

Understanding What You're Hearing: Teaching Pronunciation Features for Listening Comprehension

Pronunciation instruction is often done with the aim to improve the productive skill of speaking. However, not all teachers and students make the connection between pronunciation and improved listening skills. If students' awareness of the features of English pronunciation is increased, then their ability to listen effectively increases as well.

In this webinar, we will:

- focus on how to teach the features of English pronunciation that will help students improve their listening skills
- examine pronunciation topics such as connected speech/linking, thought groups (chunking and pausing), sentence stress, reduced syllables, and rhythm.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE



Paula Runnals



Paula holds a bachelor's degree in Spanish from the University of California, Berkeley and a master's degree in Education from Stanford University. She has over 15 years of experience as a language teacher. Paula has taught Spanish as a Foreign Language in California middle and high schools, and to adults in Australia. She has also taught English as a Second Language and test preparation courses in Spain, New Zealand, and Australia. She has specialized in the instruction of Academic English and Pronunciation. She lives in Valencia, Spain and is a lecturer in UC Berkeley's Summer English Language Studies Program. In her free time, Paula likes to scuba dive and travel—to date she has lived in six countries and has visited an additional 34.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE



Understanding What You're Hearing:

Teaching Pronunciation Features for Listening Comprehension



In this session we will:

- Identify which features of English Pronunciation are most important for listening comprehension
- Understand why these features are important
- Examine three features and view some activities to teach and practice them
- Share resources to use for teaching pronunciation



Why? Goals and Context

- Raise awareness of features of spoken English
- Recognize that it is not necessary to imitate them all, but awareness will improve listening comprehension
- Be explicit about the difference between production and reception purposes
- Understand that spoken and written English are different and that we should teach these differences to students

Whatcha doin? = What are you doing?

Juh wanna go to the mall? = Do you want to go to the mall?

- Emphasize the importance of authentic audio

Features of English Pronunciation

- Phonemes (individual vowel and consonant sounds)
- Word and sentence stress
 - Word stress – which syllable is stressed within a word
 - Sentence stress – which words within a sentence are stressed
- Rhythm (the timing or beat of spoken English)
- Thought groups and pausing (chunks of words that go together for meaning)
- Connected speech (when words link together based on their final and initial sounds)
- Intonation (the rise and fall in the pitch of the voice)

Your Turn



Features of English Pronunciation:

- Vowel and consonant sounds
- Word and sentence Stress
- Rhythm
- Thought groups
- Connected speech
- Intonation

Which pronunciation features do you think are most important for improving listening comprehension, and why?

Features of English Pronunciation

- Phonemes (individual vowel and consonant sounds)

Segmentals

Why not these features for listening?

- Most pronunciation instruction focuses on consonant and vowel sounds
- Students initially learn through memorizing individual words and through written text (dictionary or ideal pronunciation)
- Common problems in speakers of the same L1
- Only a small part of a bigger system of English pronunciation

One segmental exception: the schwa /ə/

- The most common vowel sound in English
- Any vowel A, E, I, O, U, can be a schwa in an **unstressed** syllable
- Many common words reduce to /ə/ (*for, the, a, you, him, can*)
- Many students overpronounce vowel sounds
- If students understand how common the schwa is in native speaker speech, it will improve their listening comprehension

The presentation is about pronunciation.

*The **pre**sent**ation** is **a**bout **pr**on**un**ci**ation**.*

My favorite T-shirt says:



Features of English Pronunciation

- Phonemes (individual vowel and consonant sounds)

Segmentals

- Word and sentence stress
 - Word stress (which syllable is stressed within a word)
 - Sentence stress (which words within a sentence are stressed)
- Rhythm (the timing or beat of spoken English)
- Thought groups and pausing (chunks of words that go together for meaning)
- Connected speech (when words link together based on their final and initial sounds)
- Intonation (the rise and fall in the pitch of the voice)

Suprasegmentals

Our Focus Today

- Phonemes (individual vowel and consonant sounds)

Segmentals

- Word and sentence stress

Suprasegmentals

- Word stress (which syllable is stressed within a word)
- Sentence stress (which words within a sentence are stressed)
- Rhythm (the timing or beat of spoken English)
- Thought groups and pausing (chunks of words that go together for meaning)
- Connected speech (when words link together based on their final and initial sounds)
- Intonation (the rise and fall in the pitch of the voice)

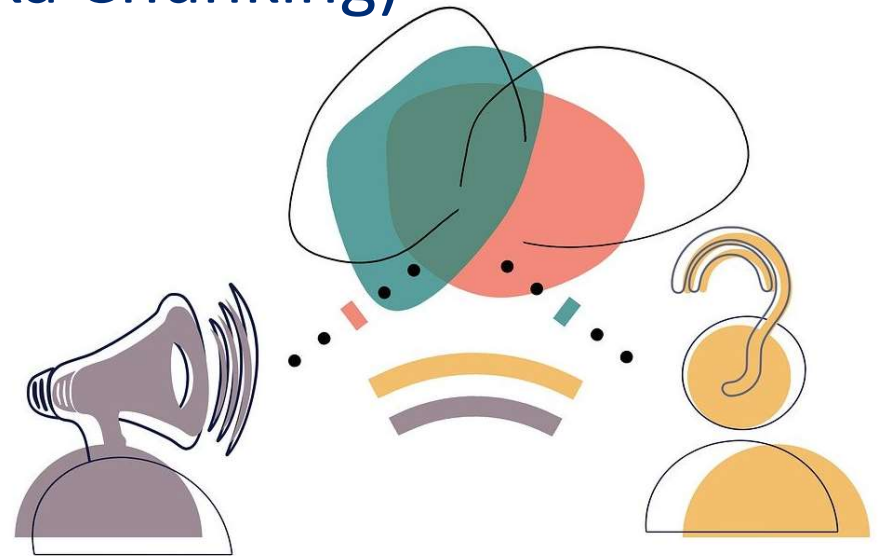
Why Suprasegmentals for listening?

Suprasegmentals (also known as (aka) prosody)

- Make up the 'music/melody' of English
- Suprasegmentals are not visible in print
- Give information to the listener about what is important in spoken English
- Teacher talk and scripted audio vs real world English
- Meets the needs of all students (mixed L1 classes)
- Research has shown that teaching suprasegmentals improves students' communicative competence (fluency and listening skills)

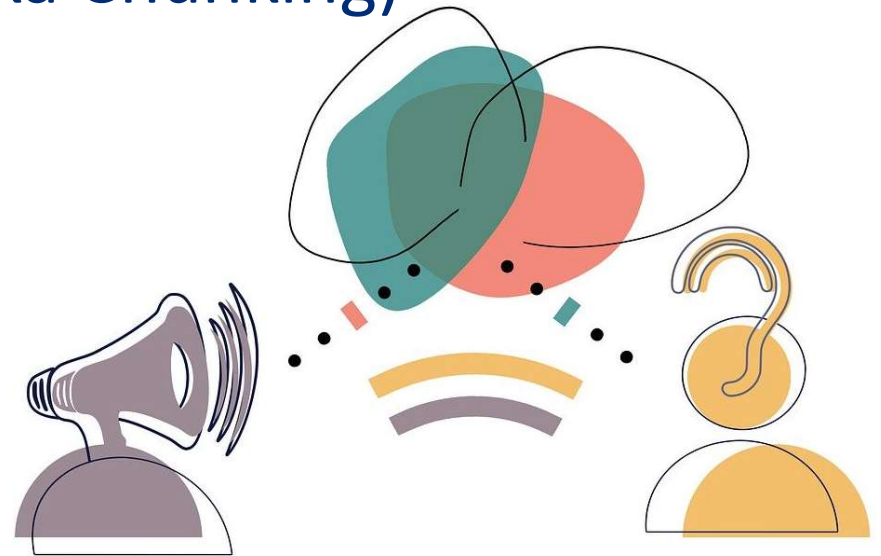
Features of English Pronunciation for Listening

- Sentence Stress and Rhythm
- Thought Groups and Pausing (aka Chunking)
- Connected Speech (aka Linking)



Features of English Pronunciation for Listening

- **Sentence Stress and Rhythm**
- Thought Groups and Pausing (aka Chunking)
- Connected Speech (aka Linking)



Sentence Stress

Stress - What is pronounced more strongly?

- Stress is marked by the sound being **longer, louder, higher** and/or **clearer**

In sentences:

- Usually **stressed**: nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs (**content** words), wh- question words, and negatives
- Usually **not stressed**: prepositions, articles and conjunctions, pronouns, auxiliary verbs (**function** words)

David living city month.

David has been living in the city for a month.

David has been **living** in the **city** for a **month**.

Content Words Activity

Purpose: To focus on content words only

Benefits: Training students to listen to content words and not worry too much about the function words can help improve their listening skills.

Instructions:

1. Pre-teach students about sentence stress and the role of content words.
2. Pick a phrase. Say only the content words in a phrase, ask students if they understand the general meaning.
3. Have them predict the phrase and compare answers with a partner.
4. Give them a piece of a **transcript** and ask them to underline the content words.
5. Play the audio to check, or play the audio first and ask them to underline the content word.

Content Words Activity

Example 1:

David living city month.

David has been **living** in the **city** for a **month**.

Example 2:

Where want go?

Where do you **want** to **go**?

Where does he **want** to **go**?

Rhythm

Rhythm – the timing or beat of spoken English

- English is a **stress-timed language**
 - Stressed syllables are said at approximately regular intervals
 - Unstressed syllables shorten to fit this rhythm
 - Adding in syllables does not slow the rate of speech
- In **syllable times languages** each syllable takes roughly the same amount of time to say

Dogs	chase	cats.
The dogs	chase	the cats.
The dogs	are chasing	the cats.
The dogs	will be chasing	the cats.



Your Turn

What is your first language?

Do you know if it is stress or syllable timed?

If yes, which is it?

If no, take a guess!

Sentence Stress and Rhythm Activity

Purpose: To focus on stressed words and rhythm

Benefits: Raise students' awareness of these features and train their ear

Instructions:

1. Select a poem, limerick, or other text that you will read aloud (or find a recording of one that you will play).
2. Provide students with a copy of the text.
3. Instruct students to underline the stressed words as they listen to the text.
4. Ask students to repeat and use a physical gesture to keep the rhythm (snap, tap, clap, slap or step).

Sentence Stress and Rhythm Example

Example Text

There was a young lady named Bright
Whose speed was far faster than light.
She set out one day
In a relative way,
And returned home the previous night.

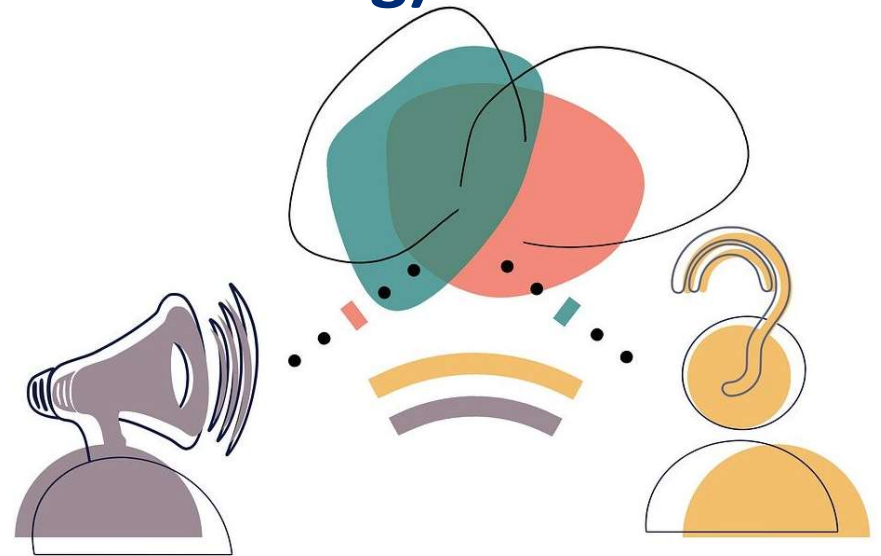
Completed Activity

There WAS a young LADY named BRIGHT
Whose SPEED was far FASTER than LIGHT.
She set OUT one DAY
In a RELative WAY,
And reTURNED home the PREvious NIGHT.

Adaptation idea: Have more advanced students identify the schwas heard in the unstressed words.

Features of English Pronunciation for Listening

- Sentence Stress and Rhythm
- **Thought Groups and Pausing (aka Chunking)**
- **Connected Speech (aka Linking)**



Thought Groups and Pausing (Chunking)

- A group of words that go together to form meaning or chunks of language.
- There is a pause between thought groups; the pause is shorter within a sentence (/) and longer at the end of a sentence (//).
- Every thought group *usually* has a single **focus word**, which is *usually* the last content word in the thought group. (aka prominence)

The first item on our agenda is to address parking.

The first item / on our agenda / is to address parking. //

The first **item** / on our **agenda** / is to address **parking**. //

Why Focus on Thought Groups and Pausing (Chunking) for Listening?

- In written language, punctuation often indicates a pause or end of a thought group. But we can't see this punctuation when listening.
- Changing the pauses can change the meaning!

“2 hour long exams”

2-hour-long exams (length: the exams are two hours long)

2 / hour-long exams (amount & length: there are two exams that are both one hour long)

Thought Groups and Pausing Activity

Part 1 Instructions:

1. Select a text you will read out (or find a recording with a transcript).
2. Remove all punctuation and capitalization from the text, then give students a copy of this clean text.
3. Tell students you are going to read the text (or play the recording) and while listening, they should mark the thought groups by putting **/** where there is a short pause and **//** where there is a longer pause.
4. Read the text, repeating as needed.

Thought Groups and Pausing Activity

Example Text (Kochem et al., 2020)

thought groups are so vital because they are the foundation upon which so many other suprasegmental features are built using logical thought groups can help a speaker sound more fluent and it reduces the cognitive load of the listener which will allow them to better understand your intended message

Thought Groups and Pausing Activity

Example Text (Kochem et al., 2020)

Thought groups are so vital / because they are the foundation / upon which so many other suprasegmental features are built. //

Using logical thought groups / can help a speaker sound more fluent, / and it reduces the cognitive load of the listener, / which will allow them to better understand your intended message. //

Thought Groups and Pausing Activity

Part 2 Instructions:

1. After marking all pauses, have students work individually or with a partner to underline the focus word in each thought group.
2. Discuss the answers as a class.

Example Text (Kochem et al., 2020)

Thought groups are so vital / because they are the foundation / upon which so many other suprasegmental features are built. //

Using logical thought groups / can help a speaker sound more fluent, / and it reduces the cognitive load of the listener, / which will allow them to better understand your intended message. //

Thought Groups text by Kochem et al. (2020) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Thought Groups and Pausing Activity

Part 2 Instructions:

1. After marking all pauses, have students work individually or with a partner to underline the focus word in each thought group.
2. Discuss the answers as a class.

Example Text (Kochem et al., 2020)

Thought groups are so vital / because they are the foundation / upon which so many other suprasegmental features are built. //

Using logical thought groups / can help a speaker sound more fluent, / and it reduces the cognitive load of the listener, / which will allow them to better understand your intended message. //

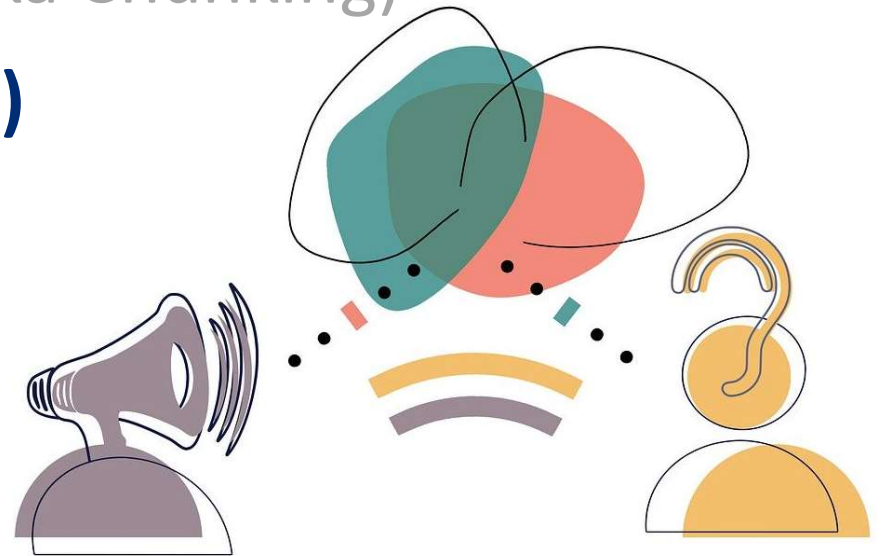
Thought Groups text by Kochem et al. (2020) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Your Turn

What other strategies or activities could you do to help students identify thought groups and pauses while listening?

Features of English Pronunciation for Listening

- Sentence Stress and Rhythm
- Thought Groups and Pausing (aka Chunking)
- **Connected Speech (aka Linking)**



Connected Speech (Linking)

- Words blend together in a stream of speech because of the final sound of one word and the initial sound of the next word

*What causes words to sound like they are
blending together?*

Connected Speech - Links

- Consonant to Vowel Sounds (NOT spelling)

I'm American → I mAmerican

It's over → It sover

Stand up → Stan dup

The man is in our house → The ma ni zi nour house

- Vowel to Vowel (leads to another sounds being inserted)

I am → I **y**am

You are → You **w**are

Connected Speech Activity: How Many Words?

Benefits: Raise students' awareness and increase word recognition

Instructions:

1. Pick any short phrase to read aloud.
2. Ask students to count the number of words they hear.
3. Instruct students to write down what they heard.
4. Compare with a partner and then check the answer.

Phrase 1: "I'm all over it." → 4 words; I'm all over it.

Phrase 2: "What are you up to today?" → 7 words; What are you up to today?

Connected Speech Activity:

Mark the consonant to vowel links

Example Text (Kochem et al., 2020)

Thought groups are so vital / because they are the foundation / upon which so many other suprasegmental features are built. // Using logical thought groups / can help a speaker sound more fluent, / and it reduces the cognitive load of the listener, / which will allow them to better understand your intended message. //

Connected Speech Activity:

Mark the consonant to vowel links

Example Text (Kochem et al., 2020)

Thought groups are so vital / because they are the foundation / upon which so many other suprasegmental features are built. // Using logical thought groups / can help a speaker sound more fluent, / and it reduces the cognitive load of the listener, / which will allow them to better understand your intended message. //

Remember: linking will not happen across pauses

Thought Groups text by Kochem et al. (2020) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Your Turn



How would you adapt this idea for your curriculum, context, and students?

Productive extension activity:

Analyze a transcript & imitate a piece of speech

Ask students to:

1. Pick an audio or video of a native speaker that has a transcript. This should be a monologue not a conversation.
2. Choose 30 seconds of the video.
3. Analyse the speech and annotate the transcript for stress, pauses and connected speech.
4. Practice at home and in class in pairs or small groups.
5. Present to the whole class (or can be done in groups).
6. Teacher and peer feedback.

Recap: Features of English Pronunciation for Listening

- Sentence Stress and Rhythm
- Thought Groups and Pausing (aka Chunking)
- Connected Speech (aka Linking)



Resources

- Pronpack.com
- Youglish.com
- Ted.com
- TubeQuizard.com - Pronunciation for Listeners section
- Audacityteam.org
- <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/learner-english/>

Your Turn



*What are your favorite resources
to teach pronunciation?*

In this session we:

- Identified which features of English Pronunciation are most important for listening comprehension
- Understood why these features are important
- Examined each feature and viewed some activities to teach and practice it
- Shared resources to use for teaching pronunciation



References

Grant, L. (2017). *Well Said: Pronunciation for Clear Communication*. Boston, MA: National Geographic Learning

Grant, L. (2018). *Segmentals: An Overview*. Retrieved from: <https://www.pronunciationforteachers.com>

Hancock, M. (1996). *Pronunciation Games*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

Hancock, M. (2022). *Pron Pack: Connected Speech for Listeners*. Chester, UK: Hancock McDonald ELT

Hancock, M. (2022). *Pron Pack: Word Recognition for Listeners*. Chester, UK: Hancock McDonald ELT

Kochem, T., Chosh, M., Compton, L., & Cotos, E. (2020). Oral Communication for Non-Native Speakers of English. <https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/oralcommunication/chapter/overview-4/>

Walker, R., & Archer, G. (2024). *Teaching English for a Global World*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press

Unless otherwise noted, all images in this presentation are the author's own or are "no-attribution required" under the [Pixabay simplified license](#) or the [Unsplash license](#).

Thank you!

Questions or concerns?

Email: americanenglishwebinars@fhi360.org

AE Live Webinar Resource Center: <https://openenglishcommunity.org/page/american-english-webinar-series/>

AE website: americanenglish.state.gov

AE YouTube channel: youtube.com/StateAmericanEnglish

AE for Educators Facebook page: facebook.com/AmericanEnglishforEducators

AE Facebook page: facebook.com/AmericanEnglishatState



Earn Your Digital Badge



<https://forms.office.com/r/bNnLBJGkby>



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE



Thanks for attending!

The next AE Live Series 20 webinar will take place on
July 10, 2024.

We hope to see you then!

If you'd like to register to receive event reminders for this series,
please visit: <https://forms.office.com/r/NNxdKn8bjW>



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE



Reflection Questions

1. Would focusing more on suprasegmentals (like sentence stress, rhythm, connected speech, and thought groups) change how you teach pronunciation and listening? What benefits do you see? What challenges might you face, and how could you address them?
2. Which ideas from today's webinar will be most beneficial for your students? How will you integrate these in your lessons?
3. What other pronunciation-related strategies or activities could you use to improve your students' listening comprehension?



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

