

Teaching English rhythm

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Psychological difference

Why is a new language rhythm difficult?

- 1. Rhythm is basic to our home identity.**
- 2. The use of rhythm has a different purpose in Spanish and English.**

Rhythm is basic to our home identity. The first part of language that we all learned as infants (starting even before birth) is the rhythm of our mother's language (Werker & Gervain, 2013). By the time we have reached the age of one, the rhythm of the mother tongue is deeply familiar to us, and we unconsciously tend to apply it to any L2 that we are learning. That is why it is highly

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important that students of English be made consciously aware of how rhythm is at the centre of how spoken English works.

Students and teachers need to be encouraged to think not of subtracting an accent, but of adding a new one for use when it would be helpful. This is known as *code-switching*. Students should be helped to view English pronunciation like a jacket that you can choose to put on or take off, depending on who you are speaking with. This is practical.

Linguistic difference

Stress has a different meaning and purpose in Spanish and English. For English speakers studying Spanish, this difference is hard to hear. The opposite is true, that the English use of stress is hard for Spanish speakers to notice. The reason is that stress has a different use in the two languages. In English, the main purpose of stress is to call attention to the emphasis that the speaker wants the listener to notice.

Rhythm is the controller/framework

- 1. The need to highlight emphasis means that rhythm controls everything in English.**
- 2. It is inefficient to practice sounds while ignoring the rhythm – the clarity of a sound depends on timing.**

Contrast is at the heart of any spoken language. It helps the listener distinguish between sounds or other parts of the auditory signal (for instance, the difference between *have* and *had*).

**Contrast:
highlighting and backgrounding**

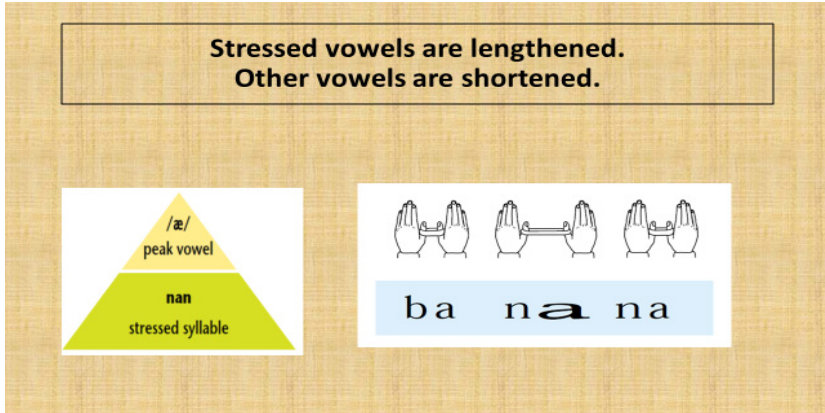


Notice how the butterfly in the picture on the right is easier to see than the butterfly in the picture on the left. That is because the butterfly on the right is highlighted and the rest of the picture is backgrounded. All contrasts are based on this principle.

Word stress

It is helpful to understand the different purpose in the way English uses stress. Spanish uses contrastive stress marks to show different meanings between words. For instance, the words *canto* and *cantó* mean something different. This meaning difference is hard to learn for English speakers who are studying Spanish. On the other hand, stress in English signals something quite different and is mainly signaled by lengthening the main stressed vowel. This is contrasted by shortening other surrounding vowels. English irregular syllable length is what makes the rhythm of the two languages quite different.

Foundation research on the timing of spoken English was done by Dennis Fry at the Phonetics Department of the University College, London. The results of this experiment indicate that the duration [length of time] ratio has a stronger influence on judgments of stress than has the intensity [loudness] ratio (Fry, 1955, p. 767).



Aniruddh Patel, both a musicologist and a linguist, wrote about this characteristic irregular syllable length:

The second factor affecting speech rhythm is vowel reduction. In some languages, such as English, unstressed syllables often have vowels that are acoustically centralized and short in duration (linguists commonly refer to this sound as “schwa,” a neutral vowel sounding like “uh”). In contrast, in other languages (such as Spanish) the vowels of unstressed syllables are rarely if ever reduced, contributing to a less variable pattern of vowel duration between stressed and unstressed syllables. One recent measurement of spoken English finds that vowels in stressed syllables are about 60% longer than the same vowels in unstressed syllables. In contrast, studies of Spanish suggest that stress does not condition vowel duration to the same degree. (Patel, 2008, p. 123).

This matters because English speakers tend to store vocabulary according to the stress pattern. For that reason, if the stress is said on the wrong syllable, intelligibility is weakened, because it is difficult for an English listener to identify the word without the correct stress. On the other hand, Spanish speakers suffer a barrier to efficient listening comprehension if they cannot notice the difference.

Schwa

One problem for Spanish-speaking students reading the printed word is that there is no letter for this reduced vowel in the English alphabet. The technical

name for this sound is *schwa*. But even though there is no letter for it, there is a symbol used in most dictionaries: /ə/.

What is the reason for “schwa” reduction?

Schwa is an essential element of contrastive stress. Reduction in clarity as well as length is a way of hiding less important vowels so that the peak vowels can shine. As one teacher put it, “The less important vowels lose their integrity.” This lack of clarity is not from laziness but is fundamental to the English system for marking contrastive highlighting.




Schwa: any vowel can be reduced to schwa, very short and unclear. /ə/

- That is why Schwa is the most common vowel sound in spoken English.

Kansas	K ə nsəs
Alaska	əl ə skə
Nebraska	Nəbr ə skə
Canada	C ə nədə
America	ə m ə rɪ cə

British linguist Gillian Brown wrote: “From the point of view of the comprehension of spoken English, the ability to identify stressed syllables and make intelligent guesses about the content of the message from this information is absolutely essential” (Brown, 1977, p. 91).

Below is a chart showing the difference between stressed vowels and de-stressed vowels:

Stressed vowels Long, clear	Unstressed vowels Short, clear	Reduced vowels Very short and unclear
 a e i o u	 a e i o u	 ə ə ə ə ə
Very easy to hear	Easy to hear	Hard to hear

(The words *strong*, *regular* and *weak* are better for low level students than *stressed*, *unstressed*, and *de-stressed*.)

The basis of English rhythm: irregular syllable length (below are word stress patterns)

<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> remain amaze arrive arrange	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> mainly soapy reason training	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> attractive atomic arrangement electric	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> principle politics sensitive minister
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Spanish-speaking students should be encouraged to think of this irregular rhythm as a useful tool, however odd they may sound to themselves using it. Students are not being asked to think of “accent reduction” but instead of “accent addition”. The new rhythm pattern is a way to “switch codes” depending on what is most practical in the circumstance.

Reinforcement Activities for Word Stress

Task A. You can help boost students’ mastery of English rhythm by giving them big rubber bands to stretch while they say the lengthened, stressed

syllable when they are practicing a word. This is a kinesthetic way to practice and it is fun. But, of course, it may not be such a good idea for junior high school age! Sample words to practice with:

**CONtrast , CHIna, JaPAN , ENGLand, eLEctric, arrangement,
ASpirin, aGREEment**

Task B. Ask students to write the above words on paper or on the board, making the stressed vowel letters extra wide. Then have them read these words out loud together, reciting in unison.

**I want an ASpirin. They want elecTRicity. This is a good
arRANGEment.**

Task C. Ask students to write the words below. Then underline the letters of the stressed syllables and draw a slant line through the reduced vowels or have them draw a schwa symbol below the reduced vowels.

**ketchup mustard vanilla tomato lettuce carrot
orange sandwich chicken breakfast muffin bacon**

Sentence stress (emphasis)

Spanish mostly uses grammar or the order of the words to call attention to the main point, but English uses stress (vowel lengthening) and change in pitch (melody) for this purpose. Here are examples of the difference between the way English and Spanish make clear what is most important in the sentence. Capital letters or underlining can be used to indicate a stressed syllable.

Emphasis in English and Spanish

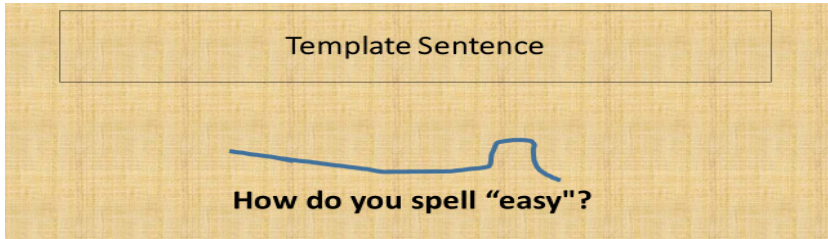
Al contrario, la culpa la tiene él.
Contrast in word order

No, it's HIS fault.
Contrast in: 1. pitch change, 2. clarity 3. length

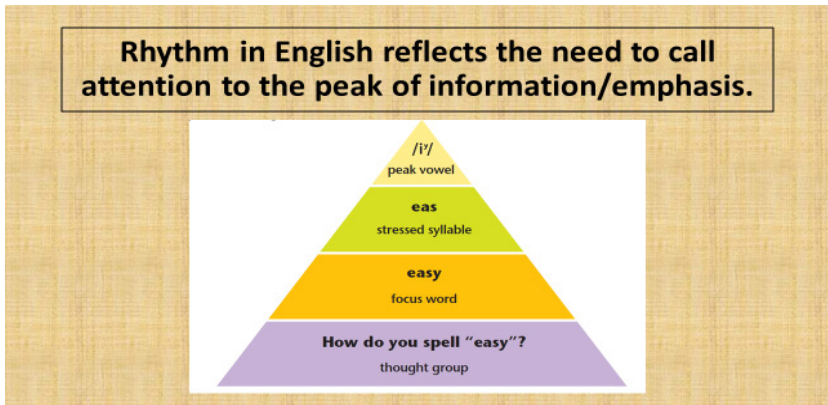
Two more examples of the difference:

- a. The bear was HUNgry. (He wanted food)
- b. El oso tenía hambre.
- a. The bear WAS hungry. (He isn't hungry anymore)
- b. El oso sí que tenía hambre.

A thought group (short sentence, clause, or phrase) has one focus word. The primary stress must be extra long and extra clear. Below is a short sentence with one most important word, “easy”:



This pyramid image shows the way the English system builds from a foundation thought group to give special emphasis to the peak vowel, which is the peak of information.



Contrastive Focus
(notice the lengthened vowel)

Follow that **car**!

Wh**i**ch car?

The y**e**llow one!

Reinforcement activities for sentence emphasis

The use of choral recitation is a help to keep the rhythm accurate, much like singing in a chorus.

Task A. Have class chant the short dialogue above, stretching a rubber band at the emphasized syllable.

Task B. Do the same task, but raising a hand at the emphasis.

Task C. Do the same task, but raising their eyebrows at the emphasis. This is amusing, but is harder than it seems. It actually takes concentration.

Task D. Follow a similar group recitation pattern with the sentences below.




We need CONTRast. We need a compUTer. We need an aGREEment.

I took an ASpirin. This is a good arraRANGEmEnt.

Ask students to notice that small structural words, like *the, is, a, an, and* are typically reduced so much that they are compressed together into a kind of blur in between peaks of information. This compression/reduction of less important words is very common in normal English speech (unless the speaker is being extra emphatic and extra slow). Compressed speech can be a source of listening comprehension trouble for learners of English.

Students need to understand that the reason for reduction is to make a contrast with peaks of information. Practice saying it this way helps listening comprehension as well as intelligibility.

Task E. Have students walk around the room in a circle, saying these same sentences together, making an extra-long step when saying the stressed syllable. This is a good change of pace.

Stressed vowels Long, clear	Unstressed vowels Short, clear	Reduced vowels Very short and unclear
		
a	a	ə
e	e	ə
i	i	ə
o	o	ə
u	u	ə
Very easy to hear	Easy to hear	Hard to hear

Summary

English rhythm is basic to how the spoken language gives “road signs” to the listener. This system can be displayed as a prosody pyramid.

1. The thought group is the foundation: *How do you spell “easy”?*
2. Each thought group has one focus word: *easy*.
3. Each focus word has one primary stressed syllable: *eas*.
4. Each primary stressed syllable has a peak vowel: /iː/.

Prosody Pyramid Materials

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- **Clear Speech (4th ed) Cambridge University Press**
- **Clear Speech from the Start (2nd ed.) Cambridge University Press**



Write to me for file of 50 page booklet:

Teaching Pronunciation Using the Prosody Pyramid

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