

Sentence stress

This is a simple procedure you can use to raise learners' awareness of sentence stress whenever you're working with longer stretches of language like functional expressions or dialogues. It gets learners thinking about sentence stress for themselves and, used regularly, will help them develop a more confident feel for the characteristic rhythm of English.

Awareness-raising

- 1 Your learners have just read a short dialogue and / or some functional expressions which you now want them to practise. For example, here's a dialogue between friends which includes expressions for making and responding to suggestions:

“
MIA Some of these films look quite interesting.
JON Yeah, that's true. Why don't we go and see one some time this week?
MIA Yeah, OK. Would you like to see *Family Law*? I heard it's really good.
JON Hm, I don't know. It sounds a bit boring. We could see *The Others*.
MIA Well, I don't usually like horror films, but that one sounds good.”

English Unlimited Elementary, Unit 10

Write or display the lines on the board.

- 2 Say the first line several times with a fluent, natural rhythm. Draw attention to the fact that not all the words are stressed equally. We stress the most important words in a sentence – those which carry the main information – like *films*, *look* and *interesting*. Conversely, we tend not to stress little ‘grammar words’ like *of*.

Invite the learners to say which words are stressed and mark the stresses on the board. With words that have more than one syllable like *interesting*, be sure to mark the stress on the correct syllable. It's useful to mark the stress above vowels, as shown here:

Mia Some of these films look quite interesting.

*Note that there will sometimes be borderline cases, e.g. in this line, some speakers might also stress **these** and **quite**. Don't let this worry you! If learners suggest this, you can say that there are some possible alternatives, but there are some words which definitely are (and are not) stressed. The point of this activity is to help learners develop a general feel for the rhythm of the language without getting into a detailed discussion.*

- 3 In pairs or small groups, learners look at the rest of the lines and decide which key words are most likely to be stressed. It may help students to think which words need to be in the sentence for the meaning to be clear (these are normally stressed) and which could be taken out without the meaning being lost (these are normally unstressed).

English Unlimited Teaching Tips

4 As a class, go through the remaining lines and decide where the stresses go. Mark them on the board. Here's a possible way of marking up the dialogue:

Jon Yeah, that's true. Why don't we go and see one some time this week?

Mia Yeah, OK. Would you like to see Family Law? I heard it's really good.

Jon Hm, I don't know. It sounds a bit boring. We could see The Others.

Mia Well, I don't usually like horror films, but that one sounds good.

Variation

With groups who are familiar with parts of speech, build up a summary on the board like this:

Usually stressed	Not usually stressed
verbs	modal verbs
nouns	pronouns
adjectives	prepositions
question words (What, Why, ...)	articles
yes, no	determiners
negatives (don't, isn't, ...)	conjunctions

Practice

Learners are now ready to practise saying the lines. You can use a variety of techniques here:

- A simple **choral drill**. To start with, say the lines yourself and have the learners repeat after you. Then continue by simply pointing at the lines on the board while the learners say them. Keep the focus on correct sentence stress. If necessary use gestures or clap your hands or tap the board to emphasise the stress pattern. For more advice on this stage, have a look at the Teaching Tips on **Drilling**.
- A **half-and-half drill**. Say one character's lines while the learners respond with the other lines. Alternatively, divide the class into two large groups: group A says one character's lines, group B says the other lines.
- A **key word drill**. To begin with, learners chant only the stressed words in a regular rhythm:

Some **films** **look** **interesting.**

Then they say all the words but keeping the rhythm the same, so that the unstressed words are 'squeezed' between the stressed ones:

Some of these **films** **look** quite **interesting.**

See also the Teaching Tips on **Disappearing Drills** and **Pair Drills**.