

# TEACHING SUPRASEGMENTALS

Diane Schmitt and Norbert Schmitt

Teaching pronunciation has traditionally involved having students work through drills of sound discrimination. With the recent emphasis on communicative language teaching, the ubiquitous /b/ versus /v/ and /l/ versus /r/ drills, and thus, pronunciation in general have fallen by the wayside. However, pronunciation involves much more than the discrimination of individual sounds. If we truly want to enable our students to transfer and negotiate meaning - the aims of communicative teaching - we need to make them aware of the greater role played by aspects of pronunciation bundled under the title *suprasegmentals*.

Suprasegmentals encompass the rhythm, stress, linkage and intonation patterns which contribute to fluent and natural-sounding English. For example, stress is a device by which speakers focus listeners' attention on particular words in a sentence. Likewise, differing pitch patterns in intonation can indicate different meanings for one sentence or convey different attitudes on the part of a speaker (Avery, P. & Erlich, S., 1987). Suprasegmentals, therefore, are very important for both conveying and understanding meaning in conversation.

How does one approach teaching pronunciation in the classroom? The *Zoom Principle* as outlined by Kadhur (pp.6-7, this volume), approaches pronunciation by utilizing listening comprehension strategies and creating what Gilbert (1987) refers to as a "speech loop" between pronunciation and listening. A pronunciation program which follows the *Zoom Principle* can heighten students' awareness of sentence stress and pitch while keeping the focus of the lesson on the communication of meaning. In such a program, teachers will first focus on global meaning-bearing aspects of pronunciation and then zoom-in on any local segmentals which are causing problems (Firth, 1987).

As is evident from the preceding articles, a number of different viewpoints exist concerning which types of activities are best suited for teaching pronunciation. We have followed Allen's cyclical approach (pp.12-14, this volume), which combines consciousness raising, communicative and form-focussed activities with an added section of games. This variety will provide the teacher with a number of directions from which to attack pronunciation problems. Learners will engage in a variety of tasks from which they can gain generalizable pronunciation skills. Each activity includes a list of related activities which can be used to reinforce the pronunciation objective and provide additional practice. It is hoped that these activities will prove useful, and above all, stimulating for teachers in their quest to help students speak English naturally.

## REFERENCES

- Avery, P. & S. Erlich, (1987). Preliminary considerations in the teaching of pronunciation. *TESL Talk* 17, 1: 8-11.
- Firth, S. (1987). Pronunciation syllabus design: A question of focus. *TESL Talk* 17, 1: 160-170.
- Gilbert, J. (1987). Pronunciation and listening comprehension. In Morely, J. (ed.). *Current perspectives on pronunciation*. Washington D.C.: TESOL.

## OTHER SUGGESTED SOURCES

- Gilbert, J. (1984). *Clear speech*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.