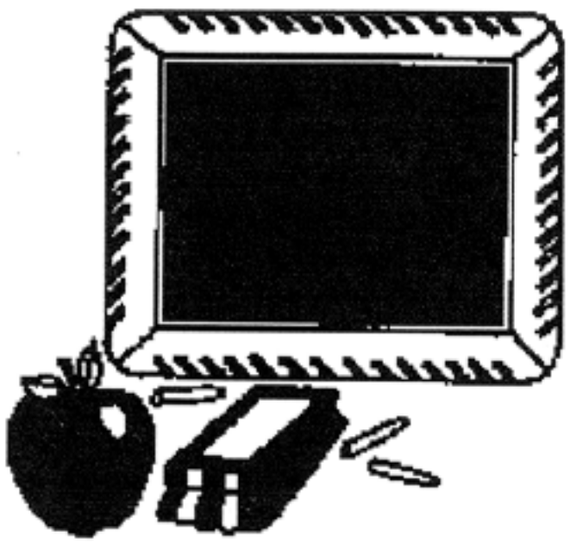

Tips for Teachers

Using Imitation of Television Actors to Overcome Fossilized Speech Patterns

Susan Bégat, Louisiana State University

Prator and Robinett (1985) have suggested that the most "fundamental" way of improving pronunciation in the target language is by imitation of native speakers. However, in conversations with native speakers, language learners tend to focus almost exclusively on the segments and words that are critical to their basic understanding of the message, and they often fail to note the speaker's stress, pitch, intonation, and pause patterns. By helping language learners listen to native speakers with the goal of imitating, rather than merely understanding, we can help them perceive more of the nuances of spoken English and to break out of fossilized patterns. The activity described in this article will heighten the ESL or EFL learner's awareness of the suprasegmental aspects of English, i.e. stress, pitch, and intonation, as well as native speaker pronunciation and pausing. It will also provide students with opportunities to practice imitating the speech of native speakers.

I use this activity with International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) for whom learning to control stress, pitch, intonation, and pausing can greatly improve both their public speaking skills and their general English. However, the appealing subject matter and video component make it an ideal activity for adaptation to a wide variety of age, school, and program settings.

Preparation of the materials

Identify an appropriate segment of a video or DVD recording that features a conversation between just two people. You can also videotape a similar segment from a television program. An ideal segment is three to four minutes in length and does not contain too much slang, jargon, mumbling, "one-liners," or distracting background noise. Transcribe the segment. Double-space the text, and blank out a few words. Then, photocopy it for student use.

Procedure

(The examples mentioned here are from the transcript that appears at the end of this article.)

1. Preview the general content of the dialogue with your students by explaining who the characters are and summarizing the plot.

2. Before showing the scene, give students a global listening task. For example, determine what John does for a living, or explain Daisy's response when John proposes marriage. Then, show the tape and let students use the visual and verbal clues to answer these questions.

3. Change to a discrete language task by giving students a copy of the transcript with a few missing words. Ask students to listen again and fill in the blanks. Replay the tape as necessary.

4. Identify and discuss any idioms or other vocabulary that may be unfamiliar, such as the use of "how's that?" or "stand in your way". By the end of this step, the meaning of all words and expressions should be clear to the students.

5. Play the dialogue again and ask students to mark the transcript for pronunciation, stress, pitch, intonation, and pause patterns. In the beginning, you may want to do this step with your students to teach them the marking symbols that you use. To increase students' perception, model the actors' speech, but exaggerate slightly.

6. After students have marked the transcript, ask them to perform the scene. By this time, students should be able to give the dialogue nearly the same stress, pitch, intonation, pauses, and pronunciation as the professional actors. Allow time for repeated practice of this step if you can.

7. As a closing activity, ask students to predict what happens next in the film. For example, do John and Daisy get married? Or, what could be the "things" that John doesn't know about Daisy that could make a difference? You can either explain what happens or, if time permits, play a clip to show the answer.

Additional possibilities

1. To demonstrate how mistakes with suprasegmentals can affect meaning, change the stress, intonation, and pitch patterns in a line of the dialogue. Ask students if they can detect a difference in meaning. This works particularly well with a line that has emotional appeal, such as "I just know I'm never gonna love another woman the way I love you. I need you. I love you. Marry me."

2. Emphasize native speaker pause patterns by repeating a speaker's lines without pauses. Students can generally perceive the difference in overall comprehensibility.

3. Depending on class size and time constraints, you might hold a class competition to find the best John or Daisy, for example.

4. Preparation of a new segment can take up to one and a half hours depending on its length. Sometimes, I prepare the recording and make preparation of the transcript an extra credit assignment for a student.

5. Although improved pronunciation is the goal of this activity, students also appreciate the opportunity to practice using authentic vocabulary and common expressions in the context of carefully prepared classroom exercise.

Conclusion

Although setting up this activity may be somewhat time consuming, even a short dialogue, such as the one that follows, can provide a rich source of linguistic input. Once the materials are prepared, they can be used over and over with other classes. Most important, diligent practice with this type of activity can help students break out of fossilized language patterns. Finally, although the focus of this activity is on improving pronunciation, students also enjoy mastering the use of particular words and common expressions.

Sample transcript

This transcript is from an episode of the *The Waltons* called "The Revelation."

Notes:

1. Reduced forms of "going to" and "want to" are transcribed as spoken.

2. Four times in this scene, one speaker repeats the words of the other speaker but with very different meaning and hence with different stress, pitch, and intonation. Students should be made aware of these places.

3. An excellent example of contrastive stress occurs in this line by John: "You're only part of my life now, I want you to be all of my life."

Scene (at a table in a restaurant)

*John to the waite*r: Thanks very much. We'll have two glasses of red wine.

Daisy: So how was your day?…

John: Well alright, I was up at 5:00 this morning working on the book because I had to be at the wire service at 11:00…and I typed like a tiger until 10:30 and then came to pick you up.

Daisy: Well, I was thinking today how much my life has changed since we met.

John: How's that?

Daisy: Well…from the very first day back there in Scottsville you were there when I needed a dancing partner. (pause) What was that song they kept playing over and over again at the marathon?

John: Whispering!

Daisy: Whispering.

John: It was so late. We were dead tired. Hanging on to each other trying to keep going.

Daisy: We were a good team.

John: We're still a pretty good team. (pause) I love you.

Daisy: Me too.

John: Daisy, let's get married.

Daisy: Not just yet.

John: Why not? Daisy, if it's the career you're worried about…don't…I mean I'm proud of you in that. I'm not going to stand in your way.

Daisy: Things are pretty good the way they are.

John: I know they're good the way they are and I wouldn't change any of that but…it's killing me when I have to leave you at night. I wanna be with you when I'm sleeping, when I wake up in the morning…all the time. You're only a part of my life now. I want you to be all of my life.

Daisy: I feel like I'm that already.

John: I just know I'm never gonna love another woman the way I love you. I need you. I love you. Marry me.

Daisy: John, there are *things* you don't know about me.

John: Well, there are things you don't know about *me*!

Reference

Prator, C. H., Jr., & Robinett, B. W. (1985). *Manual of American English Pronunciation*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace Javanovich.

About the Author

Susan Bégat, an instructor in the English Department of Louisiana State University, has taught English, ESL, EFL, and French in the U.S. and France. Currently, she works in the Spoken English Program for international teaching assistants at LSU-Baton Rouge.

Txt wd a twst 4 tch lang nd lit

Lydia P. Escober-de la Rosa, University of Eastern Philippines

Working with text messages is similar to working with the Gestalt concept of "closure," that special ability of the mind to create a structural whole from fragmented parts. Our students put this ability to use when we ask them to complete a text that has been transcribed as a cloze procedure, a common language class activity.

In most classrooms, cell phones are considered a rude and useless interruption. If we think about their use from another point of view, however, we can see the potential for exploiting them as language-learning devices. One advantage is that since cell phone use involves both the mind and the body, users do not become easily bored. Another advantage is that text messages require writers to think quickly and to be brief and precise. The activities described below illustrate several techniques for using cell phones to develop English reading comprehension, spelling, and note taking skills.

Setting the stage

Before using the activities described below, the teacher should conduct a session in which some characteristics of texting and rules for its use are discussed. He or she will also need to ascertain how many phones are available and who might need help in learning to use one. During this lesson, students should try these tasks.

1. Practice decoding simple words that fall into categories like body parts (ayz, noz, irz, and hndz) or phrases used in greetings and leave takings (gud am, gud pm, gud nyt, and gudby).

2. Discuss texting etiquette. For example, using all capital letters is the texting equivalent of using loud and angry speech and is therefore rude.

3. Practice focusing on content words rather than function words because storage space is limited in the cell phone. This is the same skill that our parents used when they paid by the letter to send a telegram years ago. This form of language is sometimes called "telegraphese".

4. Practice transcribing a text message into its full standard form.

Spelling Texts

In this activity, students recreate the full standard form of text messages given to them by the teacher. If your class is small, you might give each student different messages. If your class is large you might have three or four variations with several students working on each one. Typically, I give each student three messages to work with. First, students work individually to transcribe the messages in standard form. Then, they compare notes with classmates who had the same set of messages. They

might find errors in their work, differences of opinion, or more than one plausible interpretation for a particular message. Questions can be discussed in class or individually. If time permits, some students might be asked to write their original text and standard forms on the board for discussion. In marking these exercises, I typically expect correct spelling of homophones since the messages provide sufficient context.

Text Charade

This is a flashcard vocabulary game with a simple adaptation for the cell phone. In the flashcard version, teacher and students first have to make a set of small cards with action words. The game is best played in small groups, each of which gets a set of action word cards. A player draws a card from the stack and demonstrates the action without speaking. The group tries to identify the word. If they can, the actor gets a point, the word is removed from the stack, and person who guessed the word pulls the next card. If the group cannot guess, the card is returned to the stack and play continues. With the cell phone variation, one or more people text the words to the group(s) instead.

Text Message Projects

One project that I have used is the creation of classroom collections of text messages in their original and standard form. Students work individually to collect text messages. Then, in groups, they sort, organize, and transcribe their messages. After careful checking and editing, each group binds its collection in final form creating a sort of bilingual dictionary built from their own language experience and interests. They enjoy reading and rereading the messages that they have collected as well as the ones from other groups. This project can be on-going throughout the school year.

Whisper-a-Text

This activity works well for hearing, reading, discussing, and even memorizing shorts poems. Some that have worked well include Robert Frost's "Dust of Snow," William Carlos Williams' "this is just to say," Natividad Marquez's "The Sea," or Angela Manalang Gloria's "Querida." Haiku also work well.

Students should sit in rows with several students, up to 10, in each row. The last student in each row holds the cell phone. The teacher forwards the texted poem to the students with the phones. Without showing the poem to anyone else, they whisper it line by line to the student in front of them who, in turn, whispers it to the next student, and so on, until it reaches the one in front. The student in front, records each line as he or she hears it. As soon as all the lines have been whispered and recorded, the texted poem is written on the board. Then, the final versions are compared with other groups and with the original.

Any deviation from the structure of the original texted poem is an opportunity for discussion. Afterward, the class can discuss the content of the poem itself.

Text me a question

In this activity, students use their cell phones to send texted questions about their homework assignments to their teacher during his or her office hours. The teacher can explain that only relevant questions submitted during office hours will be answered. Any form of access that makes it easier for students to talk with their teachers is worth using, and many students find it easier to ask questions in this way than to call or visit their teacher. In a variation on this activity, the teacher might not respond to questions immediately but might say that the first 5 or 10 questions submitted will be answered in the next class. This can be a particularly good incentive for students in literature classes or other classes with demanding reading assignments.

Caveat

While not everyone in the English speaking world has ready access to cell phones yet, it is a growing phenomenon, and even classes outside a cell phone network area can be introduced to texting. This can be an especially valuable exercise in places where computers are still lacking. The resourceful teacher can introduce texting with a picture of a cell phone showing its parts. She can also discuss the language used in texting and share her phone with students showing them her outbox full of messages. Students can learn how to retrieve and read messages even if they cannot send them. Later, when the opportunity presents itself, the teacher can take students on a field trip to a place covered by a network. With a few borrowed phones, students can experience the speed with which telephone and texted messages can reach other people.

Conclusion

Texting activities can be integrated appropriately into a wide variety of English language courses. The sample activities described here are intended to help teachers think of other possibilities that might be even more relevant in their own setting.

About the Author

Lydia P. Escober-de la Rosa teaches language and literature at the University of Eastern Philippines, Northern Samar. She attended universities in the Philippines, Hawaii (U.S.A.), and Singapore. Her current interest is research on indigenous literature.

Creating Learning Opportunities with Peer Teaching

Amy Delis, Brigham Young University, USA

We may master a skill by practicing it, but as an old saying goes, we truly understand a concept when we have to teach it to others. I have tried to put this adage into practice in my ESL and EFL classes with a wide variety of peer teaching opportunities, particularly with short student presentations.

I have found that student presentations can help me achieve the objectives of my class and can help my students reach new levels of understanding about what they are learning. Short, guided student presentations can be used to preview a new chapter or topic, to review work done previously, or to lead practice of a particular skill or strategy.

Student presentations can be used to help prepare the class for an upcoming chapter, unit, or topic by:

- Providing needed background information for a new chapter or topic
- Providing an overview or outline of an upcoming chapter or unit
- Demonstrating a skill or task that will be practiced later on
- Previewing the form, meaning, and/or function of a particular grammar principle

To illustrate, I have used student presentations to help advanced ESL reading students learn about the cultural and historical setting for a novel they are going to read. When my class read *The Hiding Place* about a family's experience during the Holocaust, I provided my students with some background information about World War II, life in Europe in the 1940s, concentration camps in Poland, and so forth. My students studied the information and then presented it to their classmates.

Student presentations can also be used for a variety of review activities including:

- Reviewing vocabulary or grammar principles at the end of a unit
- Demonstrating strategies
- Teaching a review game in preparation for a test
- Conducting a review lesson in preparation for a test

I frequently use review presentations in reading and writing classes. For example, when I taught a beginning level reading class, I asked a few of my students to each demonstrate one of the reading skills we had learned to review a story we had read. "One student identified main ideas; another led the class in imagining alternative

endings to the story; a third student demonstrated how to discover the meanings of words through context clues."

As useful as student-led preview and review activities can be, class time is limited, and I cannot use them as frequently as I would like. Recently, I have found it most useful to have students in my writing classes work in small groups to make short presentations on the form, meaning, and usage of troublesome grammatical points.

Over the years, I have learned some valuable lessons about how to make student-led presentations more effective. I offer these guidelines for someone who might want to try peer teaching for the first time.

Tailor the assignment to fit the class. Often this means adding structure and clarity to the assignment.

Provide time for students to practice or ask questions. One week before their presentation date is ideal.

Give specific guidelines for preparation. For a grammar presentation, for example, I tell my students to have a one-page handout showing their name, a definition or statement of the principle, and examples. Their presentation must include form, meaning, and usage of the point under discussion.

Give specific criteria for evaluation. A checklist is often helpful in this regard. Students should see the checklist before they make their presentations. In the grammar presentations described above, students earn full credit if they have a handout, explain the form, meaning, and usage of the principle, and hand in a self-reflection paragraph (explained below) in the next class period.

Show the class an example presentation. I do the first presentation and show the basics for getting full credit. It is especially important to demonstrate that you can say something important in a short period of time.

Provide helpful teaching hints for the students. I advise them about articulating carefully, monitoring their speed, using visual aids, involving the whole class, and practicing.

Have students write self-reflections. Generally, I ask for one typed paragraph with a clear topic sentence and supporting details answering questions such as: How did you feel during the presentation? What was the most valuable thing you learned from preparing for this assignment? Was it helpful to work in groups? What did you like best from your presentation? What could you have done better?

There are many benefits of student presentations, some of which I did not anticipate when I first began using them.

- Presentations add variety to classroom routine.
- Presentations give the teacher an opportunity to work on a different level with individual students, in a more collegial way.
- Students have practice in purposeful public speaking skills.
- Students have practice understanding a wider variety of English accents.
- Students have practice in being leaders.
- Students learn to work together in a closer way than simple pair work activities can accomplish. They often create lasting friendships.
- Through writing self-reflections, students have more accountability and achieve greater metacognitive awareness of both their learning and their teaching.
- Students appreciate you more as a teacher!

I've seen the benefits of student-led presentations in test results as well as in student comments and reflections. Although my own use of student presentations has been limited primarily to reading and writing classes, I'm sure that they could be equally successful in speaking and listening classes as well.

About the Author

Amy Delis has an MA in TESOL from Brigham Young University and for the past five years, has taught adult ESL classes in Utah and Hawaii, as well as elementary school EFL classes in China. She is currently teaching at the English Language Center at BYU in Provo, Utah.