

# Teaching Pronunciation for Communication:

## The second time around 1

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### *Introduction*

In the April, 1983 issue of the MEXTESOL Journal (pp. 10-23) I first published my arguments for integrating the teaching of pronunciation into the Communicative Approach to language teaching<sup>3</sup>. In this article I presented a teaching strategy and showed how communicative techniques could be adapted to present and practice sound contrasts such as the consonants / θ / vs. / ð / (as in *teeth* vs. *teethe*) or the vowels / i / versus / I / (as in *heat* vs. *hit*). Towards the end of this first attempt to deal with communicative strategies for teaching pronunciation I admitted:

The one glaring omission in my current approach--one that I am fully aware of--is that I am still having problems with fully integrating stress and intonation...into my teaching of English pronunciation. Methodologists have often argued that this area is as important as, if not more important than, sounds *per se*. And I tend to agree. The problem is...what one should do about it. (p. 23)

In this sequel I would like to present a pedagogical framework for teaching pronunciation and to apply it to the teaching of intonation. I hope to show you how I now fill the gap mentioned above in my 1983 article.

### *Framework*

A framework for teaching pronunciation must offer clear guidelines in the following areas:

1. the linguistic knowledge to be communicated to learners.
2. the pedagogical goals to be attained.
3. the overall sequence of the lesson.

Such a framework can guide teachers in moving beyond a simple description of any target feature to presenting its communicative function(s).

The framework my colleagues and I propose has two stages: (1) the planning stage and (2) the teaching stage. The planning stage specifies what the teacher needs to know and what the students need to know. The teaching stage consists of five steps beginning with analysis and ending with communicative practice and feedback.

### Planning

Teachers must have thorough knowledge of the feature to be taught such as means of articulation and occurrence in discourse. They also must be aware of potential problems or typical errors their learners may encounter. Finally, they need to set pedagogical priorities in terms of how important a given feature is for the students *vis-a-vis* their communicative needs.

With all this information, teachers then must decide how much the students need to know. Given the age, educational background, and level of proficiency of the learners, different decisions will be made. For example, young children learn best through focused modeling and imitation whereas educated adults often need good descriptions (oral and visual) and clear explanations to produce a new and unfamiliar sound.

### Teaching

1. The first, but optional step, in teaching is ANALYSIS. For those learners who can benefit, teachers provide oral, visual and tactile illustrations of how the feature is produced and where it occurs in order to raise learner consciousness.

2. Next LISTENING DISCRIMINATION is practiced using focused listening activities with feedback on accuracy of learner perceptions. This is a necessary step in communicative teaching of any important pronunciation feature since accurate listening comprehension is necessary for ultimately achieving intelligible oral communication.<sup>4</sup>

3. Instruction then moves on to CONTROLLED PRACTICE with feedback. This could involve practice with contextualized minimal pair sentences or with short dialogues or other texts with special attention paid to the highlighted feature.

4. GUIDED PRACTICE AND FEEDBACK comprise the next step, which might include structured but communicative exercises that still enable the learner to monitor for the target feature. We have found that information gap activities and cued dialogues of various sorts work well at this stage of practice.

5. Finally, we move on to COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICE AND FEEDBACK, where learners engage in less structured activities that require them to attend primarily to the content of their utterances and only secondarily to the form. This step also constitutes an informal *test* and enables the teacher to assess learner progress and determine how much more practice will be needed.

The teacher should move through each of the five steps at the rate dictated by class progress. If listening is problematic, extra time will be needed for Step 2. If production is labored and difficult, sufficient time must be devoted to Steps 3 and 4 before moving on to 5. In my earlier papers (Celce-Murcia 1983, 1987), I had encouraged teachers to move very quickly to Step 5 and to spend the most class time on communicative activities. I now feel that this is fine if the class is

ready but that it is unwarranted and counter-productive if the students are still having problems with listening and/or articulation.

### *Teaching rising and rising-falling intonation*

The above framework will now be applied to the most fundamental intonation contrast in English, i.e. rising vs. rising-falling intonation.

For the planning stage, teachers need to be aware that English has at least a three-pitch intonation range<sup>5</sup> (high, medium, low) with a fourth extra-high level for affective purposes. Intonation functions to group words together into thought groups and to signal when one speaker has finished and another may begin. Also, in each intonation group, there is usually one prominent word. If this prominent word is monosyllabic, it carries the critical pitch change; if the prominent word is multisyllabic, the stressed syllable carries the critical pitch change (not the entire word). Rising vs. rising-falling intonation is often enough to change the meaning of an utterance in English. Rising intonation signals uncertainty and is typical of yes-no interrogatives, whereas rising-falling intonation expresses speaker certainty or confidence and is typical of declarative utterances.<sup>6</sup>

How much of the information stated in the preceding paragraph now gets conveyed to the learners would depend very much on the learners themselves (as stated above in the description of the framework).

In the teaching stage, if appropriate, the teacher might begin with an example for analysis or consciousness raising, e.g. "Joe bought a Pontiac" and illustrate the two intonation contours:

1. Joe bought a Pontiac

2. Joe bought a Pontiac

With the first pitch pattern the speaker is making an assertion, stating a fact. With the second pattern the speaker is asking a yes-no question to confirm (or disconfirm) something s/he has been led to believe is true.<sup>7</sup> Learners should, of course, be reminded that grammatically signaled yes-no questions also take the second pattern since they are, in fact, more frequent and less marked in English than questions with statement word order as in (2) above:

3. Did Joe buy a Pontiac?

For listening discrimination practice we like to use an exercise sheet such as the following:

Utterance	Question ↗	Statement ↗↘
1. He left already.		
2. The Dodgers won the game.		
3. You overslept again.		
4. Maria missed her flight.		
5. It's snowing in Arizona.		

With erasable pencils students can use such a sheet <sup>8</sup> and listen to the teacher or a tape recording while marking which intonation pattern they hear. After feedback to check for accuracy, students can practice in pairs or small groups giving each other feedback on their perception and production. Finally, students can try to perform the role of teacher, i. e., to test their classmates' perception, and the class can ask for repetitions if the intonation is not clear.

For focused practice I have often used the reading and recitation of a poem by Christina Rossetti entitled "Uphill".<sup>9</sup> Each of the four quatrains in this poem has the same question and answer format and supports practice of my intonation objective very nicely. The first quatrain is given below:

*Does the road wind uphill all the way?*

*Yes, to the very end.*

*Will the day's journey take the whole long day?*

*From morn to night, my friend.*

After listening to a model responsive reading (with two voices if possible), the teacher and class can read responsively, or the two halves of the class can read responsively, or students can practice reading responsively in pairs, with special attention to intonation.

For guided practice, I have used an excerpt from Tennessee Williams' play, "The Glass Menagerie".<sup>10</sup> It is a conversation between Amanda and her brother Tom. The first half of the excerpt I normally use is given below (the rest continues in the same question-and-answer mode):

*Amanda: You mean you have asked some nice young man to come over?*

*Tom: Yep. I've asked him to dinner.*

*Amanda: You really did?*

*Tom: I did!*

*Amanda: You did, and did he--accept?*

*Tom: He did!*

*Amanda: Well, well--well! That's--lovely!*

*Tom: I thought that you would be pleased.*

*Amanda: It's definite then?*

*Tom: Very definite.*

Such a script can be used for dramatic reading that encourages use of the extra-high pitch level where appropriate. If the learners act out the script, some of their focus shifts to conveying emotion and meaning rather than stress and intonation, and the teacher can see if they are beginning to learn the target feature .

For more communicative practice, one can use a range of activities illustrated by the following two:

*Activity 1.* Using pictures of various rooms in a house taken from magazines, the high-beginning class can play a game of "20 questions". One student selects a picture from the stack without showing the class and members of the class ask questions:

*--Is it a kitchen?*

*No, it isn't.*

*--Is it a bathroom?*

*No, it isn't.*

*--Is it a living room?*

*Yes, it is.*

Each student who guesses correctly comes up to help respond:

*--Is there a sofa in the living room?*

*Yes, there is.*

*--Is there a TV set?*

*No, there isn't.*

*--Is there a coffee table?*

*Yes, there is.*

This continues until five correct guesses have been made. After this, one of those who guessed correctly stays in front and takes over the next round by selecting a new picture as soon as everyone else has sat down. The teacher gives feedback on intonation as needed and this is done as unobtrusively as possible.

*Activity 2.* A much more advanced communicative activity that my colleagues and I have used is a role play about the beginning of a trip. There are partners (husband/wife, roommates, siblings, etc.) who have just begun a vacation that they have planned long in advance. Responsibilities for the trip were divided up with (A) taking charge of reservations and itinerary and (B) taking charge of all the arrangements at home so they could be away for several weeks. Each partner is given one of the following scenarios (they should not see the scenario that the other one has):

Partner A: *You're a bit worried that B hasn't taken care of all the tasks that were delegated to him/her. You know that B has been busy at work, and also that s/he tends to be a bit forgetful and scatter-brained. You happen to have a list of the things s/he had to do in your pocket so you decide to find out if anything really important was forgotten. Be appropriately annoyed if B has forgotten anything!*

Partner B: *You have been really busy at work/school the past week... much busier than you thought you'd be just before your vacation. A had given you a list of things to take care of. Just as you got in the car you discovered this list in your pocket. Most of the things have been checked off, but there are three which you neglected to do. You hope that A doesn't ask you about them! You know s/he will be furious.*

Both of the partners have a copy of B's list, but B's copy has checks in front of all items but (2), (4) and (7) whereas A's copy of the list has no marks:

#### LIST

*Things to do: 1. close the windows, 2. pay the rent, 3. tell the neighbors we'll be away, 4. have the mail held, 5. arrange to have the plants watered, 6. phone Jean to say good-bye, 7. cancel the newspaper, 8. get the prescriptions re-filled.*

The role play typically proceeds quite well with A asking B a question for each item and B responding appropriately (recall that A is expected to express annoyance for each *no* response):

*A: Did you remember to close the windows?*

*B: Yes.*

*A: Good. Did you pay the rent?*

*B: No, I forgot!*

*A: Darn it! The landlord will be furious. We'll have to wire money tomorrow or the next day!*

*B: I'm sorry....*

*A: Did you tell the neighbors we'll be away?*

*B: Yes, I did.*

*Etc.*

Again, the teacher would give feedback on intonation and other relevant pronunciation feature(s) after pairs have had ample opportunity to practice and perform their role plays.

### *Discussion*

In applying the above framework to teaching features such as stress and intonation (as well as consonant and vowel sounds) we have found that *practice* and *feedback* are extremely important. The learners must be made aware of how well they are doing and what their most serious problems are. Practice should progress systematically from focused exercises to communicative activities and should be varied and plentiful, interesting and contextualized. The teacher should focus on one or two features at a time building up cumulatively to coverage of the whole sound system, recycling problematic features and repeating practice of them as necessary. Furthermore, learners need to have a sense of progress, i.e., what they are doing well, what they still need to work on. In fact, empirical research continues to show that focused pronunciation instruction of the type described here results in learner improvement (Gilbert 1980, Pennington and Richards 1986) and that learner feedback correlates with pronunciation improvement (Dickerson 1983, Purpura 1994). This is why feedback is such an important part of our pedagogical framework.

Pronunciation is qualitatively different from grammar and vocabulary. Grammar and vocabulary pose primarily cognitive challenges for learners, whereas pronunciation is sensory (auditory perception) and physiological (articulation). Pronunciation is a motor activity, with tactile and kinesthetic aspects to it. It is also the most affectively-loaded language area; learner must be positively disposed and committed and must make a genuine effort to change their speech habits. Pronunciation is an area of language teaching where we can apply much of what we learned from audiolingualism; it is also an area we can greatly improve by incorporating what we have learned from communicative language teaching.

### *Notes:*

1. The author can be reached at TESL & Applied Linguistics, University of California-Los Angeles. Fax: (310) 828-2090.

2. I must acknowledge the contributions of my UCLA colleagues Donna Brinton and Janet Goodwin to the evolution of my thinking in the area of teaching pronunciation. We have long been collaborating on a publication for teachers (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin, in press) and I wish to acknowledge their influence at the outset.
3. An updated version of my 1983 paper appeared in a volume edited by Morley (1987).
4. Here we agree with Ur (1984), Prator & Robinett (1985), Wong (1987), and Kenworthy (1987), all of whom believe that listening discrimination is necessary for improving pronunciation.
5. Researchers such as Backmann (1977) indicate that in contrast to English-Spanish has a flatter two-pitch intonation range and that Spanish speakers need to expand their pitch range (among other things) to achieve better intonation in English.
6. This simply describes general trends and does not negate the fact, for example, that some English interrogatives can be spoken with rising-falling intonation to suggest impatience or annoyance (i. e., Are you coming or not?)

Are you coming or not?

7. With extra-high rising intonation on *PONtiac* sentence (2) expresses the speaker's surprise or disbelief, i. e., this becomes an exclamatory question.
8. I recommend using up to ten items in such an exercise (the example has only five).
9. The complete four-verse poem can be found in most editions of *The Oxford Book of Verse* (Oxford University Press).
10. Many anthologies devoted to American drama and virtually any anthology of Tennessee Williams' works include "The Glass Menagerie".

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