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**Teaching Tip:**  
**Using introductions to improve initial intelligibility**

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Early instruction in speaking any language includes pre-packaged chunks of functionally important language such as introductions and leave-takings. Such functional uses of language are critically important in early language use (e.g., Weinert, 1995) and provide a way for beginners to communicate in highly constrained situations (Wray, 2000). In addition, learners with higher proficiency can use the opportunities provided by functional routines to gain access to social interactions and thus, access to greater opportunities for learning the target language. However, the success of functional routines is often dependent on pronunciation that matches the expectations of interlocutors.

**Goals of Teaching Tip**

1. To demonstrate the importance of pronouncing names in a listener-friendly way.
2. To describe how pronunciation impacts small talk routines.
3. To show how greeting routines operate with 2 and 3 people together.

This teaching tip demonstrates how introductions in English can be used to introduce communicatively-oriented pronunciation from the very beginning of instruction, whether that is in a class for beginners or as an ice-breaker to start an oral communication class at higher proficiencies. The teaching tip includes three elements that promote pronunciation, pragmatics and oral communication. The three elements can be used individually, together or in sequence: Saying personal and place names clearly, making small talk, and introducing one person to another. Although the tip talks about introductions in English, we also give suggestions for ways that the principles behind the tip may apply to other languages.

This teaching tip is originally based on Wayne Dickerson’s exercise, *Stress on Names*. The original exercise focused on the pronunciation of personal and place names in English. Names follow the default prosodic pattern in English in that the focus always falls on the last part of the name. Like other English sentences, the last part of the name is overwhelmingly on the stressed syllable of the last lexical word (or content word) in the phrase. Crystal (1969) found that the last content word of the phrase carries focus about 90% of the time in normal spoken English. For example, in (1), the stressed syllables of *Nelson* and *Iowa* are the default location in each phrase for focus. Focus in English is marked by pitch and length changes.

(1) My name’s Jim Nelson. I live in Ames, Iowa.

Proper use of focus (also called primary stress, sentence stress, nuclear stress, prominence and tonic by other writers) is very important for how English speakers understand speech. Hahn

(2004) found that English-speaking listeners understood lectures better when words were spoken with the correct focus. In addition, listeners evaluated speakers more positively when the speakers used focus correctly.

In one sense, names are no different from any other use of focus. However, in another sense, names are unusual. Names carry a higher communicative burden because of their role in greeting routines. We start conversations with new people by providing our names. Because names are spoken in particular ways, they can help in a successful beginning of an interaction, or they can be a reason that an interaction struggles. If names are spoken in expected ways, they are easier to hear. If they are spoken in unexpected ways, possible conversations can stumble from the start.

Personal names in particular carry a very large communicative load. People know how to say their names in familiar ways, and if the way they say their names does not sound right to English-speaking listeners, those listeners will not hear them accurately. And as a result, the listener may ask the speaker to repeat the name, which is likely to be pronounced in the same way the L2 speaker is used to saying it but not in the same way the native listener is used to hearing it. This is not a recipe for success.

### **Exercise 1 – Self introduction**

The first part of this teaching tip involves learning to say names in the way that English speakers are used to hearing them. An easy way to do this is in using a chain exercise in which people introduce themselves to the next person, as below. This kind of exercise serves to make student familiar with the names of their classmates and to help the teacher know what kind of functional pronunciation the learners have with this basic task.

Exercise 1: Introduce yourself to the person next to you. Then that person introduces herself/himself to the next person, and so forth.

Person 1: Hi, I'm \_\_\_\_\_.

Person 2: Hi, my name's \_\_\_\_\_.

(Continue with Person 2 introducing self to Person 3, and so on).

### **Exercise 2 – Saying names “English style”**

After this exercise, it is time to draw attention to the way that names are said in English by pointing out the prosodic patterns expected by English listeners. Learning to say names in this way is what Olle Kjellin, a Swedish pronunciation expert, calls “listener-friendly pronunciation”. The next exercise involves identifying the part of the name that gets the greatest emphasis. The way such emphasis is signaled is not pointed out ahead of time, as students usually pick up on which words are more prominent. It is possible to then do repetition practice with names if time allows.

Exercise 2. Listen and identify which part of the name gets the greatest emphasis.

Richard Smith	Jason Nelson	Professor Delling	Doctor James Fallon
Anne Marie	Emily Carter	Mrs. Smithson	Reverend Jensen
Des Moines	San Francisco	Hong Kong, China	Boston, Massachusetts

Names in English are emphasized on the \_\_\_\_\_.

The take-away lesson from this exercise is that names in English are spoken with a particular emphasis pattern, with emphasis on the last part of the name. This pattern is true for personal and place names. Our experience is that students do not have trouble saying this pattern for place names, since they do not have a personal commitment to how these names are emphasized. However, they often do have trouble saying their own names according to the English pattern. Their names packaged in English prosodic wrapping can sound strange, funny or wrong. And personal names are part of personal identity. Making changes to the way one's name is said, even if it helps listeners to understand, can be difficult. Saying names in a new way is not an issue of cultural imperialism. It simply is a recognition that L2-L1 interactions are inherently unequal, and that L1 listeners may need help in processing an unfamiliar name. Names spoken with an unexpected emphasis pattern are harder for English speakers to hear and process. This is true for all names, even those that are familiar. If the name is unfamiliar and is spoken with an unexpected emphasis pattern, it can be almost impossible for English listeners to hear clearly.

### Exercise 3 – Small Talk

Names are important, but they are not the only part of successful introductions. Exchanging names leads to small talk, that is, talking about routine and non-threatening topics that lubricate conversational opportunities. These kinds of functional routines also have prosodic features that are critical to their success in English. The exercise below builds on the use of self-introductions and includes a typical small-talk routine. In this case, the small talk involves the question “Where are you from?” which is asked by Person 1 and then repeated by Person 2.

The first asking follows the default pattern for focus in English, with emphasis on the last word, FROM. However, the second asking reflects a new pattern used in repeated questions. In this second question, emphasis shifts to YOU, reflecting the new referent of the pronoun. The pattern is common for questions of this sort, as in the well-known phatic exchange *How ARE you? Fine. How are YOU?* The return question doesn't have to be exactly the same, but the shift of emphasis to YOU remains characteristic. For example, in *What are you DOing? Not much. How about YOU?* the repeated question is a general abbreviated form of the first question, yet still has the same pattern.

Exercise 3. Self-introductions – Introduce yourself to someone else. Use the expected emphasis patterns on the final part of your name in your introduction. Then switch and introduce yourself to another person.



Exercise filled in with possible names.

Person 1: Olga, this is Peter Schmitt.

He's from Geneva, Switzerland.

Peter, Olga. Olga, Peter.

Person 2: Hi, Peter.  
It's nice to MEET you.

Person 3: Hi, Olga. Nice to meet you, TOO.

This kind of introductory routine is unusual in ESL materials, although it is not uncommon in contexts where people are meeting for the first time (as in “cocktail party” type introductions). There are four elements in this short dialogue that bear mentioning. (1) highlights that introducing someone involves the use of the somewhat impersonal sounding “This is...” rather than the more intuitive “She is..” or “He is...”. Our experience is that students use “S/he is...” and sound strange. In (2), the repeated introductions to each other offer a chance to remember the names, but also are accomplished with hand motions, in which names are said with a hand signal and a quick visual focus. The hand motion and visual focus then move to the other person as the other name is said. In (3), another functional routine is used for more attention to focus, with “It’s nice to MEET you”. A variation in the change of focus to you shows up in (4), in which the use of TOO receives focus. TOO often shows up in its own phrase when used in final position, and in that position, receives the focus.

### **Final thoughts about names and introductions**

Greetings and introductions are critical in all languages and have culture-specific communicative patterns that involve pragmatics, language content, and pronunciation features. They are essential parts of phatic communion in that they allow people to begin interactions with others and thus open the door to further interaction. To be able to successfully introduce oneself, speakers must sound right, or at least be within a range of acceptability so that interactions do not fail before they even start.

One of the biggest obstacles to success is how personal names are said. Names are as close as our skin, and saying one’s personal name in an unfamiliar way can be disconcerting or even offensive to the speaker. Unfortunately, a target language speaker may have to hear a name in such a way in order to understand it. No amount of trying to enlighten a target language speaker will help them hear, especially in the short run. And introductions are decidedly short-run types of interactions.

Pronunciation features are language specific. In English, they include:

- a. Emphasis, or focus on the last part of the name, no matter how long the name, and no matter whether the name is personal or a place.
- b. Shifting emphasis to YOU on questions returned in much the same form, e.g.,

A: Where are you FROM?

B: \_\_\_\_\_. Where are YOU from?

A: Cool. I'm from \_\_\_\_\_.

In other languages, the pronunciation and content patterns will differ but will likely play just as important of a role. Teachers should not expect that most learners will pick up these patterns without help. The costs of failure are high enough that explicit practice on these kinds of interactions will pay off many times over. Understanding how to say one's name so listeners understand it builds success in first interactions, makes clear the importance of pronunciation from the beginning of instruction, and helps learners understand the cultural aspects of typical greeting routines.

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