CONCENTRATING ON FUNCTION WORDS

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Prosodic features, including rhythm, stress, and intonation, are an essential part of teaching pronunciation as learners’ command of these features is essential to both intelligibility and comprehensibility. This aspect of pronunciation often presents challenges to teachers of pronunciation since numerous factors play a role. With regard to stress, learners are often unaware of the rhythmic patterns of English with its regularly occurring alternating patterns of unstressed and stressed elements; further, they may be unaware of the negative impact that failing to stress or unstress given elements of speech has on their interlocutors. For pedagogical purposes, it is useful to distinguish content words (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) from function words (e.g., articles, conjunctions, prepositions, particles) and to note that the former are typically stressed whereas the latter are not. As learners may come from languages with quite different rhythmic patterns, focused practice in this aspect of English speech is essential. This teaching tip involves several game-like activities designed to heighten learner awareness of the stressed-unstressed rhythmic nature of English. Two interactive options are presented: Function Word Concentration and Swat the Content Word.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

English is often characterized as a stress-timed language, with stressed elements occurring at relatively regular intervals in a phrase or tone unit (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Although recent research (e.g., Dickerson, 2015) calls this characterization into question, most pronunciation specialists would agree that the rhythm of English phrase units consists of alternating patterns of weak (or unstressed) and strong (or stressed) elements (Levis, 2018). For pedagogical purposes it is useful to point out that stress in English typically falls on designated content words (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) while all other elements of the phrase (e.g., articles, conjunctions, prepositions, particles) tend to be unstressed. These elements, known as function words, help to maintain the stressed-unstressed rhythmic pattern of English. While stressed elements are relatively easy for learners to hear, unstressed elements are much more difficult. Lack of knowledge about the stressed-unstressed rhythmic nature of English can cause problems in second language (L2) learner comprehension and production, with learners from syllable-timed or mora-timed language backgrounds often placing stress on the wrong elements of the phrase when speaking. Alternatively, this lack of knowledge may cause them to fail to stress elements that should be stressed (e.g., using reduced rather than full vowels, failing to lengthen stressed syllables, etc.).

In pronunciation teaching, the use of gestures, whole body techniques, and “gadgets” (material objects such as chopsticks, rubber bands, and drinking straws repurposed for pedagogical purposes) is far from new. Chan (2018) traces the interest in these techniques back to the 1980s and 1990s and provides a convincing argument for their efficacy in pronunciation teaching. Looking empirically at practice, Nguyen (2016) and Smotrova (2017) document practices in the pronunciation classroom with respect to teachers’ actual use of gesture, while Gluhareva and Prieto
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(2017) report on a small-scale study indicating improvement in student accentedness rating following training in rhythmic beat gestures. Finally, haptic pronunciation practitioners have argued forcefully for the use of movement and touch in pronunciation practice (Burri et al., 2019), noting the symbiotic relation between pronunciation improvement and pragmatic competence.

This teaching tip involves several game-like activities designed to heighten learner awareness of the unstressed nature of function words. Two interactive options are presented: Function Word Concentration (adapted from Celce-Murcia et al., 2010, pp. 214-215) and Swat the Content Words. Both practice options employ embodied pronunciation techniques, i.e., the incorporation of physical movement, gestures, and touch in pronunciation teaching, as this has been shown to be highly effective in L2 pronunciation teaching (Chan, 2018; Kielstra, 2017). They also assume that the basic principles of English phrasal stress have been previously taught and that students are familiar with the differential stress patterns of content versus function words.

**Function Word Concentration**

An interactive way to raise students’ consciousness about unstressed function words and the stressed-unstressed rhythmic nature of English is the following adaptation of the card game “Concentration.” In this game, the object is for the players to find the matching pairs of cards in the two decks of cards: Deck A (consisting of phrases with a blank where the function word occurs) and Deck B (containing the missing function words).

**Directions**: Prior to class, the teacher prepares the two decks of cards, taking care that the phrases chosen are ones that the learners are already familiar with. The round begins with the teacher shuffling each “deck” of cards (ideally color-coded to more easily distinguish the two decks) and placing them face down in rows on a table or desk. In smaller classes, the game can be played by forming two teams, with the team members working collaboratively to play the game. In larger classes, the teacher can call for volunteers to be the two competing players. Following the rules for “Concentration,” the player on team one turns over one card in each deck. If they are a match (e.g., the first player draws the phrase “___ a minute” and the second draws the word “in”), they remain face up and the second player reads the phrase aloud, taking care to use the reduced form of the function word in the blank. (During this phase the teacher and/or the other players can provide feedback). Team one then takes another turn, following the same procedure as already specified. If the two cards are not a match, they are turned face down again and the turn reverts to team two. The game ends when all pairs are matched.

Depending on the level of the class, the number of cards in the decks can be reduced or expanded (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for sample games consisting of 9 and 16 cards in each deck respectively). Teachers wishing to have students play the game in pairs or small groups can easily create multiple sets of the game cards using index cards. As students play, the teacher should circulate and monitor student production. To add an element of competition to the game, one point can be awarded for each correctly matched pair. In this way, the players can determine who has won the round. To play additional rounds, students simply reshuffle the deck and begin the game anew.
As a follow-up reinforcement activity, teachers can employ embodied techniques such as having the class clap along to (or tap out) the stress patterns of the phrases used in the game. Gadgets such as chopsticks (to tap out the stress patterns) can also be used as additional reinforcement (see Gilbert, 1991 for more information on gadgets).

**Swat the Content Words**

An alternative or parallel activity to having students concentrate on the unstressed function words in a phrase is “Swat the Content Words.” In this activity the teacher uses the whiteboard or blackboard to display a text; large flip chart paper may also be used. The text is written without any stress markings. Depending on the proficiency level of the students and their previous experience with English rhythm and stress, the teacher may wish to group students and have them mark the stress patterns of the text prior to engaging in the actual activity. The teacher begins by asking for a volunteer or volunteers to come to the front of the class and providing them with fly swatters so that they can “swat” the content words (i.e., the stressed items) as s/he reads the text aloud. In this way the students can verify the stress patterns they have already marked; an opportunity for questions and further discussion should be provided. Texts will vary by proficiency level. Sample texts that work well include congruent pattern drills (drills where all sample phrases or sentences fit the same rhythmic pattern), jazz chants, children’s rhymes, sayings, anecdotes, etc. See Appendix 3 for sample texts that can be used.

Several options present themselves for follow-up reinforcement. The teacher can direct students to mark the stressed elements of the content words by underlining them, circling them, or marking the text with bullets to designate where the stress falls. As in “Function Word Concentration,” embodied techniques and gadgets can also be used for reinforcement.
Appendix 1: Concentration Card Deck #1

Deck A: Phrase Cards

- all ___ once
- Time ___ go.
- just ___ fun
- What ___ mess!
- That’s ___ car.
- by ___ way
- right ___ time
- out ___ order
- pay ___ advance
Deck B: Word Cards

to  a  on
the  for  our
at  in  of
Appendix 2: Concentration Card Deck #2

**Deck A: Phrase Cards**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Card 1</th>
<th>Card 2</th>
<th>Card 3</th>
<th>Card 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>right __ time</td>
<td>ham ___ eggs</td>
<td>Time __ money.</td>
<td>tea ___ two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cup __ coffee</td>
<td>Nothing ___ happened.</td>
<td>not __ all</td>
<td>What __ shame!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>__ a minute</td>
<td>as cold __ ice</td>
<td>What’s ___ name?</td>
<td>I __ help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>better __ ever</td>
<td>What ___ you want?</td>
<td>ten __ two</td>
<td>Who ___ you?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Deck B: Word Cards

- to
- in
- on
- at
- for
- of
- is
- and
- as
- do
- are
- can
- than
- her
- a
- has
Appendix 3: Sample Text Types for “Swat the Content Word”

Children’s rhymes

Three blind mice
Three blind mice
See how they run
See how they run
They all ran after the farmer’s wife
She cut off their tails with a carving knife
Did you ever see such a sight in your life
As three blind mice?

Rhythm drills

MICE
The MICE
The MICE will
The MICE will have
The MICE might have been

EAT
EAT
EAT
EATen
EATing

CHEESE.
CHEESE.
CHEESE.
CHEESE.
CHEESE.

Woods (1979); see also Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin (2010)

Congruent pattern drills

1. I need a pound of butter.
2. I’d like to buy a sweater.
3. You didn’t close the window.
4. He wants to buy a laptop.
5. She doesn’t speak much English.
6. The rain is worse in August.
7. I ate a slice of pizza.
8. She bought a new umbrella.

1. Did I tell you I’m leaving for Spain?
2. Please remember to leave me the key.
3. Can you ask him to help you to move?
4. Do you think that it’s happening now?
5. Would you help me to carry this bag?
6. Is there anyone else who can come?
7. Were you planning to visit the zoo?
8. Have you seen her in Henry’s new Porsche?

Woods (1979); see also Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin (2010)
**Jazz Chants**

*More Bad Luck*  

| The bread was stale            | He loves the ocean.  |
| It was four days old.        | He loves the sky.    |
| The milk was sour.           | She loves to travel. |
| The coffee was cold.         | She loves to fly.    |
| The butter was rancid.       | He likes the country.|
| The steak was tough.         | He loves the clouds. |
| The service was dreadful.    | She likes the city.  |
| The waiter was rough.        | She loves the crowds.|
| His tip was small.           | She loves to telephone.|
| I’m sorry I went             | She loves to talk.   |
| To that place at all.        | He loves the mountains.|
|                             | He loves to walk.    |
|                             | She loves to travel. |
|                             | She loves to fly.    |
|                             | He loves the ocean.  |
|                             | He loves the sky.    |

*He Loves the Ocean*  

| He loves the ocean.  |
| He loves the sky.    |
| She loves to travel. |
| She loves to fly.    |
| He likes the country.|
| He loves the clouds. |
| She likes the city.  |
| She loves the crowds.|
| She loves to telephone.|
| She loves to talk.   |
| He loves the mountains.|
| He loves to walk.    |
| She loves to travel. |
| She loves to fly.    |
| He loves the ocean.  |
| He loves the sky.    |

Graham (1978)  

Graham (1993)

**Sayings**

1. There’s no fool like an old fool.
2. Youth is the best time to be rich and the best time to be poor.
3. The old repeat themselves and the young have nothing to say.
4. Youth is not a time of life; it is a state of mind.
5. It is better to waste one’s youth than to do nothing at all.
6. Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.
Marching chant

Left, left, left right left
I left my wife
And forty-nine kids
In starving condition
Without any gingerbread
Left, left, left right left
[repeat]

Poetry – Dreams by Langston Hughes

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donna M. Brinton is an educational consultant based in Los Angeles, California. Formerly, she was employed as Senior Lecturer at the University of Southern California and as a Lecturer at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is the co-author/co-editor of several professional texts including Teaching Pronunciation: A Course Book and Reference Guide (Cambridge University Press, 2010). She has also contributed articles on second language pronunciation pedagogy to several edited volumes. Most recently, she guest edited a special issue of The CATESOL Journal on evidence-based pronunciation teaching (with John Levis and Ana Wu).

REFERENCES


