Title of Module: *Pronunciation Priorities for Multilingual (ESL) Students*

Writer: Christina Michaud

Video 1: *Pronunciation Priorities at the Word Level*

Introduction

Welcome to our module on Pronunciation Priorities for Multilingual (ESL) Students. In these videos we will discuss some of the biggest priorities for pronunciation work for multilingual college students taking courses in an English-language university setting. We will start our focus from the level of the syllable, in the word, to the phrase and sentence level, but overall we will take a suprasegmental, research-based approach to helping you prioritize your own pronunciation issues.

In this video, we will talk about pronouncing verb and noun endings, saying the correct number of syllables in a word, and stressing the correct syllables in a word.

Eye-Opener: Consonants and Vowels

In these videos, we don't focus on individual consonant and vowel sounds, such as the difference between an "l" and an "r" in "loyal" and "royal," or the /i/ and the /I/ sounds in "leave" and "live," for instance. This is deliberate. Research tells us that these individual segments are not the most essential for clear, intelligible communication, and there are higher priorities most ESL speakers need to attend to. We call those higher-priority items suprasegmentals—aspects of pronunciation that have to do with prosody, intonation, rhythm, and music, that ride above the level of individual consonants and vowels.

Pronouncing Verb and Noun Endings

Let's start with one of those higher-priority items.
Of course, you know that English uses endings such as "s" or "ed" to mark the grammar on some nouns and verbs. As advanced speakers of English, you obviously know the "rules" for these verb and noun endings—count noun plural, add "s"; past tense, add "ed," etc. However, sometimes, even highly advanced speakers of English as a second language don't pronounce these verb and noun endings, either correctly, or even at all.

Mispronouncing these endings, or not saying them at all, is a problem. These endings are more than just one or two little letters: they carry the grammar of some of the most important words in your sentence, and if you don't say them correctly, your listeners may be confused, and may miss valuable content in your presentation while they try to figure out what you meant in the absence of the correct verb or noun ending. Not saying these endings is also stigmatized in English, and can make your listeners think you are less well educated than you are.

Let's focus on the most important of the verb and noun endings for the moment, the past tense verb ending "ed" and the "s" ending on both plural count nouns and on third-person singular present tense verbs.

There are three ways to pronounce the "s" ending, either as [z], [s], or [Iz]. The difference between the [z] and [s] ending is very small and not something to worry about too much—you do have to make sure the ending is there, though, when you pronounce the word. The [Iz] ending is very important because it is an extra syllable—an extra beat—in your sentence. The "s" ending only is pronounced as [Iz], and only makes that extra syllable, after what are called sibilant sounds—hissing sounds like /s/, /z/, /sh/, and so on.

There are also three ways to pronounce the "ed" ending, either as [d], [t], or [Id]. Again, the difference between the [d] and [t] ending is very small and not something to worry about as long as you say the ending and don't make it an extra syllable. The [Id] ending is very important, again, because it is an extra syllable—an extra beat—in your sentence. Say the "ed" ending as [Id], and only make that extra syllable, after the sounds /t/ or /d/.

Remember, in all cases, we are talking about sounds, and not spelling! Silent "e"s at the end of the word do not count.

Some ESL speakers always or nearly always make the "ed" ending an extra syllable. Some speakers always or nearly always omit the "ed" or "s" endings in speech. Always be very, very careful to say these endings.

Saying the correct Number of Syllables in a Word

A syllable is a beat. Every word in English can be counted in terms of syllables. The syllable is the building block of English rhythm, and to be understood clearly, you need to say the correct number of syllables in a word. "Word," for example, has one syllable. "Syllable," for example, has three.

Sometimes students add or delete syllables with verb or noun endings, as we just discussed, but there are also other reasons ESL speakers may add or delete syllables in words.

Sometimes students add sounds to the beginning of the word or syllable, sometimes in the middle, and sometimes at the end. If you add extra syllables, your English will sound cluttered, busy and too crowded, and it will be hard for your listeners to follow you. Often, speakers of Spanish may add an extra syllable at the beginning of a word, saying "es-state" for "state," for example, and speakers of Korean, Japanese, or Chinese may add extra sounds at the middle or end of a word, saying "test-a-book" for "textbook." Use this checklist to think about where you may be adding syllables in words.

Sometimes ESL speakers may omit syllables from words. In addition to not saying verb and noun endings, they may omit entire syllables in the middle of multisyllabic words. If you omit syllables, saying “sport” for “support,” for example, your listeners will be confused, and they will spend time and energy trying to figure out what you meant that could have been better spent focusing on the rest of what you have to say.

Stressing the Correct Syllable in a Word

In English words, some syllables are strong, or stressed, and some are weak, or unstressed. Stressed syllables are louder, longer, clearer, and higher than unstressed syllables. In every word of more than one syllable, one syllable will be the stressed syllable. First you need to know how many syllables a word has, and then you need to find out which syllable in the word is stressed.

Always check the number of syllables and the stress pattern in the word. Use a dictionary to help you. Many dictionaries mark the stressed syllable with a small line *before* the stressed syllable, though some mark it on *top* of the stressed syllable and some mark it *after* it. In this example, the word “intersectionality” is a seven-syllable word, with the stress on the syllable “AL,” which is the fifth syllable in the word. We can call the word a 7:5 word, where 7:5 is the word’s stress pattern.

Here are a few more examples of marking a word’s stress patterns in this way: “Feminism” is a 4:1 word—four syllables, stress on the first syllable. “College” is a 2:1—two syllables, stress on the first syllable. “Socioeconomic” is a 7:6. “Identity” is a 4:2.

For each of your problem words, jot down the word’s stress pattern like this in your notes to help you remember how to pronounce it during your presentation.

But after that, you have to actually stress the stressed syllable, which can feel odd to many ESL speakers. Often students say that they *know* which syllable should be stressed, but if you listen to their English, you may still not be able to hear which syllable is stressed—that is because many ESL speakers speak English according to the rhythm and music of their native languages, which may have more equal syllable weighting, or less up-and-down of pitch than English does.

If you don’t *really* stress the stressed syllable in a word, however, your English will be hard to understand. Native speaker listeners might say that your English sounds “all the same,” or “like a monotone,” or they might not be able to pinpoint what is wrong, they might just feel that you’re particularly hard to understand.

Stressing syllables appropriately can take a lot of practice. Try practicing in front of a mirror, opening your mouth wider on the stressed syllable. Try humming words, so that you can hear a distinct difference in pitch between the stressed and unstressed syllables. Try stretching out a rubber band and forcing yourself to lengthen the stressed syllable in a word for as long as it takes to stretch out the band.

For many ESL speakers, putting more stress on the stressed syllable in words is one of the most effective ways to make themselves more understandable.

Video 2: Pronunciation Priorities at the Sentence Level

This video covers some additional challenges ESL speakers face at the level of the phrase and sentence. We will talk about pausing at thought groups in sentences, stressing key words in sentences, and using appropriate intonation in sentences.

Pausing at Thought Groups in Sentences

A thought group is a group of words that go together. In general, you should not pause a lot between words within a thought group. Instead, pause briefly at the end of each thought group. When giving a presentation, if you are speaking from notes or aloud from slides, try to plan your thought groups ahead of time. This is hard in extemporaneous speech, however, but it can be practiced when reading aloud. Punctuation and grammar often give us clues about where the boundaries of thought groups are, so you can certainly pause at the punctuation. Use small pauses for commas and slightly larger pauses for other punctuation marks, including parentheses. However, in longer sentences, you will probably need to identify more thought groups, and therefore pause, even when there isn't a punctuation mark. In the sentence," Throughout her text, the author discusses the benefits of planning ahead," there is only one comma, yet we can say that there are multiple thought groups. If you need to pause for breath, try not to pause in the middle of a thought group—pausing before the "of," for example, is much better than after the "of," since we think of a prepositional phrase as a single unit that cannot be divided—"of planning ahead."

Stressing Key Words in Sentences

English has stress in individual words, but English also uses stress in phrases and sentences to help convey meaning. We can put *extra* stress on words to show contrasts and make implications. Use extra, or contrastive, stress in your presentations to show your listeners the connection between one idea and another.

Some ESL speakers struggle with stress, and feel that the extra stress I'm talking about now is too much—too dramatic, too emotional, too over-the-top. Students report feeling silly, dumb, and like they're exaggerating or acting when they try to use this extra, contrastive stress. However, this "extra" stress is not an optional part of English—it is not something fancy, decorative, or humorous, that you can choose to use or not use depending on how you feel like it. It is an essential part of the language that conveys necessary information, and your listeners depend on your use of contrastive stress to follow your presentation.

You can practice using extra stress to make contrasts.

Example 1: Although **previously,** airport terminals in the U.S. were largely open, with people allowed to accompany their friends and family right up to the gate, **after 2001**, non-travelers were not allowed inside terminals.

Notice that I stressed the words “previously” and “after 2001,” to highlight the contrast here.

Example 2: **Some** authors have argued that the legacy of slavery and racism in the U.S. can be counteracted as we move forward, but **Coates** claims that reparations for past harms should be paid.

Notice that here I stressed the words “Some” and the author’s name “Coates,” again to make a contrast.

You can also practice using extra stress to imply things to your listeners. Look at this sentence. If you saw this sentence in writing, with no one reading it aloud, you wouldn’t have any context to decide how the sentence was going to end. It could go either way, really. But extra stress helps the speaker imply the ending of the sentence.

Now listen to me read the sentence aloud: Yesterday we discussed the **history** of Facebook, but today we’re going to discuss. . .

Did you hear my extra stress on “history”? That should imply a contrast with the word “future” in choice B, and you should know how my sentence is going to end: Yesterday we discussed the **history** of Facebook, but today we’re going to discuss the **future** of Facebook.

Without extra stress, my listeners wouldn’t know what’s coming next.

Now let me read the sentence aloud differently. Listen: Yesterday we discussed the history of **Facebook**, but today we’re going to discuss. . .

Did you hear my extra stress on “Facebook”? That should imply a contrast with the word “Twitter” in choice A, and you should know how my sentence is going to end this time: Yesterday we discussed the history of **Facebook**, but today we’re going to discuss the history of **Twitter**.

Extra stress is essential in these sentences for guiding your listeners.

Using Appropriate Intonation in Sentences

In addition to using stress in sentences, English also uses intonation in sentences. Intonation is the music of English, the up and down, the high and low.

You might have heard someone say that English intonation rises in questions and falls in statements. That's not exactly right, though that is how many people describe English intonation in a simplistic way. It's true that English intonation should fall, in general, at the end of a sentence. Intonation is essential in English. Intonation helps your listeners follow your message. Sometimes ESL speakers struggle with appropriate intonation.

If speakers *don't* do this—if their intonation rises at the end of each phrase? or thought group? or sentence? (like mine just did) then their English may sound uncertain, unprepared, or even unreliable.

In general, questions that are not yes or no questions also fall at the end: What do you think about this? What did you know about English intonation before this video? How do you use intonation in your speech and presentations?

Practice using falling intonation at the end of sentences and wh-questions, then. Remember, when you are giving an oral presentation, your listeners rely on the overall intonation contour of your sentences to follow your train of thought.

CHECKLIST: Preparing to Read Aloud

Read a text silently first in order to become familiar with it. You need to understand a text completely in order to use correct sentence-level stress, intonation, and timing. Then, read your text aloud four times, each time focusing on a different item on the checklist to monitor your progress. If something is difficult for you to say or to remember to say, mark it on the text. Use any system that's helpful to you. When you're ready, try to put it all together! Put a check next to each item as you work on it. Work iteratively through this checklist, not trying to do everything in one single pass.

1. **Word-Level Focus: Key Words**
    a. ___ Number of syllables and word-level stress in key words
    b. ___ No added or deleted syllables

2. **Word-Level Focus: Noun and Verb Endings**
    a. ___ –ed endings (past tense, passive voice, past participles)
    b. ___ –s/-es endings (plurals and third person singular present-tense)
    c. ___ 's and s' endings (possessives)

3. **Sentence-Level Focus: Thought Groups**
    a. ___ Thought group divisions
    b. ___ Pauses at punctuation (small and large pauses) and elsewhere
    c. ___ Connected sounds (no pauses) within a thought group

4. **Sentence-Level Focus: Stress and Intonation**
    a. ___ Extra stress for contrasting and implying
    b. ___ Normal sentence-level intonation (falling)

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