


1977

The Importance of Including in an ESL Program: A Study of Intonation Patterns Used in Everyday Spoken English and Some Suggestions for Working with Intonation in the Classroom

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Recommended Citation

Cardozo, A. Rebecca, "The Importance of Including in an ESL Program: A Study of Intonation Patterns Used in Everyday Spoken English and Some Suggestions for Working with Intonation in the Classroom" (1977). *MA TESOL Collection*. 235.
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THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUDING IN AN ESL PROGRAM
A STUDY OF INTONATION PATTERNS USED IN EVERYDAY SPOKEN ENGLISH
AND
SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR WORKING WITH INTONATION
IN THE CLASSROOM

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December 16, 1977

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the
School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

This project by Rebecca Cardozo is accepted in its present form.

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ABSTRACT

Native speakers of English rely on more than just words and grammatical structures to communicate their feelings, attitudes and intentions. In fact, it is often not the words and the grammar that convey the speaker's message. Rather, it is the speaker's intonation pattern, body language and voice volume that get the message across. It is the purpose of this paper to illustrate the importance of including in the ESL classroom a study of intonation patterns used in everyday spoken English. It is also the purpose of this paper to suggest materials and methods which could be used in the classroom in order to help ESL students understand this vital component of the English language.

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"Good morning, Bill."

He knew by her tone of voice that she liked him. This was no ordinary "Good morning." This was an invitation!

* * * * *

"Good morning, Bill."

He knew by her tone of voice that to her he was just another guy.

* * * * *

"Good morning, Bill."

He knew by her tone of voice that she knew all about last night....

* * * * *

On each occasion, Abigail said "Good morning," but clearly, she intended to communicate more to Bill than just a polite greeting. And, each time, Bill got the message....

Native speakers of English¹ rely on more than just words and grammatical structures to communicate their feelings, attitudes and intentions. In fact, it is often not the words and the grammar that convey the speaker's message. Rather, it is the speaker's intonation pattern, body language and voice volume that get the message across. Thus, "Good morning" may, indeed, be a polite greeting, or may, indeed, be anything but polite.

¹ Throughout this paper, "English" refers to Standard American English.

It is the purpose of this paper to illustrate the importance of including in the ESL² classroom a study of intonation patterns used in everyday spoken English. It is also the purpose of this paper to suggest materials and methods which could be used in the classroom in order to help ESL students understand this vital component of the English language.

What is intonation? Intonation can be defined as the pattern of changes in the pitch levels of a person's speech. Pitch level is determined by the number of vibrations per second of the vocal cords. Regardless of whether a person's voice is "high" or "low," he or she uses four relative pitch levels when speaking. These levels can be labeled "low," "normal," "high," and "very high." Kenneth Pike says, "In English, four relative but significant [pitch] levels can be found which serve as the basic building blocks for intonation contours.... The pitch levels appear to be nearly or completely meaningless by themselves.... The significance of pitches is determined by their height relative to one another.... It is the intonation contour as a whole which carries the meaning...."³ Thus, it is the rising and falling of pitch which determines a given intonation contour and, in turn, carries meaning.

Consider again how Abigail said "Good morning" to Bill on three separate occasions. What mattered most in each case was how Abigail manipulated her voice, creating rising and falling pitch levels, thereby

² "ESL" means English as a Second Language.

³ Kenneth Pike, The Intonation of American English, Ann Arbor, Michigan, The University of Michigan Press, c. 1945, pp. 25-26.

communicating to Bill significantly different feelings, attitudes and intentions.

"Good m-o-r-ning, Bill."

"Good morning, Bill."

"Good m-o-r-ning, Bill."

Of course, Abigail's body language helped her to get her message across. Her facial expressions, especially her winks and side glances, clarified any message that her tone of voice failed to convey. Still, it was her intonation that told Bill how she felt, not her winks and whispers alone.

The number of possible intonation patterns a speaker might create is infinite. However, if these patterns were created and used at random, they would be of little value in communication. Thus, as Pike points out, "The changes of pitch which occur within a sentence are not haphazard variation.... In each language...the use of pitch fluctuation tends to become semi-standardized, or formalized, so that all speakers of the language use basic pitch sequences in similar ways under similar circumstances...."⁴ This is why, generally speaking, Abigail and Bill were able to understand one another. And, this is why native English speakers know when someone is making a statement, asking a question, or expressing anger, surprise, pleasure, sarcasm, or any number of other emotions or attitudes.

⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

In English, however, intonation patterns are not completely formalized. There are no formal rules which require the use of certain patterns in particular situations. What is required, is that both the speaker and the hearer have a common understanding of the intonation patterns being used. In most everyday conversations, a common understanding of intonation patterns does exist. Occasionally, however, the speakers do not understand each other. Observe Abigail and Bill in yet another encounter.

"~~Good morning, Bill.~~"

"Now, just what do you mean by that, Abigail?"

Bill knew there was a particular message riding on Abigail's words. But he wasn't familiar with the strange way she chose to express herself.

In spite of the fact that misunderstandings do sometimes occur, there are a great many intonation patterns that are commonly used and understood by native speakers of English. Certain patterns have acquired precise meanings. Hearing these patterns, native speakers know, for example, that a question has been asked, or that the speaker is angry, surprised, sympathetic or disinterested. Native speakers very often draw conclusions about a speaker's feelings, attitudes or intentions on the basis of the way in which something is said, regardless of the speaker's choice of words or grammatical structures. "An extraordinary characteristic of intonation contours is the tremendous connotative power of their elusive meanings.... Actually, we often react more violently to the intonational meanings than to the lexical ones.... This illustrates the fact that the intonation contours, though fluctuating like the speaker's attitude, are

as strong in their implications as the attitudes which they represent; in actual speech, the hearer is frequently more interested in the speaker's attitude [expressed through his intonation] than in his words."⁵ This is particularly true of sarcasm. In a sarcastic remark, the words are often exactly opposite in meaning to the true attitude or message being communicated.

Clearly, an understanding of spoken English requires more than just an understanding of the lexical and structural components of English sentences. Intonation patterns are fundamental tools which native English speakers use in communicating with each other. Without an understanding of the meaning of the most commonly used patterns, a person can never have a complete command of the English language.

Since intonation is a basic communicative tool of the English language, intonation patterns should be part of an ESL program at the beginning levels as well as at the more advanced levels. Unfortunately, in most ESL classrooms, if intonation is dealt with at all, it is dealt with in a cursory and haphazard way. There are probably a number of reasons for this. One reason may be because intonation is not widely recognized as being as basic a component of the English language as are vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing. Clearly, recognition of intonation as an essential part of English is long overdue. Two other reasons why intonation is often brushed aside may be the lack of formal rules which can be taught and the lack of materials to aid the teacher in presenting this aspect of the language. The meanings of specific intonation patterns

⁵ Ibid., p.22.

can, indeed, be "elusive."⁶ But every ESL teacher who is a native speaker knows "instinctively" what the most common patterns are intended to communicate. Every ESL teacher who is a native speaker uses these patterns and understands them when others use them. Thus, the individual ESL teacher has at his or her command all the knowledge of intonation patterns that he or she needs in presenting this aspect of the language to ESL students. Furthermore, every ESL teacher is capable of developing his or her own materials for classroom use. The best material for dealing with intonation patterns comes from everyday conversations. Thus, the teacher does not have to go far to collect fresh, lively material to present in class.

The remainder of this paper is a collection of everyday conversations which could be used to illustrate how different emotions, attitudes and intentions can be expressed through intonation. Suggestions are also included regarding the use of these conversations in the ESL classroom.

⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

EVERYDAY DIALOGUES

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE USE OF THE DIALOGUES

Suggestions for the Use of the Tape

- * Have the students listen to the conversation. Ask the students to determine how the speakers feel toward one another and/or what the speakers are actually thinking.
- * Have the students listen to all or part of a conversation. Ask the students to imagine the events which may have led up to this conversation. Ask the students to describe how the speakers feel toward one another.
- * Have the students listen to certain lines of a conversation. Then ask them to imagine what the speakers had said before and/or what the speakers would say subsequently.
- * Have the students listen to and repeat the lines of the conversations. Then ask them to try to reproduce the conversations with the appropriate intonation.

Suggestions for the Use of the Tape with the Script

- * Have the students listen to the conversations while reading the script silently. Then ask the students to reproduce the conversations without the aid of the tape. (The scripts may or may not be marked.)
- * Have the students listen to the conversations. Then play the taped conversations again and ask the students to read along out loud. Then ask the students to reproduce the conversations without the aid of the tape. (The scripts may or may not be marked.)
- * Have the students listen to the tape and mark the intonation patterns on their scripts. Then ask the students to reproduce the conversations without the aid of the tape.
- * Give the students unmarked scripts. Ask them to imagine how the conversations would sound if particular emotions were being expressed. Then play the tape for comparison.

Suggestions for Further Practice with Intonation Patterns

- * The "OH" Game. Each student is given a card with a statement written on it. Student A addresses his statement to Student B. Student B must respond with "Oh." Student B must, of course, use the intonation pattern which would logically follow Student A's statement.

A variation of this would be the use of other one-word responses such as "Really," "Nice," or "Uh-huh."

The students could also be asked to write their own statements and/or choose among a variety of responses.

- * Each student is given two cards, one blue card and one white card, for example. A statement is written on the blue card. An emotion is indicated on the white card, e.g., "anger" or "surprise." (The statements and emotions can be chosen by the teacher or the students.) Student A addresses his statement to Student B. Student B must respond while expressing the emotion indicated on his white card.

- * Unmarked Dialogues. Give the students a dialogue. Have them work in pairs deciding what intonation patterns would be appropriate for the dialogue. Have the students role-play their separate versions of the dialogue.

Have the students write their own dialogues. Ask them to role-play them.

- * Pictures. Give the students pictures which portray people talking to one another. Have the students imagine the emotions or attitudes being expressed by the speakers. Ask the students to role-play the conversations which they imagine are taking place in the pictures.
- * Telephones. Have two students prepare a dialogue to be communicated over the telephone. Have the other students try to determine what events led up to the conversation. Also, ask the other students in the class to decide how the speakers feel toward one another.

Each of the dialogues which follows is intended to illustrate how the same word or words can communicate a variety of attitudes or feelings depending on how they are said. The intonation patterns shown are those which I would use in these particular situations. Another speaker might use slightly different patterns to convey the same meaning. Thus, the intonation markings are not intended to suggest "rules" for expressing certain emotions or attitudes. Rather, they are simply markings to show how one native speaker expresses herself. Nevertheless, the patterns shown are commonly used and understood and can be heard in everyday conversations. A tape of these conversations accompanies this paper in order to clarify the intonation markings shown and to demonstrate how these conversations might actually sound.

YES

May I have a piece of gum?

Yes.

(friendly, willing)

May I have another piece?

Yes!

(still friendly, but less enthusiastic)

May I have another?

Yes.

(getting annoyed)

Was that your last piece?

Yes!

(angry)

WONDERFUL

I got five letters today!

Wonderful!

(very pleased)

I haven't received any letters for three months.

Wonderful.

(sarcastic)

REALLY

I'm going to Europe tomorrow.

Really?

(interested, somewhat surprised)

I quit my job so I could go.

Really.

(disapproving)

I'm not going alone.

R-e-a-lly?

(teasing)

NICE

There's Mary!

Ni-ce!

(giving her the eye)

That's her new car.

Nice.

(approving)

By the way, how was your date last night?

Nice.

(not so great)

Uh-oh, looks like rain.

Nice.

(sarcastic)

THANKS

Jerry, here's \$1,000 for you to spend anyway you like.

Thanks! (very grateful)

Bill, here's \$1.00 for you to spend.

~~Thanks.~~ (polite)

John, here's \$.10 for you to spend anyway you like.

Thanks. (sarcastic)

OH

There's a spider on your neck!

Oh! (frightened, surprised)

Here's our new baby.

~~Oh-h-h-h.~~ (adoring)

I just lost \$100.00.

Oh. (sympathetic)

I saw Bill at the Dunes Motel last night, and he wasn't alone.

Oh? (interested... I'm listening...)

You got a telephone call last night.

Oh. (interested)

You got a call from Europe last night.

Oh! (surprised, pleased)

Oh (Continued)

You've got a flat tire.

Oh. (disgusted)

She's from the Far East.

Oh! (interested)

I think I should be President of the United States.

Oh? (polite but not necessarily interested)

Women think I'm wonderful, handsome, intelligent and a fantastic lover.

Oh. (not impressed)

The students refuse to do their homework.

Oh! (annoyed)

SLEEPING....OH

Where've you been?

Sleeping.

Oh? (a little surprised)

Where've you been?

Sleeping.

Oh. (acknowledgement)

Where've you been?

Sleeping.

Oh. (annoyed)

Where've you been?

Sleeping.

Oh-oh. (teasing)

YES, IT IS

It's a beautiful day and not too hot. Bill and Abigail aren't studying today. They're playing tennis.

The speakers agree.

The speakers disagree.

It's a beautiful day.

It isn't a beautiful day.

~~Yes, it is.~~

Yes, it is.

It's not too hot.

It's too hot!

~~No, it isn't.~~

No, it isn't.

Bill and Abigail are playing tennis.

Bill and Abigail aren't playing tennis.

~~Yes, they are.~~

Yes, they are.

They aren't studying.

They're studying.

~~No, they aren't.~~

No, they aren't.

THAT DOESN'T MATTER

Would you like to meet her?

Sure.

She's French.

(The implication is that something is wrong with being French.)

That doesn't matter.

Shall we eat Mexican food?

Sure.

It's spicy.

(The implication is that she might not like spicy food.)

That doesn't matter.

Shall we go to that movie?

Sure.

It's X-rated.

(The implication is that she wouldn't like to see an X-rated movie.)

Great!

UH-HUH

Have you ever been to the Holiday Inn?

Uh-huh.

(Yes.)

Have you ever been there on a Friday night?

Uh-huh.

(There's something special about Friday night, and he knows what it is.)

Do you think you'll ever go there again on a Friday night?

Uh-h.

(No.)

Have you ever been to the Holiday Inn?

Uh-huh.

(Yes)

Have you ever been there on a Friday night?

Uh-huh.

(He likes it there on Friday night.)

Do you go there often?

Uh-huh.

(an enthusiastic yes.)

TAG QUESTIONS

You'll be at the party, won't you? (The speaker isn't sure if the answer will be yes or no.)

You'll be at the party, won't you? (The speaker thinks the answer will be yes.)

Spanish isn't difficult, is it? (The speaker isn't sure if the answer will be yes or no.)

Spanish isn't difficult, is it? (The speaker thinks the answer will be no.)

They should practice speaking English, shouldn't they? (The answer might be yes or no.)

They should practice speaking English, shouldn't they? (The speaker expects the answer to be yes.)

Arabian women wear veils, don't they? (The speaker isn't sure of the answer.)

Arabian women wear veils, don't they? (The speaker expects the answer to be yes.)

Your name is Bill, isn't it? (The speaker isn't sure of the answer.)

Your name is Bill, isn't it? (The speaker is quite sure his name is Bill.)

WH- QUESTIONS

I've never seen him before.

~~What's his name?~~

(The speaker wants information.)

I used to know him.

~~What's his name?~~

(The speaker wants information repeated.)

~~How old are you?~~

(The speaker wants information.)

50.

~~How old?~~

(The speaker wants information repeated.)

50.

I don't believe it!

~~Where are you going?~~

(The speaker wants information.)

Drinking.

~~Where are you going?~~

(The speaker wants information repeated.)

GOOD MORNING

Good m-o-r-n-i-n-g Bill. (sexy)

Good m-o-r-n-i-n-g, Bill. (disinterested)

Good m-o-r-n-i-n-g, Bill. (teasing)

Good m-o-r-n-i-n-g, Abigail. (very cheerful)

Mornin', Abigail. (hip)

TAKE A RED ROD

Take a red rod Jack.

(The teacher is giving instructions.)

No. Jack, a red rod.

(Someone else took it.)

No. Jack, a red rod.

(Jack took a blue rod.)

No. Jack, a red rod.

(Jack took a red pencil.)

No. Jack, a red rod.

(Jack took several red rods.)

Good, Jack.

(Jack finally got it right.)

WOULD YOU PLEASE BE QUIET?

Would you please be quiet?

(polite)

Would you please be quiet?

(getting impatient and annoyed)

Would you please be quiet?

(angry)

HOW WAS CLASS THIS MORNING?

How was class this morning?

We worked on If-Clauses again. (factual account)

Are they difficult for you?

No. (No.)

How was class this morning?

We worked on If-Clauses again. (annoyed)

Are they difficult for you?

No! (annoyed that he has to keep working on them.)

THE BLUE SUIT

I want you to wear the blue suit to the party.

Okay.

I want you to wear the blue suit to the party.

Don't tell me what to do!

I want you to wear the blue suit to the party.

So who are you to tell me what to do?

I want you to wear the blue suit to the party.

But Jack likes it. Let him wear it.

I want you to wear the blue suit to the party.

Well, why didn't you say that in the first place?

THE BLUE SUIT (continued)

I want you to wear the blue suit to the party.

Oh, it'd be much more fun to carry it and arrive in my underwear!

I want you to wear the blue suit to the party.

What's wrong with my brown one?

I want you to wear the blue suit to the party.

You said the blue tie before.

I want you to wear the blue suit to the party.

Yea? And what am I gonna wear when I get there?

I want you to wear the blue suit to the party.

Oh, I thought you wanted me to wear it to the movies.

MORE EVERYDAY CONVERSATIONS - GOOD MORNING, BILL

Good morning, Bill. (friendly)

Good morning, Abigail. (blasé)

How was your trip? (friendly)

Nice. (blasé)

Well, what did you do? (friendly)

Not much. (blasé)

~~Oh.~~ (She gives up.)

GOOD MORNING, HILL

Good morning, Bill.

(friendly)

Good morning, Abigail.

(friendly, happy)

How was your trip?

(friendly, interested)

Nice.

(He had a really good time for some reason.)

Well, what did you do?

(very interested)

Not much.

(Hinting that he had an affair)

Oh.

(She knows.)

DO YOU WANT TO GO TO THE HOLIDAY INN?

Do you want to go to the Holiday Inn?

(friendly)

Sure.

(agreeable)

Let's sit over there by those girls.

(friendly)

Okay.

(friendly)

I saw you dance with that girl the other night.

(interested)

Oh?

(a little surprised)

She's married, you know.

(informative)

Oh?

(surprised)

DO YOU WANT TO GO TO THE HOLIDAY INN?

Do you want to go to the Holiday Inn?

(friendly)

Sure.

(bored)

Let's sit over there by those girls.

(friendly)

Okay.

(bored)

I saw you dance with that girl the other night. (friendly)

Oh.

(Who cares?)

She's married, you know.

(interested)

Oh.

(So what?)

I HEAR YOU HAD A GOOD WEEK-END

Hi Bill. How are you this morning?

(Both speakers are acting friendly and interested)

Couldn't be better.

I hear you had a good week-end.

Oh?

Yea. Mary said she saw you at the Holiday Inn Saturday night.

Really? You saw Mary? What else did she have to say?

Oh, nothing. I just passed her on the way to work and she happened to mention that she'd seen you.

Yea... I had a nice week-end. How about you? Bob mentioned that you went away for the week-end....

I HEAR YOU HAD A GOOD WEEK-END

Hi, Bill. How are you this morning? (teasing)

Couldn't be better. (friendly, ignoring her tone of voice)

I hear you had a good week end. (teasing)

Oh? (He wonders how much she knows.)

Yea, Mary said she saw you at the Holiday Inn Saturday night. (straightforward)

Really? You saw Mary. What else did she have to say? (He knows Mary's a gossip.)

Oh, nothing. I just passed her on the way to work and she happened to
mention that she'd seen you. (teasing)

Yea... I had a nice week-end. And, how about you? Bob mentioned that you
went away for the week-end.... (teasing)

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