

# Suprasegmentals: Pronunciation Practice for Your EFL Classroom

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## Introduction

Studying English as a second or foreign language can be a challenging effort for students whose goal is effective communication. The grammar rules of English don't always make sense, spelling can be difficult and at the discourse level, the nuances of rhythm, sentence stress and intonation are incredibly complex and difficult to master. One reason for the students' difficulty is the sound system of English. In many settings, areas like pragmatics and pronunciation get passed over for vocabulary and grammar. This is often due to lack of time or syllabus demands. Fortunately, this is changing. English teachers across the world have begun devoting more and more class time to discourse-level communication.

One area of English pronunciation that is worth focusing on is the stress-timed quality of English. The amount of time it takes to say a sentence depends on the number of syllables that receive stress in the sentence - not the total number of syllables. The diagram below is a good example of how stress timing affects English. Notice how each sentence takes approximately the same time to say:

HORSES	EAT	GRASS.
The HORSES	EAT	GRASS.
The HORSES	EAT	the GRASS.
The HORSES will	EAT	the GRASS.
The HORSES will have	EATen	the GRASS.
The HORSES might have been	EATing	the GRASS.

Many beginning learners focus on reading and pronouncing each word correctly and fully. By assigning equal weight to each syllable, they give their speech a choppy-sounding, unnatural rhythm that can affect their comprehensibility. Therefore, focusing students' attention on the stress-timed factor of English may assist them in sounding more natural and fluid in their speech.

In English, there are two types of words: content words and function words. Content words are principle words that express meaning. They include nouns, main verbs, adjectives, question words, demonstratives and adverbs; and they all receive stress. Function words are those words that have little or no meaning themselves but help express grammatical relationships. These words include articles, prepositions, auxiliaries, and pronouns.

## Warm Up

- As an awareness task the teacher reads an example sentence aloud to students, first by pronouncing each word carefully (i.e., teacher talk,) and then a second time using natural speed and intonation.
- Ask students, which seemed more natural and why. Pair students and have them discuss the differences between the two readings. Then using the ideas the students came up with, explain the concepts of stress - timing and how English makes use of this device. (If necessary, point out the differences between syllable-timed and stress-timed languages here too.)
- Talk about the differences between stressed words and non-stressed words. Point out to students that content words (nouns, most verbs, adjectives, etc.) receive stress, where function words (determiners, prepositions and pronouns,) do not.



- |             |             |              |                          |
|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| 2. as (f)   | 7. quickly  | 12. next to  | 17. in order to          |
| 3. many (f) | 8. worms    | 13. however  | 18. slam dunk            |
| 4. went     | 9. the      | 14. activity | 19. Cambridge University |
| 5. with     | 10. mustard | 15. eat      | 20. in front of          |

## Content/Function Example Sentences Worksheet 2

1. The cat chased the mouse across the street.
2. I'd like fries with that, please.
3. Could you tell me the quickest way from here to London station?
4. France is bracing for fresh mass protests over a controversial new labor law.
5. Of course, Olivia is not at all sleepy.

## Nonsense Sentences (and Models) Worksheet 3

1. a. Kai dupe chu me lo runt, Sprunt
1. b. Model: I'll meet you at the bank, Frank.
2. a. la rove dirk um tink.
2. b. Model: The X marks the spot.
3. a. don me wanana fil yo zeeking to la pillypolally.
3. b. Model: It was another day of losing for the 76ers.
4. a. Boa my wee jah bloppy-go.
4. b. Model: Six times seven is 42.
5. a. Germ twa lee bosen ra choley.
5. b. Model: "John," said the teacher, "is lazy."

## References

- Avery, P. & Ehrlich, S. (1992). Teaching American English Pronunciation. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Avery, P., Ehrlich, S., & Jull, D. (1992). Connected Speech. In P. Avery & S. Ehrlich (Eds.), Teaching American English Pronunciation. (p. 73-90). Oxford: Oxford University Press