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## TEACHING TIP

### INTELLIGIBILITY: FIVE WINNING ACTIVITIES FOR SPEAK TEST PREPARATION

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Many English Language Learners (ELLs) struggle with computer-based spoken English assessments (Lowe & Yu, 2009). Apart from test anxiety and lack of confidence in their English language skills, students complain that it is difficult to speak to a computer (personal communication). In this teaching tip, we share activities that international teaching assistants (ITAs) felt helped them to speak more comprehensibly and to achieve higher scores on the SPEAK Test.

#### INTRODUCTION

Spoken English assessments, such as the SPEAK Test (Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit), are commonly used throughout universities in the United States to gauge speakers' intelligibility, of critical importance in teaching. Research on undergraduate students' perceptions of ITAs indicates that these students tend to blame their ITAs for communication breakdowns (Williams, 2011). Among factors leading to this negative perception are overall poor communicative competence (Lindemann, 2002) and poor pronunciation skills (Isaacs, 2008).

For those international teaching assistants (ITAs) whose speech is not deemed sufficiently intelligible, universities often offer services or classes designed to help them develop their speaking skills. ITAs' scores on these high-stakes tests may determine whether or not they attain or retain a teaching assistantship, often their primary source of income as graduate students. Regardless of feelings toward the SPEAK Test, many ITA educators are tasked with not only helping ITAs develop their speaking and teaching skills, but also with preparing them to score well on this exam.

Given the importance of ITA training, we have developed activities that may help our ITAs to improve their intelligibility more swiftly and to develop strategies to be more successful in the SPEAK Test. Following, we describe five activities that we have found to be helpful and would like to share with other ITA educators. These activities are *fly-swatting fillers*, *cell phone persuasion* (for prominence and intonation patterns), *body language for better intonation*, *Audacity and rhythm*, and *giving directions* (for stress and thought groups).

## **ACTIVITY 1: FLY-SWATTING FILLERS**

Because the SPEAK Test is a high-stakes test, students commonly report some measure of test anxiety. Their nerves become apparent in the recordings, as for many people, their speech rate outpaces their ability to construct sentences, replaced instead with fillers, false starts, self-correction, and hesitation. In this activity, students become aware of and have the opportunity to adjust - in real time - distracting speaking habits that may interfere with their fluency or ability to communicate clearly.

### **Pedagogical Possibilities**

The purpose of this activity is for students to build self-awareness of distracting speaking habits such as fillers, false starts, hesitation, low volume, and monotone speech. These habits do not make for clear delivery when teaching; consequently, it seems that examinees' scores are lower if their speech is rife with hesitations or fillers and false starts, or if they speak quietly with a narrow pitch range, even if they have clear pronunciation. Fillers are characterized by sounds like "um, uh, eh, nn" that often function as a way to hold the floor in conversation, letting listeners know that the speaker has more to say. False starts are instances where the speaker repeats a word or part of a word; these also seem to function as floor holders, and may be indicative of self-correction. Hesitations refer to long moments of silence, perhaps mid thought group. Too many hesitations can leave the listener with the impression that the speaker is unprepared or has trouble articulating his or her thoughts. Low volume can also be problematic, not only because it may be difficult to hear the speaker, but also because the speaker's pitch range can narrow when speaking quietly, removing valuable cues to important information, the organization of one's speech, and so on. It is good use of class time to play audio samples with these features so that students practice identifying them as a group before they need to give each other feedback.

After this warm up, students act as mirrors for each other, giving feedback in order to build their self-monitoring skills in real time. For many students, immediate feedback plus slowing their speech rate, lengthening key words, and pausing between sentences help them to reduce fillers, false starts, and long hesitations. Immediate feedback on low volume and monotone speech also helps students speak more loudly and with a broader intonation range. By the end of the semester, students should already be aware of any of these habits they may have, especially by listening back and analyzing their own audio recordings. This activity will make them aware of whether or not they still have these habits in real time as they speak.

### **Set Up and Directions**

Students are divided into groups of 3 or 4. They take turns reading changes to a schedule (see Figure 1). The audience listens and reacts. There should be one fly swatter (or magic fairy wand) per group. Fly swatters are usually available seasonally in dollar stores and in larger grocery stores. An alternative to the fly swatter is the seemingly ubiquitous magic fairy wand—found practically all year round in dollar stores and other places that sell children’s toys. In the absence of these props, students can instead tap the desk with their hands, although this probably will not leave as lasting a memory.

The speaker will go through changes to the schedule (Figure 1) in 90 seconds, and must adjust their delivery to make the audience happy. Listeners will do the following as needed:

- Fillers, false starts, hesitation: raise the fly swatter each time to mirror this
- Monotone: pretend to fall asleep
- Low volume: put your hand to your ear, gesturing that you cannot hear the speaker
- Good delivery: look content, smile ☐

Chemistry 201 December Schedule	
Field Trip:	Friday, December 3 Plymouth Pharmaceutical Labs <i>leave campus at 1:30 p.m.</i>
Lab Report 5:	Due Friday, December <del>9</del> <sup>10</sup>
Midterm Exam:*	10:00 A.M., Monday, December 13 open book, open notes
Final Review Session:	6:30 P.M., Wednesday, December 15 <del>205</del> <sup>212</sup> Chemistry Annex Building
Final Exam:*	<del>1:30</del> <sup>1:00</sup> P.M., Saturday, December 18 Van Huis Auditorium

\*Programmable calculators not allowed.

*Announcement 5*

*Figure 1.* Changes to a schedule prompt (Papajohn, 2009, p. 300).

Depending on how well students perform in the warm up, they can either keep the same roles throughout the activity, switching only when it is their turn to speak, or they can change roles with each speaker. What seems to work best is to have one speaker, one person who listens for fillers, false starts, and hesitations, and have the rest listen for monotone and low volume.

A variation of this activity is for students to show looks of confusion when the speaker does not announce the changes clearly enough (if they end on the old information and do not stress the new information, for example). In that way, the speaker can remember to

repeat and emphasize the new information, or perhaps make a comment on the change. This could be a separate role, or it could be the additional responsibility of the person who is listening for monotone speech and low volume.

Depending on the time allocated for the activity, after each speaker has a turn, or after each group member has had a turn as speaker, the group should discuss what they learned and how they can apply it to speaking more clearly in preparation for the SPEAK Test.

Table 1

*Fly Swatting Fillers: The Activity in Brief*

<b>Time of Activity</b>	15-20 minutes, including the review
<b>Materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Fly swatters (or fairy wands)—one for every three or four students</li> <li>● Schedule prompt</li> </ul>
<b>Pedagogical Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Build self-awareness of distracting speaking habits such as fillers, false starts, hesitation, low volume, and monotone.</li> <li>● In real time, work to change distracting speaking habits.</li> </ul>
<b>Directions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Speaker will go through changes to the schedule, and must adjust their delivery to make the audience happy. Listeners will do the following:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Fillers, false starts, hesitation: raise your fly swatter each time to mirror this</li> <li>○ Monotone: pretend to fall asleep</li> <li>○ Low volume: put your hand to your ear, gesturing that you cannot hear the speaker</li> <li>○ Good delivery: look content □</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## ACTIVITY 2: BODY LANGUAGE FOR BETTER INTONATION

One way to do well on the SPEAK Test is for test takers to imagine that they are actually engaging in purposeful communication with another person. Yet, the test taking atmosphere, where students sit in a lab facing an unresponsive computer and speak simultaneously, makes this task challenging, in many cases resulting in a monotone audio recording that sounds less like an attempt at communication and more like the student was simply completing a boring and/or stressful task. This activity is designed to spotlight the need for communication, and stresses the importance of using body language and varying one's intonation in doing so.

### Pedagogical Possibilities

In this task, the focus is on using facial expressions, hand gestures, and posture to bring out intonation variation when making recordings. With facial expressions, we review and practice smiling when happy or amused (e.g., when recommending a place to visit, talking about something we enjoy, mentioning something amusing in a story, greeting a group, etc.), and we open the eyes wider, raising the eyebrows when stressing key information (e.g., when giving directions on a map, mentioning key points in a graph, noting changes to a schedule, and so on). We review and practice hand gestures for emphasis, for comparing size, counting and more (e.g., giving directions on a map, comparing and contrasting differing ideas, explaining a graph, and so on). In terms of posture, we practice sitting up straight or leaning back instead of letting the shoulders slouch forward. We give students permission to take up space and to gesticulate. This open posture not only benefits the students by giving them better breath support, but it also gives them the appearance of confidence or of being relaxed.

In terms of intonation variation, we review three different levels: word level with prominence (stressing new information, key information, and contrasting information), “sentence” level with pitch movement (differentiating between questions and statements, indicating level of certainty, assuming listener’s knowledge, and indicating whether or not the speaker is finished with the utterance- especially when listing), and “paragraph” level with key choice (for organization and emotion). By the time we review these concepts in preparation for the SPEAK Test, they have already been introduced, examined, and practiced extensively. In reviewing them, it is useful to draw analogies between what we do with pitch when speaking to what it is like on a piano keyboard (<http://virtualpiano.net/>) and to illustrate pitch contours with Praat so that students can more easily see and hear it in action. Incorporating body movements (such as nodding or raising the eyebrows on prominent words) may also help students anchor the speech patterns with movement. You and your students may find it interesting to compare recordings made with neutral body language before the review, then with animated body language after the activity, and view the pitch contours through Praat to note any differences in pitch range.

### **Set Up and Directions**

Ideally, this activity is done in a computer lab so that students can connect with each other in pairs via Skype, Google Hangouts, or Facetime in order to better simulate the testing atmosphere. If this is not possible, students pair up and sit face-to-face. Either way, they need to be able to sit back far enough to see each other’s hands and faces in order to mirror each other’s body language.

Students take turns asking each other the questions below based on the map (Figure 2). During the 60-second response, the student who is listening mirrors the speaker’s body language and pays attention to the speaker’s intonation variation. If the speaker is monotone, the listener should make exaggerated gestures and facial expressions until the speaker catches on (if the speaker does not catch on, the listener can tell them what they

need to do instead). Afterwards, it is helpful to have the students share their experiences with this activity; specifically, what they noticed about body language and intonation, as well as how they can apply what they have learned when taking the SPEAK Test.

- I will get to your town an hour before you can meet me. Could you recommend something I could do while I wait?
- I'm an avid reader but I do not want to look at my mobile device. Could you recommend a place I could go to find something to read?
- I'd like to see a movie. Could you recommend something for me to rent at the video store?
- I love to spend time outside. What do you recommend I do at the Forest Preserve?

Table 2

*Body Language for Better Intonation: The Activity in Brief*

<b>Time of Activity</b>	15-20 minutes, including the review
<b>Materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Speaking prompts</li> <li>● (If possible) a computer lab with Skype, Face Time, or Google Hangouts</li> </ul>
<b>Pedagogical Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Using and being aware of use of body language (facial expressions, hand gestures, posture)</li> <li>● Prominence: for new information, key information, and contrasting information</li> <li>● Pitch movement: for questions or statements, assuming listener's knowledge, and more</li> <li>● Key choice: for organization and emotion</li> </ul>
<b>Directions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Student A asks a question based on the map (see speaking prompts).</li> <li>● Student B answers (60 seconds), while Student A mirrors B's body language (facial expressions, hand gestures, and posture). If B is monotone or low energy, A makes exaggerated gestures and facial expressions until B catches on (if B does not catch on, A can tell them what they need to do instead).</li> <li>● Students switch roles.</li> </ul>

### ACTIVITY 3: CELL PHONE PERSUASION

Similar to Activity 2, *body language for better intonation*, this activity also encourages students to use body language in order to broaden their pitch range. Because it is common practice for people to walk around talking on cell phones, students can do this activity just about anywhere without feeling self-conscious. This activity serves, in part, to make

the bridge between talking to someone on the phone and talking to no one, thus providing students with mindful speaking opportunities that they can utilize on their own.

### **Pedagogical Possibilities**

In this task, we focus on prominence and intonation patterns. For that purpose, we use a “persuasion” prompt from the SPEAK Test (e.g., convince your roommate not to smoke in your apartment), which requires students to use intonation (including prominence, pitch variation, and intonation patterns) and body language to convince someone to do what they request. By this point, students have a clear and demonstrated understanding of these pronunciation features.

To review these features, students are given examples on how to use prominence to emphasize key words and on how to use intonation patterns (rising and falling) to convey their message successfully. They are encouraged to write down key words that they will use in the recording and practice those words for a few minutes. If they are uncertain about the pronunciation of a word, we encourage them to use Merriam-Webster online (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>) in order to listen to a model and look at the phonetic transcription, including primary stress placement.

### **Setup and Directions**

Before students receive the prompt, we explain the purpose of the activity and give them instructions (projected on the screen throughout the activity) for completing it. Then, students are given the following prompt: Imagine that you are talking to a friend who needs to pass the SPEAK Test, but has done little to improve his/her English. Persuade them to work on their English, and give them a few recommendations on how they can do so effectively.

Instead of recording this on a computer, students are instructed to answer the prompt in the form of an imaginary phone conversation, in this case, with their friend. While making this 45 to 60-second recording, students are told they may get up and walk around, and that they should make hand gestures and facial expressions that they normally would use when trying to persuade someone to do as they wish. Once they finish recording, they exchange phones with a partner, listening and providing feedback on the quality of their partner’s overall response and on the specific targets: prominence and intonation patterns. Students may re-record an improved version, if necessary.

For students who do not have smart phones, we loan them a portable recording device or allow them to use one of the computers in the lab. However, if they are to use a computer in the lab, they must stand up and record their answers to the prompt moving their body appropriately. The key element here is to have students move their bodies while recording their response in order to elicit more natural speech (intonation and body language).

Table 3

*Cell Phone Persuasion: The Activity in Brief*

<b>Time of Activity</b>	20-30 minutes, including the review
<b>Materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A prompt</li> <li>● A pen or pencil and paper for notes</li> <li>● A cell phone or a portable recording device</li> </ul>
<b>Pedagogical Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Work on prominence.</li> <li>● Focus on intonation patterns.</li> </ul>
<b>Directions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Prompt: Imagine that you are talking to a friend who needs to pass the SPEAK Test, but has done little to improve his/her English. Persuade them to work on their English, and give them a few recommendations on how they can do so effectively.</li> <li>● Students write down words that they will need to say in their recording. They practice those words.</li> <li>● Students go away for 5 minutes and record their answers (45-60 seconds).</li> <li>● They bring their device back and switch with a partner.</li> <li>● They listen to the recording and give feedback to each other on the overall answer and on the specific targets.</li> </ul>

**ACTIVITY 4: AUDACITY AND RHYTHM**

The purpose of this activity is to help students improve their rhythm by ‘imitating’ a model. The main focus here is on linking and reduction. However, this activity can be adapted to target any given pronunciation feature (e.g., segmentals, word stress, prominence, intonation patterns) for a variety of purposes. Since the purpose here is to prepare for the SPEAK Test, the model provided is a sample response to a prompt on the test. This activity is conducted in a computer lab; however, if students have personal computers with Audacity installed, it also works. In fact, doing this activity in class can motivate students to try this on their own machines as well.

**Pedagogical Possibilities**

In this individual task, we focus on imitation to help students become aware of and practice rhythm in English (perception and production). It is also our purpose to help students develop self-monitoring skills, a key element in pronunciation improvement. This activity is often conducted in class (or assigned for homework) after students have read and watched materials on English rhythm so that they can better understand the concepts by putting them to practice. It is noteworthy that at this point the students are



already familiar with imitation tasks as well. Students' attention should be focused on the target features rather than on the novelty of the activity.

### Setup and Directions

This task is conducted individually as opposed to the group and pair tasks described above. Students listen to a sample answer to a “define and explain” question that is segmented so that they can repeat each sentence after the speaker. By “segmented,” we mean that silence is inserted between sentences for easier imitation (see Lima, 2015 for instructions on how to do this).

The students open the file in Audacity and record each sentence after the speaker. Then, they listen to their recording and monitor their progress. They are prompted to analyze how well they imitated the speaker, in this case, in terms of linking and reduction. They are then instructed to re-record as many times as they wish until they are satisfied with their performance. Afterwards, they record a 60-second uninterrupted response (define a term in their own field of study) in Audacity. Once again, they listen to their recordings to analyze how they did, and record again if they believe there is room for improvement.

Table 4

#### *Audacity and Rhythm: The Activity in Brief*

<b>Time of Activity</b>	25-35 minutes, including the review
<b>Materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Computers (a computer lab if possible)</li> <li>● Audacity installed on the computers</li> <li>● Audio file that has been segmented and silence inserted (see Lima, 2015 for instructions on how to do this)</li> </ul>
<b>Pedagogical Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Linking (rhythm)</li> <li>● Reduction (rhythm)</li> </ul> Other potential goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Stress (word and phrasal)</li> <li>● Prominence</li> </ul>
<b>Directions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Students open the file in Audacity and record each sentence after the speaker. They should feel the rhythm.</li> <li>● After they finish recording, they listen and monitor their progress. How well did they imitate the speaker in terms of linking and reduction?</li> <li>● Students re-record if they see room for improvement.</li> <li>● Now they define a term in their own field of study. They then record their response in Audacity (60 seconds).</li> </ul>

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- They listen to their recording and analyze how they did.
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## ACTIVITY 5: GIVING DIRECTIONS

In this activity, students practice giving directions to each other by using a map. Because so many people rely on directions GPS gives them rather than a map to find their way, providing extra practice opportunities for map reading can boost students' confidence. There are a number of sample maps available online, and for this activity, the simpler the better. The SPEAK Test typically has a map that is laid out in a grid with clear blocks, common street names, and names of shops and other places typically found in a town. The map we provide below from Papajohn's (2009) is stylistically typical of what is on the SPEAK Test.

### Pedagogical Possibilities

In addition to working with map reading vocabulary and giving commands (e.g., turn right, go through the intersection, walk three blocks), this particular activity lends itself well to thought group division, as well as phrasal stress and word stress practice, especially for compound nouns since the map has many.

To give directions in a way that someone can easily understand and remember, making shorter phrases and pausing between each step is important. To illustrate, which set of directions is easier to follow (pauses are marked with /)?

Example A: Exit onto Main St and walk three blocks and turn left when you see Park Place because your destination will be on the right.

Example B: Exit onto Main St / and walk three blocks // Turn left when you see Park Place // Your destination will be on the right.

Example B should be much easier to follow. The above examples can be used to illustrate the importance of pausing. As a warm up, students can listen to a set of directions and mark the transcript for pausing (/), then read it back.

When reviewing stress, it is helpful first to have the students identify where the stress is; listening and repeating is a good way for them to feel the stress. In these examples, the stress is indicated by capital letters:

- the BUS station
- the POST office
- the PET store
- turn LEFT

- go STRAIGHT
- EXit onto MAIN street.

This is not the time to debate syllable boundaries; rather, we should focus on the vowel that is stressed. Once the students successfully identify the stressed syllables, eliciting the qualities of a stressed syllable is next. Students hear these stressed syllables as longer in length/duration, slightly louder in volume, and usually higher in pitch. Take a few minutes to focus on and emphasize each quality by accompanying it with appropriate hand gestures or other body movements, such as Marsha Chan’s Stress Stretch that she shared in PSLLT 2015 and demonstrates in this video: (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWJv-l6OvAY>).

This is also an opportunity to practice when to use articles. The general pattern of use is that students should use “the” when referring to a place on a map (there is usually just one place of each kind on the map), and no article in front of proper nouns, such as street names or named landmarks. See Table 5 for examples.

Table 5

*Article Use with Places on a Map*

Map	Article Use
Proper nouns e.g., Main St., 5 <sup>th</sup> Avenue, Central Lake	(none)
Other nouns e.g., the bakery, the bus station, the library, the intersection	the

**Set Up and Directions**

For this activity, students pair up and sit back to back; the instructor informs them that they are not to twist or turn around when talking with each other. Instead, they will need to speak loudly enough and stress the key information (directions and place names) clearly. Each student has something with which to write, and a copy of the same map (see Figure 2 below). Members of each pair will take turns giving directions from one place to another. Student A begins by asking Student B how to get from one place to another of their choosing, for example, from the train station to the coffee shop. Student B gives directions, while Student A traces or marks the route student B gives. Student A reads back the route

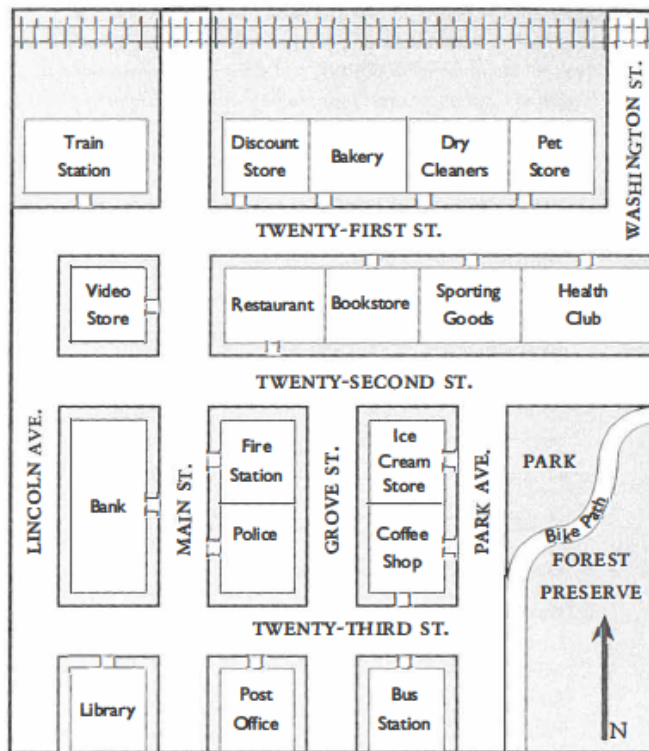


Figure 2. Sample Map (Papajohn, 2009, p. 251).

Keys to successfully completing this are to pause between each step, and stress the directions (left, right, straight, through) and the place names. Also important is the communication style. Rather than completing a task or making a recording, two activities that students might speed through, the students are practicing explaining to another person in such a way that the other person understands the directions. If their partners do not understand the directions, they will find out because either the partner will ask during the task, or when their partners read back the route, it will be incorrect.

After the activity, the teacher can ask students to share what they noticed or what they learned, particularly what was the most effective for clear communication. The class can then discuss what strategies or approaches they can take when addressing this prompt on the SPEAK Test.

Table 6

*Giving Directions: The Activity in Brief*

<b>Time of Activity</b>	20-30 minutes, including the review
<b>Materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A copy of a map for each student</li> <li>● A pen or pencil</li> <li>● Chairs arranged in pairs, back to back</li> </ul>
<b>Pedagogical Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Stress (word and phrasal)</li> <li>● Thought group division (pausing)</li> <li>● Giving directions / commands</li> <li>● Reading a map</li> <li>● Article use</li> </ul>
<b>Directions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Student A asks from where to where (e.g., from the).</li> <li>● Student B gives directions while Student A traces the route Student B gives.</li> <li>● Student A reads back the route.</li> <li>● Student B asks from where to where (e.g., from the).</li> <li>● Student A gives directions while Student B traces the route Student A gives.</li> <li>● Student B reads back the route.</li> </ul>

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