Nov. 3, 2013

Beth Glassner-Calkins, Instructional Design & e-Learning Professionals' Group, LinkedIn, asked for suggestions on teaching call-center employees how to pronounce the names of people from diverse countries.

This query prompted me to recall (and dig up handwritten notes about) a lesson designed to help myself (the instructor) and college ESL students from various language backgrounds to pronounce one another's names comprehensibly. (Eventually, I hoped, we might even say the names *correctly*, learning a little about worldwide articulation features in the process.) Lesson purposes were [a] to set up a welcoming, interactive course atmosphere by helping everyone feel comfortable about addressing one another by name, and [b] to introduce the fundamentals of effective pronunciation (speech clarity)—the concepts of syllables, stress, rhythm, and tone—in the very first hour of an intermediate-level oral-skills course.

I started with a grid on a board (in those days, green and markable with chalk, now replaced by white or smart boards, computer-screen projections, etc.) It had a numbering system for the most common syllable-stress patterns in names, visual representation of these through dots of different sizes, intonation lines, and variously-sized and arranged lower– and upper-case letters spelling typical names that fit the nine or more distinct patterns.

Of course, a chart of this kind might show *any* system of visual representation that learners can make good use of and that is easy to produce on a computer or by hand. On the grid to the right, the numbers 1-4 tell how many syllables each sample item in that box contains; The letters a-d indicate which syllable to emphasize: the first, second, third, fourth, etc. In the string of dots, the biggest circle represents the most strongly emphasized syllable in each name; it is pronounced louder, longer, higher, and more clearly than the other syllables. Smaller dots indicate syllables with weak or no stress (said softer, shorter, lower, and less clearly than the focus syllable; their sounds may even be "reduced" in pronunciation.

The intonation line under the dot patterns shows high vs. lower voice pitch and movements up or down in steps or glides. Finally, in each example, the big letters of the strongest syllable are capitals (upper case); the other letters are smaller and lower-case.

Syllable-Stress Patterns for Common Names from Diverse Cultures

The numbers 1-6 tell the number of syllables in each of the three examples that follow.
The letters a-f indicate the most strongly stressed syllable—the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, or 6th.
A big dot ● indicates strong emphasis. Smaller dots . . . are for weak or unstressed syllables.
The intonation lines ⌐⌐ show rises and falls in voice pitch—the "speech music" of pronunciation.
Emphasized syllables are in BIG CAPITAL LETTERS, in contrast to weak syllables in small letters.

1 ●	2a ● .	2b . ●
BOB **JUAN** **LEE**	**AR** thur **AB** dul **GUP** ta	E **LAINE** Mei **LING** Mau **RICE**
3a ● . .	3b . ● .	3c . . ●
JON a thon **EL** o ise **AN** thon y	Far **ZA** na Er **NES** to Mo **HAM** med	Au gus **TIN** Zhang Xiu **YING** Ba shaa **RAT**
4a or 4b ●. . . . or . ●. . .	4c . . ● .	4d . . . ●
JAN u ar y Ve **RON** i ca De **ME** tri us	Gua da **LU** pe l li **AN** a Ga bri **EL** la	E man u **EL** Se bas ti **AN** Pi erre-Lou **IS**

5a to 5e   6a to 6f and so on.

●. . . .   . ●. . .   . . ●. .   . . . ●. .   . . . . ●. .   etc.

The point of such notations was to offer different ways of visualizing the pronunciation of sounds in syllables. They were meant to incorporate the principles and practices of Dr. David Allen Stern (the "Step System of American Speech Music"), Judy Gilbert (renowned author of "Clear Speech"), Ann Cook ("American Accent Training") and other experts in comprehensible pronunciation or accent reduction/acquisition. They even invite kinesthetic techniques, such as counting syllables with beats, stretching a rubber band to "feel" vowel lengthening, "drawing" pitch with the hands, etc.

Next, on large cards with these features, I showed five of the parts of my own full name, which illustrate a variety of one– to three syllable patterns common in American-English and German names: 1, 2a, 2b, and 3a. By pointing and gesturing, I indicated the "meanings" of the various symbols, visuals, and letter arrangements, including the skewed placement of the letters in each name. As class members repeated my pronunciation and later practiced "reading" these signs aloud, they got the idea of how one might represent the pronunciation of names (and other words) visually.
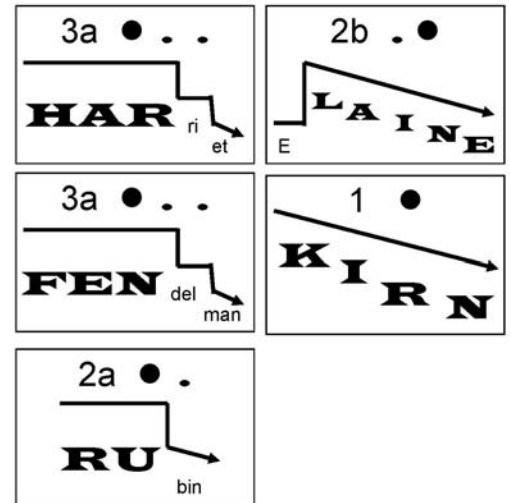
Participants received cards on which to draw and print the parts of their names, using any one or more of these visual systems—or even inventions of their own. They used heavy (colored) markers. During a break, I worked with individuals, checking their creations for conveyance of meaning by trying to pronounce *their* names accurately. I added my own suggestions for visual representation of names on the backs of some cards if helpful.

Everyone's card sets were then used in activities commonly used for first-day intros and activities: a (first, middle, last, maiden) name chain, mini-speeches about names (that clarified pronunciation), etc. Later in the course, they were used as examples of relevant speech features in pronunciation or accent acquisition lessons.

Of course, the main larger-than-sounds features of American-English speech may or may not *exactly* correspond to native-speaker pronunciation of names in diverse cultures. In addition, individual sounds, voicing, sound linking, reduced forms, and the like may differ in various languages. Even so, if call-center employees and other customer service providers are speaking *English* in their daily work, understanding syllable stress, intonation, rhythm, etc. may help them to address (potential) customers by name *comprehensibly*—or at least to avoid embarrassing mistakes. Before attempting to say a new (or "strange") name aloud to its owner, they can mentally put it into one of these categories, attempt its pronunciation, and have their effort assessed by listeners, preferably people familiar with the relevant language. Most likely, there are audio programs for various languages that can help, too.

As I looked up common names from various cultures to include in my grid, I learned quite a lot about their pronunciation. It was not only fun but also fascinating to read this information. Another way to teach language students about names is to have them do comparable research on the web and to report to the group what they have learned.