# Rise-Up and Flow-Down: Teaching Pronunciation

David A. Isaacs

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## Abstract

English language learners (ELLs) during acquisition face challenges associated with English word stress, sentence stress, and intonation since each language is unique in this regard and has its own particular rhythmic system. Acquiring English language fluency is more than the study of grammar, words, and sentences, but also involves the practice and the perception of the emotional coloring of the utterances with correct pronunciation that does not interfere with communication. Pronunciation strategies is an important element of English fluency and can help mitigate miscommunication. Although making mistakes in this area is very common, learners can still learn to avoid errors that can interfere with communication when classroom instruction explicitly provides learners with the tools to overcome them. Utilizing instructional methods that focused on word stress, sentence stress, and intonation, first-and-second-year university students at a private university learned to recognize, practice, and perform correct English word stress, sentence stress, and intonation patterns using a novel approach to pronunciation instruction the researcher calls the rise-up and flow-down method. The results of the classroom practice over a semester indicate that there is a direct perceived improvement in the students' ability to use English word stress, sentence stress, and intonation that may lead to an overall improvement in English fluency. The study hopes to add a valuable and practical classroom practice method to be used for the instruction of pronunciation.

## Introduction

Learning standard American English pronunciation is more than individual isolated sounds; word stress, sentence stress, intonation, and word linking impact the sound of spoken English. English involves complicated multi-functional and multi-dimensional characteristics of speech, and for learners to strive for a complete elimination of accent is not possible. Improving pronunciation might heighten self-esteem, improve communication amongst other social benefits (Akyuz, S. & Aydın, S., 2017). Effective communication is important, educators should choose to work on problems that appreciably interfere with communication. Classroom practice research can contribute valuable methods to use to achieve such outcomes.

The prevailing classroom practice to teach pronunciation tend to emphasize shadowing, segmenting, listening and can be categorized in three distinct areas: intuitive-intuitive approach, analytic-linguistic approach, and integrative approach (Akyuz, S. & Aydın, S., 2017; Writing@CSU, 2021).

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*北陸大学国際コミュニケーション学部　Faculty of International Communication, Hokuriku University

The intuitive-intuitive approach emphasizes shadowing, segmenting, and listening to native speakers. It assumes the learner can naturally mime the native speaker input.

The analytic-linguistic approach explicitly instructs pronunciation with visual replications of the physical aspects of pronunciation and depends on the instructor using imitation, listening, and production materials. It assumes the learner can copy the visual cues.

The integrative approach relies on meaningful practice and instruction, practice beyond the word level and phoneme. Pronunciation instruction is built into meaningful classroom activities.

The current study hopes to contribute to the discussion around teaching pronunciation looking at the classroom practice used by the researcher. With that context in mind, the research questions posed in this study are the following:

1. How did the students in the study learn pronunciation outside the formal classroom setting during the study period?
2. How did the method help students perceive an improvement with their word stress, sentence stress, and intonation?
3. What were students' attitudes towards the rise-up and flow-down method?

## Method

The data were collected from a group of students (n=45) in the Faculty of International Communication as well as a group of students from the Department of Psychology. All participants in this cohort are studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The participants for this study were all 1st and 2nd year students. The students' data were gathered from the questionnaire the lecturer created to identify learner impressions with the rise-up and flow-down method (the questionnaire used in the study is available upon request). The participants' ages range from 18 to 23. They were all Japanese nationals. Most of the students came from the Hokuriku area in Japan. All of them were enrolled in the course because they are required courses. Most of them had learned English in their home country for 7 to 10 years from junior high school to the time they enrolled in the course for this study. The participants in this study had a strong desire to develop native-like pronunciation to complete their educational goals and to fulfill graduation requirements.
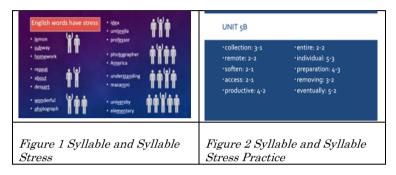
## Procedure

The treatment phase of the study was one university semester from April 1, 2021, to August 1, 2021, in which the participants were explicitly instructed to focus on improving their pronunciation using a novel method to teach word stress, sentence stress, and intonation the researcher named as the rise-up and flow-down method. The description of the treatment phase of the study and what the rise-up and flow-down method is follows.
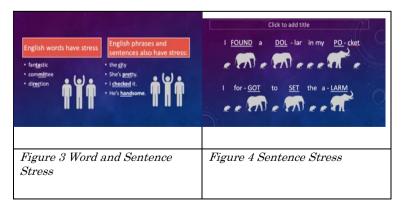
### Word Stress

In this study classroom practice utilized familiarizing students with syllables and syllable stress. In Figure 1 the rise-up and flow-down method used people gifs raising their hands or hands by their sides. The raised hands syllable receives the stress. In addition to this, students practice word stress when learning new vocabulary as shown in Figure 2. Students are encouraged to use electronic or paper dictionaries at home to identify the number of syllables for each word along with the word's syllable stress number. At the outset of the next class meeting, the students practice repeating the words after the instructor and showing the number of syllables along with the stressed syllable number with their hands

raised high holding up the correct number of fingers to represent the correct word stress (Writing@CSU, 2021). During this time the instructor also assists students with pronunciation, identifying and correcting errors with the counting of the number of syllables and syllable stress number, and checking overall understanding of the rise-up and flow-down method. This portion of the rise-up and flow-down method had the greatest amount of classroom time dedicated to learning the method and on improving word stress pronunciation and awareness. Each class period of ninety minutes spent approximately five to ten minutes on syllable and syllable stress practice as shown in Figure 2 for all new vocabulary words learned during the course of the study. The above description comprises the first aspect of the rise-up and flow-down method.



*Figure 1 Syllable and Syllable Stress*



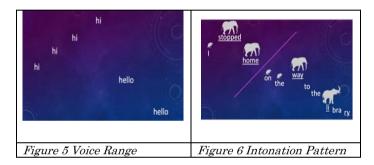*Figure 2 Syllable and Syllable Stress Practice*

## Sentence Stress

The instructor-oriented students to the concept that phrases and sentences also have stress patterns as Figure 3 depicts. This assists students with understanding the concept that sentences also have pronunciation patterns. This helps to build an instructional link to introduce the next phase of the classroom practice used in this study. Learning sentence stress, the rise-up and flow-down method instructed the importance of elephant and mouse words as revealed in Figure 4. Elephant words are major class words- nouns, main verbs, adjectives, question words, negative words, and numbers. Mouse words are minor class words- pronouns, prepositions, articles, conjunctions, and helping verbs. Visual media comparing elephant words to mouse words helped students to learn proper sentence pronunciation. This portion of the rise-up and flow-down method had the least amount of classroom time dedicated to it in this study. The instructor wanted students to understand the concept of sentence pronunciation patterns, while actual classroom practice did not rely on the visual messages from Figure 3 and Figure 4. Students did, however, practice actual sentence stress for approximately five to twenty minutes each class meeting from communicative based instructional materials. The above description comprises the second phase to the rise-up and flow-down method.



*Figure 3 Word and Sentence Stress*



*Figure 4 Sentence Stress*

Intonation

Voice range practice assists students with learning intonation. Students viewed a video with a monotone speaker using English. The students then viewed a PowerPoint slide with 'hi' practiced in a variety of voice ranges as seen in Figure 5. The students learn to use range and learn to identify the underlying meaning of 'hi' when used in differing voice ranges. The students are then introduced to the intonation pattern common to American English where speakers of English rise-up on early important words, categorized as elephant words earlier in this paper, and to flow-down on each syllable, not word, to finally end with a large flow-down on the final important word in the sentence or phrase as depicted in Figure 6. This portion of the rise-up and flow-down method had little classroom time dedicated to it in this study. The instructor wanted students to understand the concept of intonation, while actual classroom practice did not rely on the visual messages from Figure 5 and Figure 6. Students did, however, practice actual intonation for approximately five to thirty minutes each class meeting from communicative based instructional materials. This portion of the rise-up and flow-down method is the third component used to instruct pronunciation in the classroom.



| *Figure 5 Voice Range* | *Figure 6 Intonation Pattern* |

Near the conclusion of the semester, a questionnaire to investigate student attitudes concerning the use of the rise-up and flow-down method to instruct pronunciation was conducted. The questionnaire used a Likert six-point scale, a type of psychometric response scale in which responders specify their level of agreement to a statement typically in six points. The questionnaire hoped to ascertain learner reactions to the rise-up and flow-down method and how effective it was with improving their perceived improvement and awareness with word stress, sentence stress, intonation, and overall pronunciation (Springer Link, 2010).

## Results

The results for questions one to three (See Table 1 below) showed the students now emphasize learning the pronunciation of new words and shadowing. The majority of the Likert scale responses to the three questions was at four and higher. This accounted for more than an 81% average positive rating to questions one, two, and three.

The results for questions four to eight (See Table 1 below) revealed the students felt the explicit classroom instruction helped to improve their word stress, sentence stress, and intonation. The Likert scale responses to the four questions was at four and above. This accounted for more than a 94% average positive rating to questions four, five, six, seven, and eight.

The results for question nine (See Table 1 below) showed a significant percent of the respondents wish to continue to participate with instruction that uses the rise-up and flow-

down method to teach pronunciation. The percent of respondents that answered four or above on the Likert scale question was 96% with no responses below three and 4% responded to question nine at three on the scale.

The data to question ten revealed 86% of the respondents felt their pronunciation had perceptively improved during the treatment phase of the study (See Table 1 below).

| Table 1. Likert-Scale Results | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | M | Std. E | Std. D | Skew | Kurt |
| 1. On a scale of 1-6 (6 = strong effort) how much effort do you give to learning the pronunciation of new words now? | 45 | 3.98 | 0.14 | 0.92 | 0.05 | -0.08 |
| 2. Do you use a dictionary to learn how to pronounce new words now (6 = always)? | 45 | 4.53 | 0.20 | 1.31 | -0.46 | -0.86 |
| 3. Do you practice shadowing to improve your intonation now (6 = always)? | 45 | 4.29 | 0.16 | 1.10 | -0.50 | -0.18 |
| 4. Is learning the number of syllables and syllable stress helping to improve your word stress? | 45 | 4.87 | 0.13 | 0.84 | -0.22 | -0.64 |
| 5. Is studying elephant and mouse words helping to improve your sentence stress? | 45 | 4.71 | 0.14 | 0.94 | -0.05 | -0.96 |
| 6. Is learning the number of syllables and syllable stress number helping to improve your pronunciation? | 45 | 5.13 | 0.12 | 0.79 | -0.54 | -0.29 |
| 7. Is practicing your voice range helping to improve your intonation? | 45 | 4.64 | 0.17 | 1.13 | -0.82 | 0.53 |
| 8. Is practicing intonation pattern helping to improve your intonation? | 45 | 4.80 | 0.15 | 0.99 | -0.75 | 0.95 |
| 9. Would you like to study word stress, sentence stress, and intonation more (6 = very much)? | 45 | 4.71 | 0.14 | 0.92 | 0.26 | -1.19 |
| 10. Do you feel your word stress, sentence stress, and intonation are improving (6 = very much)? | 45 | 4.27 | 0.15 | 1.03 | -0.96 | 1.60 |
| *6 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree | | | | | | |

The overall results to the questionnaire showed the students in the study viewed the rise-up and flow-down method positively with an average Likert scale score of 89% of the responses above four for all ten questions on the questionnaire.

## Discussion

The results of the questionnaire reveal some significant findings that may help to answer some questions pertaining to best classroom practices to teaching pronunciation to ELLs.

The first revealing finding for this study is understood when questions 1-3 are analyzed. The questions wished to reveal how students learn pronunciation outside of the formal classroom setting. The results overwhelmingly show the students in the study now focus on improving pronunciation outside the formal classroom environment (See charts 1, 2, and 3). This result can possibly show the students felt the rise-up and flow-down method was helpful with improving their overall pronunciation and wished to continue to improve their pronunciation out of the classroom environment. It also can possibly show the students learned to take self-control over how they learned pronunciation, which every teacher strives

to develop in ELLs particularly in Japanese university students (Johnston, Aliponga, Koshiyama, Ries, & Rush, 2014; Wagner, 2014).

The second important finding in this study is the respondents found the explicit classroom instruction highly effective with their perceived improvement to their pronunciation (See charts 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 above). Questions four to seven hoped to reveal the effectiveness of the treatment phase of the study. The average positive Likert scale responses over four to these questions averaged 94% for all respondents. No responses were below three on the Likert scale. Therefore, only 6% of the remaining respondents found the explicit interventions used by the researcher in class as somewhat effective with the perceived improvement with the students' pronunciation. The importance of teacher-lead intervention with improving student's overall pronunciation cannot be ignored. Students most likely cannot learn to be autonomous and improve their pronunciation independently without explicit teacher lead instruction (Johnston, Aliponga, Koshiyama, Ries, & Rush, 2014). It also can possibly show the students learned to self-correct their pronunciation, which every teacher strives to develop in ELLs particularly in Japanese university students (Johnston, et. al, 2014; Wagner, 2014).

One encouraging finding with this study that can possibly significantly add to best classroom practices to teaching pronunciation is shown with the results to question nine revealed in chart 9 (See above). An overwhelming number of respondents wished to continue to study pronunciation with 96% of the students answering four or above on the Likert scale questionnaire to question nine, which asked if respondents wish to continue to study word stress, sentence stress, and intonation. The rise-up and flow-down method was seen as beneficial and worthy of additional classroom instruction time by the participants in this study.

Finally, question ten revealed the participants felt their overall pronunciation was perceptively improved with 86% of the students answering four and above on the Likert scale questionnaire. Respondents clearly felt the rise-up and flow-down method had improved their pronunciation in one semester. In addition, 9% of the respondents felt their pronunciation had improved more than before the study. Students who felt their pronunciation had not improved in one semester comprised 5% of the respondents.

The findings in this paper may support the integrative-approach to teaching pronunciation since the rise-up and flow-down method does not focus on the common classroom practices used in the analytic-linguistic approach and the intuitive-intuitive approach. The rise-up and flow-down method practices pronunciation using meaningful classroom activities.

## Conclusion

Likert scale questionnaires independently used without other forms of analyses can be inherently limited in producing reliable and accurate results due to limits on the ability to reveal the complete snapshot of educational experiences. This can have a negative impact on the validity of the results. Data gathered should best be augmented with interviews, observations, tests, and more open-ended questionnaires. Such a paradigm would enable the data gathered from the Likert scale questionnaire to reveal a fuller picture of the environment under investigation (Nemoto & Beglar, 2014).

This study hopes to add to best classroom practices with regards to the instruction of pronunciation. It is not intended to claim there is any real measurable improvement in the students' pronunciation beyond the perceived improvement shown in the results. There is no intent to claim the method is better than other methods since this is not a comparative study.

Additional research goals to further investigate the benefits of the rise-up and flow-down method to teaching pronunciation should focus on augmenting the data gathered with the Likert scale. This researcher would like to follow up on the study with participant observations and interviews to glean a fuller picture of the educational experience the participants had with the rise-up and flow-down method in order to answer the research questions posed in the study more fully.

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