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## Personalising Input to Address Khmer Speakers' Pronunciation Issues

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### Abstract

The paper focuses on the personalization of pronunciation input based on the differences between Khmer and English. This personalised approach is in contrast to generic coursebook-based pronunciation syllabi, which do not address the specific needs of speakers of different mother tongues. In the Cambodian context, the differences highlighted involve problematic consonant sounds, the elision of final position consonant sounds and word stress. Materials targeting these specific pronunciation difficulties are provided in this article.

### Introduction

According to Jenkins (2000), pronunciation regularly impedes successful communication in international contexts. This belief is supported by Finocchiaro & Brumfit (1983) who claim that comprehensible pronunciation is an integral part of communicative effectiveness, and Brown (1989), who states that non-native speakers have an increased dependency on phonology due to the fact that they have less recourse to contextualization. This is why there needs to be an emphasis on pronunciation in the language classroom.

Unfortunately, pronunciation tends to be the most neglected language skill, along with reading (Morgan, 2009). This is especially true for teachers with limited qualifications and experience. Indeed, sixty-five percent of the less experienced teachers in Morgan's research (2009) saw themselves as either being "not knowledgeable enough" or having "no knowledge" with regard to this language feature.

The emphasis on pronunciation in the Cambodian context is particularly pertinent as Moore and Bounchan (2010) found that a large number of students attach importance to

pronunciation. Despite the priority given to pronunciation by Cambodian students, an issue which hinders the fulfillment of this need is the dearth of available, relevant material.

Though resources are plentiful, they tend to be written for an international market. This means that the majority of the input is redundant with regard to the needs of each nationality. Lan (2012), writing in the Vietnamese context, agrees, stating that even though there are a large number of English pronunciation books and websites available, they tend to be written by native English speakers for general learners, as opposed to a specific market, such as the native Vietnamese speaker.

The same is true of the Cambodian context. Though Kenworthy (1994) does list pronunciation issues according to L1, Khmer is not one of the languages covered. As phonological transfer from the speaker's mother tongue can cause pronunciation problems for an international audience, mastering the features of English phonology which can result in communication breakdown is crucial to mutual intelligibility among L2 speakers, and has been termed the *Lingua Franca Core* by Jenkins (2000). This is why a number of activities specifically targeted at the native Khmer speaker are provided in the appendices.

### **Suggested input**

There needs to be relevant pronunciation when a course claims to cover oral communication skills, with the input addressing learners' specific needs. The material should be both overt and covert. The former can make pronunciation a theme for discussion, for example, as in Figure 1, followed by a focus on the communication breakdowns that took place during the discussion and the reasons for their occurrence.

Figure 1. Discussion Prompts.

*Please discuss the following before providing feedback:*

What are your strengths and weaknesses with regard to pronunciation?

Have you experienced any communication breakdowns because of pronunciation when conversing in English? What were they?

Communication breakdowns can also be modelled by using digital sources, such as <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yR0IWICH3rY>, which have the added advantage of appealing to the visual learner.

Covert material could take the form of drilling and minimal pairwork of target sounds, for example, to aid in the development of the motor skills needed for the creation of the different sounds. This could be followed by an activity, as shown in Figure 2, in order to promote communicative effectiveness. In this activity, 5 sets of minimal pairs are featured, with each word being allocated a number. The example given focuses on /ʃ/ and /s/, as /ʃ/ is a sound which doesn't exist in the Khmer inventory, and tends to be replaced with /s/. The activity can also be conducted with the minimal pairs /tʃ/ and /z/, /θ/ and /s/ or /ð/ and /d/ as the former sound of each pair is problematic for Khmer speakers (Bounchan & Moore, 2010). These, along with their other issues, are listed in Appendix A.

The teacher models this activity by saying the words, with the students writing down the corresponding numbers to form a telephone number. The students then check their answers with a partner, asking the teacher to repeat any problematic words, and this is followed by the teacher giving the answer to determine if the students have been able to distinguish the target sounds. The next step has the students conducting the activity in pairs as active involvement makes the processing of information more likely. Partners' answers provide feedback as to whether or not the production of the target sounds has been successful, followed by the students explaining the differences between the minimal pair.

Figure 2. Telephone number activity.

0. sheet	1. seat	<i>The teacher will tell you his/her telephone number by saying each number's corresponding word. After guessing the number, it will be your turn.</i>
2. shell	3. sell	
4. she'll	5. seal	
6. short	7. sort	
8. show	9. so	

i) *Listen to the teacher.*

Put your arms in the air if the word has the same sound the same as the /tʃ/ in **chart**.

Fold your arms if the word has the same sound as the /z/ in **zoo**.

Put your finger on your nose if the word has neither sound.

ii) *Now it's your turn to pronounce words with or without the target sounds for your partner to respond appropriately.*

iii) *Choose whether the activity is repeated with /ʃ/ and /s/, /θ/ and /s/ or /ð/ and /d/.*

Figure 3. Kinaesthetic activity.

In addition to input satisfying learner needs, it is important that the amount of theory and practice is balanced. Spending a disproportionate amount of classroom time on the former should be avoided because as Cives-Enriques (2003) says, learning is the consequence of meaningful interaction, as opposed to providing factual information about language. Laroy (1996) concurs, commenting on the fact that teaching the names of the speech organs, for example, did not improve his students' pronunciation, despite his expectations. This is why there are a range of activities in the appendices, covering the issues native Khmer speakers have with English pronunciation.

That being said, if participants, as Laroy (1996) goes on to suggest, are unfamiliar with active participation and taking responsibility for their learning both in and out of the classroom, it is important that the rationale for conducting such activities is explained. Therefore, students should be told that the crossword in Appendix B has been created in order to promote learner retention of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for example, whilst Appendix C provides a list of useful websites for the purpose of promoting learner autonomy.

An example of the provision of meaningful interaction is illustrated in Appendix D, which requires the sharing of information in order to complete a task. Such problem solving activities engage learners cognitively and emotionally. The example in question is a task, called 'Neighbours', which is based on 'Baker Street' (Klippel, 1984). It has been turned into a pronunciation activity for the Khmer student, covering the individual sounds absent from the Khmer inventory and the elision of final position consonants, features focussed on in the previously mentioned *Appendix A: Cambodian Pronunciation Issues*, sources for which are Bounchan & Moore (2010), Keuk (2008), and Moore & Bounchan (2010). After conducting the activity, there should be a discussion to focus the students' attention on the problematic issues which arose during the activity as opposed to simply providing the students with the rules. Tomlinson (1998) comments on this approach being preferable, as it:

“... involves learners investing energy and attention in order to discover...something about the language for themselves... .Getting the learners to work out the rules...asking learners to investigate when and why...and getting learners to notice and explain...” (page ix).

Personalizing classroom input by basing the suggested activities on the pronunciation difficulties that native Khmer speakers have, together with the provision of student-centred tasks, mentally stimulates and aids in the development of self-confidence. Moreover, it develops a positive attitude towards learning, as students are able to see improvements in their communicative competency. Further examples of such activities include Appendix E for final consonant elision, and Appendices F and G for word stress, which, according to Bounchan & Moore (2010), can be a major issue for Cambodians due to Khmer's mainly monosyllabic nature, as well as Appendix H for further practice of the problematic /ʃ/ sound.

However, it should not be construed that rules are not to be provided, as their provision might be of benefit to certain learner types. Rules, as shown in Appendix I, should only be distributed after the course participants have been exposed to the targeted pronunciation point, and been asked to formulate them for themselves.

## Conclusion

To sum up, materials should focus on learners' relevant pronunciation issues, striking a balance between theory and practical application. The input should be both overt, involving discussions on pronunciation, as well as covert, taking the form of task completion, interviews, information gap activities and the negotiating of meaning, in order to be engaging and mentally stimulating. Raising awareness of the specific pronunciation problems faced should, in turn, help to improve production and minimize miscommunication caused by L1 transfer.

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## Appendix A. Cambodian pronunciation issues.

### CONSONANTS

1. Non-Khmer sounds tend to be mispronounced, which can cause communication breakdown. For example:

/tʃ/ is pronounced as /z/                      teach as tease

/ʃ/ is pronounced as /s/                      she's as seas

/θ/ is pronounced as /s

/                      think as sink (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yROIWICH3rY>)

/ð/ is pronounced as /d/                      they as day

2. Final position consonants tend to be omitted causing spoken grammatical inaccuracies. For example, the following minimal pairs tend to be pronounced the same:

*we* and *wheel*                      *war* and *war~~r~~*                      *play* and *playe~~d~~*                      *car* and *car~~s~~*

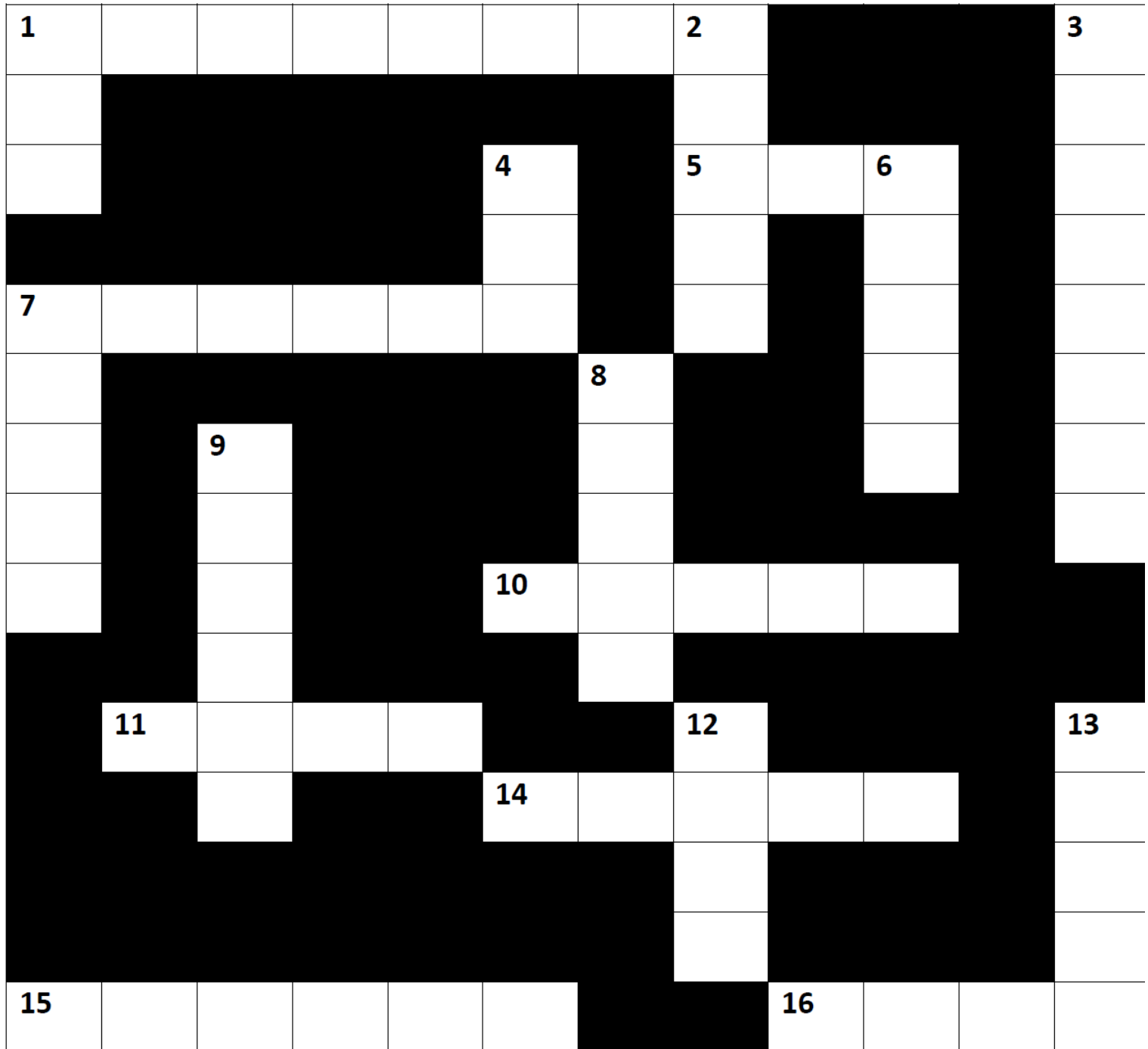
This includes omitting final position -(e)s and -(e)d which can lead to spoken grammatical inaccuracies.

### WORD STRESS

As Khmer is mostly monosyllabic, word stress can be problematic and cause communication breakdowns.

## Appendix B. Clothes crossword.

Write in the missing words based on the pronunciation clues.



Across	Down
1. ʃraʊzəz	1. təl
5. kæp	2. sDks
7. dʒæket	3. slɪpəz
10. dres	4. hæʔ
11. belt	6. pæns
14. bu:ts	7. dʒi:nz
15. blaʊz	8. skɑ:f
16. su:t	9. glʌvz
	12. kəʊt
	13. ʃɜ:t



**Appendix C.** Pronunciation websites.

*Here is a list of websites that you might find informative and helpful as you practise your pronunciation, along with some funny examples of miscommunication caused by pronunciation.*

**Practice**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/grammar/pron/sounds/>

Shows mouth positions (British English)

<http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics/>

Shows tongue and lip positions (American English)

<http://www.manythings.org/pp/>

Has activities and diagrams of mouth shapes, tongue and lip positions.

<http://www.btinternet.com/~ted.power/phonetics.htm>

Has activities to help learn the sounds.

<http://www.paulmeier.com/ipa/diphthongs.html>

Models sounds

**Funny examples of miscommunication**

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/articles/u/uk\\_cantonese.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/articles/u/uk_cantonese.shtml)

Learning Cantonese

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3JcHhA7M-Y>

Scottish Voice Activated Lift

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7\\_oNBT9wsc&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7_oNBT9wsc&feature=related)

Life of Brian: Release Roger. Which sound can't Julius Caesar pronounce?

**Appendix D.** Neighbours.

*Share your information to complete the worksheet. If you don't share your information, you can't complete the task.*

*Because this is a pronunciation activity, don't show anyone your information and don't spell any of the words.*

	<b>White House</b>	<b>Wine House</b>	<b>Wise House</b>	<b>Wide House</b>	<b>Wye House</b>
<b>Name</b>					
<b>Age</b>					
<b>Can't...</b>					
<b>Pet Hate</b>					
<b>Favourite Possession</b>					

## Answer key

	<b>White House</b>	<b>Wine House</b>	<b>Wise House</b>	<b>Wide House</b>	<b>Wye House</b>
<b>Name</b>	Ms Coat	Ms Cole	Mr Coe	Mr Cope	Mr Cove
<b>Age</b>	08	18	80	17	70
<b>Can't...</b>	shake	save	share	shave	chair
<b>Pet Hate</b>	zips	chips	shoes	ships	zoos
<b>Favourite Possession</b>	bone	bowl	boat	bow	book

The 20 sentences to be distributed to groups of 4 or 5:

The person in Wine House can't save.

White House's occupant can't shake.

The favourite possession of the person in White House is a bone.

Mr Cove lives in Wye House.

Mr Cove hates zoos.

Mr Cove is 70. His neighbour is 17.

The five activities they can't do are shaving, saving, chairing, shaking and sharing.

A bowl is the favourite possession of the person who can't save.

Ms Coat is 8 years old.

Ms Cole's favourite possession is a bowl.

Ms Coat can't shake.

The person who can't share loves his boat.

Mr Cope hates ships.

The 70 year old can't chair while the 18 year old can't save.

The 8 year old hates zips.

The person who can't shave's favourite possession is a bow.

The 80 year old hates shoes and doesn't share.

Mr Coe lives between Ms Cole and Mr Cope.

The person whose favourite possession is a bowl doesn't live next door to the person whose favourite possession is a book.

Next door to the 80 year old is a person who loves her bowl while hating chips.

**Appendix E.** Word endings: Consonant or vowel.

*Listen to the teacher and write a) or b) depending on which one you hear.*

Number	a or b	Sentences
1		a) Which day? b) Which date?
2		a) Look at the car. b) Look at the card.
3		a) I haven't got the fee for it. b) I haven't got the feel for it.
4		a) Where's the fur? b) Where's the firm?
5		a) I stay at home. b) I stayed at home.
6		a) Don't buy it. b) Don't bite it.
7		a) I can't see the sea. b) I can't see the seat.
8		a) Here's the tree. b) Here's the treat.
9		a) Don't stray. b) Don't strain.
10		a) She's fifteen years old. b) She's fifty years old.

Now it's your turn.

### Appendix F. Word stress maze.

<b>START</b>	gorilla	atomic	relation	finality
narrative	pineapple	acidity	important	extraction
solitude	capital	substitute	education	terrific
fanatic	correction	controller	duration	phonetic
pollution	banality	cigarette	electricity	candidate
surrender	botanic	amazing	Cambodia	<b>END</b>

Go from the *start* to the *end* using the squares with words stressed **oOo**. You can only go to a square which shares a 'wall' with the one you are in. For example, you begin with 'gorilla'. Where do you go next? Is it 'atomic' or 'pineapple'?

### Appendix G. Shifting stress.

Word stress can change in 'word families'. Where is the word stress on the photo-words? Listen and decide. The first one, photograph, has been done for you

- I like taking **photographs**.
- **Photography** is my hobby.
- I want to be a **photographer**.
- You're a very **photogenic** person.
- **Technology** allows you to scan **photographic** images on your computer.

Complete the table, marking the word stress ('). A good dictionary will help you.

NOUN	ADJECTIVE	VERB	PERSON
'industry			
			in'ventor
	com'petitive		
	'critical		
'politics			
		'nationalize	
			'analyst

NOUN	ADJECTIVE	VERB	PERSON

*Add some more word families, marking the stress on each word as you go along.*

*So, suffixes affect the grammar of a word, as well as the pronunciation:*

1. The stress moves to the syllable before some suffixes: 'athlete / ath'letic
2. Some suffixes have no effect on the stress: 'punish / 'punishment
3. Very few suffixes are stressed: millio'naire

Decide which rule these 'word families' follow? Write 1, 2 or 3 next to each pair.

uniform / **uniformity** =

employ / **employee** =

history / **historical** =

investigate / **investigation** =

consistent / **consistency** =

substance / **substantial** =

solid / **solidify** =

govern / **government** =

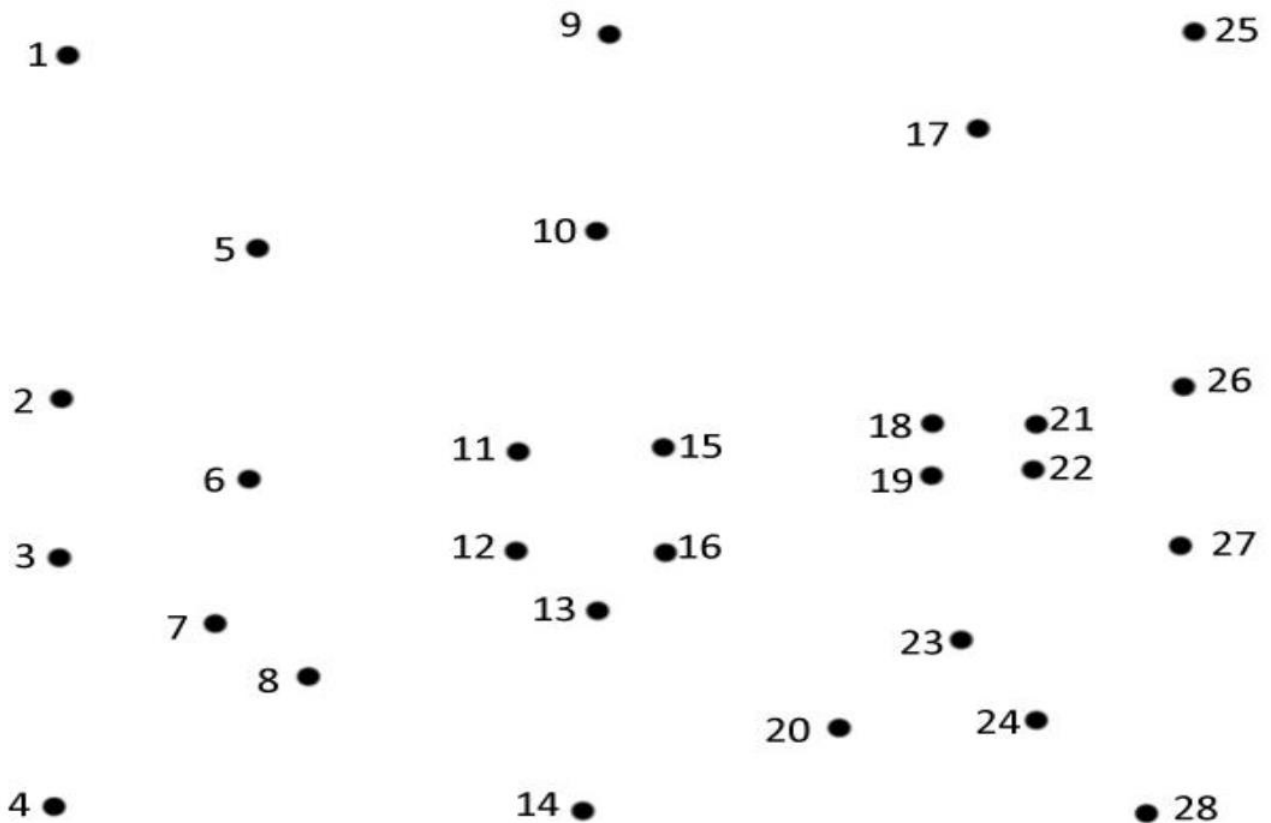
manage / **managerial** =

willing / **willingness** =

- 1) Next, mark the stress on the words below which have a **bold suffix**.
- 2) Ask and answer the questions with your partner.

*If the stress is different, decide who is correct.*

1. Are you forget**ful**?
2. Have you had any interesting discuss**ions** this week?
3. Is durian ined**ible**?
4. Have you made any arrangem**ents** for the weekend?
5. Have you ever been a volunt**eer**?
6. Is this task imposs**ible** to do?
7. Do you make regular donat**ions** to charity?
8. Are you interested in geograph**y**? Do you read the National Geograph**ic**?
9. Do you like the neighbourn**hood** where you live?
10. Have you had a product**ive** week?

**Appendix H.** Join the dots.**Key**

1. shoot	9. shake	17. she's	25. show
2. suit	10. sake	18. sees	26. sew
3. shock	11. sheep	19. she'd	27. shoe
4. sock	12. seep	20. seed	28. sue
5. she'll	13. shame	21. sheet	
6. seal	14. same	22. seat	
7. ship	15. shell	23. shore	
8. sip	16. sell	24. sore	

**Teacher's key**

1. Start at suit>sew> sake> suit>shock>seep>sheep>shell>sell>shoe>sew
2. Now start at she'd>sees>sheet>seat>she'd

**Appendix I.** Some general word stress rules.

- **Two syllable nouns and adjectives tend to have their stress on the first syllable.**

*'increase*            *'pretty*

- **Two syllable verbs tend to have their stress on the second syllable.**

*in'crease*

- **Only a very few prefixes are stressed, and these are nouns.**

*'co-writer*

*'counterpart*

*'hyperlink*

*'interface*

*'subway*

*'supermarket*

*'underwear*

NB: Prefixes can be stressed to show a contrast.

- **Similarly, only a few suffixes are stressed**

*millio'naire*

*absen'tee*

*volun'teer*

*Canto'nese*

- **Unstressed suffixes can determine the stress of a word.**

**Some suffixes cause the syllable before the suffix to be stressed.**

For example:

-iable -ial -ian -iant -iar -iary -ic -ical -ient -ify -ion -ium -ive -ity

- **Some suffixes cause the stress to fall on the anti-penultimate syllable (*the second from the suffix*):**

-cy

-gy

-phy

-ty

*de'mocracy*

*endocri'nology*

*'geography*

*sensi'tivity*

- **In contrast, some suffixes don't change the stress:**

-age

-al

-ative

-er

-ful

-less

-ment

-ness

-ous

-fy

NB: -able and -al, generally speaking, do not affect the word stress. However, there are exceptions:

*adm'ire*

*pre'fer*

*'medicine*

*'agriculture*

*'admirable*

*'preferable*

*me'dicinal*

*agri'cultural*

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### About the author

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