

## Teaching Tip -Teaching Contrastive Stress for Varied Speaking Levels

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### BACKGROUND

Contrastive stress is an important use of prominence in English speech (Bolinger, 1961). Prominence is the use of voice pitch, syllable length, and loudness to call attention to semantic categories being expressed in speech. Learners must understand that prominence is essential to express meaning in English, and that prominence typically occurs on the last content word of a phrase/sentence, as in the sentences in (1).

- (1)                      The girl was at HOME.                      It's really COLD.  
                              The book is on the TABLE.                      Try to be there EARLY.

Contrastive stress often has greater pitch change and length than normal prominence. Contrasts may be explicitly or implicitly expressed.

- (2)    Explicit:            It's easier to walk                      DOWN                      the stairs than                      UP                      the stairs.
- Implicit:            I can't believe I fell                      UP                      the stairs this time. (implicit contrast to DOWN)

Expressing a contrast is not the same as marking new information (Katz & Selkirk, 2011) but evokes special pragmatic meanings related to semantic categories (Cummins & Rohde, 2015). Contrastive stress is learnable for learners with various spoken abilities, both for perception (Pennington & Ellis, 2000) and for production (Levis & Muller Levis, 2018; Muller Levis & Levis, 2012; Muller Levis, Levis & Benner, 2014).

Contrasts can occur on any type of word class, such as nouns, verbs, prepositions, or pronouns.

- (3)                      I like to DRIVE not WALK.  
                              Do you prefer COOKIES or CAKE?  
                              I don't like HER. I like HIM.

There can be more than one contrast in a sentence.

- (4)                      I can eat or I can talk / but not together. (EAT, TALK, TOGETHER)  
                              She's always happy / but he's always sad. (SHE'S, HAPPY, HE'S, SAD)

Lexical frames help to express contrasts. They should be taught after introducing contrasts.

- (5)                      The first house is \_\_\_\_\_, but/while the second house is \_\_\_\_\_  
                              I like \_\_\_\_\_ more than \_\_\_\_\_  
                              The \_\_\_\_\_ is better/worse than \_\_\_\_\_

### Teaching contrastive stress

1. Notes to teacher: Make sure that learners understand normal uses of prominence before moving on to contrastive stress.

Student Directions: Final sentence stress works for most sentences in English. Emphasize the underlined words with extra length and pitch movement.

The girl was at home.

It's really cold.

The book is on the table.

Try to be early.

5 + 4 = 9

2 + 3 = 5

2. Notes to teacher: Students should read the sentences, dropping their voice pitch after the prominence on any words after the underlined words.

Student Directions: Practice sentence stress when it is not last. When the underlined word is not last, emphasize it and pronounce the last word very softly.

- a. She was there / but I didn't see her.
  - b. I can't go / but I'd like to.
  - c. I don't have a cat / but I want one.
  - d. I found a dollar / but then I lost it.
3. Notes to teacher: Students practice prominence in free speech. Have each student give a new sentence describing the picture.

Student Directions: Say a sentence to describe the house.



4. Notes to teacher: Introduce contrastive stress. Prominence can compare or contrast two or more items.

Student Directions: Listen to the sentences. Notice the extra length and pitch change on contrasting words.

I like to DRIVE not WALK.

Do you prefer COOKIES or CAKE?

I don't like HER. I like HIM.

5. Notes to teacher: Have students move away from reading words to also focus more on meaning differences.

Student Directions: Identify the contrasts in each pair of math sentences, then read the pairs aloud.

Example	$5 + \underline{4} = \underline{9}$	but	$5 + \underline{3} = \underline{8}$
	$12 + 12 = 24$	but	$12 + 11 = 23$
	$1 + 8 = 9$	but	$7 + 3 = 10$
	$4 + 8 = 12$	but	$3 + 3 = 6$

6. Notes to teacher: Using simple pictures of similar but different items, elicit comparisons/contrasts from students. Have each student give a new sentence comparing the pictures.

Student Directions: Give a sentence comparing the two pictures.



7. Notes to teacher: Students contrasts will be clearer if their language structure supports the contrast. Teach students lexical frames to help express contrasts efficiently and clearly. We teach two elements: (1) parallel grammatical structure for the contrasts, (2) vocabulary that emphasizes contrasts: *but, while, or, not, other, another, the first, the second, better, worse*, etc. After teaching the lexical frames, repeat exercise 6.

Examples: The *first* house is gray, *but* the *second* house is red.  
*One* house is \_\_\_\_\_, *but the other* house is \_\_\_\_\_.  
The house *in the first picture* has \_\_\_\_\_ *while* the house *in the second picture* has \_\_\_\_\_.

8. Notes to teacher: Give students guided, meaningful practice by providing them with lexical frames and pictures. Students can work in pairs and then say their sentences for the class.

Student directions: Use the lexical frames to describe different contrasts in the pictures.

the bear on the right... while...



He ... but...



9. Notes to teacher: Contrasts are normal in choice questions and expressions of preferences. This is more guided, meaningful practice to practice contrastive stress.

Student Directions: Student 1 - Ask your partner a choice question. Student 2: Respond to the question. Use the frames given in the example or make up your own.

Example Which do you like better, VANILLA ice cream or CHOCOLATE ice cream?  
I like VANILLA best. But I also like CHOCOLATE.

Which do you like better - \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_?

cake – cookies  
carrots – corn

tea – coffee  
juice – soda pop

beer – wine  
Chinese food – Mexican food

## 10. A few caveats

Contrasts may seem obvious to the teacher, but they are not obvious to learners, especially to those whose languages do not call attention to contrasts in the same way that English does.

Contrasts are a special case of prominence in English. Contrasts are often expressed by using prominence in special ways, such as not at the end of a sentence, or on prepositions or pronouns, or even on prefixes. Contrastive stress makes sense if learners first understand the normal pattern.

Keep it simple in teaching contrasts, and avoid extremely complex examples. For example, while there can be multiple contrasts in sentences, especially in the use of sayings, proverbs, and some academic language, these are highly stylized uses of contrastive stress and often have multiple ways to acceptably express the ideas. For example,

“The scores for THIS test are in NORMAL distribution, unlike the LAST test, which were in ABnormal distribution.” (Muller Levis & Levis, 2012)

Ask not what YOU can do for your COUNTRY, ask what your COUNTRY can do for YOU. (Grant, 1993) John F. Kennedy

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