

THE TEACHING OF SUPRASEGMENTALS WITHIN A TASK-BASED OR COMMUNICATIVE ESL CLASS

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As reported in a survey of Canadian ESL teachers' pronunciation practices, many ESL students appear to have problems with suprasegmental pronunciation, which is commonly interpreted to include word stress, rhythm and intonation (Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011). Word stress refers to the length, loudness and pitch of syllables within a word, relative to one another (e.g., **Ca**·na·da). Rhythm refers to which syllables in an utterance are more prominent (e.g., I'm **co**·ming on **Sun**·day.). Intonation refers to the pitch patterns in utterances. For instance, *I'm coming on Sunday* would normally have a rise-fall pitch on *Sunday* while *are you coming on Sunday* could have a rising pitch on *on Sunday*. Such problems can lead to communication difficulties (Hahn, 2004). Fortunately, however, research indicates that regular instruction of suprasegmentals may help ESL learners to be more easily understood by English-speaking listeners (Derwing, Munro & Wiebe, 1998; Derwing & Rossiter, 2003). Unfortunately, many ESL teachers do not feel confident in their ability to teach pronunciation (Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011).

Presently, Canadian ESL instructors in government-funded ESL classrooms are required to teach according to the guidelines of the Canadian Language Benchmarks (2012) and to use task-based teaching within these classes involving authentic language use. Part of real life use of English involves the use of appropriate intonation, stress and other suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation within various real life contexts such as phone calls and job interviews, to name just two obvious contexts relevant for task-based teaching. I offer my suggestions for teaching these elements of pronunciation in the classroom, largely within the framework of CLT/task-based teaching.

Word Stress

Primary stress is crucial in lessening comprehension problems for the listener. There is a good rule of thumb for primary stress, which can be used within a task-based or communicative lesson. Many suffixes pattern with specific types of primary stress assignment on words (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010). For example, words with *-tion* invariably have primary stress on the syllable immediately preceding this suffix (e.g., *syllabi**fi**cation*, *edu**ca**tion*, *transpo**r**tation*). This stress pattern also holds for *-ic* (e.g., *eco**n**omic*, *fant**as**tic*, *romo**n**tic*). Other suffixes pattern differently, and stress falls two syllables to the left of the suffix (e.g., *-ate* in *com.**pa**.ssio.nate*) or, uncommonly in English, on the suffix itself (e.g., *-ese* in *Japan**ese***).

Questionnaires are useful activities for practicing correct primary stress within a communicative or task-based format. A useful rule of thumb for creating such a questionnaire is to do the following: a) select a suffix that you wish to practice the stress pattern for (e.g. *-ic*); b) from a given list of words with this suffix, choose semantically similar words (e.g. adjectives that describe a person such as *energetic*); and then c) create a questionnaire for these semantically-related words. For example, you might require the students to ask one another in pairs, “How (*energetic*, *romantic*, *optimistic* etc.) are you?”. Such an activity could then be used to allow for communicative practice of the adjectives in questions as part of a lesson on, for example, descriptions of people’s personalities.

Rhythm

A useful thing to teach one’s ESL students is sentence focus, which is usually, but not always on the last content word within a sentence (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992). Sentence focus can be taught in virtually any communicative/task-based class because such classes frequently have discussion questions. For instance, in a lesson on job interview questions, students could be asked to identify the key word/phrase in a question. For example, in the following question, *experience* is the focus of the question: *How much experience do you have?* In any such lesson, the students could be asked to first underline/highlight the focus of the question. Next, they would circle the stressed syllable. By doing this before the task, role play, or communicative practice, their attention would be on the stress, and they would be more likely to practice it accurately.

It may also be useful to show the students that function words have reduced pronunciations in most contexts. Examples of function words are prepositions, conjunctions, articles, pronouns, and positive helping verbs (Lane, 2010). Even though it is not crucial that students reduce these words, they need to be able to perceive the reduced versions. In a communicative/task-based lesson, the teacher should give the sentences a real life-like purpose. One example might be a restaurant worker taking an order, where the task is to ensure that the order is correct. As a follow up, the teacher could repeat the order as a dictation. For instance, a sample sentence might be: “I’ll have the spaghetti and a cup of coffee”. In this sentence, *will*, *the*, *and*, *a*, and *of* would be pronounced in their reduced form, and these reduced words would be blanked out. The students would listen for these reduced words and write them in the blanks.

Intonation

Intonation in English plays a crucial role in how the speaker’s feelings or attitude is interpreted. For instance, intonation higher than a speaker’s normal intonation is often interpreted by English-speaking listeners as conveying an attitude of professional politeness. A speaker with a low, flat, monotone intonation may be interpreted by listeners as being bored or tired (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010), especially if the speaker is in a formal, professional context. Sudden, falling intonation may sound brusque to an English listener (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010).

A useful way of practicing intonation is through the task of conveying or perceiving a particular attitude in a dialogue. As the teacher enacts the dialogue, the class decides which attitude/emotion they perceive. It's important that the class not be able to see the teacher so that visual clues would carry the information. A natural productive follow-up activity for such a listening activity would be a role-play. The students performing the role play would be tasked with conveying a particular attitude and once again the class decides which attitude they perceive. The role play is successful if the class perceives the attitude as it was intended.

Feedback to Students

Regardless of the topic, it is helpful for the teacher to provide students with specific corrective feedback on their suprasegmental perception and pronunciation. Such feedback appears to heighten students' awareness of the correct pronunciation and to contrast the correct pronunciation with their own mistakes and those of peers (Havranek, 2002). Nevertheless, it is important to give a balance of both positive and negative feedback to avoid discouraging the students. In addition, in order to minimize the likelihood of hurting students' feelings in giving feedback, it may be useful to ask for volunteers to demonstrate their pronunciation, rather than picking students to pronounce the target utterance. If you have a particularly shy class, another option is for the teacher to listen to the students working in pairs, and to give feedback in their pair settings. Pair settings are less likely to make students feel embarrassed by their mistakes as the entire class is not paying attention to their pronunciation.

Conclusion

The integration of the teaching of the many facets of suprasegmentals within a task-based/communicative framework is quite doable. One of the keys to such integration is designing activities that allow ESL learners to practice the use of stress, rhythm, intonation etc. in a way that matches the natural use of these suprasegmentals in real life. Such a match between one's language teaching and a real-life, authentic activity surely fulfill key criteria of teaching in a task-based, communicative manner. Classroom practice with suprasegmentals may play an important role in helping your students to produce more understandable pronunciation, aid them in their listening and help them, in some real-life situations, to use more sociolinguistically appropriate pronunciation.

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