

Using Percussion to Teach English Pronunciation

LEVEL: Beginner and up

AGE: Young learners to adults

TIME REQUIRED: 10–20 minutes

GOALS: To practice syllable identification, word stress, and rhythm in spoken English; to recognize musical elements in the English language; to use kinesthetic activities to practice English pronunciation

MATERIALS: Pictures of animals (Appendix A) or cards with animal names written on them (Appendix B); sticks, pencils, drumsticks, or any objects that could serve as percussion instruments

OVERVIEW: Frequent, routine pronunciation activities can help learners of all ages and levels develop a foundation for listening and speaking skills. The activities can be fun, short, and simple. You can combine these elements in one activity by highlighting the rhythmic aspects of English. In this kinesthetic pronunciation activity, learners use percussion “instruments” to recognize syllables and practice word stress. The instructions below use vocabulary related to animals; however, you can adapt the activity to fit your curriculum by changing the target vocabulary and the related pictures or illustrations.

PREPARATION:

1. Collect enough sticks for each student to have two. You can use alternative percussion instruments such as

drumsticks, chopsticks, and pencils, or you can have learners use their hands to clap or feet to stomp. Essentially, a percussion instrument can be anything a student can tap, clap, hit, or use to keep time with a given rhythm.

2. Copy pictures from Appendix A, if you are able to give handouts to all students, or hang pictures for all students to see. If your learners are able to read English, you can write the names of animals on the board or make copies of the cards in Appendix B.

PROCEDURE:

Part I

1. Look at the pictures of animals with the class, using either the handouts or pictures on display. As you look at each picture, ask the students to identify the animals by name. For example, point to the picture of the elephant and ask learners the name of the animal. If they identify it, say the animal’s name again and ask the class to repeat it, using gestures if needed to make this instruction clear. You say, “Elephant.” They say, “Elephant.”

In this step, the emphasis is on sound and rhythm; students focus on listening, hearing the word clearly, and repeating it. Continue this process for all the target vocabulary items.

Note: If you do not have pictures, use written words, either on the board or on

paper (you might use the note cards in Appendix B).

2. Tell students, “Now we are going to make music with the sounds of each animal word.”
3. Move students into a semi-circle; if possible, have them sit on the floor with the pictures still in view. If sitting on the floor is not practical, ask students to stand. The goal is to vary the classroom routine and energize students by getting them up and out of their seats.
4. Ask student volunteers to hand out a pair of sticks or other percussion instruments to each student. If you are not using instruments, tell students to get ready to clap their hands or stomp their feet.
5. Tell students they are going to tap the sticks together to match the different sound parts of each word. These parts are called syllables. Choose whether or not to use the word *syllable* in your explanation, based on your students’ level.

(Note: This activity can be adapted to suit your students’ level; if your students are already familiar with syllable identification, you can reduce the amount of time you spend on this part of the activity, or you can skip ahead to Part II, which focuses on word stress.)
6. As an example, start with the word *animal*. Using your own sticks, tap them together for each syllable in the word: an/i/mal. This requires three taps of the sticks.
7. Ask students how many taps they hear. Repeat the word while tapping the syllables.
8. Ask the students to say “animal” while tapping along with the three parts of the word that they hear. Demonstrate the tapping and do it along with the students

repeatedly until they feel comfortable with the rhythm.

9. Model and practice additional words with different numbers of syllables so that students can hear how the number of taps changes accordingly:
 - a. Say the word *elephant*. Have students repeat it while tapping their sticks in time. Ask them how many parts they hear in the word. Again, they should be tapping three times.
 - b. Repeat the process with the word *dog*, which requires only one tap.
 - c. Finish modeling with a two-syllable word such as *dolphin*.
10. Break the class into groups of three or four students. Have learners continue the activity on their own with the remaining animals. You could also assign each group one or two animals, perhaps by distributing the animal-word cards in Appendix B. Then follow this procedure:
 - a. Ask groups to tap out the word for their assigned animals and identify the number of syllables in each. Give them time to practice tapping.
 - b. Bring the groups back together as a large group.
 - c. Ask each group to teach the rest of the class its taps. For example, each group could come to the front of the room, then say and tap the group’s word. The group can then ask the rest of the class to say and tap the word.
 - d. Do this until all the animals have been presented.

Part II

1. Return students’ attention to the word *animal*. Tell them to remain quiet and listen.

2. Say the word *animal* slowly while stressing the first syllable naturally but loudly: AN/i/mal. Repeat the word, tapping the sticks loudly for the stressed syllable and softly for the unstressed syllables: TAP/tap/tap.
3. Reinforce the idea by asking students what sound is the loudest. Repeat saying and tapping the syllables with the emphasis on the stressed syllable. Then have the students join you in saying the word and tapping the sticks to the stress rhythm.
4. Try another word, such as *cheetah*, together as a class. Start by saying the word together in a natural way at a normal pace.
5. Ask students, “Which is louder, the first part [syllable] or the second part [syllable]? CHEE/tah. CHEE/tah. CHEE/tah.” Now tell them to say the word and tap it out with their sticks. The first tap should be louder and the second tap quieter.
6. Model a one-syllable word such as *dog*. Explain that in one-syllable words, like *dog*, the stressed syllable is the only syllable.
7. If the students have completed Part I of this activity, put them back into their groups and ask them to find the stress in the word or words each group was assigned earlier. If students did not do Part I, put students into small groups and assign each group two or three words.
 - a. Ask each group to identify the stressed syllable of each of its assigned words through tapping.
 - b. Have each group present one or more of its words to the class. The groups should say and tap the word to show the stressed syllable.
 - c. Have each group lead the rest of the class in tapping to show the stress pattern of the word. To help everyone start tapping at the same time, you—or a student in the group—can give a start signal, such as “1, 2, 3, Go!” Then everyone taps along while saying the word three times. For example, if the word is *cheetah*, a student in the group says, “1, 2, 3, Go!”; together, the entire class taps and says, “CHEEtah, CHEEtah, CHEEtah.”
8. You can end this activity here. But to make this type of pronunciation activity as effective as possible, you should do it often and vary the language used as new vocabulary words are presented in class.

EXTENSIONS

1. Ask learners to come up with names of other animals to try. If the class is small enough, each learner could think of the name of an animal to try together as a group. If the class is large, ask for one suggestion at a time and ask learners to try tapping the word together. For each suggestion, start with simply tapping out the syllables before moving onto stress.
2. Tap out the syllables and syllable stress in a word without saying the word. Then ask learners what words might fit the rhythm presented. For example, you could start by tapping a one-syllable word that they have learned, such as *cat*. Ask learners to give possible answers for a one-syllable tap. They might say *duck*, *dog*, *fox*, *frog*, etc. The idea is that they can readily identify a one-syllable word. Next, try a two-syllable word, such as *tiger*, to be tapped as: TAP/tap; TI/ger. Remember, you are only tapping and not saying the word. Learners can then guess possibilities. If they don’t pick *tiger* but suggest another two-syllable word with the same stress pattern, then they have

responded correctly. See Appendix C for a list of suggested animal words to use in this extension activity.

3. If you are using written words rather than pictures in this activity, have learners mark the words with the correct stress or divide the words by syllables. In addition to saying and tapping out the sounds, they should be able to see how syllables and stress are built into each word.

VARIATIONS

1. Instead of doing the entire activity in one lesson, opt to do a little bit of the activity every day for the duration of a unit. For instance, one day, the activity could be done at the beginning of class as a review and warm-up; on another day, in the middle of class as a change-of-pace break; and on another day, at the end of class as a wrap-up for vocabulary that has been introduced.
2. Learners could end the activity (or review the activity later) by identifying the syllables and syllable stress within their own names. They could also do the activity with the name of their school or town and with other words that are familiar to all of them. Doing so gives you a chance to see if the concepts presented in the activity can be applied to other languages while also relating the task to language present in students' everyday lives.
3. This activity can be adapted for many ages and levels. To apply this approach to larger chunks of language, once you know learners are confident in listening for and tapping out syllables and word-stress patterns, ask them to identify and analyze stress in phrases or sentences. For example, rather than simply tapping out word-stress patterns, have learners tap out the stress in a full sentence. In the sentence *I love pizza*, learners would tap once for each word, with a louder

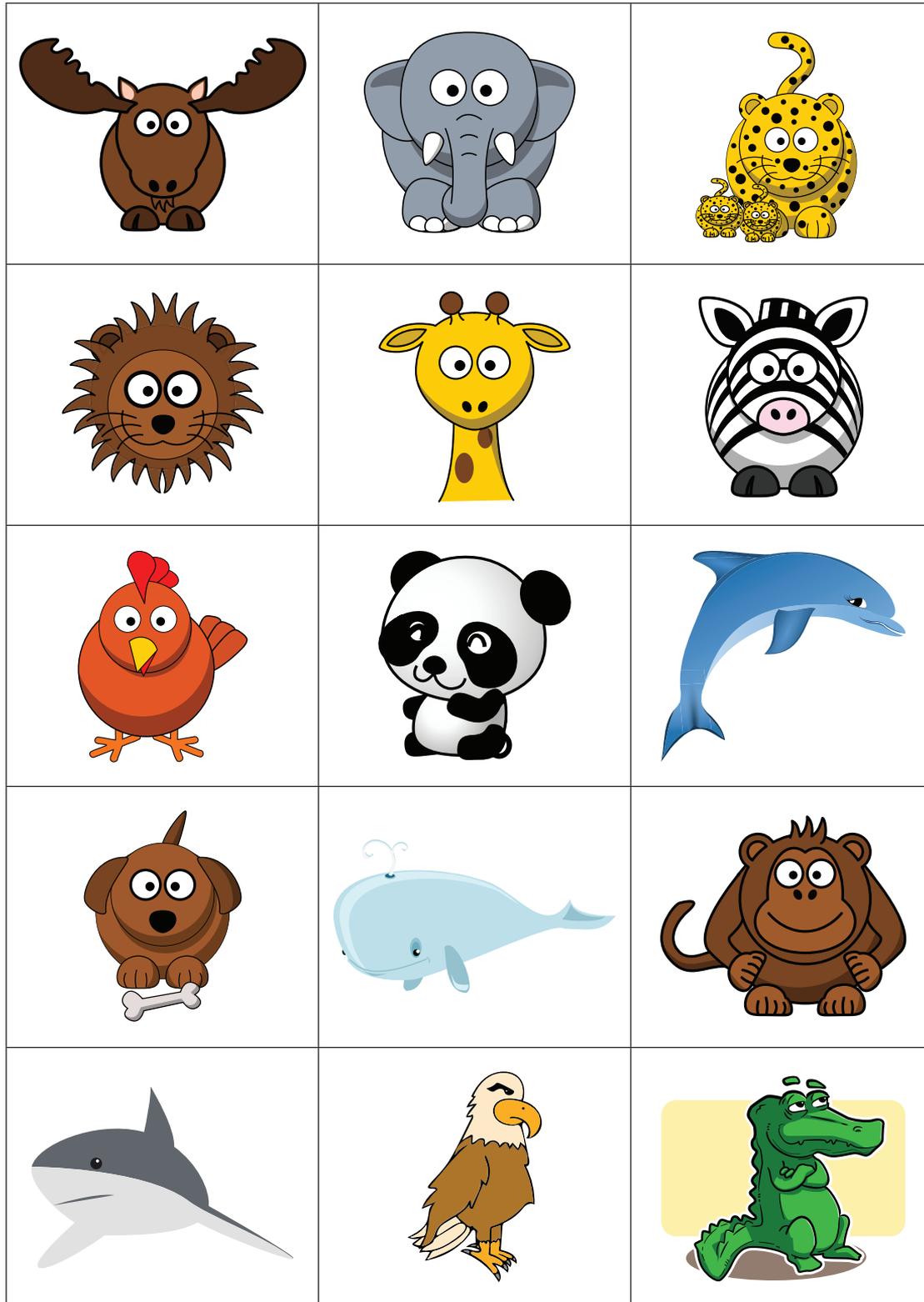
tap for the stressed word or syllable. In this example, it could be tap TAP tap/ tap, or "i LOVE pizza." Depending on your learners' level, you can introduce pragmatic (meaning-based) aspects of stress at the sentence level. Using the sentence *I love pizza*, you can ask learners how the meaning of the sentence changes when you change the stressed word, as in these stress variations:

- "i LOVE pizza." (Emphasis is on the strength of the feeling.)
- "I love pizza." (With the stress on the word *I*, emphasis is on the person, perhaps highlighting that the speaker also loves pizza after hearing someone else mention a love of the food, or clarifying that he or she, not someone else, loves pizza.)
- "i love PIZZA." (Emphasis is on the object of the love, which is pizza, not something else.)

This activity was written by **Melissa Mendelson**, an ESL teacher with more than 10 years' experience in the United States and abroad. She is currently an Associate Instructor in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Utah.

APPENDIX A

Animal Pictures



APPENDIX B

Animal Names

MOOSE	ELEPHANT	CHEETAH
LION	GIRAFFE	ZEBRA
CHICKEN	PANDA	DOLPHIN
DOG	WHALE	MONKEY
SHARK	EAGLE	ALLIGATOR

APPENDIX C

Animal Names by Syllable Count

One Syllable

cat
cow
horse
mouse
deer
rat
bee
goose
frog
snake

Two Syllables

beaver
rooster
rabbit
toucan
donkey
salmon
puppy
turtle
reindeer
spider

Three or More Syllables

gorilla
crocodile
octopus
hyena
parakeet
coyote
dinosaur
kangaroo
rhinoceros
hippopotamus