

Fun with Prosody

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What is prosody?

Prosody is the general term for intonation and timing in the way we talk. The tone of our speech can move up or down within words or across groups of words to express a variety of differences in meaning. We also pause at various times for different reasons and often use pauses so effortlessly as to not notice how quickly we recognize and interpret them.

Speakers of all languages use prosody differently, but the more people have in common, the more likely they are to successfully interpret each other.

Consider these examples:

A: Did you call Davis about that shipment?

B: Yes, I called him about *that* shipment.

Without having to say it explicitly, speaker B has indicated that there is perhaps another shipment that needs attention. Indeed, depending on which words receives the stress, speaker B's utterance can have several potential meanings.

A: Did you take the metro this morning? You are later than usual.

B: Yes, there was a breakdown. I had to get off at (pause) Gostinniy Dvor and take the long way around by bus.

Because speaker B pauses after a preposition, speaker A knows that a noun is coming and that he should not interrupt. There are several different kinds of pauses, but this one is called a *cognitive pause* and is used to allow the speaker to stop and think without being interrupted.

These are only two examples of such phenomena in English. And they are by no means universal for all speakers of the language. Regional dialects and discourse group differences can play a major role in determining how speakers use and interpret prosodic patterning. Thus, it is impractical to try and teach them all to our students.

Instead, I propose that we need only to raise our students' awareness. Let them know that these phenomena exist so that they may better listen for them when they are exploring English on their own. In fact, even making students aware of these phenomena in their native language can help them to recognize them more when they hear them in the target language.

Remember that our job is to make our students better learners of English, not better speakers of English. No, really!

Below are two examples of activities you can use with your students to raise awareness of prosodic patterning in English.

Activity 1: Intonation

Model for students an example dialog like above in which the meaning of an answer can be quite different depending on which word receives extra stress. After this, ask students to share their own ideas as what the stress means. Remember, there is no wrong answer. We are just trying to raise awareness. But feel free to share with them how *you* interpret the meaning.

Divide students into groups and give each group a task. Make sure that each group has a different task. Set a scene for which they can create a mini dialog. Ask them to create a dialog between two or more people in which one speaker answers a question in a way that can have several different meanings depending on which word (if any) is stressed. What do the differences mean?

As students work, walk around the room and monitor their progress, answering any questions they may have.

When they finish, ask for volunteers from each group to share their dialog and perform it several different times, each time using different intonation. For each, ask them what the meaning difference is. Do their classmates agree? What other possible meanings are there?

Tell students that this is only one example of how intonation can be used to change meaning. When they listen to English being spoken outside the classroom, paying very close attention to intonation can help to make them better speakers of English.

Activity 2: Pauses

Divide students into groups and tell them they will work together on a task. Tell them that you are going to give a short monologue. You will describe for them what you did this morning to get ready for school. Their task is to listen for pauses. Every time you pause, they are supposed to pay close attention to what you do and write it down. They should look at what you do with your hands and face and also what you say, if anything, while you have paused.

Give your monologue. Speak naturally for a few minutes. You will pause without having to try. Then, ask students to work with their groupmates to share all of the pauses they saw. Then, have them share their observations. What did they see? Why do they think you paused when you did?

As students work, walk around the room and monitor their progress, answering any questions they may have.

Next, ask students to observe each other. In their groups, one or more of them will give a similar dialog. Their groupmates' job is to observe and record their behavior. Each speaker should know that their groupmates are not to interrupt. They should discuss their findings in their groups first, and then share with the rest of the class. You will find a great deal of variety, but also many similarities in the way they used pauses.

Tell students that this is only one kind of pause that people use when they are talking. When they listen to English being spoken outside the classroom, paying very close attention to the ways and times people pause can help to make them better speakers of English.