Concepts to Support Teaching and Learning

To set the stage for a discussion of pronunciation teaching, look at the following excerpt adapted from a local television news report. In it, a female airline passenger is being interviewed about an emergency at the end of a long flight from Los Angeles to Miami. After introducing the woman as a "hero," the TV reporter asked her to describe her experiences on the plane. Please note that for reasons to be explained shortly, the transcript is intentionally punctuation-free.

The Airplane Aisle Incident

. . . the plane landed the cabin lights turned on everyone got out of their seats I stepped into the aisle opened the overhead compartment and was waiting my turn to leave the plane in back of me I heard a noise that didn't sound right when I turned I saw an older man was falling into a woman behind him he looked scared his face was stone white I didn't think he was breathing I yelled for help and then a couple of us moved into action the first thing I did was to get the people behind me to back away by this point most of the aisle had cleared so we were able to stretch him out on the floor I heard someone say we have to get him out of the plane so I grabbed his legs this tall guy grabbed his shoulders and we carried him off I know CPR so I cleared a space made sure everyone else was out of the way . . . fortunately when it was all over he fully recovered seemed to be fine . . .

Thought Groups and Pausing

A closer look at Excerpt 1 shows that the first few lines are divided into short segments based on the speaker's actual delivery:

The Airplane Aisle Incident: Excerpt 1

the plane landed // the cabin lights turned on // everyone got out of their seats // I stepped into the aisle // opened the overhead compartment // and was waiting my turn to leave the plane

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The double slash marks indicate one of several rhythmic features that serve as momentary boundaries between clusters of words in spoken English. These may constitute a full break in the stream of speech, a lengthening, or a holding of the word at the end of a word cluster before the next cluster begins. Two examples of words that would be lengthened or held longer in this way are underlined:

// the cabin lights turned **on** // everyone got out of their **seats** //

Lane (2010) explains that a lengthening or holding of syllables "may be heard as a pause, although within an utterance, the voice 'lingers' rather than stops" at the boundary of a word cluster (p. 52). For ease of presentation, I refer to such boundary markers as *pauses* and to the clusters of words between them as *thought groups*. Following these conventions, the double slash marks featured in Excerpt 1 indicate five pauses and six thought groups for what otherwise might have been an uninterrupted stream of speech. As the passenger related her story, her pauses were very brief, many barely noticeable, and most provided insufficient time for even a very quick intake of breath. Such pauses are a completely normal feature of spoken English that make possible its characteristic rhythmic nature (Brazil, 1994; Cauldwell, 2013; Levis, 2018). Pauses reflect momentary breaks in the flow of speech tied to the speaker's communicative intent as well as to both the speaker's and listener's needs for message organization. Though written texts in English provide clear divisions between words to simplify the process of reading, spoken English simply does not work that way. Rather, speakers speak in thought groups within which clusters of words are tightly strung together, thus forming intermittent pulses of speech (Lane, 2010; Murphy, 2017b).

Introducing Thought Groups

One way to introduce the concept of thought grouping to nonnative speakers of English is to present learners with examples of identical prepositions that sometimes occur together (Wong, 1987). More technically, these seemingly identical words usually involve the second element of a two-word verb followed immediately by the same word functioning as a preposition. Such dual occurrences of what appear to be the same words right next to each other can serve as powerful illustrations of the need for speakers to insert pauses at meaningful locations while speaking. Here are some examples:

- Why don't you think it over // over the weekend?
- What time does the doctor come in // in the afternoon?
- Who can we turn to // to learn more?
- This is exactly what I've been waiting for // for years.

Though this book covers additional facets of pronunciation as well, if the time available to teach pronunciation is limited, I suggest prioritizing the process of thought grouping. Or, if enough time to attend to other facets of pronunciation is available, be sure to teach the process of thought grouping early on and continue spiraling back to it. An awareness of how thought groups operate is essential for clearer understanding of most of the components of English pronunciation that are teachable in English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms (Brazil, 1994; Dickerson, 2010) because all such components are anchored within the thought group (Levis, 2018; Murphy, 2017b). Some priorities are to build learner awareness of what thought groups are, to define them in relation to the pauses that both straddle and help to delineate them, and to teach thought groups directly in language classrooms.

Why Are Thought Groups Helpful?

A compelling reason to teach the process of thought grouping is that it provides the time speakers need to organize their thoughts. Another reason is that when a speaker's message is well organized and presented in meaningful units, listeners have an easier time comprehending it (Reed, 2016). "The brief pauses or holding at the end of a thought group slows the student down [while speaking], giving him or her more time to make [appropriate] lexical, grammatical, and pronunciation choices" (Lane, 2010, p. 53). Here is a partial list of pronunciation features that may be taught more efficiently once learners are familiar with thought groups:

- prominence[1]
- stressed syllables within prominent words
- vowel peaks within stressed syllables
- consonants and consonant clusters
- naturally occurring phonological processes (e.g., deletion, linking, assimilation) that commonly occur across word boundaries but only within thought groups
- volume, pacing, and the rhythm of spoken English
- intonation

REFLECTIVE QUESTION

- What does the following imply with respect to pronunciation teaching?

Thought groups represent the phonological context for most of the more essential components of English pronunciation. If we ask what comes first—the prominent word, a stressed syllable, or any of the other bulleted items listed above—the answer is always the same. The thought group comes first.

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[1] Sometimes called *focal stress*, *primary phrase stress*, and *sentence stress*.