

Intonation Carries Meaning

Communicative Pronunciation Activities

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Most of our students at the university level have a good knowledge of language usage (e.g., vocabulary, grammatical structures), but have limited experiences in interacting and using the language. I suspect that many of them have scars left from performing arduous rote drills and translations of lexical features and syntactic structures which have been traditional prerequisite knowledge for entrance exams. To remove those scars, we can help our students feel comfortable in their learning environment by exposing them to lively and meaningful communicative tasks.

Celce-Murcia (1987) explained that we can teach pronunciation communicatively using the same types of activities and tasks that we use to teach other communicative language features. Believing this, I have adapted variations of activities in changes in pitch, found in Wong (1978), and created an authentic team game that can be used in listening courses for first year university students. The activities need not follow the order in which they are presented here.

The objectives for *Activity One* are 1) to teach that intonation carries meaning, and 2) to activate the students' schemata to construct possible meaningful scenarios for various situations. Activity one includes four exercises that use simple syntactic structures to teach how changes in pitch can influence the meaning of utterances. An attempt has been made to use words and phrases that are familiar to the students so they can smoothly process the lexical features and focus on the effects of pitch changes. The students are called on to share knowledge and activate their schemata to create situations for dialogues in the exercises.

The objectives for *Activity Two* are 1) to teach that intonation carries meaning, and 2) to promote cooperative attitudes about studying together. Activity two consists of four exercises that use simple syntactic structures and numerical formulas to illustrate how linking and pauses can also influence the meaning of utterances. A team game is the culminating activity which requires the students to listen actively and respond to utterances.

Pair work and group work are utilized as strategic ways to encourage learner-to-learner interaction that involve information sharing and negotiation of meaning. Students can draw on their shared background knowledge to create scenarios that are real to them. Another goal for grouping is to provide students, especially those who are not ready to speak, a comfort zone. Preparation and planning time can be done in pairs or small groups so that the better students can help others to understand the tasks. Students who are willing and have the language abilities can also take an active role and, thereby, have more opportunities to use the language in grouping activities.

Activity 1: Changes in Pitch

Task:

Students do a series of exercises to listen for pitch changes to determine who the speakers are, their roles and the situation. The goal is to develop an awareness of how pitch is used to influence the meaning of utterances.

Level:

False beginners

Materials:

Tape recording of listening scripts for conversations A and B and index cards with conversation scripts for exercise 3.

Procedure:

Exercise 1: Class work

1. Play the tape of the following conversation two times. Ask the students: *How many speakers do you hear? Who are the speakers? What is their relationship? Where are they? What's going on?*

Conversation A

He: Ready? ↑

She: No. ↓

He: Why? ↑

She: Problems. ↓

He: Problems? ↑

She: Yes. ↓

He: What? ↑

She: Key. ↓

2. Put the conversation on the blackboard or an OHP. Tell the students that a rising pitch and falling pitch carry a different meaning. A rising pitch asks a question. A falling pitch answers the question. Write the following example on the board:

He: Ready? ↑

She: Ready. ↓

3. Play the tape (Conversation A) again. Then ask the students to explain what each utterance means. In pairs, or small groups, ask the students to think of what the situation might be. Elicit some situations and write them on the board.

Exercise 2: Pair work

1. Dictate the following words (spell the words, if necessary):
three, three, yes, yes, two, to go
2. Tell the students these words make up a conversation. In pairs, or small groups, put the words in an order that makes sense and draw a rising or fall pitch next to each one, as in:
Two. ↑, Three. ↓, Three. ↑, Yes. ↓, To go? ↑, Yes. ↓
3. Ask the students: *Who are the speakers? What's their relationship? Where are they? What's the situation?*

Exercise 3: Pair work

1. Give each pair, or small group, a card with the following instructions:
Put the sentences in an order than makes sense. Write them on a separate sheet of paper.
Put an arrow after each word(s) to show a rising or falling pitch.

Sample Conversations:

Conversation 1	Conversation 2	Conversation 3
Sure	Apple	A thousand
Cup of coffee	Yes	Thanks
Cream	Thanks	I'll take it
Excuse me	Something to eat	Five hundred
Black, please	Sure	Too much
Coffee		Take it
Three hundred	What	
Conversation 4	Conversation 5	Conversation 6
Double	Hu-huh [Yes]	Left
Double	Hard	Oh-oh [Oh no]
Cup	Tomorrow	Here
Single	Tomorrow	No
Cone	Easy	Right
Yes	Today	When
Next stop	Now	

Exercise 4: Pair work

1. In pairs, or small groups, students make up one conversation and put it on the board. Then, pairs will stand up and role play the conversation. Other teams will guess who the speakers are, their roles and the situation.

Activity 2: Linking and Pauses

Task:

Students do a series of exercises to review listening for pitch and to recognize linking and pauses as other elements that influence the meaning of utterances.

Level:

False beginners

Materials:

Taped recording of listening script for conversation A, index cards with game questions and unfinished sentences, buzzer

Procedure:

Exercise 1: Class work

1. Play the tape of the following conversation two times. Ask the students: How many speakers do you hear? Who are the speakers? What is their relationship? Where are they? What's the situation [going on]?

Conversation A

She: It's heavy?
He: Heavy? (contradiction)
She: Yes, look at it.
He: It isn't heavy.
She: It looks heavy.

- Put the conversation on the blackboard or an OHP. Tell the students that important words are high pitched to either show contradiction or to mark new information. Write the following examples on the board.
 She: It's heavy.
 He: Heavy?
- Ask the students: *Does he think it's heavy?*
 He: It isn't heavy.
 She: It looks heavy.
- Ask the students: *What are the speakers doing? Where are they? What are they talking about? How does she know it's heavy? Does she carry the thing?*

Exercise 2: Class work

- First, put these numbers on the blackboard: $2 + 2 \times 2 = \underline{\quad}$. (Make sure students understand the symbols "+" and "x".) Tell the students to listen for the pauses. Then, read the formulas. Tell the students to listen for the links. Read the formulas again.
 $(2 + 2) \times 2 = 8$ Two plus two / times two / is 8.
 $2 + (2 \times 2) = 6$ Two plus / two times two / is 6.
- Mark the boundaries. Linking and pauses have an influence on meaning, just as word stress also has an influence on meaning (Exercise 1).
- Dictation: Tell the students to listen and write the formulas they hear.
 - $(1 + 3) \times 3 = \underline{\quad}$
 - $1 + (3 \times 3) = \underline{\quad}$
 - $4 + (2 \times 4) = \underline{\quad}$
 - $(1 + 2) \times (3 + 4) = \underline{\quad}$
 - $(5 + 1) \times 4 = \underline{\quad}$
 - $(2 \times 3) + (4 \times 5) = \underline{\quad}$
- Ask the students to check their formulas and answers with their partners.

Exercise 3: Pair work

- Each student writes three (3) numerical formulas and dictates them to her partner to demonstrate her ability to use linking and pauses to communicate meaning.

Exercise 4: Team game

Rules:

- Group teams of 4 - 5 students. Choose one person to give the answer. The other students will help guess the answer.
- Team hits the buzzer when they think they know the answer.
- The first team to do so answers the question. A correct answer gets 1 point and a wrong answer minuses a point. If the answer is wrong, another team may hit the buzzer for a try. It keeps going until a team gets it right, or all the teams have tried within the time limit (30 seconds per question or unfinished sentence).
- If possible, have students help moderate the game. (1) a student to take turns with the teacher to read the questions and sentences; (2) a student plus the teacher to be judges and press the right or wrong buzzer after a team gives an answer; (3) a scorekeeper; and (4) a timekeeper.
- Sample questions and unfinished sentences (put each question/sentence on index cards with stress markers over focused words):

What's your teacher's **name**?
 What's **his** name? (point to a student)
 Who's the **Prime Minister** of Japan?
 Who's the Prime Minister of **Britain**?
Bill Clinton is the **president** of -----
Hideo Nomo plays for the **LA** -----
 What's **Takanohana's brother's** name?
 What's **red, white** and **blue**?
 $(3 + 5) \times 2$ is -----

How do you say *doomo* in **English**?
 How do you say *wakarimasen*?
 Uh-uh means -----
 Ready? means -----
 Ready means -----
 What's another way to say *yes*?
 What's **another way** to say *yes*?
 What's another way to say *pardon*?

References

- Celce-Murcia, M. (1987). Current perspectives on pronunciation: Practices anchored in theory. In J. Morley (Ed.), *Teaching pronunciation as communication* (pp. 1-12). Washington, DC: TESOL.
- Wong, R. (1987). *Teaching pronunciation: Focus on English rhythm and intonation*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.