

COMMUNICATIVE PRONUNCIATION ACTIVITIES

Marilyn Buck
Diana Ormsby
CELE, UNAM

Considering language as discourse and considering the particular use of suprasegmentals as discourse markers it is surprising how little use is made of these aspects in the teaching of pronunciation in language courses, even of the more communicative type. Most courses consider intonation, for example, on an isolated sentence level and any exercises included tend to consist of simple repetition of given models with little or no attempt to take into account such factors as linguistic and extralinguistic context, communicative purpose, and psychosocial roles of the participants. This article proposes to treat some of these aspects and to show how they might be incorporated into a communicative language course.

Although the segmental features of a language are also influenced by their discourse context, this article will concentrate on intonation including such elements as stress, pitch range, and rhythm rather than on the pronunciation of the sounds (phonemes) themselves. Intonation can be used to fulfill different functions within a discourse context including expressing attitudes (hostility, acceptance, distrust) and emotions (joy, fear, anger), or signaling new or important information (Roach, 1983). In a discourse context a certain amount of information is shared by the participants, so then, the new information is what is emphasized. This will be illustrated in the exercises which follow.

Consider the following example:

A: *So, how was it?*

B: *Well, Ixtapa was beautiful, but the weather was awful.*

A: *Gee, that's too bad.*

Although this interchange consists of only three turns, there is a great deal of information about the larger context which can be inferred. We know that "it" probably refers to a previously discussed vacation, and that the topic and certain elements such as the use of "well" and "gee" imply an informal context, such as a conversation between two friends or acquaintances in an informal setting. We can also see a contrast of information between the place and the weather and we can infer that this contrast is probably the important information which the speaker will want to emphasize. Thus, the speaker will probably stress the words "Ixtapa" and "weather" or "beautiful" and "awful", or all four of these words.

In the classroom the students might receive a transcript of short interchanges such as the one above with the following instructions:

Read each dialogue and underline the words you think will be stressed. Compare your answers with a classmate and discuss your reasons. Then listen to the recorded dialogues and check your answers.

After completing the activity described in the instructions, a whole group discussion could take place in which the students' attention could be drawn to the elements of the larger context which influenced their choices. Then the students should be able to see that their answers could be "right" even if they did not agree with the actual words stressed in the recorded dialogues. What makes the stress "right" or "wrong" depends on the larger discourse context. If the students can argue for their decisions on the basis of these elements such as new or contrasting information then they are "right" in a truly significant way in that they are fulfilling the objectives of this activity which are becoming sensitized to the form (stressed vs. unstressed) as well as to the functions these forms can realize and becoming aware of the larger discourse constraints on these functions.

The same type of activity can be carried out using a larger interchange such as a scene from a play. The students first can listen to a recording of the scene while they read it. Then

they should discuss aspects of the content, for example, the characters' personality, their relationships, the conflict between them and their motivations (larger/extralinguistic context). Then the students might listen to short excerpts from the scene and underline the words they hear stressed. This activity can be handled in the same way as before but inviting the students to make generalization about the use of stress. Alternatively the students might underline first and then "check" their answers.

So far we have concentrated primarily on stress and on determining larger contexts in our sensitization activities. The same sorts of activities can be used to discover the use of pitch differences. Consider the following example:

Listen to the following dialogues. Notice the pitch changes in the underlined word. Which word has the greatest pitch change? The first or the second?

A: *It's lost!*

B: *Really?*

A: *There's a good movie playing at the Relex.*

B: *Really?*

After answering the question the students can discuss the reasons for the wider pitch range used in the first example. Here we would hope that they notice greater emotion. Then they might discuss the functions that these two exponents or realizations have in the larger discourse context. For example, the first reading of "really" expresses surprise or dismay or a similar emotion. The function of the second reading (as recorded) is most probably a filler with a conversation-management function of inviting the person to continue, thus there is no reason to use a wide pitch range.

Rhythm, including the aspects of reduction and duration of stressed and unstressed syllables, is another feature of intonation which could be focussed on in similar sensitization activities which include the larger context. On the other hand, interchanges that have been used in previous activities focussing stress or pitch could be re-used to focus on the effects of these features on rhythm.

These features can be used in different ways for different purposes. This can be effectively illustrated in the classroom using acting techniques and exercises. Acting exercises are particularly appropriate to communicative classrooms as they are, in fact, one of the few times we really repeat and transform language in the "real world" and for communicative purposes. Acting must draw on and in part create for the public the larger context of the texts that are performed, using among other tactics, variations in stress, pitch and rhythm.

Here is an example of an acting exercise very similar to the activities above. First the students listen to three different readings of the same line, "It's cold." The words are always the same, but the intonation changes to fit three different contexts. Part A has students match recorded readings to set contexts and Part B has students give readings to match given contexts:

A: Read these descriptions of the context for the sentence "It's cold." Listen to the readings of this sentence and decide which one (1-3) goes with each context. Write the number in the space.

 You are going to take a shower at a friend's house. The taps are marked "C" and "H". You ask "What does "C" stand for, 'cold' or 'caliente'?"

 You ask a friend to go swimming with you. Your friend doesn't want to go because it's only 15° today.

 You telephone a friend in Chihuahua and ask "What's the weather like?"

B. Form groups and read these contexts. Choose one and read the sentence "It's cold." to the members of your group so that it fits the context you have chosen. Your group will guess which context you chose.

Context 1. You jump into a swimming pool you thought was warm. You say "It's cold."

Context 2. A friend asks you why you ordered ice cream for dessert. You say "It's cold."

Context 3. You are in class and your teacher asks you "What's the matter?" You say "It's cold."

In the previous exercise students used intonation with set contexts. In the following acting exercise they will create contexts and by using intonation and paralinguistic features act their lines in such a way that their classmates can guess at least most of the larger contexts.

Read this little dialogue. Find a partner. Decide on a context for the dialogue. Act out the dialogue for your classmates. Can they guess your context?

A: *READY*

B: *YES*

A: *WHERE*

B: *HERE*

A: *WHEN*

B: *NOW*

There are many, many other acting exercises that could be used to practice this intimate relation between the larger context and intonation. In fact the dialogues included in textbooks provide "plays" to be acted out. The use of famous plays or scenes is an obvious choice. Plus, there are books and articles which suggest acting exercises. Although this article discusses only intonation features, acting exercises provide high motivation for correct pronunciation of the individual sounds, for word stress, and for fluency work in general. The exercises suggested are by no means exhaustive and many variations can be developed for classroom use. Teachers are not limited to boring and meaningless repetition/discrimination exercises if they wish to practice pronunciation in their classes. They can, and we think they should, include some of these more communicative type exercises which focus on the meaning as well as on the form.

References

- Alfaro, Carlos, Buck, Marilyn, Emilsson, Elin, Hildreth, Ann, Ormsby, Diana, and Phyllis Ryan. A General English Program for University Students: III Within English. Mexico: CELE/UNAM, work in progress.
- Brazil, David, Coulthard, Malcom, and Johns, Catherine. Discourse Intonation and Language Teaching. Essex: Longman, 1980.
- Roach, Peter. English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.