

A NEW LOOK AT SUPRASEGMENTALS

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Introduction

The communicative method has been criticized because in stressing the negotiation of meaning and the speaker's intentions, accuracy has become a minor goal. Accuracy implies attention to form, for example, correct grammar and correct style, vocabulary and pronunciation. It is true that we can communicate even though we make these kinds of errors, however, too many mistakes may hinder comprehension. Good pronunciation should be a goal in any course that attempts at communicating effectively. Kenworthy is right when she states that "a person may eventually understand what someone has said, but if this has involved too much frustration and irritation resulting from constant repetitions, rephrasings, or checks on what has been said (i.e. 'too much pain') then the communication cannot be described as efficient" (1992, 16).

Besides intelligibility, there is the question of acceptability, that is to say, the extent to which language deviates from native speaker norms. Duppenhaler (1991) asserts that "markedly foreign pronunciation is often taken to imply inferior overall language ability" and goes even further to state that pronunciation "is often used, whether consciously or unconsciously, to rank the overall mental ability and degree of sophistication of the non-native speaker". This means that the first impression formed of the non-native speaker, if s/he

deviates too much from the norm, will rarely be a favorable one and unfortunately this usually lasts longer than we think.

The neglect for teaching pronunciation in recent years may also be due to a misconception about what the content of a pronunciation course should be and also about the way pronunciation should be taught. This paper supports the view held by Firth who advocates a syllabus designed according to the 'zoom principle': "A pronunciation syllabus should begin with the widest possible focus and move gradually in on specific problems" (1987, 160). This means that general speaking habits, such as speed, loudness, eye gaze, fluency, and breath groups should have first priority since they affect intelligibility more than anything else. Next, one should focus on the suprasegmental aspects of the language, such as stress, rhythm, intonation, and finish with a close-up approach on individual sounds. However, according to this 'zoom principle' general speaking habits should be worked on in every class. Suprasegmental aspects are to be introduced and practiced in controlled settings. When one moves to freer, more communicative practice one can start introducing and practicing individual sounds, and recycling suprasegmental aspects, since learners cannot deal with everything at once.

This approach to the teaching of pronunciation is supported by recent studies on the way natives judge non-native pronunciation of English. A study by Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson, and Koehler (1992) reveals that errors of the suprasegmental aspects of the language, which include stress, rhythm, phrasing, and intonation, affect the native speakers' appreciation of the non-natives' intelligibility and determine acceptability more than the segmental aspects, such as sound substitutions or modifications, and syllable structure errors, such as insertion or deletion of specific sounds. A study which compared a speaker with good prosody and poor segmentals to a speaker with poor prosody and good segmentals also showed that native speakers of English rated the former better

(Johansson, 1978, as reported by Anderson-Hsieh et al.1992). Similarly, James (1976, as reported by Anderson-Hsieh et al.1992) found that native speakers of French judged more acceptable the pronunciation of those English Canadian learners of French whose intonation was good but whose articulation was poor than the pronunciation of learners whose articulation was good but whose intonation was poor.

Moreover, "giving priority to the suprasegmental aspects of English not only improves learners' comprehensibility but it is also less frustrating for students because greater change can be affected" (McNerney & Mendelsohn 1987). Learners' motivation grows as they experience success in learning the rhythm and intonation of the new language, and this is later carried over to the learning of aspects of the language that are less fun and require more detailed practice.

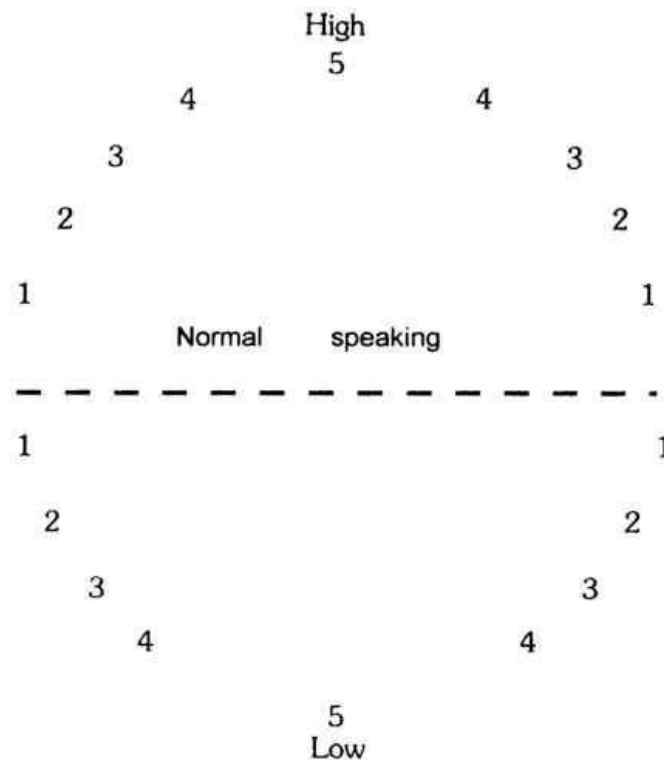
Another reason for focusing on the suprasegmental aspects of English is the fact that it not only enhances students' intelligibility, but also makes native speakers of the language more intelligible to them. Work on the rhythm of English will teach them to chunk utterances by paying attention to pauses and to stressed words, because those are the ones that carry the meaning of the utterances. Work on linking and phrasing will teach them to break up in their minds longer stretches of speech to be able to isolate key words. Work on major sentence stress will help them direct their attention as listeners to the word carrying the focus of information, and be better able to follow the speaker's intention. Recognizing pitch variation and accompanying gestures and facial expression will also lead to greater understanding of all the aspects involved in communication and will make them better listeners.

In the following sections we will present different activities we use to teach suprasegmentals to first semester students in a pronunciation course in the undergraduate program directed to prepare teachers of English and French at the University of Antioquia.

Warming up

Our classes usually start with warm-up activities which aim at relaxing students and preparing them to work with their bodies. We are well aware that this is not a gym class, yet nonetheless, as we speak by using our muscles, we have to gain motor control of our bodies, especially our articulators. Besides, when beginning to learn a foreign language, students usually get nervous, which means that their muscles become tense and as they cannot project their voices, fluency is deterred and articulation is blurred.

Following Wessels' suggestions (1987) we start classes by standing up, moving about and doing some relaxation and breathing exercises. Then we include volume and pitch. As students extend their arms to their sides they pronounce a chosen vowel louder and as they join their hands they say it more softly, lowering the affective barrier and making learning fun. The same vowel is then used to work with pitch. Students raise their arms as they say it in a higher tone and lower their arms as they say it in a lower pitch. After a while students are able to take over and direct these exercises. We also use graphic cues to guide them, such as this one suggested by Archibald (1987).



Exercises which combine volume and tone are then performed, such as uttering sounds, or words, or short sentences in different ways: quiet and low, loud and high, quiet and high, and loud and low. Students realize how we normally speak, with a soft volume and low tone or with a loud volume and high tone, and learn to appreciate the effect on the listener and to control their voices. Archibald (1987) suggests incorporating rate of speech as well. Sometimes students confuse fluency with rapidness and in their attempt at speaking fast they cannot articulate properly. Archibald sees two advantages in slowing down the rate of speech: speakers will

sound more confident and will have more time to monitor their speech and articulate better.

Word Stress

Stress is extremely important in English, since it not only helps identify words, but also influences vowel quality. Stressed syllables will always be pronounced with a 'clear' or 'full' vowel, whereas in unstressed syllables the vowel will be reduced or completely omitted. If the foreign speaker fails to reduce unstressed vowels, the native speaker may interpret them as being stressed and thus will be lead to misunderstanding. Kenworthy gives the following examples of what happens when stressing the wrong syllable of a word:

"-'comfortable' was pronounced with stress on 'com-' and on 'ta-'. The listener heard this as 'come for a table'.

-'productivity', which has the pattern pro duc tiv i ty, was pronounced with a stress on 'duc-' and one on '-ty' (pro duc tiv i ty). This was heard as 'productive tea' (and caused considerable confusion!)" (1992,18).

In one of our classes a student said the word 'reputable' with a stress on 'rep' and on 'ta' and it sounded like 'rip your table'. Such errors lead to loss of meaning.

To begin with, we sensitize students to stress by reading some sentences in Spanish with incorrect word stress. This is to show them how awkward it sounds, besides being difficult to understand. We do some exercises where they have to count the syllables of Spanish words and classify them into groups according to the stress pattern. They do so by repeating the word and clapping their hands on the stressed vowel.

We explain that as in Spanish, every English word has to be learned with its stress and that whereas in Spanish the writing system indicates where the word is stressed, in English this is not the case. We teach them how to use their

dictionaries to identify the stress of a word (see McNulty and Frodden, 1993)

Then we do the same exercise with English cognate words. We choose cognate words, because those cause a lot of trouble in pronunciation. Since students understand their meaning they think they do not need to 'learn' them, but they do have to learn their pronunciation, especially because as a result of a different stress pattern, the vowels will also differ a lot (see for example the misunderstandings above). We agree with Kenworthy when she says that "learners must get used to manipulating stress placement and using vowel reduction *together*" (1992,76). So we show them how stressed vowels are prolonged in English and how unstressed vowels are reduced, i.e. they are so short and unclear that we cannot recognize the unstressed vowels. As a helping device we write the words on the blackboard, circle the stressed syllables which have the phonetic symbol of the vowel written above, and cross out the unstressed vowels. To reinforce this aspect, the students read the words aloud in pairs and hold an elastic band between them which they have to stretch as they prolong stressed syllables and try to omit unstressed ones.

Following Epstein's (1983) suggestion students are then given a list of adjectives used to describe people and are told to classify them according to their stress pattern. In order to do this they have to consult the words in their dictionaries. In the next class we review the importance of stress working with these adjectives in isolation, using the elastic bands, and then go on to a more communicative exercise where they have to describe a loved one with other students asking them questions using the adjectives learned.

Besides using kinesic devices to reinforce stress and syllable length, we also use graphic ones, such as `_' for stressed syllables and `.' for unstressed ones, and circling stressed vowels and crossing out unstressed ones. For the word 'interesting' we would then have

~~Inter~~esting or _ _ _

Other devices used are

interesting **IN**teresting interesting

O o o _ _ _

Other exercises that aim at recognizing word stress patterns are "same or different" and "odd one out" (Kenworthy, 1992). In "same or different" the teacher says two words and the students detect if they have the same pattern; in "odd one out" the teacher says three or four words and the students detect the one that has a different stress pattern. To facilitate this task and also go one step further and work on producing the right stress pattern, we have students repeat the words said by the teacher while they clap their hands or tap on the table and then say the answer.

To show how important stress is and how it influences vowel quality we give them pairs of words in which one syllable is spelled the same but in one word it is stressed and in the other it is unstressed, for example, *face/surface*, *board/cupboard* (see Wong 1987). They have to predict which syllable is stressed and reduce the unstressed vowel, check it in their dictionaries and pronounce the words.

As an out-of-class activity we ask our students to classify all two-, three- and four-syllable words they come across into stress patterns and to practice reading those words aloud obscuring the unstressed vowels.

Sentence Stress, Rhythm and Phrasing

First of all we explain to the students that as with words, sentences also have a stress pattern or rhythm. In a word one syllable receives major stress and the unstressed ones are obscured; in a sentence some words are stressed and the rest are unstressed and consequently reduced. Generally speaking,

content words, i.e. the ones that carry meaning, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, are usually stressed, and function words, i.e. non-content words, are generally unstressed.

To illustrate this, we start by counting clapping hands and keeping the rhythm to:

one	two	three	four...
one and	two and	three and	four...
a one and	a two and	a three and	a four...
a one and then	a two and then	a three and then	a four...

This exercise shows them very clearly that in order to keep the rhythm each function word added has to be pronounced very quickly, and the more function words in between the more quickly they will have to be pronounced. In such activities you can not avoid reducing unstressed vowels.

Students also engage in round-robin with 'I have a...' and name an object. Each student has to add a new object and repeat what the others have said before. In the end they may say something like 'I have a book, and a pen, and a watch, and a pencil...' They can also play this game saying what they are taking to a picnic or to a party.

Carolyn Graham's Jazz Chants are particularly useful for practicing sentence stress, rhythm, reduced vowels and linking. At this stage 'Do You Know Mary?' can be used and students can be asked to circle every stressed syllable as they listen to the chant. Then they can repeat clapping their hands on the stressed syllables. To keep the rhythm they have to reduce function words and do some blendings as well. 'What Are You Going To Do At Two?' is used to show them that auxiliary verbs are function words and therefore unstressed and reduced.

Rhymes, riddles and limericks such as the ones suggested by Wong (1987) help students keep an eye on the phrasing and linking of sounds, which are also crucial in maintaining a good rhythm. Students are told to pay special attention to words ending on a consonant sound followed by one beginning with a vowel sound, so as to link them facilitating the pronunciation of difficult consonant clusters and improving fluency. Graham's 'Banker's Wife's Blues' can be assigned as oral homework to practice linking and rhythm. Students have to listen to the tape and record their version of it. They can also prepare other rhymes and limericks assigned by the teacher or they can look for others themselves. Some may even want to work on longer texts such as drama excerpts or poems.

Rhythmic songs are also used to mark stressed syllables and then sing along. 'Tom's Diner' sung by Susan Vega can be exploited in the following way. Students are handed out the lyrics and told to circle the syllables they think should be stressed. Then they listen to the song and check if they have done it right. After that they sing along only on the stressed syllables. Then they have to write down the phonetic symbol of the vowel above the stressed syllables. The purpose here is to have them pay attention to stressed vowels and to reduce unstressed ones. Finally they sing the whole song along with the tape.

Special emphasis is put on recognizing weak forms. Students listen to two versions of the same sentence: in careful speech and in rapid speech and have to detect which is which. In another exercise the teacher gives the rapid version and the students have to say how many words they hear or have to write down in normal spelling what they hear. Another listening practice used is filling in the blanks for weak forms and contractions.

After such recognition practice we exercise pronunciation of weak forms. Kenworthy feels that learners should try to use weak forms in their speech, since "if they do not, their speech

will present listeners with a surfeit of full vowels (which will make word recognition difficult) and with a surplus of stressed forms (which may make it very difficult for the listener to find his or her way through the message and identify the focus)" (1992,79). Students are given the phonetic transcription of rapid speech in short exchanges using common phrases, such as 'Where did he go? -I don't know'. As a homework assignment they have to figure out the normal spelling. In the following class, first the teacher reads the items and the students repeat; then the teacher asks questions at random with the students giving the appropriate response. Finally the students work in pairs practicing the short exchanges.

A similar activity is done with a shopping list, where the reduced form 'of', such as in 'What'll you have? - A quart of milk' and 'and' such as in 'Fish 'n chips' is repeated.

When a student has difficulty stressing a phrase or sentence correctly, the teacher substitutes it for nonsense syllables and has it repeated, for example, 'a pint of ice-cream' becomes 'didádídádí', or backward building is used, starting from the last stressed syllable.

Intonation

Since every class starts with warming-up activities where they work with differences in loudness and pitch, this concept is not completely new. However, in order to sensitize students to intonation we give them two short dialogs and ask them to translate them into Spanish and record them. In class the students hum the dialogs in English and the teacher marks the rising and falling voice patterns with arrows. The same thing is done with recordings in Spanish and then they compare. Through questioning the students are lead to notice that English uses a much wider pitch, that in general the pitch is a little higher and that information questions use rising-falling intonation in English, whereas in Spanish, at least in the region

of Antioquia, the intonation is falling. This remark helps to sensitize students to the existence of dialectal differences both in Spanish and in English.

Students also listen to sentences spoken in different ways and have to detect the mood of the speaker choosing from pictures featuring happy/sad/surprised/bored/questioning faces.

In another activity to recognize intonation contours and phrasing, the students are given the written version of two sentences which differ only in those respects and the students have to identify which one is read by the teacher. For example, *"Peter", said the boss, "is stupid"* vs. *Peter said, "The boss is stupid"*. The exercise is carried out in two steps. First the teacher reads each sentence and the students imitate. Then the teacher reads one of the pairs and the student has to circle the one read. Another exercise consists in saying if the utterance is a simple statement, a question or an exclamation, which is not based on the grammatical structure of the sentence. For example, 'Has she grown?' is said with a very high tone on 'she' and a low tone on 'grown', making it an exclamation.

After working on recognition, we start practicing oral production. A student takes the role of the teacher and reads the sentences used in the previous exercises and the rest of the class determines what mood s/he is trying to reflect or whether it is meant to be a question, a statement or an exclamation.

Students also detect the mood of the speakers in short dialogs and then try to imitate them or give a different mood to the speakers.

Humming is part of almost all our work with intonation. Leaving out the words makes students pay attention to just this one speech feature at a time and facilitates imitation of intonation contours. Humming can be used by the teacher to

correct students' intonation, or by the students to focus their attention and then incorporate words.

Particularly interesting for the students is the following activity. Students are handed out some short dialogs. The teacher reads them aloud and they hum line by line. Then they listen to a hummed version of them presented in a different order and they have to number them in order. After that, they have to shadow the hummed version with words (cf. Neiman 1987).

Actually when trying to teach the rhythm and intonation of a dialog we recommend the following steps: 1) listen to each line and hum it, 2) shadow-hum each line, 3) say each line simultaneously with the tape. Students may feel odd the first time they do this, but then they notice how effective it is and enjoy it.

After being more or less familiarized with how to express different moods and emotions, we give the students small monosyllabic conversations where the lines are in disorder, such as the following:

"Apple?

Starved.

Thanks.

Hungry?

Sure?

Take it". (Wong 1987)

Working in pairs they have to analyze the situation, the speakers, their relationship and intention and then organize the lines in an appropriate order (there might be more than one) and perform the conversations in front of the whole class.

Information focus

In the course emphasis is also given to the way speakers help listeners focus their attention through the use of stress and intonation. Students are shown how the speaker's voice will be raised in the most important concepts according to him/her, namely in those words that carry the new information or that show contrast to which has been said before. For this purpose they are handed some short dialogues where the information focus is bold-faced. For example;

"A: Could I **borrow** some **white sugar**?

B: **Sorry**, I **only** have **brown sugar**". (Wong 1987)

After this exercise, the students are able to expand the small monosyllabic conversations used in the previous activity incorporating all the function words and content words which were not the focus of information and had therefore been omitted. Then they have to perform them again obscuring unstressed syllables and making the words in the original dialogs stand out. The previous conversation might look something like this:

A: Are you hungry?

B: I'm starving to death.

A: Do you want an apple?

B: Are you sure?

A: Yes. Go ahead and take it.

B: Mm, thanks.

To sum up, working with the suprasegmental aspects of English is fun and rewarding for both students and teacher. Many different activities can be designed besides the ones outlined in this paper which will help students improve their intelligibility both as speakers and as listeners.

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