

# Teaching suprasegmentals within a task-based framework to improve speaking skills

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*Many English language learners (ELLs) and instructors have found that non-native speakers are apt to be understood if their pronunciation is comprehensible even if other aspects of their language use contain errors—highlighting the need to integrate pronunciation instruction into language learning curricula. This article demonstrates a task-based approach to teach suprasegmentals and explains why and how suprasegmentals can greatly aid language learners in their ability to be understood.*

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Over the past few decades, research regarding methodologies to improve English language speech production has had a greater focus on understanding the importance of intelligibility over native-like speech. For instance, Meyers (2014) noted that intelligibility in English improved when the instructional focus was on improving fluency rather than the perfect attainment of a native accent because students saw this as a more manageable goal. More specifically, Meyers and others have emphasized the importance of teaching suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation to reach this objective. For example, Derwing et al. (1998) found that learners' spontaneous production improved when they were taught suprasegmentals compared to learners who only received segmental-based (individual consonant and vowel sounds) instruction. Burns and Claire (2003) also note the importance of suprasegmentals by stating that even if students have excellent grammar and vocabulary when speaking, their ideas are often misunderstood if they produce suprasegmental errors.

Alleviating the fluency challenges noted by Burns and Claire (2003) is not only critical for intelligibility but is also vital for student well-being. Derwing (2003) found that misinterpretation by others often makes English language learners (ELLs) feel the need to avoid speaking in English, which in many contexts can lead to social isolation. The social and emotional well-being of students is not only essential for their mental health but is often an indicator of their linguistic success. As noted by Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011, p. 1), "motivation and attitude provide primary impetus to initiate learning... and later the driving force to sustain the long... learning process." If students feel motivated and included by their larger peer group, rather than segregated, they are more likely to be successful not only in the classroom, but in all contexts in which they communicate in English.

Additionally, in my experience, students who come to the United States to study for advanced degrees often come with increased fluency in their reading and writing skills compared to their listening and speaking skills. This may be the result of English language curricula in many countries having a heavy focus on rote skills rather than oral communication skills and a lack of opportunity to interact with English speakers (Sawir, 2005). This causes students without strong oral skills to struggle to succeed academically due to the quantity of interactions and assignments that require speaking (e.g., classroom discussions or presentations). Therefore, it is essential that teachers take action to give students the tools they need to clearly express themselves in the academic arena. This includes integrating suprasegmental instruction into oral skills curricula.

## **Why teaching suprasegmentals can be challenging**

The research is clear: suprasegmental features are critical to communicative competence (Derwing et al., 1998). However, the neglect of this important aspect of language in the classroom has continued because there has been a lack of attention given to assist English language instructors in teaching these features (Celce-Murcia, 1987; Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994). As a result, many instructors feel ill-equipped to teach pronunciation (Foote et al., 2011; Macdonald, 2002).

There are also many linguistic reasons why teaching suprasegmental features can be challenging for instructors. If we examine native Mandarin speakers learning English, for instance, some may not be aware of the differences in rhythmic patterns between the two languages (Liang, 2015). Also, some language learners come from backgrounds that do not have pitch changes to emphasize importance, but instead their language contains individual tones (Liang, 2015). Furthermore, many prosodic features found in English (e.g., assimilation, elision, liaison) are not found in other languages, such as Mandarin (Liang, 2015).

In addition to linguistic reasons, students, instructors, and lecturers have approached me stating several cultural reasons why teaching suprasegmental features can be difficult. For one, the teacher-centered manner in which language classrooms are conducted in some countries around the world do not provide students with many opportunities to practice their speech production. Moreover, students indicated that their English instructors in their home countries may not have had formal language instructional training and therefore did not focus on how to improve oral skills. Finally, many students noted that their instructors' teaching style in their home countries focused more on memorization than real-life practice. All of these linguistic and cultural barriers can make it difficult for the English language instructor to help students improve their suprasegmentals and therefore improve their students' overall speech production quality. However, teaching suprasegmental features need not be difficult. I have found that using a task-based framework is an effective way to engage learners with suprasegmental features.

## **Teaching suprasegmentals within a task-based framework**

Before examining an activity that aids students in improving their suprasegmentals, it is important to first explore why the activity should be accomplished within a task-based framework, defined by Ellis (2017, p. 110) as a method to “cater to incidental learning... to replicate the natural learning that takes place during first language acquisition.” For one, task-based frameworks allow for more real-life contexts (Nunan, 2006). Secondly, these contexts often motivate students because it is easier for students to recognize the value of authentic materials and the real-life settings where they will be utilizing the language skills they are being taught (Dörnyei, 2001). Finally, the goal of speech-focused, task-based work is to increase intelligibility, not the production of native-like speech (Levis, 2005; Munro & Derwing, 2011, Pica, 1994). This concept is crucial to student success because attaining native-like speech is rather unlikely and will often dissuade students from attempting the pronunciation task(s) if they believe native-like speech is the goal. In my experience, explaining this to students can ease their reservations about trying and performing the activities done in class.

## Suprasegmental task-based project

Below I will describe a task-based project I recently facilitated with three classes at different levels in an Intensive English Program (IEP) and a Transitional Program at a university in the Midwest. Each class met for five hours per week. The IEP levels at this university range from 1-5, and I did the project with levels 2-3 over five class periods. The Transitional Program is one step up from our IEP level 5 program, and I used four class periods for them. I modified the project depending on the level of the students' English and I invite you to do the same.

### Warm-up activity

This section encompasses a warm-up activity to engage students' interest and help them better understand the importance of suprasegmentals and this task-based project. Below I offer suggestions for teaching three main features of suprasegmentals: word stress, rhythm, and intonation. Each class that did this assignment took one full class period plus a review in the following period to complete the warm-up activities.

#### Word stress

Understanding word stress is very important to intelligibility. To begin this warm-up, you can analyze the sentence "I found a dollar in my pocket" with your students. Start by analyzing where each multisyllabic word in this sentence is stressed. Ask the students and/or demonstrate where the stress is in each word and why. For instance, if we examine the word *dollar*, we find that the primary stress is on the first syllable and is pronounced *doll-ar*. This is not surprising as many two syllable nouns have the primary stress on the first syllable. The same could be said for the word *pock-et*. It is also nice to give the students the opportunity to try this out for themselves. For lower level students, you could give example sentences for them to mirror what you just did as a whole class. For more advanced students, you could try asking them to create sentences on their own and then do the activity.

#### Rhythm

Another aspect of suprasegmentals that can be explored is rhythm. To start, demonstrate to the class how giving the most stress to one word in a sentence versus another word can change the meaning of that sentence. For example, if a speaker says, "I found a **dollar** in my pocket", the listener would infer that the focus is the amount found. Another example could be "I found a dollar in my **pocket**." Here the focus is the location of the dollar. Like with word stress, you could extend practice by giving lower level students some sentences to work with while asking more advanced students to create their own and try it out.

#### Intonation

A final feature you could teach is intonation. Intonation is valuable because it helps the listener better interpret the speaker's feelings or attitudes about what they are saying. For instance, take again the example sentence "I found a dollar in my pocket". You could read this sentence first in an excited or happy tone indicating surprise and delight in finding the dollar. Then you could read the sentence in a more monotone voice indicating a lack of enthusiasm upon finding the

dollar. You could also ask the students to do the same and have other students interpret the meaning.

Note that the sentence examined can be changed to fit the English language abilities of your students. “I found a dollar in my pocket” is a rather simple sentence that most students would be able to analyze, but a more complex sentence could be appropriate for upper-level students. Also, not all three of the above pronunciation features are necessary to include during the warm-up activity. As the instructor, you can decide to examine just one or two of the features and then only focus on those features during the project, which I will describe below.

## **Main activity**

### **Part 1: Listen to and analyze part(s) of a speech**

The first step of this project is to find a speech for your students to listen to and analyze. I utilized about three minutes of a speech by former President Barack Obama, which suited the low-intermediate to advanced ELLs in my setting. However, about three minutes of any speech that best fits the level or theme of your class is appropriate for the task. I also recommend finding a speech that the students already have background knowledge about or that was given in the last decade because it will be easier for the students to interpret. Finally, before analyzing any suprasegmental features, supply a printed transcript of the speech and pre-teach the gist and vocabulary in the speech to avoid difficulty with the pronunciation activities due to content.

After a speech is found and ideas and vocabulary are reviewed, ask the students to listen to the speech for your lesson’s suprasegmental feature focus area(s). For example, you could work on rhythm by asking the students to highlight which word was stressed the most in each sentence during one minute of the speech and discuss why that word received the most stress. Do this first as a class and then as groups or pairs depending upon the size or language ability of your students.

To practice word stress, choose a minute of the speech and have students mark where the stress occurs in multisyllabic words. As the instructor, you can decide if you want to focus on words with a specific number of syllables or be more specific and focus on a certain part of speech. For instance, you can direct your students to focus on all two-syllable words or perhaps only on compound nouns.

Finally, for intonation, discuss with your class the intent of the speaker for different parts of the speech and talk through how the speech made them feel. When working with lower-level students, analyze the speech in small sections, such as sentence by sentence, and for advanced students, you could ask the students to interpret the intent in larger sections.

Overall, the types of metacognitive tasks above can help students better notice and understand the importance of suprasegmental features when speaking in English and can easily be tailored to fit the level and needs of your students.

### **Part 2: In or out-of-class assignment**

The analysis described above can easily be followed up with an in-class or out-of-class assignment. For instance, have students repeat part one of this activity (individually or in small

groups) to reinforce what was focused on. However, give each student(s) a new sentence, section, or paragraph to analyze. This can be done either in class or as homework, depending on time and the students' need for support. My level two students did this mostly in class, but my level three and transitional students were able to complete portions outside of class. After you have given a part to each student or group and they've had time to analyze it, ask them to present what they found in a format most appropriate to your class.

### **Part 3: Give a presentation**

After students have had multiple opportunities to explore and analyze the suprasegmental feature(s) chosen for your class, the next step is for the students to give their own presentations while focusing on improving those same suprasegmental feature(s) in their own speech. The length, type, topic, and level of difficulty of the presentation can be formatted to fit the needs of your students and class.

### **Part 4: Give relevant feedback**

After students have completed their presentations, it is now time for the instructor of the course to give feedback and/or grade their presentations. Corrective feedback can help them better notice their errors, but it should be balanced with some positive remarks so as to not discourage the student(s). Below is a sample rubric (see Table 1) for word stress, but it could easily be altered for any suprasegmental aspect(s).

<b>Word Stress</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
	Word stress is almost always correct and is based on the speaker's communicative intent.	Word stress is placed correctly most of the time, but sometimes misplaced.	Word stress is used, but not always correctly.	Word stress is rarely used or is frequently misplaced, leading to miscommunication or confusion.	Word stress is not used to indicate key words in thought groups.

Table 1. Sample rubric

## **Conclusion**

Teaching suprasegmentals within a task-based framework can be accomplished. The most important variable is finding methods to allow your students to practice them in the most authentic manner possible by providing techniques that further their awareness, understanding, and self-monitoring abilities. In turn, they will obtain sociolinguistically fitting speech patterns which will help them gain confidence in their production outside of class.

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## Author bio

Samantha Brown is currently a lecturer at the University of Iowa. Investigating innovative ways to help students succeed in their use of the English language through interdisciplinary research is her passion. She also collaborates with her colleagues on a few committees, helping to improve the department's curriculum and testing procedures.

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