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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 begining 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.

- Lay the content/function game (see the appendix, worksheet 1). Pair students and hand out a sheet to each pair. Ask students to identify which words are content words and which words and function words. Check the answers as a class.
- Then, using some of the words from the exercise, write out two sentences on the board underlining the stressed words in both. Ask students to try reading the sentences aloud. Point out how each sentence seems to take approximately the same length in 'stress time.' For example: Say, 'Birds eat worms.' Then say, 'The birds will eat the worms.'

Main Task

Again, pair students and hand out the sentence worksheets (see appendix, worksheet 2.) Ask students to look over the example sentences and underline the words that receive stress on the worksheet.

- Ask students (again in pairs,) to read the sentences with the appropriate intonation after they have decided which words need stress. (It may be helpful to show students how to mark sentences for intonation using dots-for-emphasis and slashes / for pauses.) Encourage students to add as many dots above the content/ function words as possible until the sentence takes an almost sheet music appearance.
- Next have students read the sentences again, first with each word pronounced equally (i.e., syllable timed,) and then again using their stress-timed versions.
- Avery and Ehrlich (1992) offer an excellent classroom activity that can easily be segued into from the above task. According to Avery and Ehrlich (p.188,) by working with nonsense words rather than English words, students can be trained to listen for the acoustic signals of stress-particularly those words that are said more loudly, more clearly and more slowly. Further, by using nonsense words the teacher can ensure that students' full attention is on the words that receive stress.
- Distribute sheets with a set of nonsense sentences modeled on real English sentences (see appendix, worksheet 3).
- Read the sentences aloud, with students marking the stressed and unstressed words. To help illustrate the function of suprasegmentals, the use of dots to indicate stress and length may be helpful for this exercise. Again, encourage students to mark the stressed words with bigger dots, smaller dots for those words that receive less emphasis. For savvy or advanced students, teach intonation arrows for pitch change and slashes and sharp marks to indicate juncture or pauses.
- For example, the teacher could read the following sentences with the stressed words as indicated by the dots (or, if students are more comfortable using an underlining method, have them continue to underline content words.) Be careful to reduce the nonsense function words.
 - Model: The pilots flew their planes expertly.
 - Son geefies flugged min hox wazily.
 - Model: My dear old friend is busy in the garden.(Ehrlich, 1992.)
 Hy fiss pold deesh tut looty wo um trewy.

Conclusion

The above activities are an excellent way to practice word suprasegmentals while at the same time gently introducing the concept of (vowel, word) reduction. Because of its significance in English, teaching suprasegmental aspects to students is quintessential to their comprehension and their comprehensibility. The exercises above were designed to raise the students' awareness of these elements (through listening exercises,) and offer an opportunity to practice and reproduce them as discourse structures. Remember, a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step!

Appendix

Content /Function Worksheet 1

1. birds (c) 6. just 11. docto	r 16. he
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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