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TEACHING TIP

THE STRESS STRETCH FOR PROSODIC IMPROVEMENT IN ENGLISH WORDS AND PHRASES

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INTRODUCTION

I've been jumping up and down in classrooms for well over 30 years to create an atmosphere in which learners of English as an additional language can find vigor, excitement, and rigor, just as my favorite high school Spanish and French teachers did in their passionate ways many decades ago. But in addition to infusing role-plays, dialogs, songs, and drama into classroom activities, I've developed several systematic techniques using movement. The Stress Stretch, which I wrote about as a recipe in *New Ways in Teaching Speaking* (Bailey & Savage, 1994), continues to be useful particularly for learners who have difficulty perceiving stress and intonation in spoken English. In my teaching career, most of my students come from linguistic backgrounds that are tonal and/or do not have the comparatively salient differences between stressed and unstressed syllables or long and short vowels as English. Even among relatively advanced learners, I have encountered quite a few who speak English with ease, and perhaps with general accuracy in word choice and sentence structure, but whose prosody causes confusion, delayed comprehension, misinterpretation, or misperception to varying degrees. Perhaps you, too, are familiar with learners like these.

Words are the building blocks of sentences, and words should not only be seen in written form, but heard in auditory form, and heard clearly. Heard and felt! Learning the auditory shape of a word, along with the visual shape of the word, and the meanings of the word, helps students make the word become part of their vocabulary. They can more easily recognize the words in the stream of speech and convey the proper message when they speak. In a thought group comprising multiple words, wherein the most important word receives greater vocal prominence than the others, this focus word is stressed, and its stressed syllable takes on the responsibility for conveying to the listener the most important part of the utterance. Gilbert (2008) describes this as the peak vowel in the prosody pyramid. Learners unfamiliar with the prosodic patterns of phrase level utterances in English miss-stress the utterance in various ways: they produce unnoticeable stress, or too many stressed syllables, or stresses on the wrong words and syllables. All types of improper stress can lead to miscommunication and listener discomfort.

By integrating the kinesthetic, tactile, visual, and auditory modalities of the Stress Stretch, teachers can heighten learners' perception of stressed vs. unstressed syllables and improve their production of these prosodic elements of English.

Description

The Stress Stretch is a physical activity that complements and amplifies other techniques for indicating stressed syllables (Chan, 2001). The Stress Stretch combines a physical movement with stress in words and phrases. Specifically, it requires the stretching and lowering of the body – the expansion and reduction of body height – to coincide with lexical stress or discourse prominence.¹ The Stress Stretch is useful for beginners who are acquiring the stress and intonation of English words and phrases as well as for seemingly fossilized fluent speakers of English. It can be integrated into a lesson at any level and in any language strand (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, listening, multi-skill).

Purposes

- To gain awareness of stressed syllables in spoken English
- To associate stress with vowel length, clarity and pitch
- To internalize these suprasegmental features into body memory
- To activate and link kinesthetic, tactile, visual and auditory learning modalities
- To pronounce polysyllabic words with proper stress and intonation

Procedure

1. For introductory lessons, prepare a list of multisyllabic words within the learners' vocabulary range. Include words of two, three, four and five syllables, as appropriate. Project the words on a screen or write them on a board. Here are some examples:
 - a. Vocabulary from the New General Service List (Browne, et al, 2013)
because develop program company another international understand responsible
 - b. Academic Words (AWL) from the lecture “The Power of Music” (Chan, 2006)
access expand classical focuses identify physical relaxation
 - c. Words from the animal kingdom
tiger elephant monkey rhinoceros penguin kangaroo eagle
 - d. Words about the importance of pronunciation instruction
pronounce specific essential communication breakdown critical indispensable implement
 - e. Phrases and sentences with one prominent syllable (Chan, 2009)
photograph album. He wants tea. What did she say? He reminded us.
2. Mark the words to indicate the stressed syllable. Here are suggested ways, with examples.
 - a. Place an accent mark over the vowel in the stressed syllable.
áccess expánd clássical cúlture fócuses idéntify físyical relaxátion
 - b. Use upper case letters for the stressed syllable.
proNOUNCE speCific esSENTial communiCATION BREAKdown CRITical
indiSPENSable IMplement
 - c. Underline the stressed syllable.
tiger elephant monkey rhinoceros penguin kangaroo eagle

¹ In this synchronicity, the Stress Stretch is similar to the use of haptic hand gestures advocated by Acton and his colleagues (Acton, et al, 2013).

- d. Write the syllable-stress code²:
because [2-2] develop [3-2] program [2-1] company [3-1] another [3-2]
international [5-3] understand [3-3] responsible [4-2]
- e. Use boldface type on the stressed syllable.
photograph album. He wants tea. What did she say? He reminded us.
3. Explain that a stressed syllable is generally longer, clearer, stronger, and higher in pitch than an unstressed syllable³.
4. Pronounce each word on the list, exaggerating the qualities of the stressed syllable.
5. Sitting on a chair facing the class, model the Stress Stretch. Pronounce each word again, this time rising to a full standing position on the stressed syllable and returning to a sitting position on the unstressed syllables.
6. Have students put down their pens and books, sit up straight in their chairs, and place both feet on the ground. Have them pronounce each word, rising to a standing position on the stressed syllable and returning to a sitting position on the unstressed syllables. Ask them to feel the differences in vowel length and pitch as they repeat after you, then with you, and finally without your lead.

Advisories

1. Sit where students can see you and the words simultaneously in the same direction (e.g., in the front of the room, not in a book).
2. Encourage students to focus you (not at the text, especially in a book or on paper), observe the pronunciation (particularly stress and intonation) with their ears, eyes and tactile senses.
3. Vocalize the vowel sound from the moment you begin to rise and keep it going as you speak through the peak of the word at a higher pitch. Feel the duration of the vowel.
4. Notice the intonation (pitch) change as you move from standing to sitting and vice versa.
5. Synchronize each upward stretch only on the stressed syllable and sit on the chair for all unstressed syllables. For example, *develop*: sit-STAND-sit, or low-HIGH-low. Avoid standing on a stressed syllable and sitting on a stressed syllable.
6. Focus on primary stress; rise on only one syllable per word or phrase. Consider secondary stress as unstressed. That is, lower the body on syllables with schwa vowels, as in the second and third syllables of *focuses*: HIGH-low-low, as well as on syllables with clear vowels but secondary stress, as in the second syllable of *access*: HIGH-low.
7. If you teach where chairs are unavailable, crouch and stand.
8. Make accommodations for students with physical weaknesses or disabilities. Let them raise a hand, nod, or simply observe the rest of the class while pronouncing.
9. Rest between "sets" of words: show pictures, give explanations, use the words in sentences, or tell stories.

Stress Stretch Twins

When students have become comfortable doing the regular Stress Stretch, if they are mature, and if they have become comfortable interacting with each other at close range, you may have them

² The first numeral indicates the number of syllables; the second indicates the stressed syllable. (Murphy 2004)

³ Producing a stressed syllable also requires greater pulmonary energy. (Celce-Murcia, et al, 2010)

do the Stress Stretch as twins. Find a willing student to act as your "twin" and demonstrate the technique before the whole class.

Twins: Face each other, hold hands,⁴ and do the Stress Stretch together in synchrony.

Integrating the Stress Stretch into Lessons

In classes devoted to pronunciation, speaking and listening, it may be easy to justify taking 15 minutes to teach the Stress Stretch and pursue its use whenever you wish to draw attention to rhythm, stress and intonation. But what about using it in other classes? Words are the building blocks of sentences, and words should not only be seen, but heard, and heard clearly. When students learn the auditory shape of a word, along with the visual shape of the word, and the meanings of the word, the word becomes part of their vocabulary.

In my experience, the Stress Stretch can be integrated into other classes as well—reading, vocabulary, grammar, writing, and multi-skill classes. After all, vocabulary is presented and used in all language classes. Here are some tips for doing so. When introducing vocabulary in a reading class, for example, draw the students' attention to one aspect at a time. Depending on the level, you may wish to spend more or less time on comprehension of the word's definition(s), its parts, spelling, and usage(s) in a sentence. Often students write notes or copy examples during this part of the lesson. Afterwards, teacher and students put down books and pens, plant feet on the floor and backsides on the edge of seats, and go through the focused listening, perception, and physical and vocal actions of the Stress Stretch. Later, when you've gone on to other parts of the lesson, and you observe a need to help students' repair improperly stressed words, start doing the Stress Stretch while you speak. With this cue, students, having had sufficient practice, will follow you, connecting the rise and fall of their bodies with the rise and fall of their voice and improving the intelligibility of their utterance. Or you may suggest, "Say that again. Do the Stress Stretch while you speak," and their body memory activates better oral production.

Viewing the Stress Stretch in Action

You can view Step 6 of the procedure described above in a classroom setting, using words ranging from one to five syllables. This ten-minute [video](#) is a recording of a live lesson from page 174 of Chan (2009) *The Stress Stretch*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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⁴ Teach your students to ask permission, i.e., *May I hold hands with you for this exercise? Do you mind...? Would it be all right if...?* Allow twins to hold the opposite ends of a rolled up sheet of paper or stick as an alternative if touch is not acceptable.

textbooks, she has created thousands of learning objects in print, audio, and video formats. As Pronunciation Doctor, she provides 2000 free instructional videos at <http://www.youtube.com/PronunciationDoctor>.

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