

# Lights, camera, pronunciation!

*Char Heitman*

*University of Oregon*

Teachers often assume (or at least hope) that learners will attend to those features of the target language that will enable them to improve their language skills. However, given the flood of different stimuli, it can be difficult for learners to discriminate between what they should attend to and what they can tune out. Teachers can help by bringing key features to students' attention. In my pronunciation classes, in addition to oral practice of segmentals and supra-segmentals, I provide activities to help students learn to hear patterns in the speech around them. Listening for features such as word stress, intonation, linking, and reductions can provide a model for students to imitate and reinforce the concepts covered in class, as well as help them acquire skills for making continued progress after the course is over.

The most obvious way to study speech patterns is through video. However, students will rarely hear key features unless their attention has been drawn to them via explicit instruction. Since many students watch TV and movies as a means to learn language, this exercise helps students use audiovisual media more effectively for language acquisition on their own. Ideally, students will also learn to listen for these features in the conversations they hear in daily life. Students have reported orally or via journals that consciousness-raising activities such as these have helped them pay attention to language features of which they were previously unaware.

The following activity can be used in pronunciation or oral skills classes to help students listen for the patterns and features of spoken language.

- 1) Review the features of the speech pattern to be listened for in the film clip. For example, after discussing intonation, I present a clip in which students listen for examples of rising and falling intonation. They see the use of falling intonation for statements and wh-questions and of rising

intonation for yes/no questions, to indicate surprise, and to ask for repetition of a wh-question or statement.

- 2) Play the video clip several times, having students listen for meaning. Discuss the content of the segment, clarifying any questions or confusion students may have about the meaning.
- 3) Distribute a transcript of the video clip and have students mark each sentence or phrase, predicting which kind of intonation will be used (rising or falling) and which word will receive the most stress (where the intonation will most dramatically rise or fall).
- 4) In pairs, have students compare their predictions.
- 5) Play the video clip again (several times as necessary), having students mark their transcripts and make corrections to their original predictions.
- 6) Go over the answers as a whole class.
- 7) Have students practice and perform the dialogue as an optional additional activity.
- 8) Play the clip again for students to hear the features.

It works best to use clips in which the language is not too rapidly paced, especially for lower-level students, and in which the features are more pronounced. Some sources of clips I have used include soap operas, "Sleepless in Seattle," "Father of the Bride," "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," and "Friends." Another source is the Internet. Many of the clips tend to be monologues, which is fine for teaching different features. This method can also be used to help students hear reductions such as *wanna*, *gonna*, *hafta*, *hasta*, *gotta*, etc.; word stress; stressing contrasting information; linking; thought groups; rhythm; and other speech features.

*Char Heitman is an instructor at the American English Institute at the University of Oregon. She has degrees in Spanish, TESL and applied linguistics and has taught EFL in Japan, Holland and Spain.*