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TEACHING TIP

WALK __ BY: RAISING LEARNER CONSCIOUSNESS ABOUT UNSTRESSED WORDS

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BACKGROUND

In English, unlike many of the world's languages, stressed elements occur at relatively regular intervals in a phrase or thought group, as in the following examples:

I'd like to buy a laptop.

He wouldn't eat his pancakes.

She didn't close the window.

This alternating rhythmic pattern of English is familiar to most native speakers of English due to the reliance of English poetry on rhythmic patterns such as iambic (da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM) or trochaic (DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM-da). In terms of pedagogical practice, the strongly rhythmic nature of English lends itself to classroom activities such as clapping or tapping in time with the stressed elements.

Stress typically falls on content words (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs), as in the sentence "Did you go to the party on Saturday?" All other elements of the phrase (e.g., articles, conjunctions, prepositions, particles) tend to be unstressed. These unstressed elements, known as function words, help to maintain the stressed-unstressed rhythmic pattern of English:

˘ ˘ , ˘ ˘ , ˘ ˘ , ˘ ˘
Did you go to the par ty on Sa tur day ?

While stressed elements are relatively easy for learners to hear, unstressed elements are much more difficult, especially for those learners from language backgrounds where stress is more evenly allocated on each syllable. Lack of knowledge about the stress-timed nature of English can lead to learner difficulties in comprehension; it also reinforces the tendency of learners from syllable-timed language backgrounds to place stress on the wrong elements of the phrase when speaking, which can negatively impact the learners' comprehensibility.

Why it's important to teach

Lack of knowledge about the phrasal stress patterns of English can result in issues of both reception and production:

1. Reception: It can interfere with learner' comprehension of the incoming stream of speech.
2. Production: It can reinforce the tendency of learners from syllable-timed language backgrounds to place stress on the wrong elements of the phrase when speaking

Teaching tip: Using a cloze passage and song

This simple-to-prepare activity involves the use of a song and a cloze passage; it is designed as a follow-up to a lesson in which students have been taught the basics of stress and unstress in English. The activity is premised on the idea that having learners focus their attention on unstressed words helps to raise consciousness about the nature of unstressed words and stress timing in English. It bears mentioning that while the typical pedagogical application for cloze passages involves deleting every n^{th} word of a song (e.g., every 5th word, or every 7th word) to supply focused listening practice, in this activity the cloze procedure has been appropriated for the teaching of pronunciation—i.e., with the cloze passage prepared in such a fashion as to eliminate the unstressed elements of the lyrics.

Key to the success of this activity is locating a song that is appropriate to the level of the learner population and that will be motivating for the learners. It is also important that the lyrics are easy to understand but not overarticulated (songs where the singer “speaks” the lyrics work particularly well). In the activity outlined below, the song “Walk on By” was selected. Originally, I intended to use the version recorded by Dionne Warwick. However, on closer listening I noticed that some of the words that would normally be unstressed are stressed in Warwick’s version. So instead, I selected the version of the song recorded by Seal. The procedures for the activity follow:

Procedures

1. Show students a photo of Seal (Appendix 1) and ask if they are familiar with the artist.
2. Elicit details about the artist and his work.
3. Distribute the handout with the cloze version of the song lyrics (Appendix 2). Explain to students that they will be listening for the missing words.
4. Allow students a few minutes to study the lyrics. (You may wish to have them predict the words that belong in the blanks.)
5. Play the song (more than once, if students want you to); have students write the words they hear in the blanks.
6. Go over the answers with the students. Ask which words were particularly difficult for them to distinguish.
7. Assuming that students enjoy the activity, the teacher can use a second song for additional listening practice. See Appendix 3 for other suggested songs.
8. As a possible extension activity, have students work in small groups to locate a song that they like. Have them prepare a cloze passage and present the song to the class following the above-outlined steps.

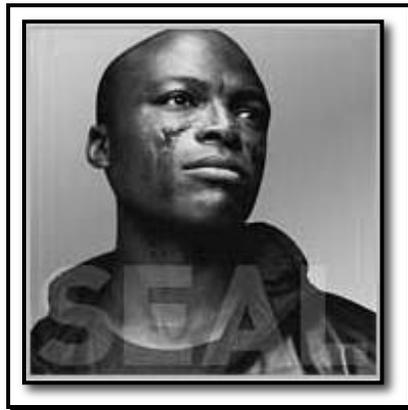
Useful references

Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. M., & Goodwin, J. M. (with Griner, B.) (2010). *Teaching pronunciation: A reference for teachers of English to speakers of other languages* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

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Appendix 1 – Photo of the artist Seal and Cloze passage of lyrics to the song “Walk on By” as recorded by Seal



If ____ see me walking down ____ street
____ I start to cry, each time ____ meet
Walk on by, walk on by
Make believe ____ you don't see the tears
Just let me grieve ____ private
____ each time ____ I see you I break down ____ cry
Walk on by, walk on by, ____ walk on by
'Coz I ____ can't get over losing you
And ____ I seem broken ____ blue
Walk on by (just walk on by), walk on by (just walk on by)
Foolish pride is all ____ I have left

So let me hide the tears ____ all the sadness
____ you gave me when ____ said goodbye
When ____ walked on by (don't stop)
When ____ walked on by (don't stop)
____ walk on by, ____ walk on by

Walk on by (just walk on by), walk on by (just walk on by)
Foolish pride is all ____ I have left
So let me hide these tears ____ all the sadness
____ you gave me when ____ said goodbye
Just walk on by (don't stop)
Just walk on by (don't stop)
Now you really ____ ____ go so walk on by
Said you really ____ ____ go so walk on by
Baby leave me, never see the tears ____ cry (don't stop)
Baby leave me, never see the tears ____ cry (don't stop)
(Don't stop) just walk on by (don't stop)
Walk on by
(Don't stop)

Music by Burt Bacharach with lyrics by Hal David

Appendix 2 - Other suggested songs for raising awareness about unstressed words

“Tom’s Diner” by Suzanne Vega
“In the Ghetto” by Elvis Presley
“Hand in My Pocket” by Alanis Morissette
“D-I-V-O-R-C-E” by Tammy Wynette
“Yesterday” by the Beatles
“Father and Son” by Cat Stevens

“Rainy Days and Mondays” by the Carpenters
“Your Song” By Elton John
“Always On My Mind” by Willie Nelson
“Coat of Many Colors” by Dolly Parton
“Cat’s in the Cradle” by Harry Chapin
“You’ve Got a Friend” by Carole King
“Hello, Goodbye” by the Beatles
“Desperado” by Linda Ronstadt
“Dream a Little Dream of Me” by the Mamas and the Papas
“Don’t Know Why” by Norah Jones
“We are Never Ever Getting Back Together” by Taylor Swift
“Jerusalem Tomorrow” by Emmy Lou Harris