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Intonation Instruction for English Language Learners: Teaching Prominence

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Introduction

English language learners who want to speak clearly and confidently must learn to incorporate appropriate intonation features into their speech. This can help them convey their intended meanings more precisely and also avoid being misunderstood. Furthermore, a knowledge of intonation features and their communicative value can enhance listening comprehension. Intonation, therefore, merits an important place in any English language curriculum. Nevertheless, it is not always given the attention it deserves. One reason for this is that teachers are sometimes unsure of how to teach what seems to be a complex skill. The purpose of this article is to suggest ways by which this seemingly complicated task can be approached realistically in the classroom. It takes the view that intonation can and should be taught systematically.

Many people think of intonation as a recognizable ‘tune’ in speech which results from the changing pitch in a speaker’s voice. In fact, it is the combination of several intonation features that actually contributes to the overall sound pattern or ‘tune’ that we perceive. As it is beyond the scope of an article of this length to cover each of these features, I shall focus on ‘prominence’ here. This article begins with a short introduction to a linguistic model that can be used for teaching. It then explains what ‘prominence’ is and how students can use transcripts meaningfully for learning. The rest of the article describes

some activities for teaching prominence, ending with a brief discussion about some important principles that should guide the teaching of intonation.

A Model For Teaching

In order to teach intonation systematically, it is essential that we base it on a sound linguistic framework which can account for various aspects of the intonation system. I have selected Brazil's (1985) model of intonation here. One of the principles of Brazil's theoretical model is that intonational choices are not related to grammar. Rather, these options allow speakers to convey specific meanings according to their perceptions of the context in which the utterance is made.

Brazil's description of intonation is particularly suitable for teaching purposes because it presents intonation as a finite system. In other words, it allows us to account for all the intonational choices made by a speaker. Learners, therefore, can see how different features relate to one another, and how they work together in giving meaning to speech. Another advantage is that the conventions for transcriptions are easy to understand, so students will have little difficulty using transcripts.

Brazil's intonation system consists of a number of sub-systems: prominence, tone, key, termination, and tone unit. The next section describes what prominence is.

Prominence

Prominence is the highlighting of a word in context. The context can be found in the words of the message, which in turn is embedded within a larger context of interaction. This larger context includes the roles of the speakers and the relationship between them, and the knowledge they share about the message. Speakers choose to make

certain words in an utterance prominent because these words contain key information which they want their listeners to notice. A listener can normally recognize a prominent word as being in some sense more emphatic than others.

Prominence is related to word stress. When a word is made prominent, it is normally the stressed syllable in that word which receives more emphasis. For example, in an utterance like ‘I bought a computer’, in which the speaker wants to highlight what he or she has bought, it is the second syllable of ‘computer’ that receives the most prominence: ‘comPUter’.

Although prominence plays a crucial role in communicating meaning, many speakers of English do not seem to have fully grasped its significance. Speakers in Malaysia and Singapore, for example, have shown some strong tendencies to do the following:

- place stress on weak syllables in prominent words
- assign prominence to the last word in a sentence regardless of context
- assign prominence to words in a random manner
- make more words than are necessary prominent

(Goh 1994, 1995)

It is therefore important that learners understand the nature of prominence and know how to select prominent words appropriately. Moreover, since prominence is fundamental to all other intonation features, it should be the foundation of any intonation instruction.

Using Transcripts

Intonation features can be extremely elusive to learners. To help them focus on selected characteristics of prominence, transcripts are needed. Transcriptions of continuous speech are typically presented in smaller sections marked by two oblique lines // at the beginning and the end. Each small section is called a *tone unit*. It is a perceptible block of information and can be analyzed in terms of tone choice on the last prominent syllable or ‘tonic’ syllable.

Although it is important that learners are familiar with the transcription style, it is not necessary for them to delve deep into the phonological qualities of a tone unit. There are, nevertheless, a few points that learners should know so that they can use transcripts meaningfully for their practice. I have summarized these points in Table 1.

	<i>Some features of a tone unit</i>	<i>Examples</i>
1	A tone unit is a small segment in a stretch of speech. Segments are usually separated by a pause or a complete stop between them. There are no pauses within a tone unit. In transcriptions, the segments are separated by two oblique lines //.	//MY son//JOHN // was FIRST in the race // // she LIKED it //

2	A tone unit may contain one or two prominent words. Prominence is indicated by upper case letters. When a prominent word has more than one syllable, only the stressed syllable is written in upper case.	//ASK him// // he's gone to LONdon// // WELcome//
3	When there are two prominent syllables in a tone unit, the last syllable is more noticeable than the first. There is a change in pitch in this syllable, also called the tonic syllable. The tonic syllable is always underlined.	// dad's RESTing in the <u>GARDen</u> // //it was VErY <u>LATE</u> //

Table 1: Some significant features of tone units

Activities For Learning Prominence

This section outlines several activities we can use to teach prominence. They are meant to be a guide and can be easily adapted according to your students' needs and your teaching environment.

1. Paying Attention To Word Stress

As we know, prominence is indicated by the stressed syllables of key words. It is, therefore, important that students know about word stress when they are learning about prominence. Activity 1 introduces them to the concept of stress patterns. For students who already have a working knowledge of word stress, this activity will help them explore tendencies in stress patterns.

Activity 1

Learning Objectives:

1. Identify stressed syllables and make generalizations about the placement of stress in words.
2. Read aloud selected words with correct stress placement.

Procedure:

1. Show some examples of polysyllabic words and point out how some syllables are stressed more than others.
2. Introduce a notation for indicating stress, e.g. Monday (Oo), Tomorrow (oOo).
3. Give each student a worksheet with lists of two-syllable, three-syllable, and four-syllable words selected from their course book.(See Appendix 1.) Ask them to select the most appropriate stress pattern for each word.
4. Read aloud or play a recording of the lists of words. Tell students to identify the stress patterns and indicate these patterns on their worksheets.
5. Check answers, and ask students to make generalizations about stress patterns in the given words.
6. Discuss with students their generalizations and confirm their guesses wherever possible.

7. Get students to read aloud the words to each other in pairs.

Additional possibilities:

- Ask students to write out words in particular domains (e.g. home, career) and then decide on their stress patterns.
- Use words with common features, such as compound words, or words that end with ‘-ment’ or ‘-tion’ to highlight particular tendencies in word stress.
- Teach students to look up stress placement in a dictionary.
- Discuss word stress ‘rules’ suggested by Kenworthy (1987:63-65)

2. Incorporating Weak Forms

Another feature of speech that students should be aware of is weak forms. These are special pronunciation of unstressed monosyllabic words, particularly prepositions and conjunctions. The unstressed vowel is normally ‘schwa’ / ə /. For example, the weak form of ‘at’ is / ət/, ‘from’ is /frəm/. An awareness of the presence of weak forms will better prepare students for the task of assigning prominence in speech. Here is a simple activity that makes use of a poem and a follow-up task:

Activity 2

Learning Objectives:

1. Identify strong and weak forms in a poem.
2. Read aloud accurately sentences that contain weak forms.

Procedure:

1. Select a poem with words that are simple enough for your students and delete the word before or after a weak form. Prepare a worksheet with the incomplete poem. (See Appendix 2a.)
2. Read the poem aloud or play a recording of it for students to fill in the missing words.
3. Check answers with students. Draw their attention to the way some content words are emphasized and how words like 'to', 'and', 'as' are 'hurried over'. Introduce the schwa /ə/ vowel.
4. Give students a few minutes to read through the poem again, this time looking for other weak forms.
5. Read aloud or play the recording of the poem again. Tell students to pay attention to the weak forms they have identified.
6. Give students some time to practise reading the poem aloud.
7. Give each student sets of short sentences containing various weak forms,(see Appendix 2b,) and tell them to take turns reading aloud with a partner, monitoring each other's intonation.

Additional Possibilities:

Give students other sets of sentences where some words are underlined. Ask them to read these sentences by emphasizing the underlined words and 'hurrying over' the words which are not. (See Appendix 2c.)

3. Perceiving and Assigning Prominence

It is a good idea to begin instruction on prominence by sensitizing students to it. You can do this by putting some sentences in a handout, on the OHP or the blackboard. Tell students to listen to each sentence and identify the word or words which they hear as more noticeable than others. Be prepared to have to repeat the sentences as some students will need more practice. When they have had a feel for prominence, students are ready for this next activity which will help them assign prominence.

Activity 3

Learning Objectives:

1. Predict appropriate prominent words based on context.
2. Assign prominence accurately by selecting key words and prominent syllables based on context.

Procedure:

1. Prepare sets of short exchanges with sufficient context. (See Appendix 3a.)
2. Give students time to read through the exchanges. Ask students to select the prominent word/s in each response and then compare their choices with another student.
3. Read aloud the responses or play a recording of the exchanges. Instruct students to indicate on their worksheets the word they perceive as most noticeable in each response.
4. Ask students if the words they have selected are also the ones they heard emphasized. Discuss with them the implications of their selection.
5. Explain the concept of prominence and the significance of stressed syllables being potentially prominent. Where appropriate, draw their attention to weak forms.

6. Have students practise reading aloud in pairs.

A Follow-up Activity:

1. Prepare sets of dialogues that contain an identical phrase. (See sample in Appendix 3b.)
2. Ask students to decide whether the phrase should be said in the same way in both dialogues. You can give them transcriptions of different prominence patterns and ask them to select the one which is suitable for the context in each dialogue.
3. Play a recording of the exchanges and get students to identify the prominent word/s in the phrase.
4. Compare what they hear with their pre-listening guesses and discuss the implications of the different choices.
5. Give time for students to practise reading the dialogues aloud with a partner. Appoint some students to listen and give feedback on the reading.

4. Practising Prominence through Communicative Activities

So far, the activities that have been suggested do not allow for spontaneous communication. These close-ended activities are necessary because they enable students to focus on the role and the mechanics of assigning prominence. To provide students with opportunities to practise prominence in more communicative activities, we can use many well-tried activities for pair work, for example, information gap tasks. Learners can also make short speeches based on topics of their choice.

The aim of these activities is to help students assign prominence appropriately so that their meaning can be conveyed more clearly. We therefore need to set tasks that do not require new knowledge of the language and should avoid procedures that learners are not familiar with. This way, students will not have to spend too much time thinking of what to say or how to approach the task. It will allow them to concentrate on making prominent those words they want their listeners to pay special attention to. If facilities are available, students can record themselves talking and then listen to the recording to check how accurate they have been in assigning prominence. This will give them a chance to reflect on their learning experience and encourage them to seek ways to further improve their speech.

There are no set procedures for conducting a lesson on intonation, but there are four simple principles that I believe should guide the teacher. These are discussed in the next section.

Underlying Principles for Intonation Instruction

1. A systematic approach

Intonation is taught in separate lessons, and teaching materials are based on a linguistic model. The various sub-systems, beginning with prominence, are first taught as separate meaningful elements before combining to form complete intonation patterns. Ground work that prepares learners for intonation is important. Before attending to intonation sub-systems, students should first practise related areas of speech like word stress, weak forms and rhythm (Kenworthy, 1987 and Vaughan-Rees, 1990). It has been shown that students who had received such systematic instruction in intonation over a period of time showed a significant improvement in their speech (Goh 1994).

2. Contextualised learning tasks

Intonational choices are made with reference to context. It is therefore important that learning tasks provide sufficient context so that learners can make informed guesses about intonation choices. Context can be given through a short description of the speech event or dialogue-type items which give information about the speakers and the larger context of the exchange.

3. Awareness raising

As well as presenting the different features of intonation, lessons should aim to raise learners' awareness about the role these features play in conveying meaning. To increase their understanding of the way intonation works, learners should have opportunities to experiment with different selections and consider their implications. Although it takes time before most learners can speak with appropriate intonation in their every day communication, they will be more likely to pay attention to intonation after being sensitized to it.

4. Confidence building

Activities for learning intonation should be a way of building the learners' confidence, and should, therefore, set realistic goals. This can be done through teaching individual features of intonation where learners have a chance to examine one small area at a time. By allowing them to focus on a manageable part before moving on to another, we make the objective of learning intonation more attainable and the task less daunting.

Conclusion

Intonation is an important aspect of effective speaking. Its systematic instruction, however, is long overdue. We should teach learners intonation as part of their overall speaking skills as early as possible. In Singapore where all children learn English from a young age, intonation can be introduced to students in upper primary classes. Where English is a second language, such as in Malaysia, systematic instruction could begin in the first year of secondary education or even earlier. Nevertheless, with learners of different proficiency levels, the focus and objectives of instruction will vary. For example, tasks for learners who are not very fluent in their spoken English can initially be more listening-based or more structured.

I hope this article has been useful to teachers who have been considering teaching intonation. For more teaching ideas that are based on Brazil's intonation model, you can refer to Bradford (1988), Hewings (1993), and Brazil (1994).

APPENDIX 1

Samples of polysyllabic words and stress pattern choices.

Before listening, students can be asked to experiment with the stress patterns and decide on the more likely one.

When they are listening, students should put a tick (✓) to indicate the pattern they hear.

Two-syllable words

	oO	Oo
1. always		
2. presence		
3. friendship		
4. begin		

Three-syllable words

	oOo	ooO	Ooo
1. important			
2. general			
3. excellent			
4. performance			

Four-syllable words

	oOoo	ooOo	oooO	Oooo
1. original				
2. photography				
3. meticulous				
4. superficial				

Appendix 2

a) Extract of a gap-filling task based on “Leisure” by W. H. Davies:

What is this life, if full of care,

We have no time to _____ and _____

No time to _____ beneath the boughs

And stare as _____ as sheep or _____.

b) Samples of sentences with weak forms that students can practise with:

Set 1 (FOR) Run for your life.
 Wait for me.

Set 2 (WAS) She was mad.
 It was too late.

c) Samples of sentences that can be used for practising strong and weak forms:

I like it.

The night was cold.

I thought I ought to tell you.

Appendix 3

a) Samples of short dialogues for selecting prominence.

1. X: When can we go?

Y: You can go now. Answer: // you can go NOW //

2. X: Is his birthday on the sixth of June?

Y: No, fourth of June. Answer: // NO // FOURTH
of June //

b) Dialogue A

X: I can't find it.

Y: It's **under the table** where you left it.

X: Oh yes. I've got it.

Dialogue B

X: Are you sure it's here?

Y: Yes, yes. **Under the table** – try looking in the right place!

X: Oh, right!

Transcription for 'under the table':

Option 1 // under the Table //

Option 2 // UNder the table //

Option 3 // UNder the Table //

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