A Guide for Pronunciation Fellows in the International Teaching Assistant Program

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Abstract

In this paper, we would like to talk about our experiences working with students from the International Teaching Assistant (ITA) Program at Michigan State University over the course of 2019-2020. The main goal of this paper is to both share our experiences and also offer advice and resources for future ITA tutors. This paper is divided into two main sections: segmentals (vowels and consonants) and suprasegmentals (word stress, intonation, etc.). Dmitrii focused on segmentals and Steven focused on suprasegmentals, though there was some overlap based on student needs. We discuss helpful resources for ITA fellows and some of the difficulties that our students had with different pronunciation features in English. Each section has suggestions about lesson planning and examples of activities from our tutoring sessions. Some of the issues that we discuss in this paper include light L/dark L, R, the minimal pair /æ/ and /e/, and different intonation patterns. The paper concludes with the list of resources for ITA students and fellows.

Authors

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ITA Program

The primary goal of the ITA program is to help non-native English-speaking international TAs to use English more effectively in their graduate programs. The program focuses on English pronunciation. However, it also provides a great opportunity for international TAs to learn more about the cultural norms of American universities and effective teaching techniques. As Fellows in the program, Dmitrii and Steven worked individually with ITAs during 30-45-minute tutoring sessions and held office hours to help students improve their English pronunciation. In 2020, the program was delivered entirely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To learn more about the program, please see the ITA website: https://elc.msu.edu/programs/ita/.

<center>**Segmentals – Dmitrii's Part**</center>

Lesson Planning and Helpful Resources

Dmitrii's segmental sessions usually started with individual sounds followed by words, phrases, and sentences (including both reading/repetition and spontaneous speech production). This structure is typical for many pronunciation resources (see Cox, Henrichsen, Tanner, & McMurry, 2019). An example of a session on the light L/dark L sounds is shown in one of the next sections of the paper. At the beginning of tutoring sessions, it was very helpful to explain how to place your tongue, lips, and jaw when pronouncing English sounds (see Figure 1 for examples). The Tools for Clear Speech (https://tfcs.baruch.cuny.edu/) was one of the most helpful resources in this regard (see Figure 2 for an example). The website includes animations of how to pronounce individual sounds as well as written instructions on how to position your tongue, lips, and jaw. Pronuncian (https://pronuncian.com/) was also a good resource. In addition to illustrations of different tongue positions, this website includes minimal pairs, lessons, and podcasts. In Google, you can also type any word and then 'pronounce' (e.g., pronounce 'pool'). Google also allows you to slow down words and switch between American or British English (see Figure 3) . In addition to L/R, fricatives (e.g., V/F, voiced/voiceless Th, Z/S, and Zh sounds) were particularly challenging for some of the ITAs, specifically native speakers of Chinese Mandarin and Korean (some of the challenging fricatives are shown in Figure 1).
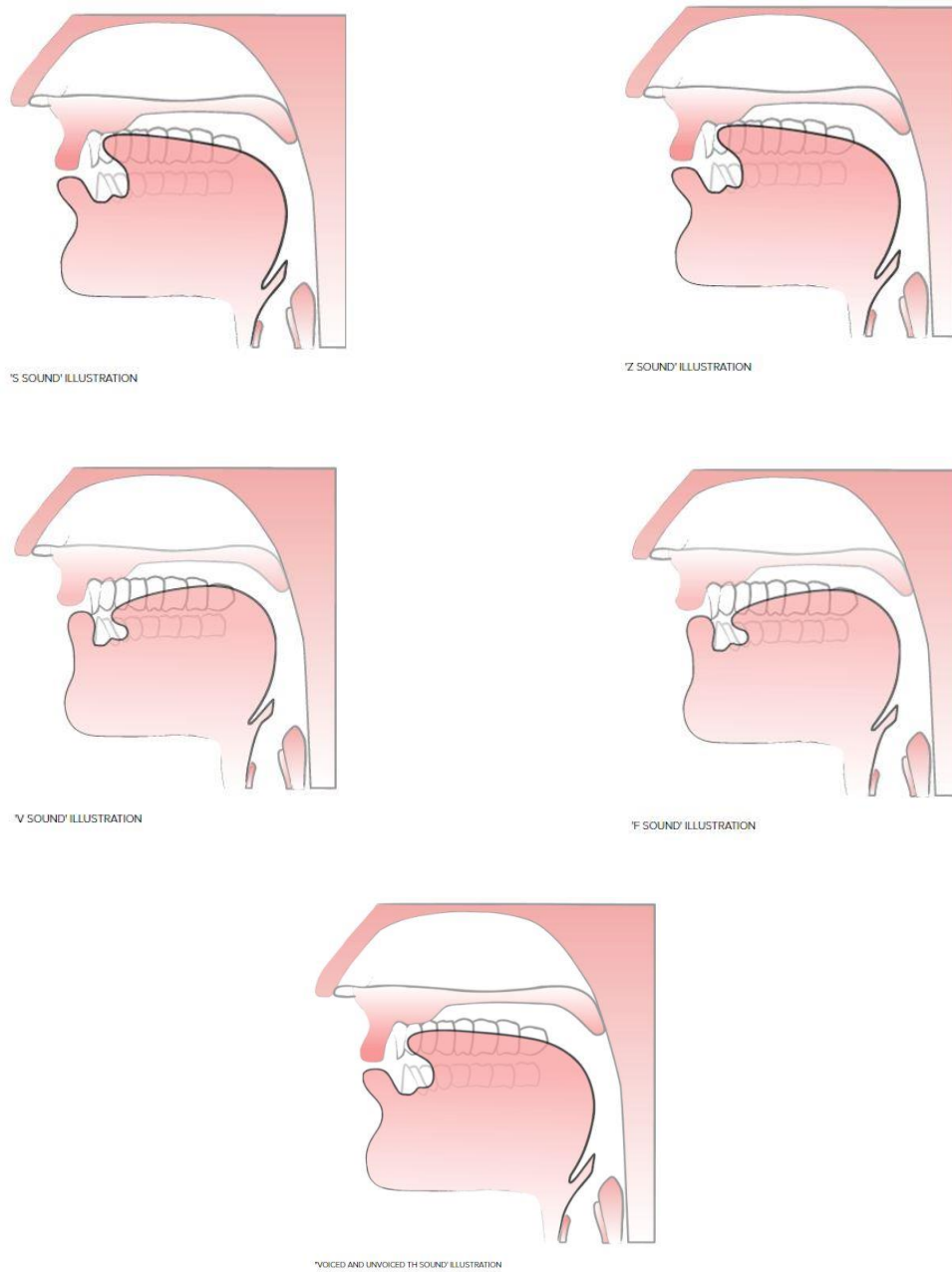
'S SOUND' ILLUSTRATION

'Z SOUND' ILLUSTRATION

'V SOUND' ILLUSTRATION

'F SOUND' ILLUSTRATION

'VOICED AND UNVOICED TH SOUND' ILLUSTRATION

Figure 1. Tongue position for some of the difficult segmentals (from Pronuncian)

Figure 2. Example from Tools for the Tools for Clear Speech

Figure 3. Using Google to teach pronunciation

After practicing individual sounds, Dmitrii's sessions would then focus on words, phrases, and sentences. Home Speech Home (https://www.home-speech-home.com/) was one of the most useful resources for teaching segmentals. This website has an excellent collection of speech therapy word lists (see Figure 4). Each word lists starts with individual words followed by phrases, sentences, and reading paragraphs. Home Speech Home includes examples of words, phrases, and sentences with segmentals in the initial, medial, and final positions. Here are some examples from the L word list: individual words initial (**l**eaf, **l**amp, **l**aught, etc.), medial (be**ll**y, sai**l**ing, ba**ll**oon, etc.), and final (ba**ll**, mai**l**, nai**l**, etc.). Examples of phrases with the L sound include: initial (tall **l**adder, pretty **l**ady, etc.), medial (a**l**arm c**l**ock, he**l**ium ba**ll**oon, etc.), and final (month of Apri**l**, dribb**l**e the ba**ll**, etc.). As we learned from our tutoring sessions, the initial/medial/final distinction is very important for ITAs. For example, the dark L (L at the of words or syllables) was particularly difficult for some of our students.
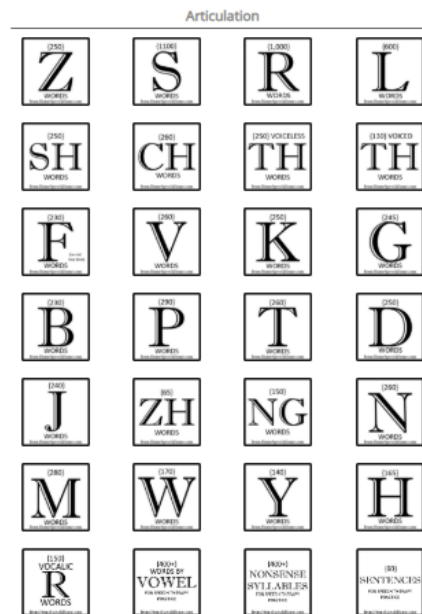

Figure 4. Word lists from Home Speech Home

In addition to individual pronunciation sessions, the ITA program had office hours. The key difference between the office hours and individual pronunciation tutoring sessions is that several students can sign up for the office hours. If you have more than one student attending your office hours at a time, you could also use communicative activities (e.g., spot-the-difference, consensus, etc.) to keep your students engaged. In spot-the-difference tasks, teachers give learners two similar, but slightly different pictures (see Figure 5). The interlocutors need to communicate to find the differences (for example, there are at least 10 differences between the pictures below). Such tasks can be implemented face-to-face or online. To access different pictures and other research materials, you can use the IRIS repository (https://www.iris-database.org/).

Figure 5. Example of Spot-the-Difference Task (Pavlenko, 2020).

Dark L: Resources and Suggestions

Based on Dmitrii's experiences in the ITA program, dark L was one of the most challenging segmental features for many ITA fellows. This is consistent with previous research (e.g., with Cantonese-speaking English learners, see Chan, 2010). The key to the velar dark L is the tongue position (see Figure 6).
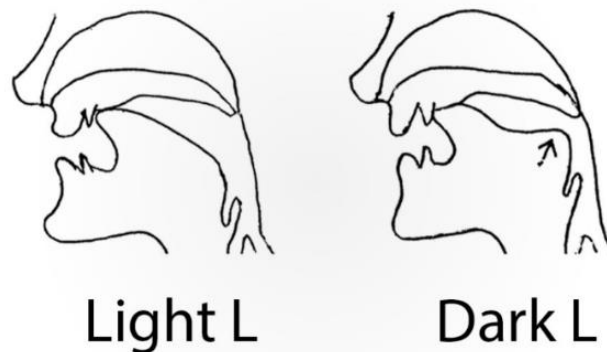

Figure 6. Different types of L (from https://www.callearning.com/)

Really Learn English (https://www.really-learn-english.com/) was a valuable resource when teaching dark L and other segmentals. This website provides excellent examples of light and dark Ls (both individual words and words in sentences). The website also uses color coding to differentiate between different types of L (textual enhancement was very useful in ITA sessions; see Figure 7 for examples). Light L was generally not an issue (unless pronounced as an R by some of the ITAs). In general, dark L was a more challenging sound. Here is some information about dark L from Really Learn English:

The dark L sound can be represented by the symbol ł. However, most dictionaries represent both sounds with the same symbol / l̩ / . That confuses many language learners because there are two L sounds in English… The dark L sound is really two sounds: a vowel sound + the L sound. After making the vowel sound, the tip of your tongue will rise up and press against the back of your top teeth in the same way as the light L sound. The dark L sound is a voiced sound, so your vocal cords will make the sound.

To pronounce dark L, CAL Learning (https://www.callearning.com/) gives the following suggestions:

- The tip of tongue touches alveolar ridge, and stays there. It is not a flick, like light L.
- Dark L has a "uh-l" sound.
- The back of the tongue is raised toward the soft palate.

It is important to note that there are other ways of how to pronounce dark L. For many students it is difficult to touch their alveolar ridge. For example, some of Dmitrii's students followed the suggestions from this YouTube video by Eat Sleep Dream English. However, when the ITAs did not touch their alveolar ridge, it was difficult to differentiate between their dark Ls and Rs (e.g., in 'pool' and 'poor').

1) I like to learn languages.

2) Lisa loves Larry a lot.

3) That is a long blog about learning.

4) It is a really good deal.

5) The small ball fell in the cool pool.

6) Call the tall girl.

7) Please leave the whole glass of milk on the table.

8) Look at the really little flag.

9) I will list all of the final details in my letter.

10) Please send the last e-mail to my family.

Figure 7. Dark and light Ls in context (from https://www.really-learn-english.com/)

Light L/Dark L (and Some R): ITA Tutoring Session

Here are some activities from one of Dmitrii's tutoring sessions about light L/dark L. As usual, Dmitrii would start with the tongue/lips/jaw position (see Figures 1, 2, and 6). This video by Pronunciation with Emma is very helpful too. If the tip of the tongue does not touch the top of alveolar ridge and does not stay there when pronouncing dark L, words like 'pool' may sound like 'poor.' Here is the list of *approximate* minimal pairs that Dmitrii prepared for his students to practice final Ls and Rs:

Four-far-fall

Deer-deal

Tier-till

Pier-pill

Tire-tile

Boar-ball

Poor-pool

Core-call

Hear-heal-here-hill

Bear-bell

Where-well

Tower-towel

War-wall

Spare-spell

Tongue twisters focusing on the R-L contrast were very helpful too. Here are some difficult tongue twisters from the ESL Commando (https://eslcommando.com/2014/02/tongue-twisters-r-and-l.html):

1. Jerry's jelly berries taste really rare.

2. Rory's lawn rake rarely rakes really right.

3. A really leery Larry rolls readily to the road.

4. The road's load is lessened lightly.

5. Lassie Lilly likes Ronny's rulers.

6. Lad Larry rarely loves lyres.

7. Lessening levels of lead really lures lily pads.

8. Revelers revel in leveling levels.

9. Barry's Belly riles with bile.

10. Billy and Lilly pile pyres for file fires.

During his sessions, Dmitrii also asked questions that included words with light L/dark L and R (for contrast). Here are some examples:

1. Have you ever taken **four** classes in the **fall** semester at MSU?

2. Have you ever seen a **deer** in East Lansing?

3. Have you found any **really** good **deals** on Amazon **lately**?

4. Is it important for researchers to publish in top-**tier** journals?

5. Would you like to visit Navy **Pier** in Chicago?

6. How much money in **dollars** would you like to make to be happy?

7. Do you **regularly** work on your dissertation?

8. Do you exercise **regularly**?

9. Do you **clearly** understand your advisor's expectations?

10. What are some **cultural** differences between the United States and South Korea?

11. Will MSU **temporarily** open its campus in the spring?

12. What is the most **popular** American band in South Korea?

13. Do you **rarely** go out these days?

Minimal Pair /æ/ and /e/

The distinction between /æ/ and /e/ (like in 'bad' and 'bed') was another difficult aspect of English for many ITAs. One of the most helpful resources was EnglishClub (https://www.englishclub.com/) as it included recordings of various minimal pairs. According to this resource:

> If these two sounds [between /æ/ and /e/] are the same in your language, it may be difficult for you to pronounce them differently because:
>
> - native speakers pronounce /æ/ in several different ways
> - /æ/ is quite similar to /e/
>
> The clearest difference is that /e/ is spoken with a wider, more stretched mouth. You can make this clear by seeing how your mouth gets wider and wider as you go from /æ/ to /e/ to /iː/.

One of the activities that Dmitrii used with his students was to have them pronounce words from EnglishClub in random order (e.g., bad, man, and, bed, men, end, etc.). Dmitrii would type the words that the ITAs said in Zoom using the chat.

Suprasegmentals– Dmitrii's Part

Lesson Planning and Helpful Resources

One of the most helpful intonation resources was Learn English Today (https://www.learn-english-today.com/pronunciation-stress/intonation.html). This website

provides examples of basically every intonation pattern in English (or as they call it "the music of the language"):

- Falling intonation (statements, commands, wh- questions requesting information, question tags that are statements requesting confirmation rather than questions, and exclamations)

- Rising intonation (yes/no questions and questions tags that show uncertainty and require an answer)

- Rise-fall intonation (choices, lists, unfinished thoughts or partial statements, and conditional sentences)

- Fall-rise intonation (usually within one word; hesitation/reluctance and politeness-doubt-uncertainty)

It was important for many students to see "the big picture" of how intonation works in English. Some of them did not realize that there are so many intonation patterns.

In his intonation sessions, Dmitrii would usually follow this plan:

- Review "Learn English Today"

- Read and repeat sentences list from Speech Home Speech

- Ask questions to elicit production of certain intonation patterns:
  - For example, "Do you like your new car?" or "Do you like your old or new car?" to make ITAs emphasize different words in a sentence and practice pitch.

- Listening to TED Talks and pretending to be a presenter (https://www.ted.com/talks)

o   TED Talks includes subtitles and transcripts. Their transcripts are particularly

helpful as they are divided into thought groups.

For our students, it was also very helpful to see the connection between stress/pitch and

emotions. The following example from English with Kim was very interesting to see for many

ITAs (https://englishwithkim.com/intonation-exercises/):

- Yeah (neutral)
- Yeah. (falling)
- Yeah? (rising)
- Yeah! (enthusiastic)
- Yeah!! (excited)
- Yeah!!! (super excited)
- Yeah?? (uncertain)
- Yeah??? (surprise)
- Yeah... (disinterested)

Figure 8. Intonation/pitch and emotions

One of the activities that Dmitrii did with his students was to make them read "yeah"

with different intonations and he needed to recognize which emotion they were trying to convey

(see Figure 8).

Suprasegmentals – Steven's Part

Lessons

There were two main sections that lessons were comprised of over the fellowship period. Those were consciousness raising activities, and individualized lessons which consisted of mainly suprasegmental practice, but with some individual work on segmental issues as necessary. The practice sessions with ITAs gave students a chance to practice suprasegmental features one-on-one with a tutor. This is important because often instructors do not focus on pronunciation in class due to various obstacles, such as lack of time, concerns about their PI (pronunciation instruction) methods, or not knowing what to focus on (Darcy, 2018). Furthermore, suprasegmentals are critical for language learners as a recent study found that Chinese L1 students who received suprasegmental PI made significant in pronunciation in terms of comprehensibility and intelligibility; their peers who only received segmental PI, on the other hand, those who only received segmental PI did not enjoy the same gains (Zhang & Yuan, 2020). Since much of the ITA population is of Chinese L1, the impacts of suprasegmentals for improving comprehensibility in the classroom cannot be ignored.

Activities will be outlined separately below, and links to resources will also be provided. Given the reality of pandemic at hand, all lessons were conducted online using Zoom. For feedback, communication outside of the lessons and contingency, a Google Doc shared between the tutor and student was used throughout the semester to keep a record of what was done during each session, to leave feedback, and comments on what would be done in the following sessions. In addition to that, Google Jamboard (an online whiteboard application) was also used to facilitate practice defining key terms and mock teaching.

1. **Consciousness Raising Activities**

Steven's students were primarily focused on improving their speech in terms of suprasegmental issues, namely stress and intonation patterns and thought groups, though individual segmental issues were addressed as they came up and those were used as warm-up activities. A normal session would progress first with a warm-up game, often a minimal pair tree activity (created using https://quickworksheets.net) or a short Kahoot (https://kahoot.com) to target specific segmental features without taking away from the main focus of suprasegmentals.

The first step to teaching suprasegmentals was to first raise the students' awareness of a) what suprasegmentals are, and b) the role suprasegmentals play in changing the meaning and tone of a sentence in English. Students may have been unaware of suprasegmentals, namely stress and intonation in English Practice was facilitated using updated materials developed by Steven in the 2019 Fellowship. First, practice identifying where pauses and stress would go in a simple sentence was done with the student. For example, in the sentence "*it was cold outside, so we decided to stay home, and watch a movie,*" students would be asked to read the sentence and identify where to put a pause and which word to stress. So, in the example given, students identified pauses after *outside* and *home*, and added stress to important content words in the sentence. Here, the main focus was to raise awareness and practice adding stress and intonation.

The importance of thought groups and correct placement of stress and intonation goes beyond clarity. Meaning can also change, perhaps in dramatic and undesirable ways, should students make a social faux pas by stressing the wrong word. This is of particular importance to ITAs working with undergrad students in the Midwest who may or may not be aware of linguistic differences, and therefore be less sympathetic to such errors. As such, for the follow-up activity students were given several sentences that hold various meanings depending on the

stress or intonation pattern used. The main purpose of this activity was twofold: first, to further

practice suprasegmentals in a holistic fashion, and second, to demonstrate how vastly meaning

can differ. This practice was facilitated using PowerPoint slides developed by Steven (See

Resources and Materials for Future ITA Use for the link to the developed slides). While the

examples are quite odd, they did help the students realize that meaning does change based on

intonation and the location of stress and pauses. One example is the following sentence:

I love cooking my dogs and my family.

The given sentence above was shown to students on a slide. Students were first asked to

read the sentence, adding stress and putting pauses as necessary. Here, there was a primary focus

on *list intonation*, which students were aware of from previous sessions. Most students practiced

with list intonation here but were then challenged by their tutor to consider what would happen if

the stress and pause pattern were shifted from list intonation to stress on *love* and no pauses

between the list items *cooking*, *dogs*, and *family*. The result can be seen in the figure 8, which is

an excerpt from the practice slides.

Figure 9. Example slide from Thought Group PowerPoint

Of course, in response to this slide students would laugh, but the point was made clear.

Stress and intonation matter, because the meaning can completely change depending on how

suprasegmentals are produced in the sentence (e.g., incorrect stress placement or awkward

pausing can impede comprehensibility by changing the meaning of the utterance). In subsequent

sessions, intonation patterns (such as list intonation in the preceding example) were used as

warm-up activities. For example, the following is an excerpt from the shared Google Doc with

one student:

Figure 10. Sample of Google Doc for one student's warm-up activity and key terms activity

Students' majors varied from statistics to computer science, so each had their own set of terms they needed to be able to define to their future students clearly. By doing the key terms activity we were able to tease apart any segmental issues pronouncing key terms in their field, and then move on to suprasegmental issues with individual key terms (mainly stress placement in multi-syllabic key terms and phrases, such as *hazard assessment)* and full sentence definitions. The students found this activity helpful, as many did not realize they were incorrectly placing stress on common words in their field that they use on a daily basis. For that reason, it is suggested that future ITAs also incorporate practice that facilitates the use of real language students will need once they start work as an ITA.

Mock Teaching

The mock teaching activity was conducted after practicing defining key terms and focusing on stress and intonation within those definitions. Part of practice teaching also included

discussions on intonation in certain phrases, such as contrastive intonation, hedging, and phrases

that can be used when teaching on Zoom and screen sharing (e.g., *Can anybody tell me what they*

see on the slide?). The goal was to keep the focus on pronunciation while also offering practice

with words and phrases in context that can be applied in the classroom. While the feedback and

practice here will largely depend on the students' output during the session, some

recommendations for future ITAs to focus on are as follows:

- Stress placement when asking students to look at a slide/figure (e.g., *What do you see*

  here? Can anybody tell me what they see on this slide?).

- Intonation when asking questions to the class (*Can anybody tell me the answer? What do*

  you think? Are there any questions) – Oftentimes, students can appear rude if they do not

  use correct intonation here.

- Pauses in long sentences – In longer sentences, I found students would tend to pause at

  incorrect times. To point this out, as they were mock teaching, I would take note of the

  sentence they said in full on our shared Google Doc, and give feedback on where a pause

  should be placed, and also why it should be placed there. This incidental feedback was

  beneficial to students because they are probably unaware that they are not pausing

  appropriately in longer utterances. Likewise, future ITAs can also use these

  spontaneously produced longer sentences to alert students as to appropriate intonation

  patterns, or places in their speech where they need to add more emphasis (stress).

Issues and Suggestions

One of the main issues that came up during the tutoring sessions was simply helping

students become aware of suprasegmentals in their own speech. Future ITAs may find that

students at first do not know where to place stress, which intonation pattern to use, and may even say that they do not think their tutor is using stress in their speech! That is why early on it is good to have some lessons dedicated to awareness raising using examples and TED Talks so that students can have some examples as to what they are expected to produce. Be sure to give students the metalanguage they need to discuss intonation as well. Next, given that these students are on track to become teaching assistants, shifting the focus of practice to defining key terms and mock teaching (even if it is only five minutes or so at a time) is necessary so that they can practice the stress and intonation patterns outside of isolated contexts. One way to facilitate this is by using Google Jamboard, which essentially serves as an online whiteboard. This allows students to mock teach, and the tutor can post sticky notes with reminders on which phrases should be focused on. This is especially helpful in the beginning as students can pay attention to said phrases without feeling too stressed. To summarize, a shift from isolated practice of suprasegmentals to more real-world practice is encouraged to help prepare students to teach in the classroom and online.

Figure 11. Sample of mock teaching page on Google Jamboard. This student was focusing on intonation in the phrase in the posted sticky note.

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Resources and Materials for Future ITA Use

Tongue Twisters:

The ESL Commando https://eslcommando.com/2014/02/tongue-twisters-r-and-l.html

Intonation:

TED Talks https://www.ted.com/talks

Learn English Today https://www.learn-english-today.com/pronunciation-stress/intonation.html

English with Kim https://englishwithkim.com/intonation-exercises/

Word Lists:

Home Speech Home https://www.home-speech-home.com/

Tongue/Lips/Jaw Position:

Sounds of Speech https://soundsofspeech.uiowa.edu/home

Tools for Clear Speech https://tfcs.baruch.cuny.edu/

Dark L:

CAL Learning https://www.callearning.com/blog/2016/03/how-to-pronounce-the-letter-l/

Really Learn English (https://www.really-learn-english.com/english-pronunciation-lesson-27-L-sound.html)

Eat Sleep Dream English https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zf5laPOZuos

Pronunciation with Emma https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANa8UWr22x0

/æ/ and /e/

EnglushClub https://www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/minimal-pairs-a-e.htm

Developed Materials

PowerPoint Slides 1 – Focus on Stress, Pausing, Intonation. There are also examples of minimal pair trees which were used for some segmental practice.

-Note: The coordinator of the ITA Fellowship pointed out that these examples should have commas. So, future ITAs should also point out to their students that these examples should have commas, but they are omitted to give students a chance to consider the various pausing patterns that could occur in the sentences.

PowerPoint Slides 2 – Includes some activities that can be done in groups, such as a Minimal

Pairs Kahoot, links to an online IPA Bingo, and tongue twisters.

TED Talk Activity

PowerPoint Slides on Light L and Dark L

Other Suggested Online Resources

Quickworksheets (for minimal pair tree creation)

Google Jamboard