

A New Perspective on Teaching English Pronunciation: Rhythm

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Traditionally, the teaching of English pronunciation equals the teaching of English sounds: vowels and consonants. For English learners, many of them also believe that if they want to get good pronunciation, they just need to work on individual sounds. Learning these sounds, indeed, is essential for students, especially for beginning learners. Yet, the question is, does mastering individual sounds of English guarantee that a student's pronunciation is good? The answer is probably NO! According to our teaching experience at Chia Nan College, quite a large number of students, though having fairly good control of sounds, still speak English in a way that it sounds choppy, foreign, or sometimes even not comprehensible. What makes their English speech unnatural? A major factor resulting in this is the improper English rhythm. What is English rhythm? Why is English rhythm difficult for Chinese students? What are the most common types of errors that Chinese students make in English rhythm? What techniques and tools are useful in the teaching of English rhythm?

In addressing the questions posed above, this paper will attempt to explore the features of English rhythm and suggest a number of techniques for helping students speak English with good rhythm. The focus of the discussion will be on: (1) the difference between English rhythm and Chinese rhythm, (2) word rhythm in English, and (3) sentence rhythm in English. In order to provide a background knowledge of English rhythm, a brief comparison between English rhythm and Chinese rhythm is first introduced. In the second and third part, some common problems of Chinese students in word rhythm and sentence rhythm are discussed respectively. A variety of practical kinesthetic, visual, and aural teaching tools and activities are then presented to solve these problems. The workshop which this paper is based on was presented at the Fourth International Symposium And Book Fair on English Teaching at National Kaohsiung University of Education on Nov. 18, 1995.

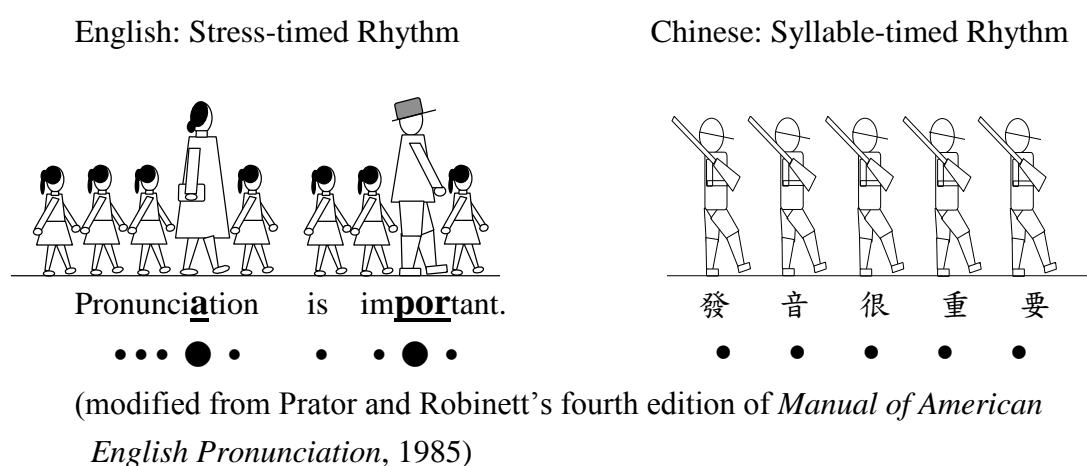
The Difference between English Rhythm and Chinese Rhythm

Before we discuss the English rhythm, we may have to explain what rhythm is. What is rhythm? In Dauer's *Accurate English* (1993), the unit "Rhythm" opens:

When we speak naturally, words are parts of phrases and longer sentences. What we hear is a sequence of syllables in time, like notes in music. The time relationships among syllables make up the rhythm of language. (p. 83)

Rhythm, actually, is timing patterns among syllables. However, the timing patterns are not the same in all languages. There are, particularly, two opposite types of rhythm in languages: stress-timed and syllable-timed. According to Mackay (1985), stress-timed rhythm is determined by stressed syllables, which occur at regular intervals of time, with an uneven and changing number of unstressed syllables between them; syllable-timed rhythm is based on the total number of syllables since each syllable takes approximately the same amount of time. English, with an alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, is obviously stress-timed, while Chinese, with nearly equal weight and time in all syllables, is syllable-timed. These two languages, therefore, are very different in rhythm.

Unfortunately, many Chinese students seem not to be aware of this striking difference. As a consequence, they tend to apply the rhythm of Chinese (syllable-timed rhythm) when speaking English. They do not even know that their English speech rhythm is affected by the rhythm of Chinese, nor do they know that this improper rhythm makes their English speech unnatural and hard to be understood. In order to help students realize that English rhythm is so different from Chinese rhythm, we can use the following illustrations to show a contrast between the two rhythms.



In the above illustrations, the English rhythm is composed of adults (stressed syllables) and children (unstressed syllables), which suggests that English has different syllable length and weight; by contrast, the Chinese rhythm is composed of

soldiers (each soldier represents a syllable), which suggests that Chinese has the same length and weight in all syllables. Through the illustrations, it is easy for the students to perceive the difference between the English rhythm and the Chinese rhythm.

Word Rhythm in English

English words can be composed of one or more syllables. In all words of two or more syllables, one syllable (stressed syllable) is stronger than the others (unstressed syllables) in the same word. A stressed syllable is louder, longer, clearer, and higher pitched than unstressed syllables. Thus, the combination of stressed and unstressed syllables helps to create the word rhythm in English, which displays an alternate change in strength, length, and pitch of syllables.

Why is syllable stress so important in English? Gilbert (1994) has explained that “this is because English speakers appear to store vocabulary with stress patterns, so a stress mistake can throw a conversation off track, especially if the speaker’s control of English vowel sounds is uncertain” (p.40). Therefore, the more frequently speakers misuse stress, the more effort listeners have to make to understand what they say.

Common Problems in Word Rhythm

Not knowing the importance of syllable stress in English, many Chinese students tend to ignore stress patterns of English words. They randomly put stress in any one of the syllables in a word, and sometimes such a stress mistake can cause its meaning changed. For example, a student once said, “The movie I saw yesterday was TERrific.” In the word “terrific,” he put the stress on the first syllable, rather than the second one; therefore, what we heard was not “terRific” but “TERrified,” for we listeners usually get the meaning of a word based on its stress pattern.

Another common problem that our students have with English word rhythm is that they tend to give each syllable almost the same strength, length, and pitch. Probably because stress in each Chinese syllable is equally strong, they treat English words in the same way. They seem not to know how to weaken and reduce unstressed syllables. A very good example is the word “CHOcolate.” Many Chinese students say “CHO CO LATE,” which is apparently influenced by the rhythm of Chinese. In English, a very important characteristic that our students often miss is that vowels in unstressed syllables are mostly reduced to a short central vowel / ə / or / ɪ /, as the vowels reduced in the second and third syllable of “CHOcolate.” It is the vowel reduction that makes the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables very clear in English. Gilbert (1987) has pointed out that “clarity of the vowel is a

2. baseball → spaceship
 ● ● ● ●
 high school → instant noodles

Rule: In compound nouns, the main stress is on the first part.

(c) Practice varying stress to alter meaning.

This activity provides students the experience of using different stress patterns to get different meanings. It helps students be aware of the effects of stress patterns on meaning. For example, in the words “**h**istory” and “his **s**tory”, it is the different stress patterns, not sounds, that result in the difference in meaning. In Gilbert’s *Clear Speech* (1993), the unit “Word Stress Patterns” offers a well-designed activity for this purpose.

Examples: Students work in pairs. Student 1 says sentence (a) or (b). Notice that the stress patterns are different in sentence (a) and (b). Student 2 has to identify the stress pattern that Student 1 uses and then choose an appropriate answer.

- | | | |
|----|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. | (a) Is it e lementary? | No, it’s advanced. |
| | (b) Is it a l emon tree? | No, an orange tree. |
| 2. | (a) Is that E urope? | No, it’s China. |
| | (b) Is that your r ope? | No, it’s hers. |
| 3. | (a) What’s in the d esert? | Sand. |
| | (b) What’s in the d essert? | Sugar. (p.69) |

This activity is especially helpful to have students pay attention to stress in compound nouns. In compound nouns, the first part has stress. If stress is put on the second part, the meaning is changed.

Examples: They grow flowers in the **g**reenhouse.
(a glass building which protects plants from bad weather.)
There are many flowers in the green **h**ouse.
(a house which is green-colored.)

2. Stress Production

(a) Introduce the characteristics of stressed and unstressed syllables in English.

	<i>loudness</i>	<i>length</i>		<i>pitch</i>
		vowel length	vowel clarity	
<i>Stressed syllables</i>	loud	long	full	high
<i>Unstressed syllables</i>	quiet	short	reduced	low

This chart is made to help students understand how stressed syllables differ from unstressed ones in the three features: loudness, length and pitch. Each feature is indispensable in the production of word rhythm in English. Stressed syllables are not only louder but also longer and higher-pitched than unstressed syllables. Also vowels in unstressed syllables are reduced so as to make the syllables shorter. Students need to know these characteristics to be able to produce stress correctly. Besides, students can use this chart to examine which characteristic(s) they do not produce in saying English words with more than one syllable. It makes students aware of these characteristics as well as identifying their problems in the production of word stress.

(b) Clap hands, tap on the desk, or play simple rhythm instruments to emphasize loudness of a stressed syllable.

The teacher can use these auditory techniques to produce a strong beat in a stressed syllable and a weak beat in an unstressed syllable. They are very effective in helping students recognize the beat strength in syllables, especially when they are not able to distinguish which syllable is louder than others by hearing words. When teaching an English word, the teacher can say a word and, at the same time, clap, tap, or play simple rhythm instruments like a tambourine or a toy hammer to emphasize the feature of loudness.

(c) Use rubber bands as a visual image for length variation in syllables.

The teacher has students pull a wide rubber band between the two thumbs while saying a word. Stretch it out during the stressed syllable but leave it short during other unstressed syllables. It provides a visual image of the variable length of the syllables as well as a kinesthetic tool that mimics the actual effort involved in lengthening a stressed syllable (Gilbert, 1994). The teaching purpose is to help students avoid

pronouncing each syllable at the same length, which appears to be the most common problem for Chinese students. They can usually lengthen a syllable, but cannot shorten a syllable. The key point is to teach students to reduce vowels in unstressed syllables. For example, the vowel “a” in “woman” is reduced to /ə/, not like a full vowel /æ/ in “manner.” In Gilbert’s *Clear Speech* (1993), there are many activities involving the use of rubber bands.

(d) Use kazoos, humming, or hand gestures to indicate pitch change.

The idea of using a toy kazoo was originated by Gilbert (1984). She suggested using this tool to help students pay attention to the pitch change of English. A kazoo can amplify the vibration of the vocal cords, so by humming into it, the teacher can give a sharp demonstration of pitch change in a word or in a sentence. Since kazoos are not available in Taiwan, big-size straws can be a substitute, or if the teacher’s voice is loud enough, humming loudly can work well too. The purpose of using any one of them is to offer students a speech model presented by pitch change only, allowing them to concentrate on this specific point (Gilbert, 1994).

Another technique to help students say an English word with correct pitch change is using hand gestures. The teacher can imagine himself as a concert conductor, holding his hands up when the pitch is high and down when the pitch is low. The up-and-down waving gestures provide a visual effect showing students how pitch changes among syllables.

(e) Play a stress matching game.

Students listen to the word rhythm made from a toy hammer, clapping, tapping, or a kazoo by the teacher or a class member, and then, from a vocabulary list, find out the word which matches the rhythm they hear and then say the word loudly. This activity can be done in the whole class or in groups. The purpose of this game is to improve students’ discrimination and production of word stress.

Examples:	German	Indian	Korean
	● ●	● ● ●	● ● ●
	Japanese	Chinese	Canadian
	● ● ●	● ●	● ● ● ●

You hear: ● ● ●
 So you say the word: Korean.

(f) Use backchaining to practice stress patterns of long words.

Backchaining is to have students repeat the word by starting with the last syllable and extending backwards to the beginning, which is especially helpful in dealing with a long word with more than three syllables. This technique can help students say a word with natural rhythm, avoiding the tendency to say a word so slowly as to make each syllable equally clear by attempting to chain it forwards.

Example: Chain the word “economics” backwards.

mics → **no**-mics → co-**no**-mics → e-co-**no**-mics
• ● • • ● • • • ● •

Sentence Rhythm in English

Just as most words have stressed and unstressed syllables, and so do sentences. Sentence rhythm, like word rhythm, is created by an alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. For example:

pronunciation He's at the station.
• • • ● • • • • ● •

In the above example, the rhythm of the sentence is exactly the same as the rhythm of the word. From this point of view, it seems that students equipped with the ability of producing good word rhythm should be able to get good sentence rhythm. This may not be true. Why? When students learn to speak English sentences, in particular longer sentences, they immediately face another problem besides the problems with word rhythm. To have good sentence rhythm, they not only need to make a clear difference between stressed and unstressed syllables, but should also know how to group syllables together into larger units(Dauer, 1993, p.95).

Common Problems in Sentence Rhythm

The two important features of sentence rhythm, stress and syllables grouping, causes much difficulty to many Chinese students. When speaking English sentences, many of them stress almost every word, very much like what they do in Chinese. Often times, their speech is full of choppy words, and each word seems to have almost the same weight and length. Grant (1993) reminds learners that “if you have a tendency to stress every word and syllable equally, you might sound abrupt, angry,

adamant, or impatient without intending to” (p. 98). On the other hand, if you fail to show which words are stressed or unstressed, the listener will probably have difficulty understanding the meaning of the sentence due to the lack of clear stressed words. Without proper stress in a sentence, the meaning is impaired. As Browne and Huckin (1987) has pointed out, “It is precisely such overuse and misuse of stress that produces the foreign-sounding speech rhythms that make speech comprehension difficult” (p. 54).

Another common problem with sentence rhythm is that they tend to pronounce words separately, and that they randomly pause wherever they want, especially when they are asked to read aloud a longer sentence where there is very few punctuation to help them out. Many of them simply do not have the idea that grouping syllables appropriately makes listeners easier to catch a small unit of message in ongoing speech. Again, this tendency may be caused by their mother tongue, Chinese, which does not need linking, or caused by written words, which are separated in print. Failure to do appropriate pausing and linking in English makes the speech sounds choppy and unclear.

Techniques and Tools in Teaching Sentence Rhythm

One popular way to teach sentence rhythm, again, is to have students listen and repeat after the tape or the teacher to imitate. It can be effective for some students, but it may not work for many others. How can we better help students achieve a good sentence rhythm in English? In the following discussion, we will present two aspects of teaching sentence rhythm: (1) sentence stress pattern building and (2) rhythmic grouping: pausing and linking. A number of teaching techniques and activities will then be introduced.

1. Sentence Stress Pattern Building

(a) Learn the “basic” emphasis pattern of English.

In English, certain words in sentences are strong and other words are weak. Students need to be taught which words are stressed and which are unstressed. Gilbert (1987) has stated that the base line in English speech is a basic emphasis pattern. Therefore, we recommend that teachers introduce the basic emphasis pattern of English to students.

The following chart shows this pattern well. It first tells students that words can be divided into two categories: content words and structure words. Content words are those which carry the basic meaning of a sentence, such as the noun “cat” or the verb

“runs.” On the other hand, structure words, also called function words, show grammatical relationships, such as the pronoun “he” and the preposition “of.” Second, the chart tells students that content words are usually emphasized (stressed), while structure words, are usually de-emphasized (unstressed) and reduced.

The “basic” emphasis pattern of English

Content Words (emphasized)	<i>nouns</i> (cat)	<i>main verbs</i> (runs)	<i>adverbs</i> (quickly)	<i>adjectives</i> (happy)
	<i>question words</i> (who, what, where, when, why, how)		<i>demonstrative pronouns</i> (this, that, these, those)	
Structure Words (de-emphasized)	<i>pronouns</i> (he, she)	<i>prepositions</i> (of, to, at)	<i>articles</i> (a, an, the)	<i>“to be” verbs</i> (is, was)
	<i>“to have” verbs</i> (has, have, had)	<i>conjunctions</i> (and, but)	<i>auxiliary verbs</i> (can, have, do, will)	

(adopted and modified from Gilbert, 1993, p.72)

(b) Find content words.

Before asking students to read sentences aloud, the teacher can have students circle or underline content words (stressed words) in sentences. Then students have to give these words extra emphasis when reading sentences. The purpose is to improve students’ knowledge of stress placement in English sentences.

Example: John wants to be an actor, and he wants to live in Hollywood.

For a further exercise, students can be asked to find stressed syllables, instead of stressed words, in sentences. Since some content words have more than one syllable, students also need to know which syllable in a content word is stressed. The teacher can put a little circle under each syllable and have students blacken the circle which indicates a stressed syllable.

Example: John wants to be an actor, and he wants to live in Hollywood.

• • ○○○ ●○ ○ ○ • ○ ● ○ ● ○

(c) Listen for stressed words.

Students listen to sentences read by the teacher or recorded in a tape and then circle or underline stressed words in sentences. Pay special attention to the stress features: loudness, length, and pitch.

Example: A: The bus is ready.

B: Yeah, and Mom and Dad are waiting at the bus station.

(d) Tap, clap, or play rhythm instruments to produce strong and weak beats.

After finding content words in sentences, students can read sentences aloud based on their stress placement and at the same time tap on the desk, clap hands, or play simple rhythm instruments like a toy hammer to produce strong and weak beats in sentences. The purpose is to help students become more familiar with English sentence stress patterns through this kinesthetic activity.

(e) Practice saying rhymes to catch sentence stress patterns naturally.

Rhymes always show clear examples of rhythm in language. Students can learn stress patterns in English effectively by saying English rhymes. In order to say an English rhyme well, students have to stress certain words and weaken (reduce) others. It helps students acquire its natural rhythm easily.

Example: Jack and Jill went up the hill,

• ○ • ○ • ○ •

To fetch a pail of water;

○ • ○ • ○ • ○

Jack fell down and broke his crown,

• ○ • ○ • ○ •

And Jill came tumbling after.

○ • ○ • ○ • ○

In Grant's *Well Said* (1993), she provides an exercise which applies the rhythm of rhymes to that of ordinary sentences. In this way, students can say the sentences with correct rhythm without too much effort. It helps them to keep the rhythm patterns in sentences naturally.

Examples:

• o • o • o •	• o • o • o •
TWINKle, TWINKle LITtle STAR,	HOW I WONder WHAT you ARE
(Let me help you find your keys.)	(Find a space and park your car.)
(Don't forget the bread and milk.)	(Thanks a lot for all your help.)
(Tell me why you don't agree.)	(Don't forget to leave a tip.)

(p. 105)

In addition to rhymes, reading aloud poems, song lyrics, jazz chants, or proverbs is also very helpful in practicing sentence rhythm in English.

2. Rhythmic Grouping: Pausing and Linking

(a) Find thought groups.

Students need to know where to pause in sentences when saying or reading a passage aloud. If pauses are not put in the right places, the listener will have difficulty processing the meaning of the sentences, even if the individual words are pronounced well. The teacher, therefore, has to teach students how to pause properly. The key point is to find thought groups. Dauer (1993) offers some treatment of pausing, which is very helpful in guiding students to pause:

Knowledge of English grammar and of the meaning of the passage are necessary to figure out where to pause. Pauses occur:

1. before punctuation marks (, . ; : ? ! “),
2. before conjunctions (and, or, but, which, that, since...), and
3. between grammatical units such as phrases, clauses, and sentences.

(p. 95)

However, not everyone pauses or groups words in the same place. The most important thing is that the speaker's pausing must be able to guide the listener to follow his meaning or thought. Also, a thought group is a rhythm group. It must contain at least one stressed syllable in English. The teacher can have students put a slash (/) between thought groups before asking them to read a passage aloud, and then have them compare their pause placement with each other and also discuss the reasons why they pause in different places.

Example:

Once upon a starless midnight / there was an owl / who sat on the
branch of an oak tree./ Two ground moles / tried to slip quietly by, /
unnoticed./ “You!” / said the owl. / “Who?” / they quavered, / in fear
and astonishment, / for they could not believe / it was possible / for
anyone to see them / in that thick darkness. /

(from *The Owl Who Was God* by James Thurber)

(b) Listen for thought groups.

Students listen to sentences read by the teacher or recorded in a tape and then put a slash (/) between the thought groups. The purpose is to draw students’ attention to pausing in sentences.

- Examples: 1. Mary made an appointment / with the dentist / on Monday.
2. After the movie, / they went to a bar / to have beer.

(c) Practice varying pause placement to alter meaning.

This activity provides students the experience of using pauses in different places to get different meanings. It helps students be aware of the effects of pause placement on meaning. In Gilbert’s *Clear Speech* (1993), there is some practice dealing with this:

Examples: Students work in pairs. Student 1 says either sentence (a) or (b) and then asks the question that follows. Student 2 answers the question.

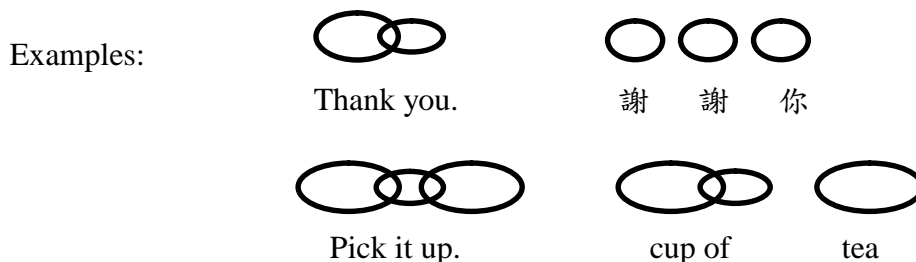
1. (a) The teacher said, “That student is lazy. ” the teacher
(b) “The teacher,” said that student, “is lazy.” that student
 Question: Who was speaking?

2. (a) He sold his house, boat, and car. three
(b) He sold his houseboat and car. two
 Question: How many things did he sell? (p. 113)

(d) Use chain pictures or curved lines to introduce linking.

In English, the words in thought group are linked together during speech. The teacher can use chains to give students a visual image to show how English words are linked together; however, Chinese words are usually pronounced separately, which

can be represented by individual circles. By doing so, students will get a vivid visual image so that they can be aware of the distinctive feature of linking in English.



Besides, the teacher can use a curved line “∪” between the words requiring linking. It helps students to produce appropriate linking.

Examples: Stand∪up. Take∪it∪out. I want∪a cup∪of tea.

(e) Use backchaining to practice proper pausing and linking.

When saying a long sentence with many words in it, students often find it difficult to pause and link words properly. The teacher can help students overcome this difficulty by having them practice reading a sentence aloud from the last part (a meaningful unit) of the sentence extending backwards to the beginning.

Example: Chain the following sentence backwards:
 “His uncle works in a bank in New Zealand.”

New Zealand → in∪New Zealand → a bank∪in∪New Zealand
 → works∪in∪a bank∪in∪New Zealand
 → His∪uncle works∪in∪a bank∪in∪New Zealand.

Conclusion

In summary, in this paper we have discussed the English rhythm, the common problems Chinese students have with word rhythm and sentence rhythm, and some techniques and tools in teaching English rhythm. Of the techniques and tools that we have introduced here, some are designed for awareness building, such as the illustrations of the different rhythmic patterns of English and Chinese. Some are meant to do ear training, and others are for production. We hope that these techniques and tools can be of help for the teacher to more effectively teach students to speak English with proper rhythm - both word rhythm and sentence rhythm.

Although we have focused on English rhythm, we do not mean to imply that teaching rhythm is the only task or the most important task in pronunciation instruction. Rather, our intention is to arouse English teachers' attention to the importance of teaching English rhythm to Chinese students. Since many of our students have the tendency to carry over the Chinese rhythm (syllable-timed) into their English speech, we believe that teaching English rhythm (stress-timed) to our students is well worth devoting efforts to. We recommend that teachers spend some time working on it besides individual sounds. By teaching English rhythm, teachers may find a surprising progress in students' English pronunciation!

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