

Speaking Clearly: Activities for Improving English Pronunciation



Some simple techniques and activities you can use - in any class - to help your students speak more clearly.

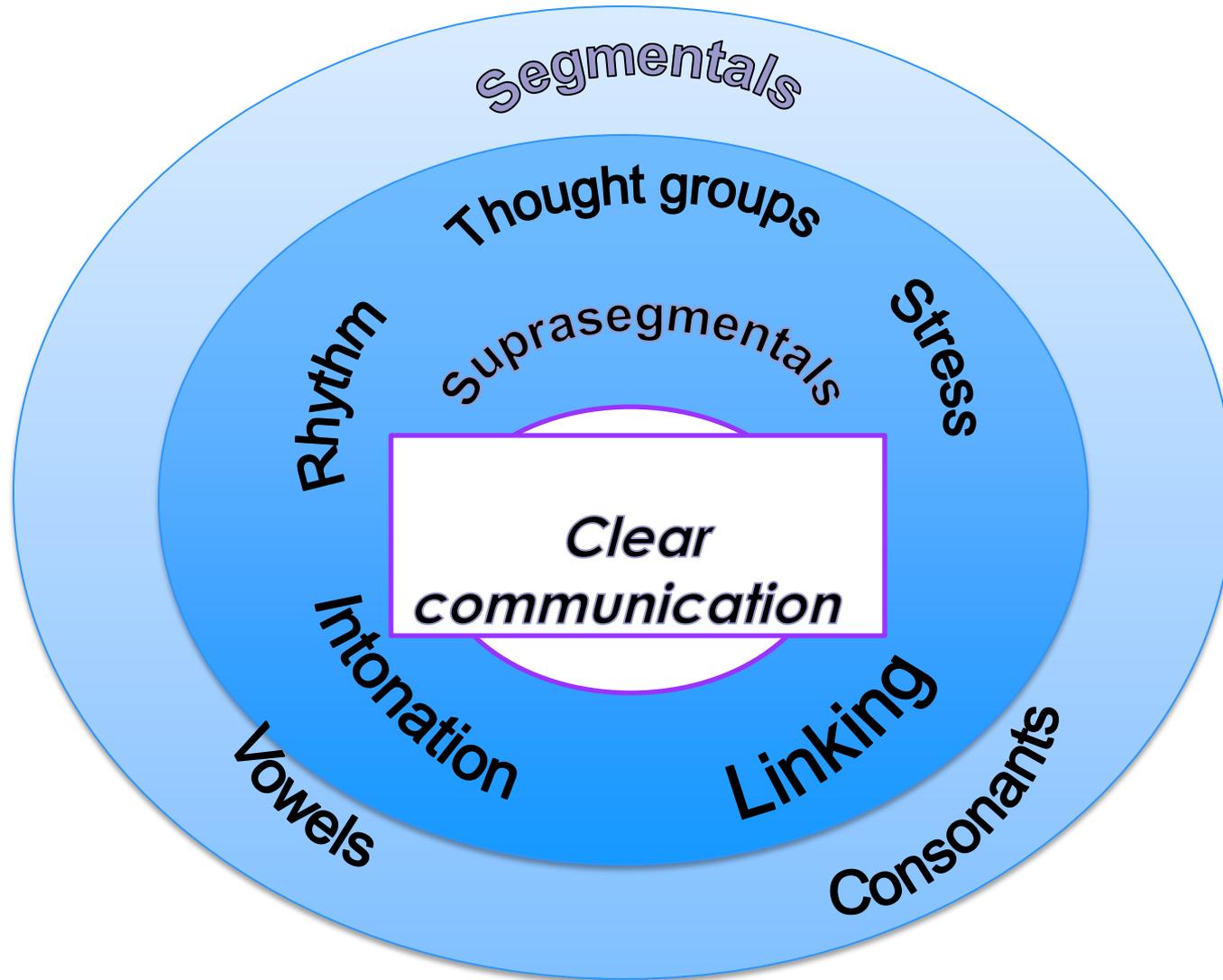
Shirley Thompson

ESL Consultant, Teacher Trainer

Goals for this webinar:

- To heighten your awareness of what's important for you and your students to focus on in order to help them speak more clearly.
- To help you understand a key component of spoken English— STRESS.
- To look at some techniques and activities you can use in a variety of settings and classes.

What is Pronunciation?



How you can help your students speak more clearly, no matter what you're teaching.

1. **Heighten your awareness and teach your students a few basic rules** of how spoken English works. Just as you teach grammar rules, teach your students the basic rules of spoken English. [As a bonus, this will also improve their listening comprehension.]
2. **Emphasize comprehensibility.** Everyone has an accent, so don't focus on "sounding like a native speaker" or "having the perfect accent". Just work on helping your students speak clearly.
3. **Start orally.** Whenever possible, introduce your lessons orally first. Introduce new vocabulary and phrases orally before students see the written form. **Help students learn to trust their ears and not their eyes.** Provide opportunities for them to listen to spoken English. If I ruled the world. . .

TRUST YOUR EARS, NOT YOUR EYES

Help students learn to LISTEN to how something is pronounced and NOT be misled by the spelling.

How do we pronounce “a” in English?

- gray
- black
- mustard
- auburn
- about
- any



Why should we focus on stress, rhythm, and how we group words together?

Everyone, regardless of language background, benefits from these skills.

For native English speakers, **stress is key to meaning**. It's what we listen for to know what's important and what to focus on.

Speakers can make mistakes with individual sounds (the troublesome “th” for example, or the “l” vs. “r”) and still be understood if the stress is correct.

So let's take a look at stress in English. . .

SYLLABLE-TIMED VS. STRESS-TIMED

Many languages are “**syllable-timed**”-- every syllable gets more or less the same stress or emphasis.

ed u ca ti on

pa pa

BUT NOT ENGLISH. . .

English is a “**stress-timed**” language.

The **rhythm** is based only on stressed words and syllables, not all syllables. In other words, the “beat” is based on which words/syllables are stressed.

A **stressed syllable** gets much more time than an unstressed one. And unstressed syllables are reduced.

ed u CA tion

PA pa

Rhythm in Sentences

How many **syllables**? How many **stresses**?

Kids play ball.

The kids play ball.

The kids are playing ball.

The kids are playing with the ball.

The kids have been playing with the ball.

In a stressed-timed language such as English, the beat is set by the number of stresses, NOT the number of syllables. So, each line takes approximately the SAME amount of time to say, even though the last one has three times as many syllables.

Kids play ball.

The **kids play ball.**

The **kids are playing ball.**

The **kids are playing with the ball.**

The **kids have been playing with the ball.**

The many levels of STRESS

- **Words** with two or more syllables will always have **one** primary stress.
 - *photograph, photographer, photographic*
- **Phrases** have stress.
 - *an excellent **photographer, in digital **photography*****
- **Sentences** have stress patterns.
 - *My grandmother was an excellent **photographer.***
 - *He's interested in digital **photography.***
- We use stress **to focus attention and show contrast**, often to correct, contradict or disagree.
 - *My **f**ather liked to paint, but my **m**other was a photographer.*
 - *She was a **ph**otographer not a **ph**otojournalist.*

Stress in English impacts meaning.

(Other languages may have stress, but often it doesn't change the meaning.)

Word-level: CONvict vs. conVICT, REcord vs. reCORD

Even when unintended:

I was teaching a speaking & listening class. After class, a student approached me with his cassette tape in his hand. . .

Student: I need to talk to you about my cassette.

Me: Do I know your cousin?

Stress affects meaning at the phrase and sentence level.

A conversation in a coffee shop:

These sentences have different meanings.

Can you guess what the problem is in each case?

1. I asked for **two** large coffees to go.
(Problem: The server gave me only one.)
2. I asked for two **large** coffees to go.
3. I asked for two large **coffees** to go.
4. I asked for two large coffees **to go**.

Let's look at stress, starting at **the word level**.

Syllable stress is something you can help your students pay attention to – in grammar class, reading class or any other class.

This daily focus will train your students to NOTICE stress in English – even if they don't always get it right, at least they'll be listening for it!

Syllable Stress

- The RULE: If a word has more than one syllable, one will ALWAYS be louder, higher and [especially!] LONGER than the others.
- It's the vowel sound that's lengthened.
- So . . . stressed vowels are key to the rhythm of spoken English.
- **Rubber bands** are a wonderful way to help your students “feel” and “see” the stress. Hook the rubber band to your thumbs and stretch it as you say (and stretch) the stressed vowel.
- (Thanks to Judy Gilbert, the author of *Clear Speech* and *Clear Speech from the Start* for this technique.)

Using Rubber Bands to notice syllable stress:
cucumbers, margarine, donuts, seafood.



Here's a vocabulary list from a unit about the grocery store in *The Oxford Picture Dictionary*.

When you're working on vocabulary, always have students **identify the stressed syllable**. [Primary stress is enough.]

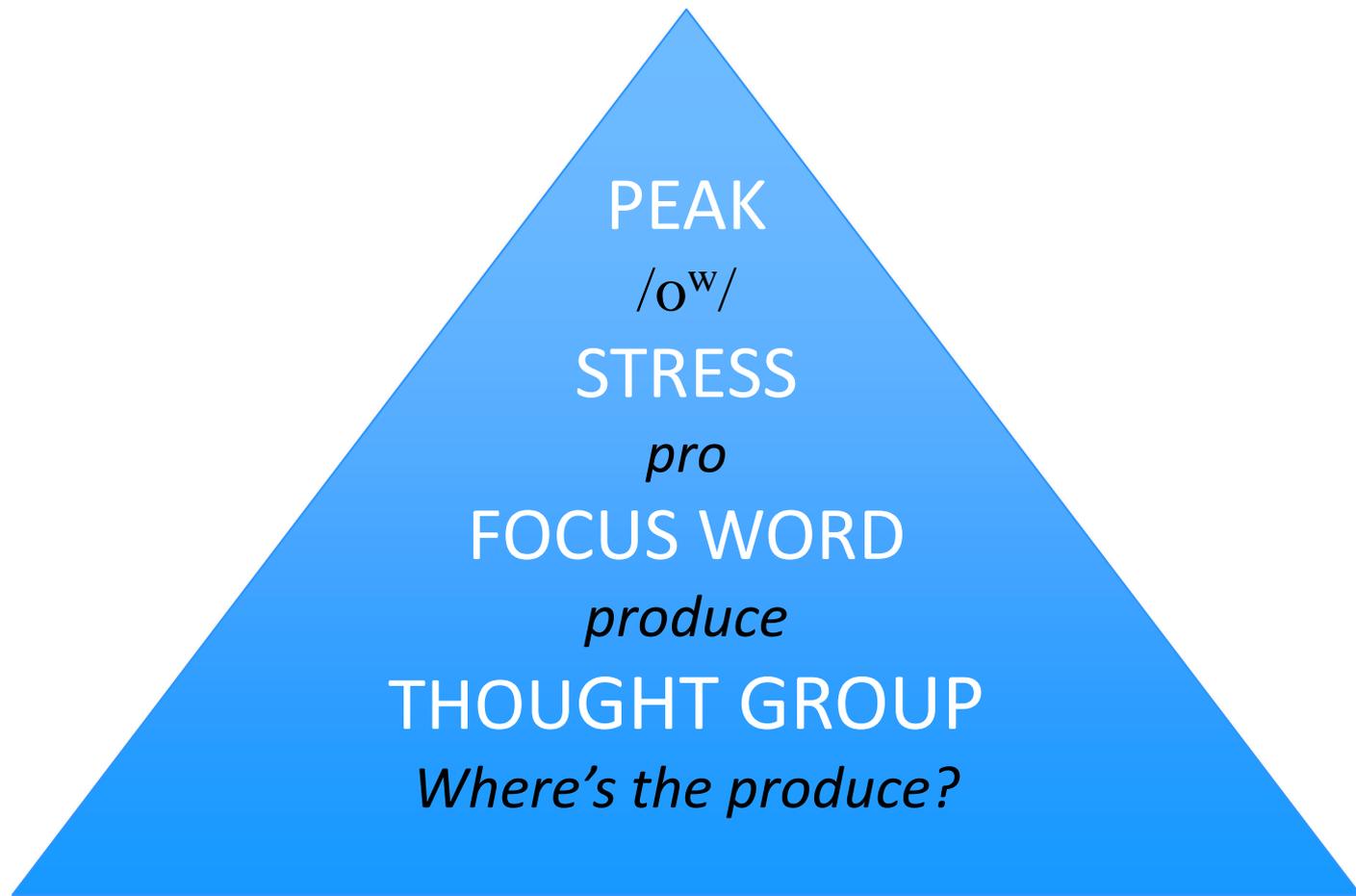
Underline the **stressed VOWEL** since it is the vowel that is lengthened to show stress.

Can you identify which syllable is stressed? If you're not sure you can always use a dictionary – online or hard copy.

1. aisle
2. customer
3. manager
4. margarine
5. yogurt

2. vegetables
3. tuna
4. basket
5. ice cream

1. coffee



Judy Gilbert's Prosody Pyramid [prosody = melody + rhythm]

is another way of looking at the importance of stress.

The base of the system is the **thought group**. . . Within that base unit is a **focus word** – the most important word in the thought group. Within the focus word, one syllable is given the **main stress**. That syllable functions as the **peak of information** within the thought group.

The Color Vowel Chart is a **teaching tool** to help students **focus on the stressed vowel** in the stressed syllable.

It represents the **15 vowel sounds** in American English with two key words: a color adjective and a noun.

You can find this online at www.colorvowelchart.org



Once you've identified the stressed syllable, then identify the color of the stressed vowel – the peak.

1. aisle = white

2. customer = mustard

3. manager = black

4. margarine = olive

5. yogurt = rose

1. coffee

2. vegetables

3. tuna

4. basket

5. dairy

Here are some ways to use this idea of COLOR: Make a **word wall** or **color coded vocabulary lists**. As the students learn new vocabulary, they write the words in the correct boxes based on the stressed vowel.

(You can download a blank word list at the [Color Vowel Chart website](#).)

<p>GREEN TEA</p> <p>seed <u>h</u>ea<u>t</u>er <u>s</u>ea<u>s</u>on seat free cream <u>f</u>re<u>e</u>d<u>o</u>m stream <u>s</u>pea<u>k</u>er street</p>	<p>BLUE MOON</p> <p>comp<u>u</u>ter food news used tool <u>f</u>ue<u>l</u> un<u>u</u>s<u>u</u>al <u>T</u>ue<u>s</u>day moose <u>m</u>oo<u>d</u>y tooth truth usually</p>
<p>RED DRESS</p> <p><u>t</u>ennis <u>t</u>enan<u>t</u> <u>b</u>ed<u>r</u>oom <u>h</u>ead <u>w</u>ent <u>d</u>re<u>a</u>d <u>i</u>n<u>s</u>te<u>a</u>d <u>r</u>ea<u>d</u>y <u>t</u>ele<u>p</u>hone</p>	<p>BROWN COW</p> <p>clow<u>n</u> ar<u>o</u>und sou<u>r</u> <u>f</u>low<u>e</u>r flou<u>r</u> hou<u>r</u> <u>p</u>ow<u>e</u>r noun sound ground loud <u>m</u>oun<u>t</u>ain</p>
<p>GRAY DAY</p> <p><u>t</u>able <u>b</u>ab<u>y</u> <u>u</u>nab<u>l</u>e shape af<u>r</u>aid <u>p</u>ain<u>t</u>ing stain cont<u>a</u>iner rem<u>a</u>inder</p>	<p>NOTE: Although English spelling is frustratingly irregular, students can begin to see that some patterns do exist.</p>

This class is using the Color Vowel Chart. They refer to it each time they encounter a new word, or a word they have problems pronouncing.



Students add new words to the posters and to their personal word lists.



BLUE MOON

cucumber	scrowdriver
musical	humid
humorous	Honduras
Cameroon	toothache
Vancouver	movie
newspaper	cool
soup	flu
lose	Tuesday
loose	future
use	mover
tools	consumer
	truthful

More Color-coded Word Lists

GREEN
 BEAN KEY
 obSCENE TAblet
 amoeba naIvete
 EVENING GLEAN
 SPEAKing
 smIThOreEENS
 TReated

SILver
 inSIPId HEre
 SIEVE PILFee
 WInTer VIual SHIFted
 Illiterate I
 Individual
 RIVendell
 FINGERboard
 DINNER

GRAY
 PRAY FADE
 CRAYons FasciNAtion
 PACE loQUACIOUS doNAtion
 MAple FATEFI
 BRAtive GAUGE
 d= MAY

RED CONTeNTion
 LEOPARD
 FI,ED DECK
 proJection HEIFER
 QUESTioN deLECtable
 REsonance
 PROJECTION
 reDEMPtion

BLACK
 emBARrassed SAId
 lAndscape exAmine
 LANCe



PURple
 SERmon pURpose
 FURt VERTex
 PERT LURking
 CURLY PURfing
 TURgid slurp
 MYRRH
 JOURNALIST
 TURbin

MUSTard
 BuMbling
 LOVer GUT
 RUST proBlem
 CoNUNdum
 BLOOD Custard
 COMFORTABLE
 FURStand
 CLUSter

OLIVE
 Caught BIOTIC
 PROPerTy

BLUE
 Ecru conClusion
 ToMBstones nEW
 SWOon SHOE
 soCUSE JENNY
 ACUTE pOrnABle
 USual
 DEW
 DOable
 nEW

WOODen
 WOULD
 LOOK COULD
 WOLF
 COOKing
 BULIet
 SOot ROCKie
 STOOD
 WOMAN

ROSE
 SCROLL
 Pros
 OATH BOARd (LOnA)
 BEVotED
 enTHRONE
 SEW
 ENORmous
 nose

BROWN
 SHOUTED
 BOUTS
 COWboys
 VOWel
 COWard
 cloudy VOWEL
 SOWd CLOUT
 Fowl BOUGH

AUBurn
 THOUGHT Dog
 COUGH FOBY
 CAught
 ORANGE Board
 Outoon
 LAUGHTer
 Fallot

Some teachers like using colored markers, but once students have learned the vowel sounds associated with the colors, you don't need colored markers.

Expression
RED CON TENTION
'LEO PARD
Fr ED
pro JECTION **DECK**
QUESTion 'HEIFER
de LEC table
RESONANCE
Pro JECTION
reDEMPTION

BLUE
Ecru conclusion
TOMB stones
SWOON
aCCUSE
ACUTE
USual
DEW
DOable
MEW
SHOE
JEWelry
pernamBUco

How Stress Works in Sentences

These are rules your students can learn and practice.

- **content words** (the words that carry information) are usually **stressed** - nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs, demonstratives (this, these, those) and negatives (can't, won't, never, no, etc.)
- **function words** are usually **unstressed and reduced** - a, an, the, pronouns, auxiliary verbs, most prepositions, etc.
- in unstressed words and in unstressed syllables, the vowel sounds are **reduced and often move to "schwa"** the "cup of mustard" sound: How do you spell "dog"? *do* and *you* are reduced
- typically the **last content word** in each thought group receives the most stress: *by the apples, on the counter, next to the cereal, I put the groceries/ in the bag.*

Just for fun, let's see what happens if we (incorrectly!) stress the function (or structure) words and background or reduce the content words. Again, you can do this with your students.

▣ We'll arrive at the airport on Saturday at 9:46 PM. We'll meet you outside the baggage area. Don't forget to bring the car seat.

▣ We'll arrive at the airport on Saturday at 9:46 PM. We'll meet you outside the baggage area. Don't forget to bring the car seat.

English speakers also use stress to indicate what's new or important in a conversation. We change the focus (by changing the stress) according to what is "new", or what we want the listener to **FOCUS** on.

A: Where are the keys?

B: Which keys?

A: My keys.

B: I thought you had them.

A: No. I gave them to you.

I'll read it again. This time focus on the words that are NOT stressed and notice how the words become reduced, or backgrounded. They're much less clear because they're less important.

In French, for example, additional words are added to change the emphasis rather than using stress.

Some languages use repetition to show what's important.

What does your language do?

What are you doing? I'm listening.

Je vous écoute.

Who's listening? I'm listening.

Moi, je vous écoute.

Why aren't you listening? I am listening.

Mais oui je vous écoute.

Let's move now to some very practical things you can do in your classes to help your students learn to notice stress and its important role in spoken English

An easy jazz chant.

- Carolyn Graham's jazz chant, *How do you spell "dog"?* is fun and gives student a "template" for asking how to spell a word.
- Jazz chants can provide students with useful "chunks" of language – expressions that they learn as a whole rather than word-by-word.
- Beat out the rhythm by **clapping or marching**. It's fun to have students march in a circle as they chant. It gets the rhythm of English into their bodies. Let's try it!
 - How do you spell dog?
d-o-g
 - How do you spell cat?
c-a-t
 - How do you spell octopus?
Don't ask me!

THE COLOR SOUNDS OF THE ALPHABET:

You can use the idea of colors representing vowel sounds to help students learn to spell orally. (You can download this at www.colorvowelchart.org and post it on a wall or hand it out.)

- A is grey.
- B, C, D, and E are green.
- F is red.
- G is green.
- H is gray.
- I is white.
- J and K are gray.
- L, M and N are red.
- O is rose.
- P is green.
- Q is blue.
- R is olive.
- S is red.
- T is green.
- U is blue.
- V is green.
- W is mustard.
- X is red.
- Y is white.
- Z is green.

In grammar classes. . .

- Whenever possible, introduce grammar points **orally**.
- Have students read practice sentences **aloud**. Help them read in **thought groups** with correct **stress on content words**.
- Focus on the individual sounds that DO matter in English – final sounds that indicate grammatical features such as
- /s/, /z/, /t/ /d/, and /Id/.
- Teach students to notice how stress can change the meaning of a sentence. **I ordered two hamburgers. vs. I ordered two hamburgers.**
- Teach students to use contrastive stress. This is very common in talking about grammar points. “*You should use the **past tense** here, not the **past progressive** because. . .*” “*That should be a **comma**, not **period**.*”

Grammarchant: Irregular Verbs

from *Grammar Chants* by Carolyn Graham

Say, said.

Stop on red.

Eat, ate.

Don't be late.

Break, broke.

Have a coke.

Take, took.

Learn to cook.

Speak, spoke.

Tell a joke.

Write, wrote.

Get off the boat!

Chants can be used to **teach or reinforce grammar points** while at the same time providing speaking & pronunciation practice. Student can quite easily absorb complex grammar points through this type of quality repetition.

IF IT RAINS I'LL WEAR MY RAINCOAT BY CAROLYN GRAHAM

If it **rains** / I'll **wear** my raincoat.

If it doesn't rain / I won't.

When it's **cold** / I **always wear** my gloves.

When it isn't cold, / I don't.

If it **snow** I **won't wear** sandals.

If the **sun** comes **out** I **will**.

But if it **rains** I'll **wear** my **brand new coat**.

If I **don't** I'll **get** a **chill**.

POETRY: Poets, of course, have a wonderful sense of the rhythm of language. Again, select poems that mirror natural speech rhythm.

HOLD FAST TO DREAMS

(excerpted)

by Langston Hughes

Hold fast to dreams,

For if dreams die,

Life is a broken-winged bird,

That cannot fly.

Review parts of speech by having students identify all of the **nouns, adjectives, adverbs and other content words** that will be stressed. Then have them identify the **function words** that will be reduced. You can do the same activity with a **paragraph from a reading you're studying, or grammar sentences.**

Is the Post Office Open Tomorrow?

(excerpt from *Jazz Chants* by Carolyn Graham)

~~Is the~~ post office open tomorrow?

~~It's~~ open ~~from~~ nine ~~to~~ five.

~~Is the~~ post office open tomorrow?

~~It's~~ open ~~from~~ nine ~~to~~ five.

~~What~~ time ~~does it~~ open?

~~It~~ opens ~~at~~ nine.

~~What~~ time ~~does it~~ close?

~~It~~ closes ~~at~~ five.

~~It~~ opens ~~at~~ nine ~~and~~ closes ~~at~~ five.

~~It's~~ open ~~from~~ nine ~~to~~ five.



Reading & Pronunciation: Use recorded reading passages to help your students practice both listening and speaking.

- There are several ways to use a recorded reading.
- First, have your students **listen several times** and **write down whatever words they hear**. This will help them notice that important words are stressed.
- Next, have them **listen and read along** with the script.
- Then, select a couple of lines and have them **mark the text**. Where are the **thought groups**? Which words are **stressed**?
- I'll read a couple of sentences now so you can see how this works. Write down whatever words you hear.
- I attend English classes / at a language program in my city/ because I want to improve my communication skills./ English has become the international language /around the world,/ and I might be able to get better employment/ and make more friends /if I learn to speak fluently.
- Finally, have the students **"mirror"** the speaker, that is, read along with the speaker mimicking the pauses and stresses. This passage is from www.dailyesl.com, a free site. Or ask a colleague to record a reading for you. Please share ideas on the ning.

Conversely, you can ask students to **predict** where the speaker will **pause**, which **words** will be **stressed**, which will be **reduced**, and which words will receive the **focus stress**.

Then have students listen several times to the sentences read aloud as they check to see if their predictions were correct.

- I attend English classes at a language program in my city because I want to improve my communication skills. English has become the international language around the world, and I might be able to get better employment and make more friends if I learn to speak fluently.
- Round robin reading is another way to practice. Each student reads one thought group.

An easy way to bring pronunciation practice into your reading lessons: Questions

- Questions are common in pre- and post-reading exercises. Or ask questions about a picture, chart or other graphic.
- Focus on **intonation patterns** for questions: yes/no, information, choice
- As always, focus also on thought groups and stresses
 - Is it **raining** in the **picture**? (rising)
 - **What's** the **woman doing**? (falling)
 - Is she **happy** or **sad**? (rising/falling)

Let's recap. . .

- TEACH some basic rules of spoken English.
- All words with more than one syllable have a stressed syllable with a lengthened vowel.
- English has a distinct rhythm pattern based on stressing some syllables and words and reducing others.
- Stress affects meaning in English so it's worth paying attention to.
- Practice basic features.
- Always identify stressed syllables in words, stressed words in phrases, and focus words in conversations.
- Practice language in "chunks" or thought groups.
- Whenever possible, have students listen before they read, write or speak. Help them learn to trust their ears.
- Spoken English is learned by lots of listening to good models, and lots of repetition or phrases and sentences.

Stress is a powerful tool!

Stress is the main technique that English uses to draw the listener's attention to what is important. It "points" us to what the speaker wants us to focus on. If this is the **only** thing you have time for, it will help your students spoken English immensely!



Thank you for joining this webinar!

- I look forward to your questions and comments on the ning.
- Please share resources that you use to work with your students on speaking clearly.