

Horton Hears a Phoneme:
Dr. Seuss for Phonetics and Pronunciation

Alayne Cramer

Diablo Valley College & Laney College

Proceedings of the CATESOL State Conference, 2005

Recipe for Using Dr. Seuss for ESL in 5 Easy Steps



1. Prepare 2 pages Cat in the Hat or other Dr. Seuss favorite. Type up. Put on a transparency.
2. Sprinkle in a pinch of rhythm and intonation.
3. Slice in any two phonetic patterns.
4. In 10-30 minutes of class time, distribute in equal parts phonetic and pronunciation practice.
5. Garnish with role playing, game, or other activity

Would you be willing to walk into a class of college-aged students with *this* on your agenda?

Horton Hears a Phoneme: Dr. Seuss for Phonetics and Pronunciation, featured for Community College and Adult Education teachers, gave the ‘go ahead’ to seventy potential believers who participated in this 2005 CATESOL workshop.

Of course, if you didn’t know who Horton was, you might not understand the first part of the title of the workshop. Horton, one of Dr. Seuss’ most famous characters (1954), is an elephant. Due to his very large ears, he is the only one in the jungle capable of hearing the smallest of sounds, coming from the smallest of people who happen to be living inside a speck of dust. The title, *Horton Hears a Phoneme*, is a reflection of the character, Horton, as well as the idea that Dr. Seuss books focus on the most discrete words and sounds, thereby providing the learner of English with many practical opportunities for practicing phonetics and pronunciation.

I first ordered a Dr. Seuss book for my Pronunciation and Phonetics classes several years ago after having sampled various segments of stories in previous classes.ⁱ The rhythmical, sometimes even mystical quality of the words coupled with stories whose deeper meanings

require adult understanding have never failed to enchant my community college students. The following opening lines to *Horton Hears A Who* (1954) exemplify the powerful combination of words with rhyme to transform the ordinary into the fantastic as the reader/listener is drawn into the made up world of the *Jungle of Nool*:

On the fifteenth of May, in the Jungle of Nool,
In the heat of the day, in the cool of the pool,
He was splashing...enjoying the jungle's great joys...
When Horton the elephant heard a small noise.

And to the eyes of the ESL teacher, these four lines provide a plethora of phonetic and sound patterns to work with such as the long 'U' sound in the double 'OO' combination in the words *Nool*, *cool* and *pool*, the two spellings of the 'OY' sound in the words *joys* and *noise*.

Focusing on two Dr. Seuss books, *The Cat in the Hat* (1954), a beginner level book, and *Horton Hears a Who* (1954), an intermediate level book which I have used as a text in both my Pronunciation class and Spelling & Phonetics class, the workshop demonstrated techniques and methods for focusing on rhythm, intonation, and specific pronunciation and phonetic points and patterns.

Insights that Emerged

"But how do you keep your students from sounding like they're talking in rhymes and half lines?" a workshop participant asked right after I had demonstrated the rhythmical quality of the following lines from *The Cat in the Hat* (1954): The sun did not shine/It was too wet to play/So we sat in the house/All that cold, cold wet day.

For the next several weeks, I pondered this. Was I indeed cultivating students who spoke in a stilted fixed beat? A recent classroom experience has provided me with the window of insight

I needed. As a student was reciting a page from *Horton Hears a Who* (1954), I noticed that he did, in fact, stop at the end of each line—thus speaking half sentences at a time!

Enjambement & Thought Groups

Enjambement, “. . . the breaking of a linguistic unit (phrase, clause or sentence) by the end of a line or between two verses,” is a poetic device used to build the tension and drama in poetry.

This is “in contrast with end stopping, where each linguistic unit corresponds with the line length” (Wikipedia, 2005). The following lines demonstrate enjambement in the Dr. Seuss book,

Horton Hears a Who:

So you know what I think?. . .*Why, I think that there must*

Be someone on top of that small speck of dust!

Instead of stopping at the end of the first line, the reader should continue reciting, thereby completing the thought at the end of the second line. If the reader instead pauses after the word “must”, the result is a broken thought group. An entire chapter is devoted to thought groups in Judy Gilbert’s text, *Clear Speech* (1984). According to Gilbert, “a thought group can be a short sentence or part of a longer sentence” (p. 129), and “there is often a pause at the end. . .to signal that the thought group is finished” (p. 130).

Huge misunderstandings can result if the speaker pauses in the wrong place. Likewise, our thoughts can emerge sounding broken or stilted if we pause between words that belong to the same thought group, as the student did when pausing at ‘must’, as if it were the end of the thought. Later, when the same student read the two Dr. Seuss lines as one complete thought group, his classmates reported that the meaning and dramatic import of these verses were greatly enhanced.

In addition to practicing phonetics and pronunciation patterns, Dr. Seuss books can also provide students with the opportunity to analyze where a thought group starts and stops and to

discover, first hand, the impact speaking in thought groups vs. breaking up a thought group can have upon the listener.

ⁱ Although Dr. Seuss books are copyrighted, teachers may obtain copyright permission to use sections of books in their classrooms through the publisher, Dr. Seuss Enterprises. The other option is to order a book as a required text, just as you would order any other text.

References

- Gilbert, J. B. (1984). *Clear speech: Pronunciation and listening comprehension in North American English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wikipedia. (2005). Enjambement. Retrieved April 25, 2005, from <http://en.wikipedia.org>
- Seuss, T. (1954). *The cat in the hat & Horton hears a who*. Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P.