

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

(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

right __ time	ham ___ eggs	Time __ money.	tea ___ two
cup __ coffee	Nothing ___ happened.	not __ all	What __ shame!
__ a minute	as cold __ ice	What's ___ name?	I __ help.
better __ ever	What ___ you want?	ten __ two	Who ___ you?

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		EAT	CHEESE.
The	MICE		EAT	CHEESE.
The	MICE		EAT	the CHEESE.
The	MICE	will	EAT	the CHEESE.
The	MICE	will have	EATen	the CHEESE.
The	MICE	might have been	EATing	the CHEESE.

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

Congruent pattern drills

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| ● ● ● ● ● ● ● | ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● |
| 1. I need a pound of butter. | 1. Did I tell you I’m leaving for Spain? |
| 2. I’d like to buy a sweater. | 2. Please remember to leave me the key. |
| 3. You didn’t close the window. | 3. Can you ask him to help you to move? |
| 4. He wants to buy a laptop. | 4. Do you think that it’s happening now? |
| 5. She doesn’t speak much English. | 5. Would you help me to carry this bag? |
| 6. The rain is worse in August. | 6. Is there anyone else who can come? |
| 7. I ate a slice of pizza. | 7. Were you planning to visit the zoo? |
| 8. She bought a new umbrella. | 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
 It was four days old.
 The milk was sour.
 The coffee was cold.
 The butter was rancid.
 The steak was tough.
 The service was dreadful.
 The waiter was rough.
 His tip was small.
 I'm sorry I went
 To that place at all.

Graham (1978)

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 (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

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