

SOAS LANGUAGE CENTRE LEARNER SUPPORT

LEARNERS' VOICES

Learning Tones – Practical Tips: Part 1

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Whistling and humming

Pronouncing all the different consonants and vowels in a new language can be daunting, but adding the tones to it straightaway may make it almost unmanageable. So why not tackle tones separately from consonants and vowels? For every new word that you learn, try to hum or whistle only the tones until you can hit them well. When you feel comfortable with the tones, you can then add the consonants and vowels.

If you have access to native speakers, ask them to hum the tones for you so that you can listen to the pitch contour only, without getting distracted by other speech sounds.

When I learned Ikann in Nigeria, the children in the village picked up on my method of learning tones very quickly and sometimes I would have a bunch of them following me around the village humming words for me and cracking up laughing because they found it incredibly funny. It still helped me though!

Sorting words into tone groups

Take all the words that have the same tone pattern into one group, i.e. all the low–low words together, all the rise–fall words together etc. Then you can practice pronouncing them in one go and get into the rhythm and swing of that particular pattern. Along the same lines, you can then practise contrasting examples, e.g. a low–high word next to a high–low word etc.

Again, this technique is also useful for hearing the tones on new words. If you already know a word that you think has the same tone pattern as the new word, you can ask a native speaker “Does X sound like Y?”

Using a sentence as a “frame”

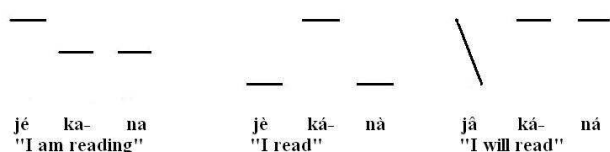
Putting words into a sentence may help you too, especially in Asian tone languages where the tone of a word sometimes changes when it is used in a construction. You can use sentences like “Where is the ___?”, “I want to ___.” or any other sentence that is either useful or maybe tricky for you. You can combine this with the tone groups technique, and you might find that all the words from one tone group will change in the same way.

People’s names

What I find really useful in Yoruba is remembering tone patterns that sound like the names of my friends in Nigeria. Because I need to say my friends’ names rather often, the tone patterns of their names are already stored very nicely in my brain. So when I learn a new word that has a mid–high pattern I know that it will sound like Solá’s name and I immediately know how to pronounce it.

Drawing pitch patterns

If you learn very well with visual aids it might help to draw pitch patterns, a bit like writing down musical notations. This can help you bring out the contour tones and the level tones because you would draw them differently. An example of this is given below, with language data from Ikann, the Nigerian language that I mentioned above.



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