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Integrating Pronunciation Instruction into the Literacy-level Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Explicit integration of pronunciation instruction into an adult ESL literacy-level curriculum is vital to oral skills development. However, most ESL teachers lack the preparation and resources for the planning and implementation of pronunciation instruction. In response, this paper means to act as a resource for literacy-level ESL teachers who are looking for models of pronunciation instruction meant for their population of learners, including three illustrative literacy-level sample lessons.

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Adult English Language (EL) classes are seeing increasingly higher numbers of learners who have had no or very limited access to formal education in their native countries due to civil war, economic hardships or lack of educational opportunities. These learners are commonly referred to as literacy-level learners and are defined as those who are learning a new language without being print literate in any language and who have not had access to formal schooling. At this level, most daily tasks require speaking skills, which for literacy-level learners, often develop prior to literacy skills (Bigelow & Lovrien Schwarz, 2010; Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010). Implicit in this drive to improve oral skills is the need to speak English with intelligible pronunciation that is understood by the English speakers that they interact with outside of the classroom. Studies have

shown that ESL learners desire pronunciation instruction (Derwing, 2003), and that beginning-level learners, when asked, are especially eager to receive this instruction (Baker 2011). However, research has shown that it is common for adult EL teachers, including those who have advanced degrees, to have very limited training in the areas of phonetics, phonology or pronunciation instruction (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011; Gilbert, 2010). Teachers often report that they lack the knowledge and training to make informed instructional decisions regarding pronunciation (Baker, 2014). Additionally, pronunciation research and materials rarely focus on adult immigrants and refugees who have low levels of literacy and who have experienced limited or no formal schooling, a population with whom many adult EL teachers work (Chela- Flores, 2001; Darcy, Ewert, & Lidster, 2012; Zielinski & Yates, 2014). As a result, pronunciation is often taught infrequently and without prior planning, resulting in piecemeal error correction that lacks intention and focus (Gilbert 2010; Levis & Grant, 2003), leaving learners with insufficient instruction on how to improve their intelligibility. This article will discuss current pronunciation instruction and materials for literacy-level learners, review recommendations for effective pronunciation instruction, and describe three pronunciation features: voice quality settings, word stress, and sentence stress; along with activities for practicing those features in literacy-level classes.

PRONUNCIATION INSTRUCTION AND LITERACY-LEVEL LEARNERS

Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010) assert that there is a pronunciation "threshold level" that non-native speakers (NNSs) of English have to obtain, and that if their pronunciation skills stay below this level, they will have communication problems, no matter how much grammar and vocabulary they master (p. 8). Other researchers cite the social costs that may result from a lack of pronunciation skills as they interact with native speakers (NSs): claiming that NSs evaluate NNSs on the basis of their accent and intelligibility, limiting access to employment, slowing acculturation, and restricting opportunities for practicing English in meaningful communication settings (Bailey, 2005; Derwing, Munro, & Thompson, 2008; Morley, 1991; Parrish, 2004; Yates, 2011; Zielinski & Yates, 2014).

For many literacy-level learners, the classroom is the only place where they are able to develop their English skills (Strube, 2009) and may also be the only place in which they feel safe enough to practice speaking. So what happens to learners whose teachers avoid teaching pronunciation? Contrary to what many teachers may hope, literacy-level learners rarely notice their own irregular pronunciation patterns without explicit, meaningful instruction (Zielinski & Yates, 2014). As an illustration, Derwing, Thomson, and Munro (2006) followed the progress of 40 beginning-level learners attending a full-time ESL program for new arrivals to Canada over a ten-month period. Pronunciation was not purposefully integrated in this program. Native English speakers rated speech samples from the learners three different times during the study: before the

learners received instruction, after two months of instruction, and after ten months of instruction. At the end of the ten months, improvements in pronunciation were found to be very minimal. In order for new language learners to become successful communicators in English and form the confidence that they need to practice and improve their English both in and outside of the classroom, they need to be provided with explicit and effective instruction in the area of pronunciation.

Literacy-level teachers can be hesitant to incorporate pronunciation into their instruction for a number of reasons. The sheer number of pronunciation deviations can make it overwhelming for teachers to prioritize instruction and even know where to begin (Derwing, 2017). Other aspects of English, such as alphabetics and literacy skills, may be deemed more important, or teachers may feel that pronunciation instruction is too challenging for this level of learners (Zielinski & Yates, 2014). Teachers' reluctance to include pronunciation instruction in literacy level classrooms may be denying learners the opportunity to build pronunciation skills that could impact their future language development (Chela-Flores, 2001; Derwing, 2017). Additionally, recent research suggests that adult language learners are best suited to acquire phonetic knowledge during the first 6-12 months of extensive immersion in the L2, which implies that early instruction can be highly effective (Darcy et al., 2012; Derwing, Munro, Foote, Waugh, and Fleming, 2014). In light of this information, it is imperative that literacy-level teachers are devoting instructional time to raising learners' awareness about English pronunciation features and providing adequate opportunities for practice and feedback.

Lack of Pronunciation Materials for Literacy Level Adult EL Learners

The lack of research concerning literacy level EL learners' pronunciation has resulted in very few published materials for beginning learners. In her 2001 article, Chela-Flores stresses the importance of thorough pronunciation instruction, beginning in the first stages of learning and continuing throughout a language program, but admits that there is a severe lack of materials that are appropriately leveled for literacy level learners, with most currently available course materials designed for intermediate to advanced level learners (Chela-Flores, 2001; Darcy et al., 2012).

Regrettably, textbooks and tools that claim to be developed for beginning level learners often have high amounts of vocabulary and reading, resulting in an overwhelming amount of text for literacy level learners. Most of the current available pronunciation materials are appropriate only for learners with high fluency and reading skills (Chela-Flores, 2001). Even Gilbert's popular text, *Clear Speech from the Start* (2005), requires a level of reading comprehension that is far above the reach of most literacy level learners. As a result, the onus of developing a curriculum that includes regular pronunciation instruction with level appropriate materials rests with the teachers of low literacy classes, a task for which many teachers have not been trained.

Recommendations for Pronunciation Instruction

Despite the scarcity of explicit pronunciation research and materials for literacy-level learners, there is a large body of global recommendations from researchers that follow early recommendations from Morley (1991) and Celce-Murcia (2010) and continue to be emphasized in pronunciation literature today (for example, in Zielinski & Yates' work with beginning level learners) that can be successfully applied to pronunciation instruction at any level. This section will describe three of those recommendations framed for pronunciation instruction for literacy-level learners: take a systematic approach, teach suprasegmentals along with segmentals, and integrate pronunciation into every lesson.

Taking a Systematic Approach

Just as literacy-level learners are not expected to read words without explicit instruction in alphabetics and phonics, neither should they be expected to pronounce English intelligibly without scaffolded instruction to improve their abilities to hear and practice English sounds and pronunciation features. Morley recommends incorporating a variety of practice objectives into pronunciation instruction for all levels of learners. These types of practice include imitative practice, rehearsed practice, extemporaneous practice, and both listening and spelling practice (1991). In their 2010 book, Celce-Murcia et al. suggest basing pronunciation instruction on a communicative framework that takes learners through five stages: description and analysis, listening discrimination, controlled practice, guided practice, and communicative practice. The progression of these phrases serve to begin by first raising awareness of the targeted pronunciation feature and gradually move learners to being able to produce the feature successfully in spontaneous speech. This scaffolded approach is very similar to the way that learners are taken through a series of developmental stages when they are learning any other aspect of English such as grammar or vocabulary. Zielinski and Yates strongly encourage teachers to take a similar systematic approach when teaching English pronunciation for beginning-level learners (2014). Figure 1 shows their systematic sequence that explains purpose and rationale for the four developmental stages in the acquisition of new pronunciation features: listening and awareness, control, practice, and extension.

Far too often, teachers skip the listening and awareness stage of development, leaping right into practice before learners have had the chance to become aware of and hear the pronunciation feature. Research tells us that adult learners tend to perceive the sounds and patterns of a new language through the lens of their first language, which can make it difficult for them to hear, recognize, and replicate sounds and rhythms that are unique to English (Yates & Zielinski, 2009) As a result, learners need help in noticing the difference between their own pronunciation and the target language (Couper, 2003; Morley, 1991; Yates & Zielinski, 2009; Zielinski & Yates, 2014). Spending time in the initial listening and awareness stage of development before moving through more to less controlled practice stages allows learners to gain control over the pronunciation feature so that they can apply it to their own speech. Zielinski and Yates's framework also provides learners with the opportunity to practice the

pronunciation feature in a variety of modalities, such as auditory, visual, and kinesthetic, which may be more accessible for literacy-level learners. Utilizing the kinesthetic elements of physical movement to enhance pronunciation instruction has long been recommended by pronunciation specialists (Baker, 2014). Sample activities for specific pronunciation features that align with the developmental stages outlined in this section will be provided in a later section.

Stage of Development	Aims
1. Listening & Awareness	To develop learners' awareness of the target pronunciation feature, and how it differs from the feature in the L1.
2. Control	To develop learners' physical control over the pronunciation of the target feature.
3. Practice	To develop learners' ability to produce the target feature, in a range of different and increasingly difficult structured contexts.
4. Extension	To develop learners' ability to apply their new skills in a range of contexts.

Figure 1: A Systematic Approach to Pronunciation Instruction

Focus on Suprasegmentals

Knowing where to begin and what to focus on in regard to pronunciation instruction is a pervasive challenge for literacy-level teachers, particularly in classrooms where learners represent multiple language backgrounds. Should they focus on segmentals, the sounds of a language, or suprasegmentals, the stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns? A general consensus is emerging that a balanced approach to pronunciation, one that incorporates both segmental and suprasegmental acquisition and production is the most successful (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Darcy et al., 2012; Derwing et al., 1998; Derwing & Rossiter, 2003; Gilbert, 2010; Kang, Rubin & Pickering, 2010; Morley, 1991).

Indeed, for literacy-level learners, suprasegmental instruction may be particularly helpful because they can be demonstrated in other ways than the "listen and repeat" method, incorporating the auditory, visual, and kinesthetic modalities that Zielinski and Yates recommend for successful pronunciation instruction with beginning-level learners (2014).

Knowing that few EL classrooms represent speakers from a single language background, we recommend that teachers aim to incorporate suprasegmental instruction, such as word stress, sentence stress, and intonation, along with global features, such as voice quality settings and volume, in their pronunciation instruction along with targeted segmental instruction on sounds that carry high functional loads (Derwing, Munro, Wiebe, 1997; Derwing & Munro, 2014). English suprasegmental and global pronunciation features such as voice quality settings, word stress, and sentence stress are areas that learners from a wide variety of language backgrounds struggle with, therefore, focusing pronunciation

instruction on broader aspects of speech should be effective for a range of language backgrounds (Derwing, 2003). In a literacy level class, particularly one that is multicultural, suprasegmental instruction will benefit the largest number of learners, and should deliver more "bang for your buck" than traditional segmental instruction.

Integrate Pronunciation Instruction into Lesson Plans

Growing numbers of researchers are calling for pronunciation instruction to be integrated into regular classroom instruction rather than taught as "stand alone" lessons or special classes (Burns, 2006; Celce-Murcia, et al., 2010; Foote, et al., 2011; Grant, 2014; Morley, 1991; Zielinski & Yates, 2014). Programs are encouraged to think of pronunciation as an "integral part of oral communication" (Morley, 1991, p. 496), and essential to communicative competence (Celce-Murcia, et al., 2010). Low-literacy learners in particular require frequent repetition in order to maximize their learning potential; when pronunciation instruction is integrated into the regular classroom curriculum, it allows for meaningful communicative practice that connects the pronunciation instruction to the learners' daily lives and varied practice and interaction, which utilizes best practices for literacy-level learners and pronunciation instruction (Condelli & Wrigley, 2006; Gilbert, 2010, p. 31; Levis & Grant, 2003; Morley, 1991).

Integrating pronunciation into regular classroom instruction does not mean that every lesson should be built around pronunciation. Rather, it means that teachers should have a pronunciation feature in mind, (Zielinski & Yates, 2014), and weave practice of that feature into the vocabulary and oral skills practice that is already a part of everyday lesson plans. Incorporating pronunciation instruction into literacy level lesson materials, vocabulary, and topics serves to address the previously mentioned gap in appropriately leveled pronunciation materials since it alleviates the need for teachers to locate or create stand-alone pronunciation resources. The following section will provide examples of how teachers can integrate pronunciation along with commonly taught language such as vocabulary and dialogues.

PRONUNCIATION FEATURES FOR LITERACY-LEVEL LEARNERS

This section will discuss three different pronunciation features: voice quality settings, word stress, and sentence stress. Our decision to focus on these three features draws from the research mentioned in the previous sections and from our own experiences teaching literacy-level learners; these three features have been shown to be particularly accessible during classroom instruction in both general pronunciation teaching research, Zielinski and Yates's beginning learner focused research, and from empirical observations of our own learners' responses to instruction. The two of us have each spent over 15 years teaching in EL classrooms and providing professional development around the topic of pronunciation for EL teachers who work in a wide variety of instructional

settings. The three pronunciation feature sections below also include suggestions for activities that we have successfully integrated into regular classroom routines in our own teaching that can be duplicated by other literacy level teachers.

Voice Quality Settings

Voice quality settings are defined by Esling and Wong (1983) as the "long term postures of the larynx, pharynx, tongue, velopharyngeal system and lips" (p. 89). They identify English voice quality features as: spread lips, open jaw, palatalized tongue body position, nasal voice, lowered larynx, and a creaky voice, many of which are significantly different from the voice quality features of ELs. When someone first begins to speak a new language, it is natural for them to apply the voice quality settings from their first language. Many NNSs of English hold their jaws in a loosely closed position, maintaining minimal jaw movement, which is in contrast to the open jaw that is a distinctive characteristic of American English speech. Features of voice quality settings that occur in EL learners' native languages (such as minimal jaw movement), but do not occur to the same degree in English, can be obstacles to intelligibility (Esling & Wong, 1983).

Some researchers hypothesize that teaching adult EL learners to apply English voice quality settings in their own speech should improve their production of both segmental and suprasegmental features (Esling & Wong, 1983; Kerr, 2000). Voice quality settings are considered to be a global and long-term aspect of prosody that directly influences the articulation of segmentals. This leads to several researchers to claim that teaching English voice quality settings is the most "holistic" way to teach pronunciation, and that learners are best served when pronunciation instruction begins with establishing and practicing the settings of the new language before moving to specific phonemes (Esling & Wong, 1983; Jones & Evans, 1995; Kerr, 2000; Thornbury, 1993). These claims are particularly relevant to literacy-level learners, who may have previously had limited exposure to English, and no prior pronunciation instruction.

With its emphasis on jaw posture, tongue position, breathing, and strengthening of the vocal muscles, voice quality settings instruction can be carried out with the most basic of language content, causing it to be highly appropriate for the literacy-level classroom. Drawing attention to the differences in voice quality settings between EL learners' L1 and English using visual demonstrations such as videos, mirrors, and partner work has the potential to make this area of instruction highly viable to literacy-level learners since it is one of the few areas of pronunciation that is visible as well as auditory, and as a result does not require extensive language to explain, demonstrate, or practice. Moreover, the auditory feedback can be difficult for literacy-level learners to notice and synthesize, so the kinesthetic feedback provided by mirror and partner work when working with voice quality settings may be more helpful for this level (Kerr, 2000).

Voice Quality Settings Activities

1. Listening & Awareness
    - Learners watch a video of a native English speaker with the sound off. Teacher asks the learners what language the speaker was using, and has the learners imitate the mouth movements that they noticed. Using handheld mirrors, the learners speak their L1 while watching their mouths. Learners and teacher compare the L1 mouth movements to the English mouth movements in the video. (This activity is used when voice quality settings are first introduced.)
    - Using a list of vocabulary (pictures or words) that is relevant to the context of the lesson, teacher says each word aloud while the learners watch the teacher's mouth. Learners then look in their mirrors, say the word, and imitate the teacher's mouth movements.
    - Teacher chooses a word from the list and silently mouths it. Learners read the teacher's lips and say the word out loud. Repeat several times.

2. Control
    - Learners work in pairs. One learner chooses a word from the above list and silently mouths it. Their partner reads their lips and says the word out loud. The first learner indicates their partner's accuracy, then continues mouthing the words until they have completed the list. Partners then switch roles.

3. Practice
    - Teacher introduces a sentence frame that can be used with the vocabulary words (e.g. Food unit: *I like to eat* ___). Learners work in small groups. Groups are given a set of vocabulary flashcards (may be pictures or words). Learners take turns drawing a card, saying the sentence using the vocabulary word on their card.

4. Extension
    - Learners act out a short dialogue, independently choosing the words to complete the dialogue from the vocabulary list, first in pairs then in front of the class.
    - Learners complete a mingle grid or a survey, moving around the classroom and asking one another questions (e.g. *What food do you like? What food don't you like?*).

Word Stress

It is claimed that "[word stress is] the most convenient focal point for pronunciation instruction; an area of maximum overlap of communicative importance and teachability" (Dalton & Seidlhoffer, 1994, p. 73). There is significant evidence that word stress plays an important role in intelligible English for a vast majority of native English speakers. Most people who grow up speaking English produce and process word stress automatically, without any

conscious thought. However, for many NNSs, especially new learners, the variable word stress of English is an unnoticed phenomenon which can cause intelligibility difficulties when interacting with native English speakers.

Stressed syllables in multisyllabic words are often described as being louder, longer, and higher in pitch than the unstressed syllables. Native English listeners process meaning based on the stressed syllables in incoming speech, relying on the cues that the stress pattern provides (Celce-Murcia, et al., 2010) to understand the message. Consequently, when word stress is missing or misplaced, it can cause breakdowns in communication (Benrabah, 1997; Celce-Murcia, et al., 2010; Field, 2005).

According to Field, some ESL teachers argue that these listener perception errors will be minor because the listener will be able to rely on contextual information to compensate for words with mispronounced stress (2005). Field points out the fallacy of this argument; context depends on how much of the speech the listener has been able to understand (2005). For literacy-level learners who often have severely limited vocabularies it is crucial that they are able to produce individual words in a manner that will be intelligible to the listener considering the fact that there may be few opportunities for listeners to gain context when interacting with NNSs who produce short utterances. Gilbert recommends prioritizing word stress and distinguishing between strong and weak syllables when working with beginning learners (Gilbert, in Celce-Murcia, et. al., 2010).

To begin to use word stress, literacy-level learners need to first understand that every multisyllabic word in English has a stress pattern (Celce-Murcia, et al., 2010). Word stress is specific to the individual word, therefore, it falls to reason that this feature should be taught along with new vocabulary, including attention to and feedback on the production of their stress patterns (Derwing, 2017; Field, 2005). As with voice quality settings, there are ample opportunities to incorporate kinesthetic and visual practices into word stress instruction, making this pronunciation feature well-suited for literacy-level learners.

Word Stress Activities

1. Listening & Awareness
    - Teacher says a word from the vocabulary list. As the teacher says the word, she taps or claps for each syllable. Teacher asks learners how many syllables they heard. Teacher repeats the word, using hand gestures to indicate which syllable is stressed. Teacher asks learners which syllable was the strongest.
    - Teacher shows learners two words from the vocabulary list that have different word stress patterns (pictures or written words). Teacher hums the word stress pattern for one of the words (e.g. HUM-hum-hum for *STRAWberry*). Learners indicate which word corresponds with the stress pattern.

2. Control
    - Learners use movement (e.g. raising and lowering hands, pulling rubber bands) to mimic the stress patterns in the vocabulary words as they say them.
    - Each learner is given a set of pennies. Teacher says a word from the vocabulary list. Learners count the syllables, setting out one penny per syllable (e.g. *manager* would need three pennies). Learners then move the penny that represents the stressed syllable so that it is higher than the other pennies. Teacher leads saying the word as learners tap the corresponding pennies for each syllable.

3. Practice
    - Each learner is given a word stress grid with the word stress patterns represented using bubbles (see Figure 2 below). Learners work in partners to write each vocabulary word into the corresponding square on the grid resulting in words being grouped according to their stress pattern. Learners then read the words from their grid aloud, paying attention to the accuracy of their grid.

O	**O o**
O o o	**o O o**

Figure 2: Word Stress Grid

4. Extension
    - Teacher introduces a short dialogue, with options for learners to complete it using words from the vocabulary list. Learners then form two lines facing each other with each line taking on a role in the dialogue. As learners complete the dialogue, one of the lines shifts over so that everyone has a new partner. This is repeated several times.

Teacher moves up and down the lines of learners, monitoring for use of word stress and providing guidance and feedback as needed.

- Learners use large and small dots to mark word stress on important multisyllabic words from a current story they are reading. They practice reading the story aloud by themselves using the dots to remind them of the word stress, then retell the story from memory to a partner, using as many of the stressed words as possible.

Sentence Stress

As discussed in regard to word stress above, the ability to use stress appropriately in spoken English plays a large role in meaningful communication. Moving beyond the word level, sentence stress is equally as important, serving as a mechanism through which English speakers draw the listener's attention to the words in an utterance that provide the most meaning. Speakers do this by lengthening stressed syllables in important words while reducing syllables in function words (e.g. articles, auxiliary verbs, prepositions). Sentence stress, combined with word stress, is what provides English with its rhythm.

Learners whose first language has a stress pattern in which all syllables in an utterance are expressed with more or less equal stress tend to use a similar pattern when speaking English Celce-Murcia, et. al., 2010). This lack of appropriate sentence stress can cause communication breakdowns because when listening to English speech, native English speakers subconsciously pay attention to the strong (stressed) words in order to make meaning.

When teaching sentence stress to learners, it is important to both teach how to stress the important words in an utterance, and destress, or reduce, the function words (Hahn, 2004). For literacy-level learners, this may take the form of using chants, movement, or visual markers to indicate the sentence stress in utterances. Gilbert (2014) recommends teaching features such as sentence stress through the use of dialogues and template sentences. Integrating sentence stress awareness and practice into the dialogues and phrases that literacy-level learners are already working on in class provides an explicit context for stress patterns, and a template that learners can draw from later to inform the rhythm of their speech.

Sentence Stress Activities

1. Listening & Awareness
    - Teacher reads a simple dialogue aloud to the class several times. Teacher raises and lowers their hand to show the variation in stress as they say each line.
    - Teacher goes line by line through the dialogue. After each line, learners indicate the most important words. Teacher underlines those words. Teacher reads dialogue again, calling attention to the stress placed on the important words. Teacher uses hand gestures and her voice to demonstrate that the function words are reduced resulting in words such as "does it" sounding like a single word, *duzit*.

2. Control
    - Learners repeat each line of the dialogue after the teacher, clapping, tapping the table, or nodding heads on the stressed words and reducing the unstressed words. Teacher speeds up the dialogue as learners grow more comfortable.
    - Teacher takes on the role of one side of the dialogue as the class takes the other, continuing to make movements for stressed words. Reverse roles and repeat the dialogue.

3. Practice
    - Teacher says a sentence from the dialogue aloud, replacing the syllables with sounds (e.g. "Where are you going?" "LA lala LA la?"). Learners call out the line from the dialogue that matches the pattern.
    - Learners work in small groups to put in order sentence strips that have the lines of the dialogue written on them.
    - Teacher then passes out cards with large and small dots representing the syllables in each sentence. Learners match the cards with the sentence strips according to the pattern.

4. Extension
    - Using the sentence strips and pronunciation pattern cards from the previous activity as a guide, learners act out the dialogue from the previous activity, first in pairs then in front of the class. Teacher monitors and gives feedback on the use of sentence stress.
    - Teacher puts learners into pairs and assigns each partner a role (e.g. customer/clerk, manager/employee, etc.). The teacher calls out a situation (e.g. "You can't find the red onions in the store") and the learners roleplay the situation.

CONCLUSION

Teaching literacy-level learners can be a challenging but highly rewarding task. Learners at all levels benefit from explicit and structured pronunciation instruction, but for literacy-level learners it is absolutely critical that pronunciation is included in regular classroom instruction. With a minimal amount of preparation, any literacy-level lesson can include an element of pronunciation instruction that will lead to increased intelligibility, confidence, and more positive interactions outside of the EL classroom. As teachers, it is vital that we balance an open and welcoming classroom environment with systematic, research-based pronunciation instruction. As Morley (1991) states, not attending to a student's pronunciation needs is "an abrogation of professional responsibility" (p. 489).

Note

Teaching demonstration videos featuring pronunciation instruction in literacy level classes on the areas of voice quality settings, word stress, and sentence stress can be found on the MN ABE Professional Development Youtube channel under the "Pronunciation Instruction" playlist.

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