

Helping Chinese Students to Develop Sensitivity to English Rhythm

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Abstract

This paper discusses some insights about teaching pronunciation from the perspective of the rhythm of English. More and more teachers in Taiwan nowadays spend time using creative communicative activities in the classroom where students are encouraged to use English. Whereas many teachers have been eagerly engaging students in the communicative activities, they have observed that many students have problems in English pronunciation. One of the most noticeable problems is their tendency to carry over Chinese rhythm into English speech when speaking or reading aloud from a text. In this paper, a three-phase instruction with an awareness-building approach is proposed to help the students to tackle on this problem. The three-phase instruction starts with a discovery process of the nature of English rhythm. Then the features of the stressed syllables, including loudness, vowel length and clarity, and pitch, are introduced along with various aural, visual, kinesthetic teaching devices. Finally, the recognition of the stress-timed rhythm in English is concluded. It is hoped that having finished this lesson, the students will be able to develop sensitivity to English rhythm and therefore contribute to a new articulatory habit in speaking English.

More and more teachers in Taiwan nowadays spend time using creative communicative activities in the classroom where students are encouraged to use English. In such a so called communicative classroom, however, they have observed that most students have the tendency to carry over Chinese rhythm into English speech. While many teachers assume that all students, sooner or later, will pick up English rhythm by imitation, for instance, by listening to or repeating after the tape or the teacher, we suggest that a formal instruction in English rhythm be arranged somewhere during the general English class.

In this paper, we first briefly state the common problem most Chinese students have in English rhythm. To help them become aware of this problem and thus overcome the problem, a three-phase instruction is then presented. The three-phase instruction includes: 1) a discovery process of the nature of English rhythm, 2) an introduction of the features of the stressed syllables,

namely, loudness, vowel length and clarity, and pitch, and 3) the recognition of the stress-timed rhythm in English. Along with the presentation, various aural, visual, and kinesthetic teaching devices are introduced. As the students have completed this lesson, they are expected to build up sensitivity to English rhythm, and hopefully they can better monitor their own speech with a new articulatory habit in speaking English!

Motivation

In our teaching experience, we have observed that many Chinese students have a tendency to overuse and misuse of stress when speaking English. It is not surprising to find that they tend to not only stress almost every word, but also pronounce every word separately. In other words, they give equal time and weight to each word. Grant (1993) reminds learners that “if you have a tendency to stress every word and syllable equally, you might sound abrupt, angry, adamant, or impatient without intending to”(p. 98). On the

other hand, as Browne and Huckin (1987) has pointed out that the overuse and misuse of stress are the main reasons for the foreign-sounding speech rhythms that “make speech comprehension difficult.” (p. 54)

However, most students are not aware of the possible negative effect of their poor English rhythm. For those who have somewhat fossilized in pronunciation and yet are willing to improve their pronunciation, a lesson on English rhythm could be of great help. With this in mind, a three-phase instruction is designed as a supplementary in the general English class to help the students develop sensitivity to English rhythm. The three stages are: 1) focusing on the nature of English Rhythm; 2) focusing on the features of the stressed syllables; 3) recognizing the stress-timed rhythm in English.

Stage 1: Focusing on the nature of English rhythm

Getting to know the nature of English rhythm is the first step. Every language has its own rhythm or beat. In English the combination of stressed and unstressed syllables creates the rhythm. To understand this point, read the following two sentences to your students:

(1) Big black dogs chase small white cats.

(2) A big black dog is chasing a little cat.
(Dauer, 1993, p.84)

Which sentence sounds more natural in English? Of course, we know that (2) is more typical of English, because in (2) some very short syllables alternate with longer syllables. To better understand this point, have the students say the following sentence (1) while clapping hands to get the tempo. Try to say the sequential sentences with an approximate amount of time.

Example:

(time)

|-----|

(1)GIRLS LIKE CATS.
 (2)The GIRLS LIKE CATS.
 (3)The GIRLS LIKE their CATS.
 (4)The GIRLS will LIKE their CATS.
 (5)The GIRLS will have LIKED their CATS.
 (HSU, 1993, p.3)

In this exercise, the students have to slightly squeeze the words in small letters so that they can keep the same tempo as in the model sentence (1). At this stage, the students do not have to know why these words need to be unstressed. The key here is

to have them feel the smooth alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables and the timing pattern in this practice.

Comparing with the stressed syllables, the unstressed syllables (reduced vowels), seem to cause much difficulty for Chinese students. In the following practices, we try to look into their problem with the unstressed syllables and demonstrate some exercises for ready use in the classroom:

(1) Saying rhymes

Saying rhymes is an excellent way to help the students learn the importance of the unstressed syllables (reduced vowels) in creating good rhythm. Have the students say the rhythm of a popular rhyme, for example, “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,” to get its tempo first. At the same time, ask the students to clap hands according to the dots (blackened dots represent stressed syllables). You may need to have the students repeat this practice until they can get the appropriate tempo.

Example:

● o ● o ● o ●

TWINKle, TWINKle LITtle STAR
HOW I WONder WHATyou ARE

After the students become comfortable with the rhythm of the model rhyme, they then apply its rhythm to that of ordinary sentences:

● o ● o ● o ●

TWINKle, TWINKle LITtle STAR
 (TELL me HOW to SET it UP.)
 (Sarah PLANS to TAKE a TRIP.)
 (WHENdid PETER GO to WORK?)
 (An adaptation from *Well Said*
 by Grant, L.,1993, p.105)

The reason for using rhymes is that they always show clear examples of rhythm and that students have to stress certain words and weaken (reduce) others in order to say a rhyme well. In addition to saying rhymes, reading aloud poems, song lyrics, jazz chants, or proverbs can be good alternatives in practicing the unstressed syllables in English.

(2) Learning the basic emphasis pattern in English

Having finished the above practices, the students can then be introduced to the basic emphasis pattern in English. As Gilbert (1987) has stated, the base line in English speech is a basic emphasis

pattern. In this pattern, words can be divided into two categories: content words and structure words. Content words are those which carry the basic meaning of a sentence, such as nouns or verbs. On the other hand, structure words also called function words show grammatical relationships, such as pronouns or prepositions. In general, content words are emphasized (stressed), while structure words, are de-emphasized (unstressed) and reduced. Have students read the following conversation at a job interview. Work with the students and fill out the following chart together. When needed, the teacher may want to give the students more filling-out-the-chart exercises, for it takes a fairly short time to complete the task.

Example:

Speaker A: Are you an experienced cook?
 Speaker B: Yes. I'm a very experienced cook.
 Speaker A: How long have you been a cook?
 Speaker B: I've been a cook for ten years.

Content words (stressed words)	Function words (unstressed words)
1. Verbs _____	1. Pronouns _____
2. Nouns <u>cook</u>	2. Prepositions <u>for</u>
3. Adjectives <u>very, ten</u>	3. Articles <u>an, a</u>
4. Adverbs _____	4. Helping Verbs _____
	5. "to-be" Verbs _____

Stage 2: Focusing on the features of the stressed syllables

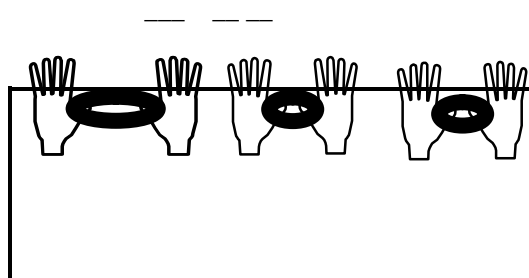
What makes a syllable sound stressed? A combination of loudness, vowel length and clarity, and pitch, creates syllable stress. Generally speaking, the stressed syllables are "longer, clearer, and sometimes higher pitched; the unstressed syllables tend to be shortened and reduced." (Dauer, p.84) Of the three features, vowel length and clarity, and pitch are likely to be left out by Chinese students. Probably due to the Chinese translation of the word "stress" (重音), which denotes only one feature "loudness", the other two important features are missing. Take the word "baNAna" as an example. Many Chinese students say "BA NA NA" with almost the same length and pitch in each syllable, which is very similar to the way they speak Chinese. Then here comes the question: How to cope with these problems? In the following exercises, we try to help our students become aware of the two salient features of the stressed syllables in English: the vowel in the stressed syllable is longer and the stressed syllable

has a higher pitch.

(1) Using rubber bands

To raise awareness of the phenomenon of vowel lengthening in stressed syllables, we suggest that the teacher use a rubber band and some visual aids, such as lines, to illustrate this feature.

Example: **MA** na ger

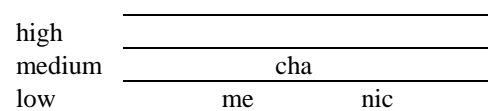


The teacher can demonstrate pulling a wide rubber band between the two thumbs while saying the word "Manager." Stretch it out during the stressed syllable "MA," but leave it short during other unstressed syllables "na," "ger." Have students repeat this exercise and see if they can say the word with correct rhythm. The key point is to teach students to weaken vowels in unstressed syllables. In this case, the vowel "a" in "manager" has to be reduced to /ə/. For more practice involving the use of rubber bands, please refer to *Clear Speech* (Gilbert, 1993).

(2) Using musical scores and hand gestures

The teacher can have the students put syllables of the given word into the blank musical score to visualize the different tones in syllables: the stressed syllable is higher pitched. The teacher can also use hand gestures, by moving his /or her hand up and down to show the pitch change in syllables.

Example: me **CHA** nic



(3) Playing rhythm matching game

In this exercise, the teacher can write some phrases or sentences, prepared beforehand, on the board: "A paper." "He can read." "Here you are." "It's good for her." Have the students tap its individual rhythm first, and then try to match these sentences

with some words they have already known:

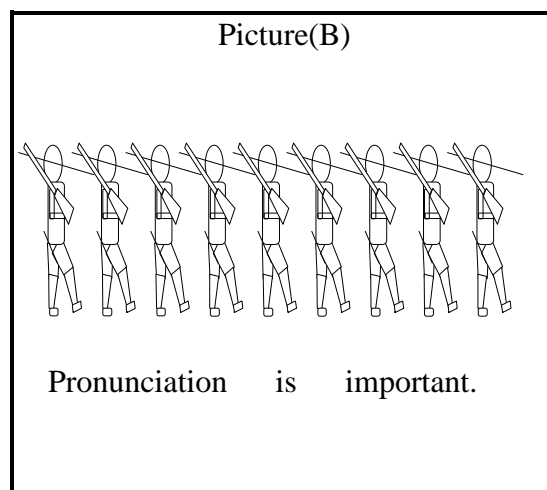
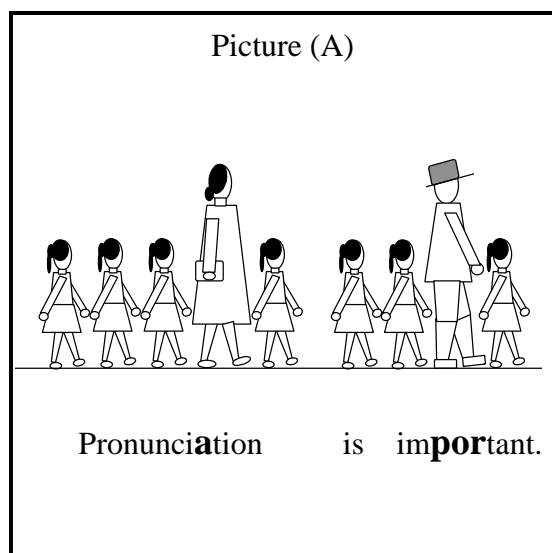
- (a) me cha nic
- (b) en gi neer
- (c) ma na ger
- (d) pho to gra pher

Give the students as much time as they need for they have to apply their knowledge of the basic emphasis pattern. Allow some discussion before giving the answer. Here is the answer:

- (a) me cha nic • • • A PAPER.
- (b) en gi neer • • • He can READ.
- (c) ma na ger • • • HERE you are.
- (d) pho to gra pher • • • • It's GOOD for her.

Stage 3: Recognizing the stress-timed rhythm in English

At this stage, we require the students to differentiate the Chinese rhythm from English rhythm. Have the students work in small groups. Look at the following pictures carefully. Can they tell which of the following illustrations represents English rhythm? Picture (A) or (B)?



(An adaptation from Prator and Robinett's fourth edition of *Manual of American English Pronunciation*, 1985)

In picture (A), the rhythm is represented by a combination of adults and children, holding hand in hand. In picture (B), the rhythm is consisted of soldiers marching along the road. Clearly, the answer is (A). All of the students can get it right with the knowledge acquired from the above two-stage instruction. Yes, in picture (A), adults represent stressed syllables, and children unstressed syllables. Together they make up the English rhythm; however, in picture (B), soldiers represent syllables which fails to tell which syllables are stressed and which are not.

As a final reminder, we also give a brief instruction of the stress-timed rhythm in English to conclude the lesson. We teach the students that, conventionally, the rhythm of English is classified as stress-timed, which has one beat per stress word. However, Chinese tends to be syllable-timed, with almost one beat per syllable.

Conclusion

With the believe that “adult learners will benefit from conscious attention to the features of English rhythm,” according to Wong (1987, p.24), we teach our students through a three-phase instruction to help them develop sensitivity to English rhythm. The three-phase instruction includes a discovery process of the nature of English rhythm, the three physical features of English rhythm, and the recognition of the stress-timed rhythm in English. The suggested aural, visual, and kinesthetic teaching techniques

are only some of the many which may be used to teach English rhythm. You may want to develop your own to fit into your teaching settings.

Be sure to remind your students to slow down, stretch out, and very clearly pronounce the stressed words, and also to “reduce” unstressed vowels! In doing so, they are on the way to achieving a good English rhythm!

Note: The poster which this paper is based on, was presented and awarded the first prize in the Theme Poster Competition at the TEFL Oral Skills Conference at National Changhua University of Education on March 16, 1996.

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協助學生培養對英語節奏的敏感度

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在台灣許多學生都有英語發音上的問題，其中一個最值得注意的問題就是，當他們說英語或朗讀英語課文時，會有使用中文節奏的傾向。本文即從英語節奏的觀點，來討論英語發音教學。文中提供三階段的教學活動來協助學生克服此一問題，此三階段的教學包括：一、認識英語節奏的特質，二、認識英語重音節形成的特性(重音節需聲量加大、母音拉長及清晰、音調提高)，三、辨認英語節奏與中文節奏之不同，瞭解英語乃是以重音節形成拍子而構成的節奏 (stress-timed rhythm)。本文希望藉此英語發音教學活動，使學生能發展出對英語節奏的敏感度，不再使用中文節奏來說英語，以期能說出腔調自然且發音清楚的英語。

