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SOME REMARKS ON TEACHING INTONATION  
TO POLISH STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

Intonation is no doubt the most neglected aspect of language in foreign language teaching. It is generally regarded as an issue pertaining to an advanced stage of study, and as such it is treated marginally by secondary school teachers and textbook writers. But what is really the attitude to intonation at this advanced stage? The following remarks concern the intonation course for 2nd year students of English. They are based on informal observations gathered over a number of years in the Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź, from the position of both a teacher and a student.

Among all Practical English subjects Intonation is ranked by students as the lowest. They question both any usefulness of the course and its actual realization in class. They feel the task of mastering English intonation to be out of proportion to the time and means at their disposal (less so to their abilities). On the whole, they share the common belief that success with foreign intonation is possible only in the natural environment of the native culture, after a few years' exposition and practice abroad. At the same time, their contact with native speakers of English is limited, which does not encourage them to study intonation here and now.

Interestingly, teachers (with the exception, perhaps, of the intonation teacher) seem to share this viewpoint. Calls for raising the status of this subject or complaints about students' intonation are not taken seriously in view of the state, often disastrous, of their pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary. Dur-

ing Spoken English classes intonation is kept well in the background. In the examination practice intonation never affects the total grade, save in extreme cases, perhaps.

What is in fact the students' command of English intonation? An objective evaluation is a difficult task. What criteria to adopt and whose opinion is more reliable: a non-native teacher's opinion supported by the handbook or the one of a native speaker and his intuitive competence? We tend to look to the latter, and his opinion is usually favourable or even very high. And perhaps the state of affairs may really be satisfactory. After all, differences between Polish and English intonation are relatively small if compared, for example, with the gap between English and Japanese. In the European culture family intonation differences seem to be of less importance in communication, though this belief can be delusive. In the university situation the student's status as a learner accounts for the native speaker's lenient reaction to deviations from English norms of usage. The same deviations on English ground may raise irritation if the speaker's status is not made known and his English is otherwise very good.

The difficulty of evaluation comes also from the fact that intonation errors are more controversial than grammatical ones. The right usage of intonation depends immensely on situation, on the amount of knowledge shared or assumed to be shared with the listener, but primarily on what seems impenetrable to any description: the speaker's intention. This is why so-called intonation errors are more blunders and oddities with varying degrees of gravity. Cases where the student's intonation stands in overt contradiction to the context are rare.

Finally, we must admit that any form of evaluation in a classroom situation has to be fragmentary. Truly communicative use of English is limited to classroom routines, discussions on rather sophisticated topics, students' reports and answers to the teacher's questions. The participation or even presence of the teacher restricts the register and, consequently, affects the intonation.

The vast area of spontaneous emotional reactions is left practically unexamined. So is the ability to interpret intona-

tion in its nuances. Practically, this is only possible when some sort of reaction, be it verbal, physical or emotional, is needed to be manifested in order to maintain the coherence of the conversation.

However good or bad the students' command of English intonation is and however difficult it is to evaluate it, a more essential problem is that no significant improvement can be seen as the course continues. Its efficiency or even usefulness can be thus called in question.

There are several good reasons for the lack of progress:

1. The goals are vague and/or inadequate for the classroom situation. We usually want the students' intonation to constantly approximate to some standard native level. Such standard intonation may be a useful reference for a teacher but it still is an abstraction. The model handbook intonation, which claims to reflect some *standard intonation* corresponds very vaguely with reality. And still formal resemblance between the student's and the model's intonation is valued more highly than effective communication. At the same time, receptive command of intonation is much neglected.

On the whole, we expect too much from classroom practice. Oral practice in class is oriented towards developing intonation habits. Such an approach is at odds with reality. With the intensity of one 90-minute session a week for only one year, with little extra practice (or none at all), attempts at automatizing intonation patterns inevitably fail.

2. The methods and techniques used are not efficient in the given conditions. The well-established practice is drilling. It is postulated by the authors of the most widely used handbook of intonation, who claim that "there is only one way to master the pronunciation of a foreign language: to repeat sound features of the language, over and over again, correctly and systematically, until they can be said without any conscious thought at all"<sup>1</sup>.

The drilling is usually preceded or followed by functional analysis of the given intonation pattern. Still, the cognitive

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<sup>1</sup> J. D. O' Connor, G. F. Arnold, *Intonation of Colloquial English*, London 1973, p. 98.

element is much limited, as the class activities are concentrated on extensive imitative practice. Practically no communicative-type exercises are available as an alternative or follow-up to the traditional procedure. Rare attempts in this direction are a result of the teacher's ingenuity, considerable extra work and good will. The consequence is, quite naturally, hardly any transfer of laboratory skills onto real life communicative situations.

3. The student's abilities are lower for intonation than for pronunciation or grammar. Success with intonation, both in production and reception, depends primarily on the student's abilities to discriminate pitches of voice, to identify their changes and to locate stress appropriately. In other words, some ear for intonation is indispensable for self-monitoring and self-assessment. Interestingly, it does not have to coincide with an ear for music, and to many a musician foreign intonation or even pronunciation is a problem.

The source of greatest difficulties are, of course, areas where the same meaning is realized quite differently in English and Polish intonation. The confusion is particularly strong in production, where one has to start with meaning, without any contextual support. The most difficult tones to master, even at the stage of imitation, are the fall-rise and rise-fall tunes, although both are found in Polish. A large percentage of the students have difficulties in discriminating falling and rising tunes, which is rather alarming. One has to mention also a tendency to overuse stress, which can give an impression of affectedness.

4. The students' motivation is generally low. This results, as mentioned, from their highly communicative orientation, but also from the low status of the intonation course among the teachers as well as from the ineffectiveness and boredom of drilling. The assessment of one's progress seems to affect motivation to a lesser degree; a poor ear for intonation usually coincides with reduced self-criticism, reduced still more if the student can communicate in English satisfactorily.

What can be done to improve the situation and make the course more effective? The crucial task is to work out an explicit and attainable goal. Considering the time limitations, perhaps it

would be reasonable just to introduce the students to the theory of English intonation? This would provide them with a cognitive apparatus - a basis for reference in further practice. The material would be within an average student's grasp and would allow for objective testing. Lastly, this would be in line with the university principle of studying rather than learning. Such a conception would not necessarily dismiss the practical command of intonation. It would recognize developing intonation habits in the cognitive knowledge-reduction process, more desirable in the university situation. It is essential, though, that non-reflexive use of English intonation not be exacted under any sanction from the student. Fluency will come over a period of practice much longer than the course itself.

If we accept that a practice stage is indispensable, more appreciation needs to be given to the receptive skill throughout the course. Especially if the students show difficulties in production it may be advisable to concentrate on developing the ability to interpret intonation at the cost of production. Practice shows that although good production does not follow automatically, it is very much facilitated by a high level of recognition, probably by intonation matrices fixed in one's memory.

If we recognize the primary communicative function of intonation, we have to accept performance far from native-like and intervene only when wrong usage leads to misunderstanding. The decision will have to be subjective, as there is practically no study available of intonation error gravity. The errors will not be numerous, anyway, and perhaps it is worth while considering a strictly remedial selective variant of the course. It would deal only with the most frequent or potential areas of difficulties to the Polish learner. An exhaustive contrastive study would be very useful here. Before it is available, one should notice potentials and advantages of attempts at such a study, as well as a study of Polish intonation, carried out by the students themselves. It is probably the best way to make them sensitive to the formal and functional differences and to the fragility of current stereotypes about intonation in English.

If the goal is to be explicit to the student, it has to be formulated in the form of behavioural objectives. The syllabus

might, for example, say that by the end of the course (term, class) the student is expected to be able to:

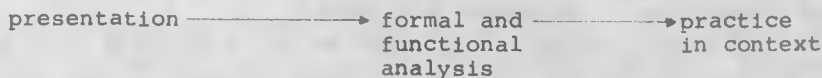
- recognize tone units and their boundaries;
- recognize syllables under main and secondary stress;
- recognize pitch changes (fall, rise, fall-rise, rise-fall);
- recognize the pitch of the stressed syllable;
- recognize a change of meaning following a stress shift;
- recognize given attitudes carried by the intonation and express such;
- recognize and express grammatical categories (e.g. declarative sentences, question tags, commands, questions).

The objectives above come in order of complexity. They are not mutually exclusive and the teacher has the freedom of choice according to the students' abilities. It is hardly fair to expect the utmost from those who hardly discriminate between falling and rising tunes. What matters more, anyway, is that the end product required is made clear and there is a clear purpose to the activities. This is likely to increase motivation and allow for more objective evaluation.

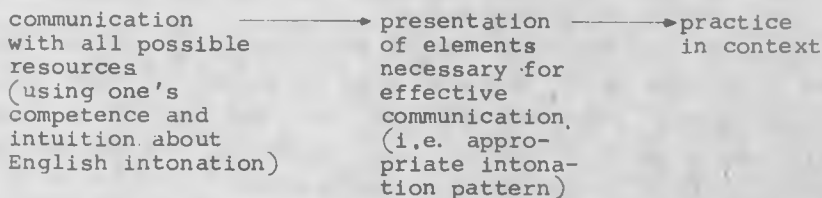
Motivation is crucial in any kind of learning. But while it is a recognized duty of a foreign language teacher to build up his pupils' interest in the language, it is at least controversial whether the same applies to the university situation. It seems more appropriate to create situations in which the student can see the potentials of intonation in everyday conversation rather than to keep showing to him how interesting the subject can be. Of course, the reaction may be of indifference or reluctance in both cases. Too often, though, it is a result of inappropriate materials and procedures. The materials available present ideal, lifeless intonation in very limited contexts. What is desperately needed is a wide choice of authentic conversational English, in both British and American varieties, with male and female voices presented in situations differing as regards the participants' emotion and status. Such recordings could be used to exemplify particular patterns together with studio intonation models or perhaps could replace it altogether. They could also be used for extensive listening. Of course, careful selection and arrangement of samples for topic and acoustic quality would be necessary. Such an approach would certainly make

the theory and class procedure's more credible and would press the student most naturally to answer the question for himself: why intonation?

If we follow the cognitive approach to intonation, the procedures will need changing, too. The traditional audiolingual model: presentation → drill → (practice in context) would be replaced by the cognitive:



It is also worth while considering a communicative model:



On the whole, imitative practice and drilling would have to be reduced considerably, giving way to communicative-type exercise. The variety of activities might include:

- imitation of a spoken text (with or without a script; if provided - with or without intonation transcription);
- doing transcription of a text on listening to it (varied for the number and kind of elements marked, e.g. stress, pitch, pitch change);
- contextual discrimination - a multiple choice test, e.g. in stress placing, tone choice, pitch choice;
- matching exercise (for the same elements);
- listening to a conversation and reading (aloud or silently) the text simultaneously;
- reading aloud using only intonation transcription;
- recognition of the attitude conveyed by the intonation (multiple choice test possible);
- paraphrasing sentences of a dialogue within the same attitude or the same intonation;
- restoring the missing parts of a dialogue with appropriate intonation (on the basis of the context);
- looking for an intonation element conflicting with the whole of a specially made-up dialogue;

- given an attitude, reacting to a stimulus utterance (paraphrasing the model or with all possible resources);
- making up and performing a dialogue based on given attitudes (possibly with tape-recording for further analysis);
- compiling all possible ways of expressing a given attitude (including non-verbal behaviour);
- staging a scripted scene (in pairs or alone, tape-recording);
- staging one's own scene (as above);
- semi-improvisation: continuation of a dialogue in a direction decided on by the partner or given to him in the instruction (e.g. objection or acceptance);
- improvisation: role-playing;

Although many teachers may be sceptical about it, the bulk of these activities could and should be performed at home (written and oral tests, exercises provided with the key) or prepared at home, even without a tape recorder. Studying the theory of intonation at home should be taken for granted.

Finally, to outline broader perspectives for teaching English intonation two remarks must be made.

Firstly, all the above conceptions are based on the widespread *attitudinal* model of intonation by Arnold and O'Connor. It is far from perfect and the main objection may be that intonation is only one of the clues necessary to identify an attitude, the others being situation, context, lexis, grammar, volume, speed, or non-verbal behaviour. It is practically impossible to incorporate even two of these factors into a compact generative model. As a result, the rules about the meaning of intonation patterns cannot be made clear - the description abounds in vague expressions like *sometimes calm* or *often friendly*.

An alternative is to treat intonation as a function of discourse<sup>2</sup>. The conception is interesting in that notions used here underlie in a sense those in the previous model. For instance, two tones together with their two variants (fall-rise, rise; fall, rise-fall) replace the previous ten. Instead of an infinite number of attitudes three notions are introduced as sufficient for the discourse description: *new matter proclaimed*, *matter referred to* and *asserting dominance*. The appeal of this model lies

<sup>2</sup> D. Brazil; M. Coulthard, C. Jones, *Discourse Intonation and Language Teaching*, London 1981.



in its simplicity, explicitness and fuller account of factors like the key of an utterance or status of participants. It is still too early to judge its validity and teachability. Anyway, no teaching materials based on this model are available yet.

Secondly, a really appreciable change for the better in teaching English intonation seems hardly possible within the present time limits of the course and in isolation from the other language levels. The right place for intonation study seems to be a modified Spoken English class. This would extend the practice considerably (4 years!) and allow for flexible remedial treatment of students' intonation as the need arises, without a special syllabus. It should be noticed here how often informal *by-the-way* learning proves more effective than methodologically faultless and fully programmed teaching. This is even more likely with intonation, where the theoretical model is still full of gaps. It is thus essential that apart from formal cognitive study the student should be ensured extensive exposure to English intonation in everyday use with the help of appropriate recordings and that he or she should be given ample chance to approach intonation inductively. Activities with drama elements during Spoken English classes or extra-curricular activities would serve this purpose well.

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#### UWAGI NA TEMAT UCZENIA POLSKICH STUDENTÓW INTONACJI ANGIELSKIEJ

Artykuł jest krytycznym spojrzeniem na istniejący stan rzeczy w nauczaniu intonacji podczas praktycznej nauki języka angielskiego na II roku filologii angielskiej. Nauczanie intonacji zostało ocenione jako mało skuteczne. Wśród głównych przyczyn wymieniono: nieadekwatne do nauczania w sytuacji szkoły wyższej cele kursu, nieodpowiednie metody i techniki, niską motywację studentów oraz ich ogólnie niższe zdolności recepcyjne i produkcyjne w tej dziedzinie języka. Poruszony został problem niskiego statusu przedmiotu oraz

trudności związanych z rzetelną oceną stanu czynnego i biernego opanowania intonacji przez studentów.

Zasugerowano kilka sposobów zwiększenia efektywności nauczania intonacji w kwestii ogólnego podejścia, metod i technik. Nakreślone również zostały szersze perspektywy poprawy sytuacji w tej dziedzinie.