable resource for improving note-taking skills, they can also be a catalyst for much needed pronunciation practice. The following pronunciation activity supplements academic listening practice by introducing students to voices of Native Americans. Native American speech excerpts were chosen for their poetic imagery, succinct language, and powerful underlying emotion. Often, students who have done this activity are successful in not only reciting the words clearly, but in conveying the emotion as well. In explaining the method, I will be using an excerpt from a speech by the Apache Chief Geronimo given in 1877:

“It is my land, my home, my father's land, to which I now ask to be allowed to return. I want to spend my last days there, and be buried among those mountains. If this could be I might die in peace, feeling that my people, placed in their native homes, would increase in numbers, rather than diminish as at present, and that our name would not become extinct.”

## Method

### Preparation

After deciding on the chapter or academic subject matter (such as science, literature, or history) you wish to supplement, search for appropriate quotes from notable speeches. Compile a list of excerpts that are roughly the same length. A length of around 50-75 words works well for an in-class activity. You should have enough quotes so that each student has a different excerpt. However if you have a large class, you may have more than one student work on the same selection.

### Step 1

Give one quote to each student. Tell them to first mark the quote for stressed words. Remind them that stressed words are usually content words such as nouns, verbs, negative words, and descriptive words. In addition, when they say the stressed words they should make them higher, louder, and clearer than other words. It is helpful to demonstrate by marking an example written on the board. In the following example, the stressed words have been underlined.

“It is my land, my home, my father's land, to which I now ask to be allowed to return.”

Walk around as they are working to provide assistance and make sure everyone understands the task. At this point, you may also help students with the pronunciation of unfamiliar words. When they are finished, have them practice saying the quote while stressing the underlined words.

### Step 2

Next, the students will mark the thought groups. Remind students that when speaking, we do not have pronunciation marks like

commas and periods to separate ideas. Therefore we pause between ideas to help our listeners understand us more clearly. Again show an example before having them work independently. In the following example, the thought groups have been marked with a slash (/).

“It is my land,/ my home,/ my father's land,/to which I now ask /to be allowed to return./”

Circulate and help students with this step. When they are finished, have them practice the quote with the proper pauses. Students may find they need to adjust their marks as they practice.

### Step 3

Marking rising and falling intonation is the next step. Students should read through their quote again and mark where their voices should rise and fall. Review the rules for the proper intonation in lists, statements, and questions. The intonation has been marked with arrows in the example below.

“It is my  land,/ my  home,/ my  father's land,/to which I  now ask /to be  allowed to  return.”

Help students complete this step. They should practice saying the quote again with the proper intonation.

### Step 4

In this step, students are given time in class (or at home) to practice the speech incorporating all of the elements of stressed words, pauses, and intonation. Walk around and listen to as many speeches as you can as students practice at their desks. Often students need another reminder that stressed words sound higher (not louder) than the other words. Lengthening vowel sounds in these words also helps students hit the proper stress. When pausing, some students may pause too long which hinders rather than aiding comprehension. Demonstrate that pauses can vary in length.

### Step 5

Finally, students are asked to recite their quotes in front of their classmates. Allow them to use their quote paper with the markings, but encourage them to make eye contact. Since they have practiced it multiple times, students should glance up at their listeners as they recite.

To encourage listening, pass out a copy of the quote with a few missing content words. Students must listen to their classmate and fill in the blanks. For example:

“It is my land, my home, my \_\_\_\_\_ land, to which I now \_\_\_ to be allowed to return.”

As you listen to each student, mark your own copy of the quote with any mispronunciations or irregular pauses. Be sure to note both strengths and areas needing improvement as the student recites. After everyone has spoken, meet with each student to review his or her performance. While the other students are waiting to speak with the instructor, they can compare listening notes to check their answers.

## Conclusion

Although this activity incorporates history quotes, it could be modified to suit other subject areas. For example, Nobel Prize speech excerpts could supplement chapters on science or poetry could be recited after studying a literature lecture. Regardless, the method of examining and marking the quote for stress, phrasing, and intonation will be the same. A valuable follow-up to this lesson is having students listen to audio excerpts from the Internet and applying the same method. In this way they learn to apply this method even without an instructor present. This will prove beneficial when it comes time to present speeches they have written themselves for they can mark their own speech for stress and pausing. In addition, the activity presented here is intended as a review of pronunciation skills students have already been taught. However, it could easily be adapted to introduce students to skills (such as identifying thought groups) they are encountering for the first time.

# Resources

- Brunner, Borgna. "American Indian Quotations." Fact Monster.  
<http://www.factmonster.com/spot/aihmquotes.html>

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<http://iteslj.org/>

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