

At the talk face

Mark Hancock

Activities for working on tonic stress

English word order is relatively fixed compared to many languages, but in compensation, the tonic stress is more moveable. This can be a problem for learners whose mother tongue uses changes in word order for the same nuances, and where frequently tonic stress falls on the last word regardless of meaning. Since tonic stress is acknowledged to be necessary for intelligibility in EFL, as well as ESL and ELF, it is important that learners receive abundant and varied practice in recognising tonic stress, in understanding the meanings behind specific choices for tonic stress, and in placing tonic stress at will so as to create specific meanings. The following activities are designed with these points in mind.

1 Stress Gym

The following activity is to help students get the knack of moving the tonic stress around, without for the moment having to think about the differences in meaning this causes. As the title 'gym' suggests, this activity is more physical than intellectual!

Photocopy the table opposite, or write it on the board. You could just put up the three columns to begin with, and then start writing in the contents as the activity progresses. Each of the sentences in the table contains three syllables, and the idea is to show that the tonic stress can fall on any one of the three. Read out A b c, stressing the letter A (you may like to use the metaphor of 'underlining' with your voice to explain this to students). Get the students to copy. Then do the same for a B c and a b C.

Now do the same thing for the first sentence Jim was here, Jim was here and Jim was here. Show how the stress pattern is identical to the three a b c patterns.

The main part of the activity is this: you call out one of the a b c patterns, and the students have to respond by calling out the corresponding Jim was here pattern. For example:

Teacher: a B c!

Students: Jim WAS here!

Do this for a while and then move on to the next sentence, and so on. Finally, students could work in pairs, one calling out the a b c pattern and the other responding with one of the sentence patterns. *Note: this activity first appeared in the TESOL Spain newsletter.*

2 Guess and Stress Game

Tell the class that Jim and Ana are playing the guessing game opposite. Ask the students to explain why Jim stresses the underlined words. (*black* and *short* are stressed because they contrast with an opposite adjective in the previous question; *long* is stressed because it is the only new word in a question which is otherwise identical to the previous one)

Invite the students to play the game with a partner, remembering to think about which words they stress.

3 Contrastive Stress Minimal Pairs

The table opposite contains exchanges between a customer and a waiter. In each exchange, the waiter gives an identical response in both column A and column B, but the stressed word is different. Ask students to explain why this is the case. Then test the student's receptive ability by saying some of the waiter's replies from either column A or column B, and the students have to say which by identifying the stressed word. Students could then similarly test each other, with one saying the waiter's reply and the other saying A or B.

4 Stress Role-play

As a continuation from activity 3, students could do the role-play opposite. Before acting out the dialogue, they could underline the stressed words. Alternatively, they could produce their own restaurant dialogues inspired by some of the exchanges in the box in activity 3.

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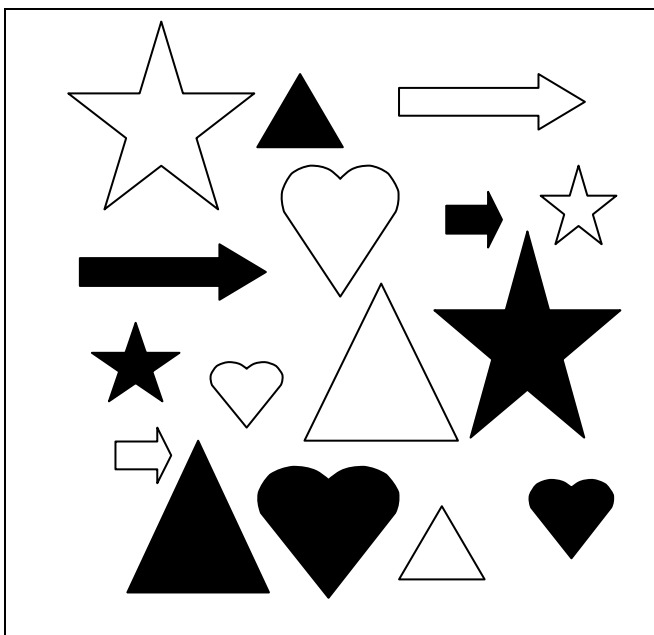
1 Stress Gym

A b c	a B c	a b C
Jim was here.	Jim was here.	Jim was here .
She can swim.	She can swim.	She can swim .
I don't smoke.	I don't smoke.	I don't smoke .
Are you cold?	Are you cold?	Are you cold ?
Who told you?	Who told you?	Who told you ?

2 Guess and Stress Game

Jim: Have you got a white arrow?
 Ana: No, I haven't.
 Jim: Have you got a **black** arrow?
 Ana: Yes, I have.
 Jim: Have you got a **long** black arrow?
 Ana: No, I haven't.
 Jim: Right, ok. You've got a **short** black arrow...

Work with a partner. Circle four shapes but don't let your partner see. Now try to find your partner's shapes by asking questions. The winner is the person who guesses their partner's four shapes with the smallest number of questions.



3 Contrastive Stress Minimal Pairs

A	B
<i>Waiter, this soup is cold!</i>	<i>This is hot, but it isn't soup!</i>
Oh, did you want hot soup?	Oh, did you want hot soup ?
<i>This soup isn't tomato!</i>	<i>This is tomato salad, not soup!</i>
Did you want tomato soup?	Did you want tomato soup ?
<i>I wanted pea soup!</i>	<i>What sort of soup is this?</i>
This is pea soup.	This is pea soup.
<i>I don't want soup!</i>	<i>My wife wanted soup; I didn't.</i>
What do you want, then?	What do you want, then?

4 Stress Role-play

C: Waiter, this soup is cold!
 W: Oh, did you want hot soup?
 C: Yes, hot soup. Hot tomato soup, not pea soup.
 W: It is tomato soup.
 C: But it's green!
 W: Yes, green tomato soup. It's delicious.
 C: I want red tomato soup. Hot red tomato soup!
 W: I'm afraid we haven't got red tomato soup.
 C: Well what have you got?
 W: Well, we've got red tomato salad...