A Simple "mmm" Technique to Teach Word Stress and Intonation in English

by ART TSANG

Word stress and intonation are important phonological features of the English language. Many English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) learners face difficulties grasping these features, hindering their effective communication in English. ESL/EFL learners are often unaware of word stress, even though it may exist in their first language. When teachers first introduce word stress or correct learners' problems with stress (e.g., /ɪˈsteɪt/ versus /ˈɪsteɪt/ in *estate* and /ˈdɪskaʊnt/ versus /dɪsˈkaʊnt/ in *discount*), some learners find it difficult to distinguish the differences in stress.

Intonation, meanwhile, is a broader and more complex topic that can go beyond the word level, and it can be one of the most difficult topics to teach in English pronunciation. Although intonation exists in different languages, it is language-specific. Therefore, regardless of one's first language (whether intonation exists or not), learners may encounter difficulties with English intonation. Swan and Smith (2001) is a reference for understanding specific difficulties learners with different first languages have.

A POSSIBLE SOLUTION: THE "MMM" TECHNIQUE

Having noted the difficulties faced by EFL learners in my years of teaching English pronunciation, I came up with a way to assist them in learning to (1) distinguish between stressed and unstressed syllables (i.e., awareness and listening) and (2) imitate others' intonation as closely as possible (i.e., speaking). Honing learners' skills in (1) and (2) can produce significant results. First, learners will perhaps make fewer mistakes with word stress. Second, they become better equipped to understand information carried by cues in intonation in spoken English (e.g., what a speaker wants to emphasize). A third result is that learners are able to convey information more effectively by using appropriate intonation in English.

This article describes a simple method to teach pitch, a feature common to both word stress and intonation. The technique can be used by native and nonnative

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Pronounced as /m/, "mmm" is a sound that should be easy for speakers of any background to produce. Phonetically known as a voiced bilabial nasal, /m/ is produced by closing the lips. It appears in words such as _mum_ (at both the beginning and the end) and is used as an interjection, as in, "Mmm, I see what you mean."

In this simple "mmm" technique, all one has to do is transform all the sounds—in a word or a sentence—into /m/. By turning everything into /m/, learners will find it much easier to tell a higher pitch from a lower one and to imitate intonation patterns. This is because learners need not invest mental resources on other linguistic aspects such as pronunciation (i.e., other sounds) and vocabulary; they simply need to utter the sound /m/, which requires little effort. Psychologically, students will also feel less embarrassed and anxious as they might when asked to repeat certain words or sentences; this is because everyone is saying /m/, and pronunciation is not a problem.

To make it easier for learners to understand the technique, I usually challenge them to say the target word or sentence without opening their mouth, which results in all the /m/ sounds. The following are the specific steps teachers can follow and adapt. Examples are also provided.

THE STEPS OF THE "MMM" TECHNIQUE

1. Start easy with two-syllable words familiar to all the learners. Write the words out (see the left column of the chart in Figure 1) and ask learners to enunciate them. The phonetic symbols in the chart are for teachers' reference only; it is not necessary for the learners to know them.

2. Ask learners to pronounce these words with their mouths closed. The word _happy_ should now sound exactly the same as _after_ (i.e., two /m/, with the first at a higher pitch). Likewise, _ago_ and _balloon_ should sound the same (i.e., two /m/, with the second at a higher pitch). Challenge learners to come up with an explanation for this and to provide more examples in both categories.

The explanation can be found in the second column in Figure 1, with the capital _M_ referring to a syllable with a higher pitch and the lowercase _m_ indicating a syllable with a lower pitch. (Note that this is not conventional; I have created this for pedagogical purposes.) It is important to point out that in English,

Target word	The "mmm"	Transcription
happy	Mm	ˈhæpi
ago	mM	əˈgəʊ
after	Mm	ˈɑːftə
balloon	mM	bəˈluːn

Figure 1. Examples of target words with the "mmm" technique applied

Target word	Common stress misplacement	Correct stress placement	The "mmm"	Transcription
triangle	triˈangle	ˈtriangle	Mm	ˈtraɪæŋgl
European	Euˈropean	Euroˈpean	mmMm*	ˌjʊərəˈpiːən

Figure 2. The "mmm" technique as it is used with three- and four-syllable words

there is a stressed syllable in each word that has two syllables or more. Therefore, only two stress patterns are possible when pronouncing a two-syllable word: either *Mm* or *mM*. Teachers can also use arrows (↗ and ↘) and gestures (putting one hand up or down) to help students grasp these concepts.

Other two-syllable words stressed on the first syllable include *ˈanswer, ˈenter, ˈJason*, and *ˈlovely*. Two-syllable words stressed on the second syllable include *aˈfraid, proˈmote, proˈvide,* and *seˈlect*.

3. Try words with more syllables and words whose stress placements are often challenging for your learners. You might pronounce these words yourself or play them for learners using online/audio dictionaries, and ask the students to "mmm" the words for you. Then discuss where the stresses are or what the common errors are. Figure 2 shows examples of two words that learners in my context often find challenging. (*Note that strictly speaking, the pitch of the first and second *m* in *European*—known as secondary stress—has a slightly different pitch from the last *m*.)

4. When students have mastered the "mmm" technique for multisyllabic words, try it with phrases and sentences. You can make use of many online resources (e.g., YouTube videos),

play the target items several times, and work out the "mmm" with learners. The "mmm" should sound like a song, with ups and downs. At the phrasal, clausal, and sentential levels, it is necessary to expand the musical scale from two pitches—*M* and *m*—to a wider range by drawing circles within two lines.

An example is, "I don't want that." (See Figure 3.) Note that for pedagogical purposes, the pitch diagram is not precise; for example, it shows approximate pitch levels but does not show rhythm and loudness. Also, unlike word stress, intonation at a phrase or sentence level is less fixed. It is equally common to hear *want* having the highest pitch in this example sentence. What is important here is that learners are aware of the existence of different pitch levels and patterns, understand their implications, and use them to communicate more effectively.

If you prefer, you can first ask learners to say the target items before demonstrating these items yourself or with audiovisuals. You can follow that with a comparison of the two versions, with the help of "mmm." Once students get the pitch of a target item right, ask them to repeat it several times. It is important to start with simpler and shorter sentences here.

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An example is, "These aren't real frogs, are they?" (This was spoken by Harry Potter on the train near the beginning of the movie *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.) Although many intermediate and advanced learners are probably already aware of the rise in intonation in the question tag "are they," many may not be aware that in this question, *frogs* has a lower pitch. Learners will likely be able to demonstrate this pitch if they "mmm" the sentence with you. You can follow up by explaining why certain words are stressed and others are not.

It is worthwhile for both teachers and learners to pay close attention to word stress and intonation while watching movies or video clips. They can select examples to share with the class and practice with the "mmm" technique.

Multiple opportunities for practice with "mmm" may be necessary, especially in the beginning when learners are being introduced to pitch. You can choose target items specifically addressing the challenges learners have. To maximize the benefits, teachers should capitalize on this "mmm" technique to improve learners' sensitivity towards the use of pitch in English, which in turn should improve their pronunciation, listening, and overall speaking skills.

WHAT'S NEXT?

After using the "mmm" technique with pitch, teachers can try it with other phonological aspects. For instance, loudness can be distinguished by a louder /m/ and a softer /m/; length, meanwhile, can be distinguished by a longer /m/ and a shorter /m/. The use of just /m/, as mentioned, is conducive to learners' concentration on the target topic (e.g., loudness, length) rather than on other issues, such as vocabulary and pronunciation.

REFERENCE

Swan, M., and B. Smith, eds. 2001. *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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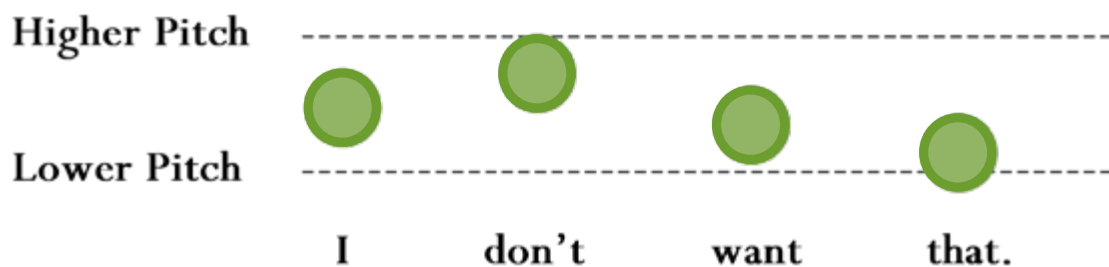
Figure 3. A pitch diagram for the sentence "I don't want that."