

**Course Topic: Teaching Pronunciation****Course Instructor:**

**Dianne Tyers** has held numerous English language teaching, training and management positions over the past 22 years in six different countries. She owns Advance Consulting for Education, INC, an English language teacher training and curriculum development company. Dianne is currently a PhD candidate at OISE, University of Toronto and has a Masters of Applied Linguistics (University of Queensland) and an MBA (University of Western Ontario). She has presented at local, national and international conferences on teaching and management techniques, culture, and language learning.

**Course Synopsis:**

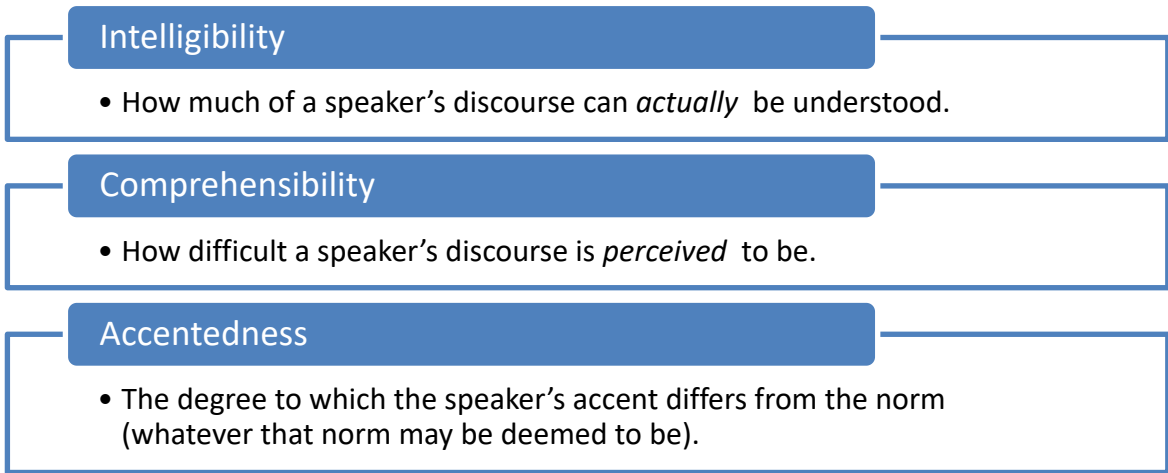
In this session, we look at the importance of stress in determining the intelligibility of student pronunciation. One of four main components of the suprasegmental features of pronunciation, stress is often overlooked in our teaching of pronunciation. Because English is a stress-timed language, however, stress plays an important role in English pronunciation. Interestingly, the main student challenge is not putting stress on syllables or words, but unstressing those syllables or words that should NOT be stressed, hence the concept of 'unstress' that we explore.

This session was developed and first presented by Silvia Rossi of Mount Royal University, Calgary, Alberta.

**Course Agenda:**

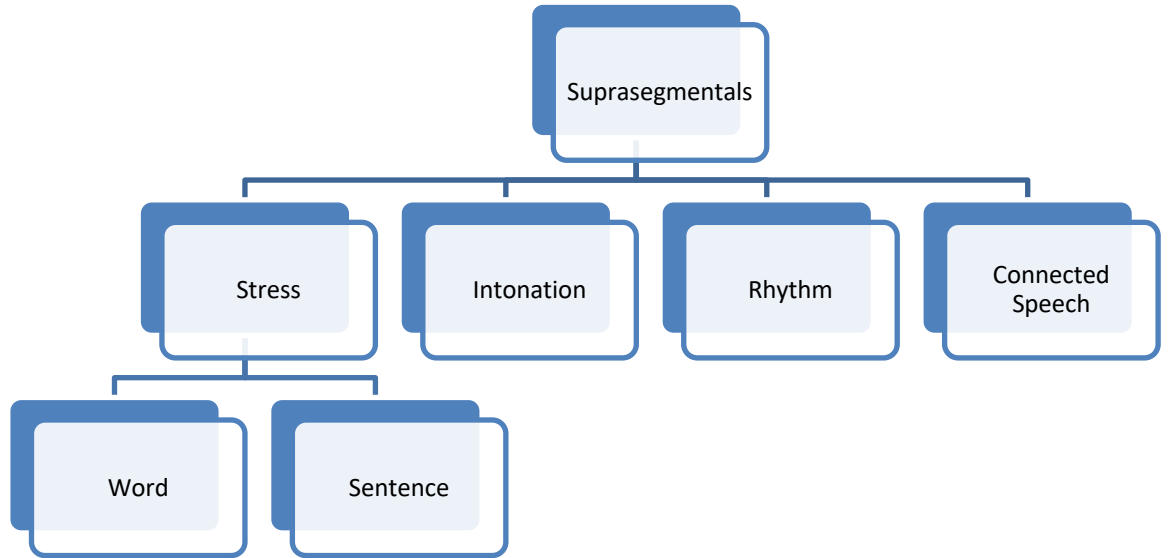
1. Intelligibility, Comprehensibility and Accentedness
2. The Suprasegmental Features of Pronunciation
3. The Importance of Stress
4. The Concepts of Stress and Unstress
5. Teaching Approaches for Stress and Unstress
6. Teaching Activities for Stress and Unstress

1. Intelligibility, Comprehensibility and Accentedness<sup>1</sup>



“Although research indicates that intelligibility is an achievable goal, a greater understanding is needed of the relationship between accent phenomena and interference with meaning.” (Derwing & Munro, 2005, p. 386)

2. The Suprasegmental Features of Pronunciation



“Numerous pedagogical resources on ESL/EFL pronunciation advocate teaching non-native speakers (NNSs) suprasegmentals to improve the intelligibility of their speech. However, little empirical support exists for such claims. Knowing how the various prosodic features actually affect the way native speakers (NSs) process non-native speech would substantially strengthen the rationale for current pronunciation pedagogy.” (Hahn, 2004, p. 201)

<sup>1</sup> Distinctions between intelligibility, comprehensibility and accentedness come from Derwing, Munro & Wiebe (1998, p. 396).

Anderson- Hsieh, Johnson, and Koehler (1992)

- Compared the influence of segmentals (individual phonemes), prosody (suprasegmentals) and syllable structure on pronunciation ratings.
- Prosody affected pronunciation ratings the most significantly and consistently.

Derwing, Munro and Wiebe (1998)

- Compared the effect of instruction in segmentals vs. instruction in suprasegmentals.
- Instruction in suprasegmentals proved superior for improving performance in communicative contexts.

### 3. The Importance of Stress

What does research say about the influence of suprasegmentals on intelligibility?

Field (2005)

- Attempts to isolate one feature: lexical stress (word stress).
- "The issue at stake in this study is therefore purely and simply whether incorrect placement of lexical stress by a nonnative speaker renders the form of words unintelligible to an interlocutor." (p. 417)
- Word stress should have medium importance in a pronunciation program.

Hahn (2004)

- Sentence stress has a major role in how intelligible nonnative discourse is.

Jenkins (2002)

- Includes sentence stress as a core item in her phonological syllabus for English language learners.

#### 4. The Concepts of Stress and Unstress

##### Stress

- Emphasizing part of a word or a complete word through increased volume and time.

##### Unstress

- Weakening part of a word or a complete word through decreased volume and time.



- English is a stress-timed language.
- An important factor in achieving correct stress and rhythm is the ability to *unstress* syllables and words where appropriate.

##### Word Level Unstress: Which syllables do we unstress?

- Unstress is created by using the schwa [ə].
- The schwa has a 34.5% rate of frequency use.
- "The schwa is the most important element in learning to produce the correct rhythm and unstress patterns in English." (Woods 2005, p. 12)
- Strong forms versus weak forms of a word. Weak forms use schwa, whereas strong forms use full vowel sounds.
- Elision - when we omit a sound altogether (e.g., vegetable, comfortable).

##### Sentence Level Unstress: Which words do we unstress?

- Content versus function words.
- Reductions of function words.
- "It seems likely that the weak quality of many [function words] provides an important cue that distinguishes them from content words and thus contributes importantly to the intelligibility of longer stretches of speech." (Grosjean & Gee, 1987)

##### Text Level Unstress: Which words do we unstress due to the larger context of an interaction?

- Contrastive (sentence) stress.

Here is what the research says about 'unstress'.

Zielinski (2008)

- Important to teach learners how to make an unambiguous contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables.
- "The distinction between strong and weak syllables and the pattern of strong and weak syllables in the speech are important sources of information for native listeners." (p. 70)

Field (2005)

- Intelligibility of longer stretches of speech could well depend on the weak quality of function words.

Knowles (1995)

- "[...]learners of English surely have problems not with stress, but the lack of it."

Avery & Ehrlich (1992)

- "[...]from the very first introduction of a new vocabulary item, care must be taken not only to stress the word correctly, but also to *unstress* it correctly." (p. 187)

Yates & Zielinski (2009)

- "[...]it is often the pronunciation of unstressed syllables that causes learners the most difficulty rather than the pronunciation of stressed syllables." (p. 89)

## 5. Teaching Approaches for Stress and Unstress

Here are three possible approaches to teaching pronunciation that can be applied to teaching your students stress and unstress.

1. Make students aware that there is a difference between what they say and what native speakers say.
2. Help students to hear the difference and practice it.
3. Use the right metalanguage to describe those differences and how the feature is pronounced.
4. Help students to discover useful patterns and rules in how the feature is pronounced.
5. Give students feedback and provide opportunities for further practice.

From Couper (2006)

1. Description and analysis of the pronunciation feature.
2. Listening discrimination activity to hear the feature in contrast to other features.
3. Controlled practice of the feature and feedback.
4. Freer practice of the feature and feedback.

*From Advance Consulting for Education*

1. Listen carefully to the pronunciation feature.
2. Develop students' awareness of the pronunciation feature.
3. Develop students' ability to control their production of the feature.
4. Provide opportunity for students to practice the feature.
5. Extend the students' use of the feature.

*From Yates & Zielinski (2009, p. 20)*

## 6. Teaching Activities for Stress and Unstress

We can categorize activities for teaching stress and unstress into activities at the word level, at the sentence level and at the text level.



### Activity #1

#### Word Level: Find the Schwa

Procedure
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Review what a schwa is with the class. Discuss why we use the schwa so frequently in English (to unstress a syllable or word because English is stress-timed).</li> </ol>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Give students a handout with lists of words with which they are familiar. Have them work in pairs to say the words out loud and identify the schwas in each word. Confirm the correct answers as a class, verifying the schwas by pronouncing each word.</li> </ol>

**Activity #2**

**Sentence Level: Marking Stress in Nonsense Sentences<sup>2</sup>**

Procedure
<p>1. Write the following sentence, made up of nonsense words, on the board and instruct students to copy it down:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Son geefies gatted min hox nal son sackleton.</p>
<p>2. Tell students that you will read it out, and they should mark the stressed syllables – by underlining them, circling them, or drawing a dot under the stressed vowel, for example. Remind them that the stressed syllables will be said more loudly, more clearly, and more slowly. Read the sentence once, at normal speed. Be careful to reduce the nonsense function words. For example, the two instances of “son” should be read /sən/ and de-emphasized.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Son GEEfies GATted min HOX nal son SACKleton.</p>
<p>3. Have students compare their answers with a neighbour.</p>
<p>4. Read the sentence once more, at a slightly slower speed, and have students compare again.</p>
<p>5. Check answers by eliciting and marking the stress on the board. Emphasize why certain syllables in certain words are stressed, and highlight how function words often get reduced to schwa.</p>
<p>6. Model the sentence again and have students repeat.</p>
<p>7. Dictate the following three sentences and ask students to write them down:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The twins painted rainbows on the hardwood floor.</li> <li>2. The pilot guided his plane through the turbulence.</li> <li>3. Some hikers spotted a fire on a mountaintop.</li> </ol>
<p>8. Ask students to identify which two sentences fit the same pattern as the nonsense sentence.</p>
<p>9. See if they can come up with one more sentence that fits the pattern of the nonsense sentence.</p>

**Activity #3**

**Sentence Level: Stepping Out the Stress<sup>3</sup>**

Procedure
<p>1. Dictate the following sentence to students:</p>

<sup>2</sup> This activity is based very closely on the activity presented on page 188 of Peter Avery & Susan Ehrlich’s Teaching American English Pronunciation. (OUP: Oxford, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> This activity is a slight variation on the activity presented on page 94 of Yates & Zielinski’s Give it a Go: Teaching Pronunciation to Adults. (AMEP: Australia, 2009).

I'd love to come to the party but I'm working on Sunday.
2. In small groups, have students mark where the major stresses would be. They should also discuss which words are unstressed and decide whether these words would be reduced or simply de-emphasized.
3. Each group should practice "stepping out" the sentence. That is, students in the group should stand in a line, link elbows, and walk forward as they all say the sentence together. The rule is that students may only take a step on a stressed syllable. For the sentence above, this means that the students would only take a step on the syllables "love", "come", "par", "work" and "Sun".
4. The teacher asks different groups to present their version of stepping out the sentence for the class. Feedback can be given. With each successive group, the teacher should encourage the students to step out their sentence at a faster speed. This will add to the fun as well as highlight the relationship between reductions and speaking speed.
* Variation: Groups compete against one another to see which group can cover the most distance while still respecting the rule of only stepping on stressed syllables.

**Activity #4**








**Sentence Level: Match the Stress Pattern<sup>4</sup>**

Procedure
1. Hand out a set of cards (see the sample set on the following page) to each small group. Their task is to match each utterance with its stress pattern.
2. As a class, analyze what happens to the unstressed words/syllables. Which vowel sounds become schwa? Are there any other reductions which occur?
3. Drill the utterances chorally and individually.
4. Play a game. Ask each group to put away the cards with the utterances written on them. They should spread the cards with the stress patterns out on a desk, and the members of the group should stand around the desk. The teacher reads out an utterance, and the students race to grab the card with the matching stress pattern. The student who grabs the correct card gets to keep the card. At the end of the game, the student with the most cards in his/her hand wins.
5. Possible extension: Ask the students to come up with more utterances to fit the stress patterns.

<sup>4</sup> This activity is a variation on the activity presented on page 90 of Yates & Zielinski's Give it a Go: Teaching Pronunciation to Adults. (AMEP: Australia, 2009).



Example set of cards:

I've finished.	
I'd love to.	
Don't worry.	
Keep quiet.	
See you later.	
Come and see us.	
Don't forget!	

Yes, of course!	●      ●      ●
It's possible.	●      ●      ●      ●
It's not allowed.	●      ●      ●      ●

**Activity #5**

**Text Level: Make a Telegram<sup>5</sup>**

Procedure
1. Ask the class if anyone knows what a telegram is. Why did telegrams have to be so short?
<p>2. Divide the class into small groups. Give each group a slip of paper with one of the following messages written on it. The group's task is to cross out all of the words that are unnecessary for understanding the core meaning (i.e. cross out the function words). The idea is to make the message as short as possible so as to save money. Once consensus has been reached, the telegram should be written on a blank piece of paper.</p> <p>a. I will be arriving by bus on Tuesday at 7 o'clock p.m. Please bring the van because I have a lot of luggage. I have a surprise for you. My new fiancé will be coming with me. I love you. Kathy.</p> <p>b. My aunt will arrive on Sunday at 4:00 from Tokyo. Please meet her at the airport in customs. She only speaks Japanese, so please translate for her.</p>
3. Groups should now exchange their newly written telegrams. The next task is for group members to work together to reconstruct the original message.
4. Representatives from each group should read out their reconstruction and compare it with the original message.

<sup>5</sup> This activity is a variation on the activity presented on page 24 of Kathy Corbett's The Rhythm of English. (Kathy Corbett: Calgary, 2001). The second telegram content is adapted from page 202 of Peter Avery & Susan Ehrlich's Teaching American English Pronunciation. (OUP: Oxford 1992).

5. Show the original messages to the students. Have a student read out each original message, focusing on the stressing content words and especially unstressing and, where appropriate, reducing function words.

\*To make this activity more relevant to the present day, a variation could be created based on the idea of a bad cell phone connection. In order to understand the message, the listener would need to catch the majority of the content words in it. (Idea from p. 91 of Yates & Zielinski's Give it a Go: Teaching Pronunciation to Adults . (AMEP Research Center, 2009).

## 6. References and Resources

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**Thanks for participating!**

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