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TEACHING TIP

FEEL THE RHYTHM! FUN AND EFFECTIVE PRONUNCIATION PRACTICE USING *AUDACITY* AND SITCOM SCENES

Edna F. Lima, Ohio University

While mastering the segmental features of English is certainly important, especially when it comes to the functional load principle (Munro & Derwing, 2006), many claim that mastering the suprasegmental features (word stress, rhythm, and intonation) of English is more crucial to improving learner comprehensibility (Isaacs, 2008; Jenkins, 2000; Kang, 2010). Rhythm, created by the alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables, is one suprasegmental that has a large impact on comprehensibility, as “learners who use incorrect rhythm patterns or who do not connect words are at best frustrating to the native speaking listener” (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010, p. 163).

The present teaching tip is designed to help adult learners improve their perception and production of rhythm in English using *Audacity* and sitcom scenes. By creating appealing and useful activities that can be assigned as homework, teachers give learners the opportunity to be exposed to a variety of speakers, practice more, work in a comfortable environment, and work at their own pace. Also, by using a script as the basis for the exercises, teachers make the feedback process easier and more effective.

This activity is part of a four-week online pronunciation tutor and focuses on rhythm and prompts learners to “imitate” the provided model. Before being assigned this activity, learners watch two short instructional videos on how to download and use *Audacity* to record and edit audio files. They will use *Audacity* to listen to the input and attempt to “imitate” it by recording their own speech right after hearing the input. *Audacity* will allow learners to record a new track and save both tracks (the original model and the new utterance) in one single file so that they can listen to both recordings and monitor their progress in approximating their speech to that given model. Given that this activity was primarily designed for the training of international teaching assistants providing instruction at American universities, the model used was American English. However, this activity can be adapted to include any given variety of English or foreign-accented speech.

Goals of the Teaching Tip

1. To demonstrate the importance of rhythm to native listeners.
2. To practice both perception and production of the English rhythm.
3. To help students develop self-monitoring skills by comparing input (model provided) with output (their imitation of the model).

Task 1 – Downloading, installing, and learning how to use *Audacity*

As mentioned previously, before doing the main activity presented here, learners watch one video on how to download and install *Audacity*¹⁴ and one video on how to record and edit files using this software¹⁵. This is specifically relevant if teachers plan to assign this and other activities as homework. Once learners are familiar and comfortable with recording and editing files in *Audacity*, they are able to perform any activity the teacher may assign in or outside of the classroom.

Task 2 – Watching a 90-second sitcom clip: King of Queens: Phone number rhythm

The next part of the activity is to have learners watch the sitcom clip (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RsIS824ZyNI>) that they will “imitate” later. This clip is from the sitcom *The King of Queens*; in this scene, a conflict between Doug Heffernan (Kevin James) and Arthur Spooner (Jerry Stiller), a son-in-law and father-in-law, is caused by improper phone number rhythm. Teachers may start with very short clips (e.g., one single scene) and then increase the length of clips (e.g., two to three scenes). First, learners are asked to just watch the video and enjoy it. That is, the purpose is for them to understand what is going on between the characters. Next, they are asked to watch the video again and pay close attention to the dialogue. What is going on? What is the cause of conflict between the characters? Finally, students are asked to focus on the rhythm. Which words are stressed? Which words are de-emphasized? The assumption here is that learners have received some sort of instruction on how rhythm is created in English before this activity is performed.

Task 3 – “Imitating” the model

Now that learners are very familiar with the scene, they are asked to imitate the model so that they can practice producing the rhythm of English. Before assigning the activity to learners, however, the teacher needs to prepare the audio file for recording. The main purpose of this activity is to have learners repeat after the model “with an option for comparing input with output” (Neri, Cucchiaroni, Strik, & Boves, 2002, p. 461). After recording themselves repeating after the model, learners listen to their audio files and monitor their own speech (self-monitoring). “How well did I imitate the model”? Learners then compare their output with the input. They then can re-record the excerpt as many times as they wish until they feel satisfied with their performance.

Preparing the audio file for recording

Step 1. Importing the original file into *Audacity*

Open *Audacity* and click on “File” and then “Open” (Figure 1).

¹⁴ YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJNIPWa8LnM>. This video includes instructions on how to download and install the LAME encoder, which enables *Audacity* to export files in MP3 format.

¹⁵ This is a tutorial (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXRfmbChdWU&list=UU-O0ulXD4eIRqUQ5v00AAuw>) that I created for my own students. The video focuses on how to use *Audacity* to record and edit audio files. It also demonstrates how to record one track while listening to another one.

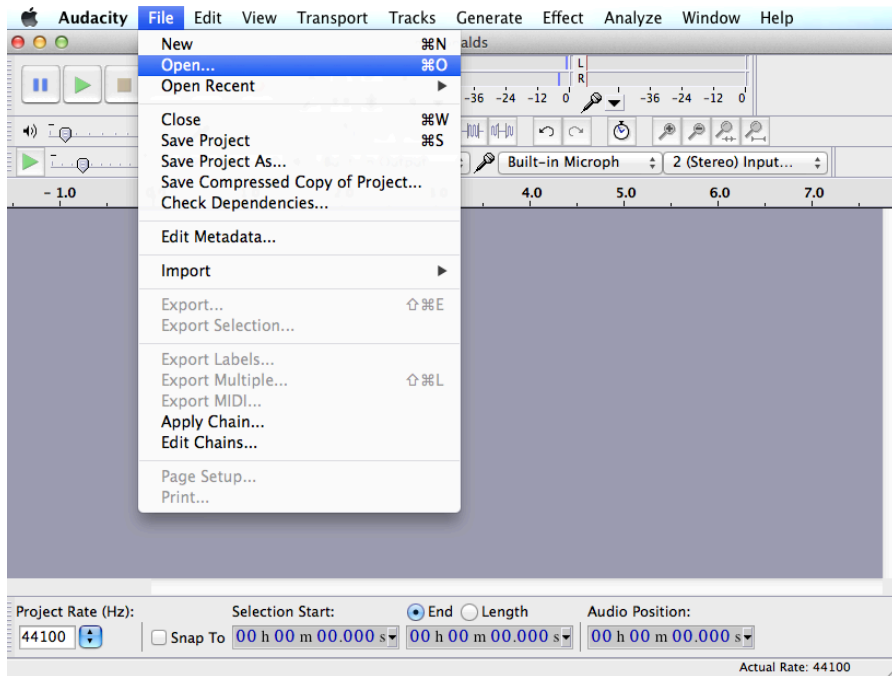


Figure 1. Importing an audio file into Audacity

Find the target file on your computer and click on “Open” (Figure 2).

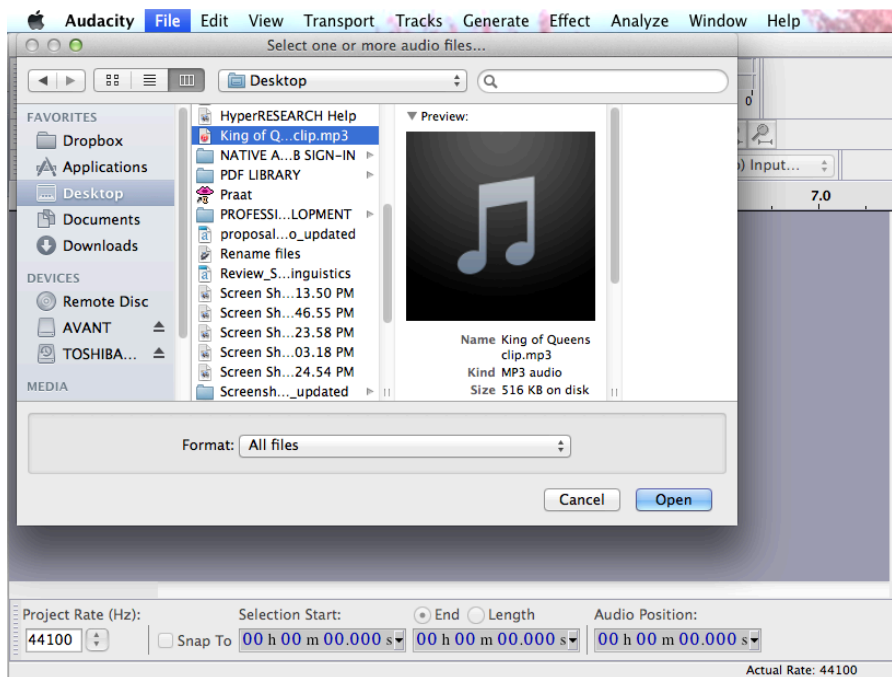


Figure 2. Selecting the audio file to import into Audacity

Step 2. Generating silence in the original file in *Audacity*

Now that the original file is open in *Audacity*, generate silence so that learners can listen to the model and repeat after each line. Place the cursor where you would like to insert silence. Click on “Generate” and then on “Silence” (Figure 3).

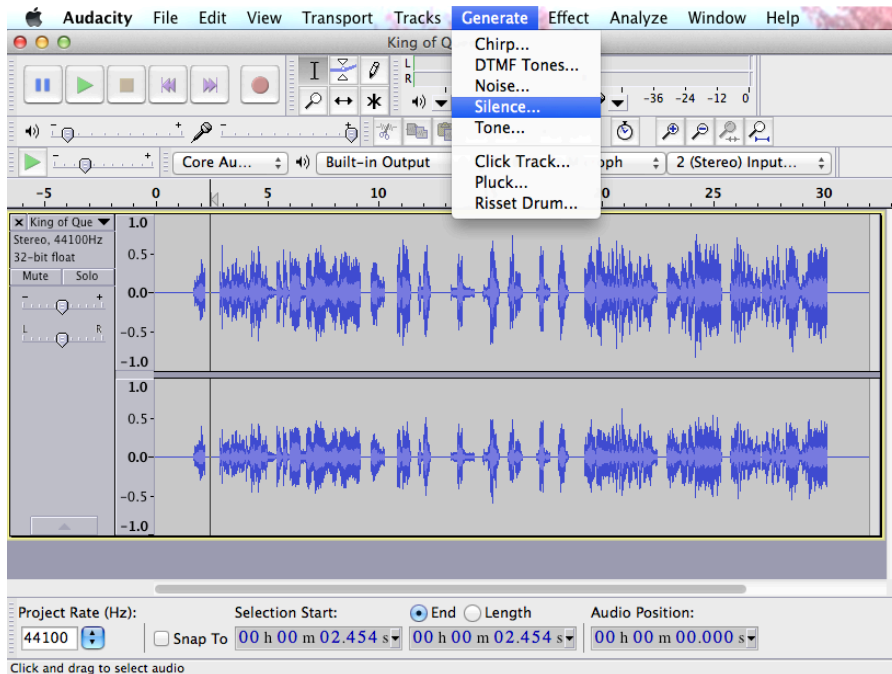


Figure 3. Generating silence between utterances in an audio file

As seen in Figure 4, enter an estimated number of seconds to allow learners enough time to repeat after the model. Click “Ok”. To avoid frustration, it is important to give learners enough time so that they are finished recording one line before the next line is played (see example below).

Example

Model: You KNOW WHAT?

Learner: You KNOW WHAT?

Model: HOW about a little PHONE NUMber RHYTHM, HUH?

Learner: HOW about a little PHOne NUMBER RHYTHM, HUH?

Model: You KNOW, a little BUM PUM PA BUM PA BUM PA...

Learner: You KNOW, a little BUM PUM PA BUM PA BUM PA...

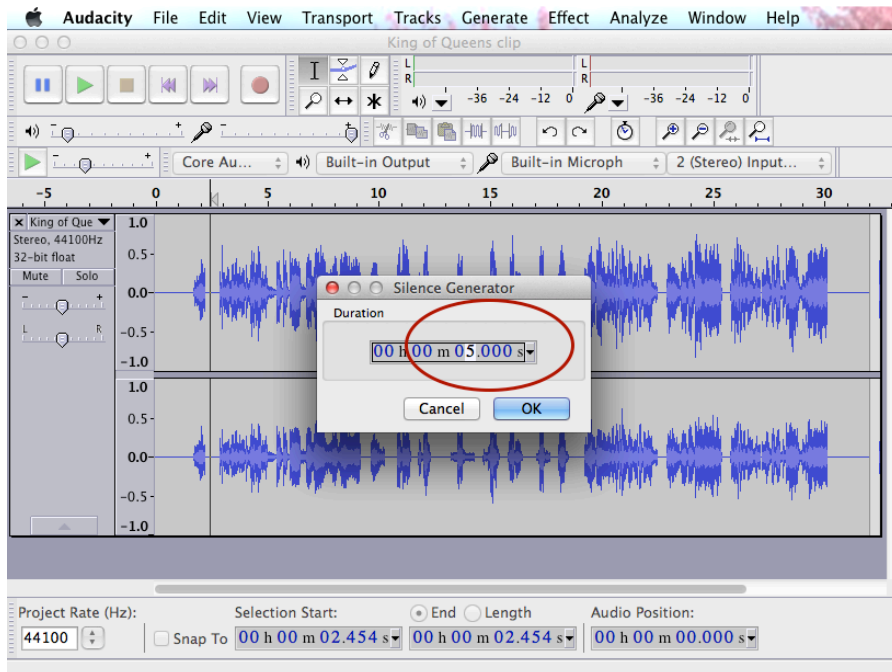


Figure 4. Generating silence depending on duration desired

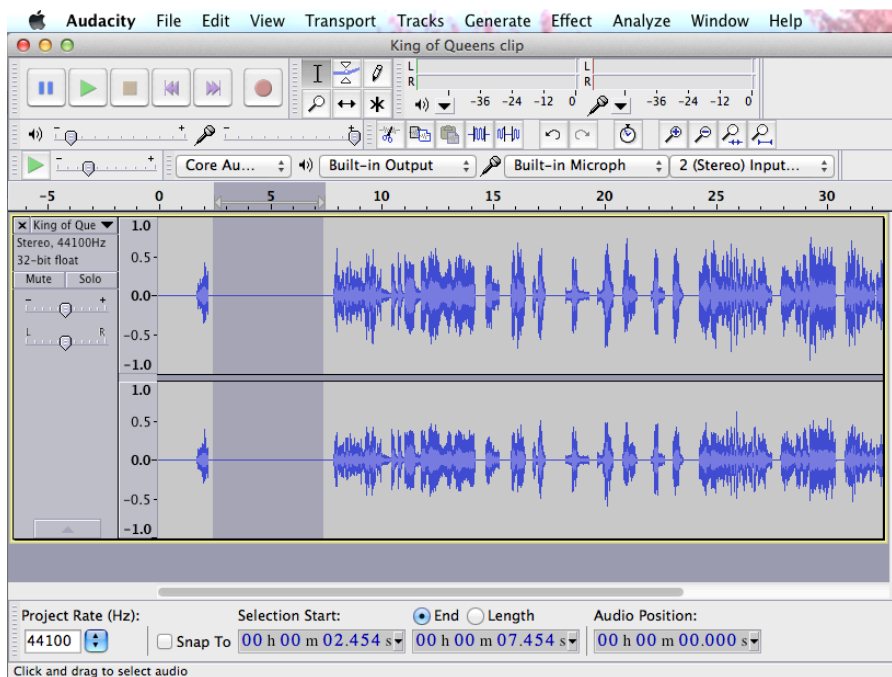


Figure 5. Five-second silence inserted after “You know what?”

Repeat step 2 until the file is ready for recording. Below are the task instructions provided to my students. The instructions were available in Moodle, and students were asked to upload their recording by a given deadline. Teachers can easily adapt these instructions in order to reflect the context in which the activity is taking place.

Rhythm Production Exercise 1

Now that you are familiar with *Audacity* (Tutorial 1: Downloading and Installing Audacity and Tutorial 2: Using Audacity to Record and Edit Audio Files) and know how to use it to record yourself, let's do a rhythm exercise. Do you remember the King of Queens: Phone Number Rhythm video clip? Well, now you will have the chance to practice some of the dialogue. Download the file McDonald's Scene Audio File and open it in *Audacity*. Listen to the recording and say each line after you hear it. Once you record the lines and are satisfied with your performance, upload the file to Rhythm Production Exercise 1 Dropbox.

Script of the lines you will hear in the recording:

Doug: You know what? How about a little phone number rhythm, huh? You know, a little bum pum pa bum pa bum pa... Got it?

Arthur: I got it.

Doug: Ok.

Arthur: One...

Doug: Yeah...

Arthur: Six...

Doug: Yep!

Arthur: ...teen

Doug (angry): I already dialed the 6. I can't go back in time and slip a 1 in!

Arthur (angry): Well, whose fault is that?

Doug: I'm making a sandwich. Why don't you order from... McDonald's?

The activity presented here works well for learners of different ages and at different levels of proficiency. Teachers can increase the challenge by selecting more complex scenes. However, because the main objective is to have learners imitate the model and not read from the script ("read" speech), it is important that the discourse is broken into smaller units like in the example provided. If the audio file contains long sentences, learners may be tempted to read from the script instead of just repeating after the model.

Other activity tips

The activity described here was developed to focus on the perception and production of English rhythm. Learners first pay attention to how rhythm is created (perception) and then record themselves repeating after the provided model (production). They then listen to their recording and compare the input with their output (self-monitoring). However, the same activity setup can be used to target any pronunciation feature. For instance, the same sitcom clip can be used in an intonation activity. Before imitating the model, learners could be prompted to listen to the dialogue between Doug and Arthur and decide if the final intonation for each utterance falls or rises. The teacher could provide the script with arrows at the end of each utterance (e.g., Doug: You know what? ↘ ↗) and have students circle the correct option.

Another activity possibility would be thought groups. I like using “The Big Bang Theory” clips to create thought group activities because of the difference in speed that each character shows. For instance, Sheldon (played by Jim Parsons) speaks really quickly as compared to some of the other characters (e.g., Amy, Sheldon’s girlfriend, played by Mayim Bialik). The point here: thought groups may vary depending on speech speed. Slower speakers tend to pause more, thus creating a larger number of thought groups. Teachers can, for example, select a scene in which three or four characters are interacting with each other, transcribe the scene, and have students watch the clip and mark the thought groups (/ for shorter pauses and // for longer pauses) in the transcript. Afterwards, students imitate the model in *Audacity*, paying closer attention to thought group division.

There are endless perception and production possibilities for practice involving *Audacity* and sitcom scenes. Teachers can create meaningful and fun activities on any given pronunciation feature for any given audience. The activities can be assigned as homework in case technology is not available in the classroom, and a discussion of the activity can be conducted in the classroom afterwards. Depending on class size and schedule, teachers can also give students individualized feedback in addition to self-monitoring. As mentioned previously, working off of a script and designing each activity to focus on one given target (e.g., rhythm) at a time, will likely make the feedback process easier and more effective.

Learners appreciate the opportunity to practice and are more likely to really engage in the activity when they are performing it in a non-inhibiting environment. They are also less afraid of making mistakes, and they are allowed to re-record themselves until they are satisfied with their performance. One of my students said, “Because the [phone number rhythm] scene was so funny, I imitated and recorded it about 100 times before I finally decided to upload my recording to Moodle”. Listening to her recording a few days later, I can say that not only did she have fun doing it, she felt and nailed the rhythm!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edna Lima (lima@ohio.edu) is a Lecturer in the English Language Improvement Program (ELIP) in the Linguistics Department at Ohio University, where she is currently teaching Oral Communication Skills for International Teaching Assistants and Writing for Research to graduate students. Edna has taught EFL/ESL for the past 20 years. During her eight years as an international teaching assistant at Iowa State University, she taught a variety of academic courses to both domestic and international undergraduate and graduate students. Her research interests

include CALL, language assessment, material design, and technology applied to language learning and teaching, especially to pronunciation instruction. Contact her at Ohio University, 383 Gordy Hall, Athens, OH. 740.593.4538 • F: 740.593.2967. lima@ohio.edu

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