

# Pronunciation: All Questions Answered

Lukas Murphy, Ed. D., English Language Fellow  
serving Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte MG  
[dr.lukasmurphy@gmail.com](mailto:dr.lukasmurphy@gmail.com)

# Goals of pronunciation teaching?

- ▶ Your student tells you the following:  
“I want to sound like an American!”
- ▶ Would you agree? Why or why not?
- ▶ If not, what should our goals be in teaching pronunciation?

# Goals of pronunciation practice

- ▶ Morley (1999) outlines 4 goals:
- ▶ **Functional Intelligibility:** Speech is not accent free but does not distract the listener.
- ▶ **Functional Communicability:** The learner is able to engage in real-life conversations such as parent/teacher conferences or a job interview.
- ▶ **Self Confidence:** As communicative competence grows, so does self confidence. This can be achieved by guided in-class activities that promote authentic language.
- ▶ **Speech Monitoring Abilities:** Instructors should help students to pay attention to their pronunciation. Tizzano (1997) found students looked to the teacher to call attention to their pronunciation problems and help them create strategies.

# What needs to be taught?

- ▶ According to Goodwin (2001) the teaching of pronunciation has shifted from emphasizing the mastery the individual sounds (segmental) or “bottom-up” approach to that of stress and intonation (suprasegmental) or a “top-down approach due to the influence of Communicative Language Teaching.
- ▶ She states this has led to a “more balanced approach” and likens the teaching of pronunciation to that of a zoom lens: “Global aspects are addressed first; yet whenever the ‘picture’ of speech is unclear, we ‘zoom in’ to examine it at a more micro level” (p. 119).
- ▶ Both suprasegmental and segmental features of the language need to be taught.

# Suprasegmentals: Thought groups

- ▶ Speakers of English do not express a thought all at one time without pausing. Say the following sentence to your partner as fast as you can:
- ▶ I couldn't believe all the snow that fell on the ground this winter!
- ▶ Now say the same sentence and pause at the backslash:
- ▶ I couldn't / believe all the / snow that fell on / the ground this / winter!
- ▶ Does this sound natural?
- ▶ Now say the sentence as you naturally would. Where do you insert a slight pause? What elements of a sentence normally stick together?

# Suprasegmentals: Thought Groups:

- ▶ Telephone dictation: Write down what you hear.
- ▶ Is there an order to telephone number thought groups? What is it? When can you teach this?
- ▶ **What is the difference in the following:**
- ▶ The reporter said / the president is lying.
- ▶ The reporter / said the president / is lying.
- ▶ Goodwin (2001)

# Suprasegmentals: Prominence or Focus

- ▶ The stressed syllable of the prominent or focus word of each thought group receives emphasis. This is done by lengthening the syllable and intonation.
- ▶ I couldn't believe all the snow that fell on the ground this winter!
- ▶ Which element(s) do you give prominence?
- ▶ The prominent element is usually one of the following:
  - ▶ 1. New information: We're learning about pronunci**A**tion.
  - ▶ 2. Correction of misinformation: Do we finish at two-**THIR**ty? No, at **THREE**.
  - ▶ 3. The most important information in the phrase. After this, we are going to be **EX**perts in pronunciation.

# Suprasegmentals: Prominence or Focus

- ▶ In the following questions, the answer is the same:

**I am learning about pronunciation.**

Which words do you stress the answer above for the following questions:

- A) What are you doing?
- B) Who is learning about pronunciation?
- C) Why aren't you learning about pronunciation?

Goodwin (2001)



# Suprasegmentals: Intonation

- ▶ In addition to lengthening the stressed syllable of the prominent/focus word, there is also an upward or downward movement in pitch. If the last syllable of the thought group receives stress, intonation glides up and down within the syllable.
- ▶ I can't find my **KEYS**.
- ▶ Did you look in the **KIt**chen?
- ▶ Yes, and in the **LIV**ing room too. I re**MEM**ber. I think I left them in the **CAR**.
- ▶ Goodwin (2001)

# Suprasegmentals: Rhythm

- ▶ English rhythm is classified as **stress timed**. What this means is that some syllables are pronounced longer (and louder) than others. The timing between these longer syllables is roughly the same.
- ▶ Consider the following sentences:
- ▶ A) She brings her children to the park to let them play on the swings.
- ▶ B) They are going on vacation for 3 weeks.
- ▶ C) He didn't bring the soda so we've got to buy some.
  
- ▶ Which words do you say stronger? What parts of speech? What vowel sound do we use in the prepositions in natural speech?
- ▶ Goodwin (2001)

# Suprasegmentals: Rhythm

- ▶ Typically content words receive rhythm stress. These are words that give us information such as nouns, adjectives, adverbs and main verbs.
- ▶ Function words typically get reduced. These are words that carry grammatical functions such as articles, pronouns, auxiliary verbs and prepositions.
- ▶ Many world languages are syllable timed. This means that all syllables are pronounced more or less with the same length.
- ▶ To build student awareness of this, you can show them the length by using a morse code system of dashes and dots. Go back to the 3 sentences and draw above them. Judy Gilbert advocates using a kazoo or a rubber band.
- ▶ Goodwin (2001)

# Suprasegmentals: Rhythm

- ▶ What is the difference between rhythm and prominence/focus?
- ▶ Consider the following dialog:
  - ▶ A) Let's go out to eat tonight. Where do you want to go?
  - ▶ B) How about Chinese or Italian?
  - ▶ A) I'm tired of Chinese and Italian. I want to have Thai food. Spicy Thai food.
- ▶ Step 1: Identify all the words that have rhythm.
- ▶ Step 2: Identify the one word in each thought group that is pronounced longer, louder and at a higher pitch than the others.

# Suprasegmentals: Reduced Speech

- ▶ In order to make some syllables stronger, others are reduced. These weakened syllables have one thing in common: their vowel reduces to schwa. Schwa is the most common vowel sound in English occurring at a 4 to 1 ratio to other vowels.
- ▶ Say the following: photograph and photographer. As word stress shifts, are the vowels pronounced the same?
- ▶ Function words that start with [h] that do not occur at the beginning of a sentence delete. How do you say the following: **Did he do it? Was he there?**
- ▶ Some conjunctions and prepositions reduce: Bread **and** butter, **to** the office, **for** a walk.
- ▶ Goodwin (2001)

# Suprasegmentals: Linking

- ▶ Within thought groups word boundaries can seem to disappear to students.
- ▶ Say the following:
  - ▶ A) They live in White Plains
  - ▶ B) They lived in White Plains.
- ▶ Notice the pronunciation of the word “in”. In A, it is “Vin” and in B, “Din”.
  
- ▶ Goodwin (2001)

# Segmentals: Consonants

- ▶ Consonant sounds are described in terms of place of articulation (where in the mouth the sound is formed), manner of articulation (how it is made) and voicing (whether the vocal chords vibrate or not). Having a working knowledge of these concepts aids in helping students with pronunciation issues.
- ▶ When English speakers encounter the name of the German composer, Bach, how do we pronounce his name? In German the “ch” represents a fricative. Because English doesn’t have this, we “repair” the name with the closest sound we have which is a stop sound. In order to teach this, one goes from the sound the student has in the L1 and show how him or her what needs to change.

# Segmentals: Consonants

- ▶ Problems:
- ▶ A) Your Thai student seems to be having difficulty saying the word “zoo”. Every time she tries, it sounds like “Sue”. You notice she must have /s/ in her language. You know that both sounds have the same place and manner of articulation. How would you teach her how to make the /z/.
- ▶ B) Your Spanish speaking student is having difficulty saying “time”. Every time he tries, it sounds like “tine” to you. You have heard him say /m/ at the beginning of words with no trouble. How do you help him?
- ▶ C) Your Japanese student is having difficulty with /l/ and /r/. Every time she tries, it sounds like the /t/ in city. She does not seem to hear the difference when you say the two sounds in context. What do you do?



# Segmentals: Allophones

- ▶ Allophone means “other sound”. We may be unaware that what we perceive to be the same sound is pronounced differently depending on where it is in the word. The phoneme /t/ is the most extreme in English. How many allophones can you find?

- ▶ Tap                      Truck                      Street
- ▶ Stop                     Cat                         Tzatziki
- ▶ Winter                  Manhattan                 Batter

# Segmentals: Syllables

- ▶ Each language has a “template” for building syllables. For English, that template is CCCVCCC being the maximum number of sounds. Think of the word “strengths” as being an example of this.
- ▶ If the student’s L1 does not allow certain clusters, how can we help the students create consonant clusters?
- ▶ Look for the two ways students try to “repair” difficult clusters. Students either **insert** a vowel between the clusters (adding syllables to the word) or **delete** difficult sound combinations.
- ▶ Why do you think Spanish and Portuguese speakers add an extra “e” in front of “street” or “school”. Why do Vietnamese or Chinese speakers have difficulty adding the plural marker to count nouns ending in a consonant? What do you suspect about their L1 and how can you help them?

# Segmentals: Vowels

- ▶ How many vowel sounds does American English have? The answer may surprise you.
- ▶ Most world languages have 5-7 vowels. What happens is the student cannot discriminate between the a in “cat” and in “want”? We need to help them build awareness of sounds that seem the same.
- ▶ One way to help students is have them associate a vowel with a key word rather than a phonetic symbol.

# Segmentals: Color Vowel Chart



# Segmentals: Vowels

- ▶ English vowels have 3 contrastive features.
- ▶ Jaw/tongue height. Say “hid” “head” “had”. What do you notice? Now say “coop” “cope” “cop”. What do you notice?
- ▶ Tongue position: (forwards/backwards) Say “creed” “crude”. Now “say” “so” and “cat” “cot”. What do you notice.
- ▶ Tensing: Say “peach” “pitch” “bait” “bet”. What do you notice about your lips as you say the first of each pair.  
Now said “who’d” “hood” and “coat” “caught”. What do you notice about your lips as you say the first of each pair?

# Word stress

- ▶ Native speakers of English remember words by their stress patterns. Word stress in English is not always predictable. There are three levels of word stress:
  - ▶ 1. Primary or strong stress (as Judy Gilbert says, the vowel is clear and pronounced longer, louder and at a higher pitch than any other vowel).
  - ▶ 2. Secondary stress (the vowel is still pronounced clearly)
  - ▶ 3. Weak stress (the vowel is unclear because it reduces to schwa).
- ▶ Mark the strong and weak stress in the following words:

▶ democracy	prevarication	critical	misunderstanding	geography
▶ theater	inflammable	unmistakable	reformer	

# Teaching: Define the objective

- ▶ First the instructor introduces the target feature. You can use charts, props, pictures or whatever you would like.
- ▶ For example when I teach the aspiration rule (all voiceless stop sounds: /p, t, k/ aspirate or add a puff of air when it is the first sound in a stressed syllable followed by a vowel) I have a sheet of paper and I say “pay” and then “play” let them watch the paper move on the first one. Then I have them do the same thing.

# Teaching: Listening discrimination

- ▶ Use contextualized minimal pair activities. A minimal pair is two words that are almost alike except for one contrastive sound. For example, head vs. had. In this pair, we are contrasting the vowels.
- ▶ Gilbert's book, clear speech has a lot of contextualized pairs, but you can make your own as well. In this example, we will contrast /f/ with /v/.
- ▶ Students work in pairs. Student A chooses either 1 or 2 and student B answers base on what he or she heard:
  - ▶ 1. My fan is broken. Buy a new one at the appliance store.
  - ▶ 2. My van is broken. Take it to the mechanic.



# Teaching: Controlled/Guided practice

- ▶ For teaching suprasegmentals and stress timing in particular, use of limericks works particularly well:
  - ▶ A flea and a fly in a flue
  - ▶ Were caught, so what could they do?
  - ▶ "Let us flee," said the fly,
  - ▶ Let us fly," said the flea.
  - ▶ So they flew through a flaw in the flue.
- 
- ▶ As you do this have students pay attention to the stress timing. You can also bring in poetry, dialogs, paired conversations. The idea is to give the students an objective, such as identifying thought groups or rhythm and have them practice within the objective.

# Communicative practice

- ▶ In communicative practice, you still identify an objective or two for students to pay attention to. Here you can create role plays, debates, interviews, group projects, etc. As you know your students, you can individualize the objective based on their needs (building awareness and helping students create their own pronunciation plan).

# Thoughts

- ▶ Take a few minutes and talk with your colleagues next to you and discuss the following:
- ▶ Was there anything in this presentation that you learned or feel was helpful?
- ▶ What aspects of pronunciation do you feel you want to tackle in the classroom? How might you go about that?
- ▶ What aspects of pronunciation would you like to learn about on a deeper level?

# Questions



# Thank you!!

- ▶ Please feel free to contact me for any questions, comments or ideas on pronunciation teaching:
- ▶ [Dr.lukasmurphy@gmail.com](mailto:Dr.lukasmurphy@gmail.com)