“Is all on it?” I heard these four simple words and didn’t have a clue what the Italian student in front of me in the queue was asking about. He was an international student getting his lunch along with some fellow students in an Oxford café last week. The person serving him looked equally confused until he pointed to the condiments. “All. Olive all”. “Oh, Olive Oil. S’already dressed”, she replied and I left them to it. His poor pronunciation and grammar created a short, but not dramatic, breakdown in communication, the sort of thing that can happen time and again to international students. The shorter the utterance, the more room for confusion.

Although we usually think of reading and writing as the key skills required by students for the academic world, listening and speaking are equally important. Pronunciation is a key element of both of them. Although we cannot rid the Italian completely of his strong accent there is plenty we can do to raise his awareness of some of the key elements. Both outside and inside the lecture theatre and classroom, how well he expresses himself and how effectively he listens will become vital to him. In terms of confidence, pronunciation can make such a difference to a student and any help with listening is always welcome. Areas teachers can work on effectively during any pre-sessional course include sense groups, sentence and word stress, intonation, linking and rhythm. You can literally take any sentence and analyse and practise it looking at each of these elements in turn. This comes from Oxford Learner’s Dictionary of Academic English and is the kind of sentence you may well hear in a seminar or lecture.

By asking the class which words take the main stress, which ones are completely unstressed, where the speaker pauses, which words are linked, what the intonation pattern is, etc you will raise their awareness of these elements. Oral practice of the sentence will push them to imitate as closely as possible the original model and it is fair to say that most of them can get closer than they think. Working on four or five sentences like this every lesson will really instill in them a need to articulate clearly and to listen effectively. When they are listening to English, they need to listen in chunks or sense groups. This sentences has four, each of which is the answer to a Wh question. Why? Following a national shift from coal to oil in 1959, Japan’s mining industry went into decline. When? in 1959 What? Japan’s mining industry What? went into decline. This activity can continue with each student choosing a sentence to dictate to the rest of the class aiming for as perfect pronunciation as possible. When their colleagues cannot grasp a particular word encourage them to ask, Did you say notional or national? I didn’t catch the last word, When did it happen? etc. This will be useful language to have when they are in seminars and lectures at a later date.
Another useful activity for raising awareness on larger samples of speaking comes when they are practising making presentations. The pronunciation habits you are trying to teach them on a sentence level can easily be applied to the paragraph level, or in presentation terms, what is said about one particular slide. A simple activity is to ask your students to present an illustration or explanation of some key terms in their field as if they were explaining them to a non-specialist. In the time it takes to explain *hydrophobic* as opposed to *hydrophilic*, (in other words one mixes with water and the other repels water so soap molecules have both parts) your student will have spoken enough words to give you a good sample to work on. Take the same areas as above and try to really push them as far as they can go in terms of delivery. Note the two adjectives are a good example of contrastive stress when we are talking about them together and the stress will fall on the syllable which differentiates them, *phob* or *phil*.

Extend this activity further by asking them to film themselves, or have a classmate do it, on their own smartphones so that they have a recording to review as many times as they want not only to practise but to act as an example of where their pronunciation was at the beginning of the course. Hopefully by the end it will be much improved. Listening and speaking are such important skills it is important they are not overlooked. They have the benefit of being able to be practised in short bursts and I would always advocate frequent rather than long practice sessions. Your learners will soon start to notice progress and will appreciate the usefulness of the exercises when they are working on a project with fellow students later in the academic year.

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