

Listening Comprehension and the Value of a Focus on Intonation

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1 LISTENING COMPREHENSION

1.1 The Importance of Listening in Language Learning

Listening is now an important area of focus in the language classroom and is said to be the foundation of language acquisition in learning both a first language or a foreign language (Dunkel, 1986; Feyten, 1991). In four models of acquisition reviewed by Dunkel (the information processing model, McLaughlin, Rossman & McLeod, 1983; the monitor model, Krashen, 1977; the intake model, Chaudron, 1985; the interaction model, Hatch, 1983) it was reported that 'all emphasize the key role listening plays in language acquisition and development' (1991:435). Some believe that listening is so important that it should be of primary focus (Dunkel, 1986; Vandergrift, 1999) but this view is not shared by all. Berne (1998) investigated language teachers' thoughts on the subject of listening and found that while almost all thought that the development of listening comprehension skills was very important for overall language development only two thirds indicated that they frequently made listening a focus in the classroom. One of her respondents claimed that listening exercises were a waste of class time and that listening should be done outside of the classroom. If one considers, in addition to what theorists say about the importance of listening, that learners report much difficulty in this area it is not

easy to see how a teacher concerned with teaching the spoken language could make such an extreme statement.

1.2 Learners' Problems in Listening Comprehension

EFL Learners regularly report persistent problems in coping with spoken English which include problems with recognition of sounds (Carrier, 1999; Rost, 1990) and their functions (Brazil, 1994a) in fast speech, problems of anxiety from a lack of understanding of the systematicity of the acoustic signal (Brazil, 1994a; Norris, 1993) and problems concerning how to approach the task of decoding spoken English (Brown, G., 1990; Carrier, 1999; Chien & Wei, 1998). There are complaints about 'speed' which are related to difficulties in understanding reduced forms, distinguishing word boundaries and recognition of non prominent words (Cauldwell, 1996). Temporal concerns are also related to processing and short term memory capacity as well (Call, 1985; Ellis, 1996; Rost, 1990). There is a need for teachers to provide a focus on listening to promote acquisition in general and to relieve the frustrations and anxiety learners may feel in coping with the stream of speech.

In order to do this in a principled way, it is incumbent on teachers to be aware of what current theory has to offer in this area. Unfortunately this may not always be something teachers do. Two thirds of the teachers in Berne's study (1998) reported 'never' or 'rarely' when asked how often they sought out current listening comprehension research. Valuable insights from research may be ignored or dismissed if teachers feel threatened by such materials (Carter, 1998). Literature on listening comprehension may appear to be extremely complex and even chaotic and thus threatening from the perspective of a non specialist such as an ordinary language

teacher.

1.3 Listening Comprehension in the Literature

Listening comprehension is a heterogeneous area of study receiving contributions from a great variety of academic fields (Rost, 1990). Witkin (1990, in Dunkel, 1991) characterized the vocabulary used in the field as being 'diffuse' and found research results 'often contradictory'. What may be even more diffuse than the terminology used is the variation found in definitions of listening comprehension. In two separate studies (Wolven & Coakley, 1988 and Glenn, 1989, in Dunkel 1991) in which a total of 50 outlines of the construct of L 1 listening comprehension were analyzed, the authors of both studies concluded that there appeared to be 'no generally agreed upon definition' (Dunkel 1991:433).

Those concerned with the testing of listening, for which a well defined construct is particularly important, have commented that because of this absence test makers often appear to be using a 'hit and miss approach' (Buck, 1991:67). In a study undertaken by Dunkel, Henning and Chaudron (1993) which in part was an attempt to resolve, for testing purposes, the lack of a consensus on a definition for listening comprehension, mention was also made of the diverse creation of listening subskill taxonomies, many of 'primitive status and tentative nature' (1993:183). These add yet another level of complexity to the field. However there are patterns to be found in the many definitions of listening comprehension and taxonomies of subskills that exist.

1.4 Definitions

The process of listening comprehension, once thought to be a passive

activity is now generally described as a dynamic interpretive process consisting of a series of complex interactive processing stages that a listener goes through (Call, 1985; Murphy, 1991; O'Malley, Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Richards, 1983; Rost, 1990). As mentioned there are many interpretations of these processes and different authors make their own distinctions in gradation and the rank order in which some processes occur. It is not possible to explore all the arguments since the concern here is with how a teacher might approach the teaching of listening to assist learners with problems. In order to find where these problem areas have been placed in the processing chain, it is useful to examine a few examples taken from the literature.

Richards defines three related levels of processing which he terms 'propositional identification', 'interpretation of illocutionary force' and 'activation of real world knowledge' (1983:220). Lund lists six 'listener functions' of which 'identification' is the first and is defined as 'focus on the code rather than the message' (1990:107). Dunkel et. al. divide the listening comprehension construct into three areas. The first area consists of processes which precede comprehension such as orientation, attention, perception and recognition. These they term as being 'lower order', 'bottom up', 'trivial pre cursor' elements (1993:180). Comprehension occupies the middle ground and the 'higher order', 'top down' elements including, for example, analysis, synthesis or evaluation corresponding to Richards' 'activation of world knowledge'. The problems of perception, recognition, and identification are described as being 'lower order' processes. Upon such examination it becomes obvious that the problems mentioned fall mainly into the 'bottom up' category of processing.

1.5 The Role of Intonation

The question for a teacher then is a matter of how to facilitate the development of processing competency (skills) in order to assist learners in overcoming problems in this area and for this purpose it is necessary to access research in the area of perception.

Research exists that suggests that what is essential for perception and recognition of the sound signal is segmentation of the signal in order to be able to process it (de Bot, 1981; Ellis, 1996). That is, because the sounds of the code are grouped into patterns or segments, perception, recognition and processing efficiency are facilitated. There are claims that this segmentation, defined by prosodic elements in the sound signal (Gerken, 1996; Morgan, Meier & Newport, 1987), occurs in English at the discourse level through patterns of intonation and stress (Cutler, 1984; Pennington, 1996; Wennerstrom, 1998). Moreover, these patterns shaped by intonation occur in 'units' that are regularly larger than the 'word' (Pennington, 1996) and, though there is much overlap, do not have one to one correspondence with either pauses or lexico-grammatical constructions at the clause or sentence level (Coulthard, 1992; Croft, 1995). Such groupings, which are thought to be among the basic units used in processing spoken language, and in the case of perception for the ear, function in speech much the same way that the separation of words or clauses on paper function in the facilitation of perception for the eye in written language (Brazil, 1997). In the literature, terminology varies and these 'units' may be called 'phonological chunks' (Ellis, 1996), 'tone groups' (Halliday & Hassan, 1976), 'pause units' (Rost, 1990), 'intonation units' (Croft, 1995), 'tone units' (Brazil, 1995) and so on. It is safe to say that if a teacher wants to develop learners' skills in detecting patterns formed by intonation in order to improve

listening competency it is necessary to examine what the literature has to say about intonation.

2 INTONATION

2.1 Importance of Intonation in Listening

Although intonation has been acknowledged by linguists in general to be ‘an indispensable component of language and communication’ (Chun, 1998:61), in the field of listening there are few listening specialists who do more than mention its importance and then proceed to ignore it in proportion to other areas of focus (for example see Mendelsohn, 1994). This may be due to several factors, one being that, perhaps because of the nature of intonation and its obvious connection with sound, it seems to be more often associated with pronunciation and speech production than listening and is usually ‘seen to fall outside the domain of listening comprehension’ (Hewings, 1995:40). It is mainly from authors in the field of pronunciation and speech production, however, that advice is to be found recommending a focus on prosodic elements in the sound stream to facilitate listening (Cauldwell & Hewings, 1996; Clennell, 1997; de Bot & Mailfert, 1982; Gilbert, 1993). This advice is ignored by authors of literature concerning listening (discussed in more detail in section 2.3 below) at great peril to credibility in the field and to principals of language learning and acquisition.

2.2 Descriptions of Intonation in the Literature

For non specialists, the existence of a variety of approaches taken in describing intonation can be confusing (Coulthard, 1992; de Bot, 1981). Among these, what may appear to be conflicting reports may be simply a

matter of focus. Theorists take different stances for various reasons that have to do with a need to isolate and examine certain elements they are interested in (Cauldwell, 1993). Intonation has been variously described as being linked to grammatical forms (Halliday, 1967 in Coulthard, 1992) or to attitudinal constructs (O'Connor & Arnold, 1973), both concepts having been shown to be untenable (Brazil, Coulthard & Johns, 1980).

The idea that intonation is linked to grammar has long been discredited (Bolinger, 1958) and there is evidence showing that, although there is a great deal of overlap, there is no one to one relationship (Croft, 1995). In the case of attempts to link attitude with patterns of intonation it has been pointed out that, in spite of the existence of the strong relationship between attitude and intonation, '... it is very difficult to say anything sensible about it, simply because there is no agreement about how to define and describe attitudes' (Taylor, 1993:11). Moreover, in spite of the existence of numerous detailed illustrations in the literature clearly demonstrating that there can be no unique linking of a particular intonational shape with a particular attitude (Coulthard, 1992; Brazil et. al., 1980; Brown, 1990; Woolard, 1993) such linking is still alluded to, examples of which can be found in influential literature (for example, Ur, 1984:13).

However, this is not the place to speculate on whether any particular model of intonation is more correct or flawed in any universal sense. What is important for the language teacher is that since there is a need to focus on this area in the teaching of listening and a framework is needed from which to do this a description should be useful and set at a level of analysis that is manageable for non-specialists in the field such as teachers and learners (Taylor, 1993). It must set up a filter that provides neither too

much detail, thus being unmanageable, nor one that excludes so much of the detail that there is little or nothing in the way of a useable framework. The Discourse Intonation Model, developed by David Brazil and outlined in section 2.2.3 below, has such qualities (Coulthard, 1992; Taylor, 1993).

2.3 The Discourse Model of Intonation:

Description and Advantages for the Teaching of Listening

The introduction of the Discourse Intonation framework into the teaching of listening to EFL learners might have positive effects in various areas for the following reasons. For decoding language as a stream of speech, the ‘tone units’ of Discourse Intonation provide a much more realistic basis for teaching because it provides an opportunity to present the spoken language as spoken language and to escape teaching through the traditional ‘filter’ of the written language (Cauldwell & Hewings, 1996; McCarthy, 1988). Moreover, the description is manageable and uncomplicated and provides a convenient framework from which to work for both teacher and student. It can also be used in analysis of breakdowns, which, once found can be targeted easily by the teacher. Finally, the DI model is extendible, that is, it is simple but not oversimplified so it would not become useless at higher levels as proficiency grows.

2.3.1 The Context of Interaction

The Discourse Model of Intonation (DI) takes as its starting point the solid pragmatic base of what is termed ‘the context of interaction’, exemplified in the statement that ‘all intonation is based upon the best estimate that can be made about what the [interlocutors] share.’ (Brazil 1994a:92). In the framework of the DI description, speakers have the choice to mark part of a message, signified by tone choices, as being something that is

shared (even if it is not) as part of what is metaphorically described as being the 'common ground'. The message can also be marked as unshared as well. Since these and other choices are signaled by tone, prominence, non prominence, key and termination (key and termination will not be addressed here), they are instantly available to the learner in the sound signal and if learners are aware of the function of these choices and familiarized with the patterns in which they occur they have access to a system that provides clues to global meaning and a framework from which to work in deciphering spoken English the base of which, consists of the 'tone unit'.

2.3.2 Tone Units

Patterns of intonation work to segment spoken English into what Brazil calls 'tone units'. These are considered to be the basic units of spoken English and the 'tone unit', not the 'word' is described as being the 'smallest stretch of speech produced without a break in it' (Brazil 1994a:150). They are to the ear what words are to the eyes and the sounds in tone units are run together much as the individual sounds are in a single word. However, a word spoken out of context on its own must be treated as a whole tone unit (Brazil, 1995). In regard to processing, tone units are 'planned and spoken as a whole' (Brazil 1994a:150) and thus, in listening, if learners are encouraged to process in terms of tone units instead of word by word or by referring to grammatical units, processing time can be more efficiently allocated.

Tone units are defined as having one stressed or prominent syllable in which the beginning of a pitch movement occurs and this is the 'tonic syllable'. Research indicates that the tonic syllable is most likely to appear near or at the final boundary for the tone unit. This is also a feature in

Japanese ‘intonational phrases’ (Beckman, 1996). However a tone unit may contain prominent syllables that are not tonic. The prominent and non prominent syllables in tone units form patterns that can help learners find important areas on which to focus their attention and also, if made familiar with these patterns, can assist learners in locating and anticipating difficult areas where perception has consistently been shown to be a problem.

2.3.3 Tones and the Forms and Functions of Tone Choices

There are five tones in the Brazil model; the fall and the rise-fall which are, following Brazil (1995), ‘proclaiming tones’; the rise and fall rise which are ‘referring tones’; and the level tone. The term ‘tone’ refers to the pitch movement that begins in the tonic syllable.

Proclaiming tones generally indicate that the speaker does not expect the listener to know about what is being mentioned. Proclaiming tones in questions may indicate that the speaker is expecting the reply to contain new information. Referring tones indicate that no new information is being exchanged. The use of a referring tone may also indicate that the speaker is emphasizing that a dominant speaker role is being taken if the speaker is, in fact, in control of the conversation at the moment. Rising tones in questions are used to ‘make sure’ of old information (Brazil, 1994b). Level tones are often used when the speaker is unsure about what should be said and is mentally preparing to speak just as learners often do when they are using language that is not familiar (Brazil, 1994b). When a speaker disengages ‘from the process of attaching either meaning to what is being said’ this will be marked by a choice of level tone (Hewings, 1995: 38).

As for advantages, It is useful to understand that there is a systematic distinction being made between new information and what is considered common ground. This provides a contrast and makes the message more salient to the listener. Since these sounds are easily accessed learners should be aware of the functions of these contrasts to facilitate processing (Brazil, 1994b).

2.3.4 Prominence and Non Prominent Syllables

The placement of prominence is one of the essential functions of intonation. A listener is being informed that a choice or significant selection is being made about a word that is marked as prominent (Brazil, 1994b) and that choice affects the meaning of the whole tone unit. This helps to organize the information and gives clues to listeners about where to divide up the utterance and which elements are being foregrounded (Taylor, 1993). If learners are made aware of these functions the task of decoding a stretch of speech becomes easier and processing can be more efficiently directed.

A final and brief word should be added about non prominent syllables which can be shown to contain patterns which can assist learners in, for example, finding where to expect protected and unprotected vowels to occur in the tone unit and also where common patterns of reduced forms may be expected. To illustrate this, if learners can be shown that, in an authentic text, the majority of non prominent single syllable words occur with a protected vowel but non prominent function words will not and which, though fewer in number have a much higher frequency of use (Brazil, 1994b). The systematicity of such patterns can be clearly demonstrated. This may help to legitimize these forms in the minds of learners and the regularity of such patterns demonstrates that they are to be expected. Illustrating this

from the framework of the tone unit facilitates teaching and assists learners in recognition of these patterns in authentic spoken text that otherwise may appear to be an unassailable blur of sound.

3 CONCLUSION

Intonation is important in listening and learners need a systematic framework and direct instruction on how to cope with the stream of speech in order to make it more comprehensible and thus promote acquisition. They need to be shown how spoken English differs from the written form, how it too is systematic but in a way that is different from the written form and some may even need to be convinced that English as it appears in the spoken form is not somehow corrupt or incorrect. A focus on listening using the Discourse Intonation approach may assist learners in these areas.

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