

Part 1: Notes on the whole course

1 Introduction

1 WHO IS THE COURSE FOR?

This course is designed for learners of English who, having achieved an advanced stage of competence in written English, feel the need for a structured programme of improvement in speaking it.

The need may be the result of various causes. Typically, earlier instruction will have concentrated heavily on reading and writing, perhaps because this has been the most efficient way of teaching in the large groups they have had to work in. Or the concentration may have been deliberate, reflecting a justified belief that many people are more likely to need to read and write English than to speak it extensively. Whatever the reason, many learners undoubtedly do find themselves in the position of having to take part in various kinds of spoken communication – very often in professional contexts – without the confidence that would enable them to do so comfortably.

Effective speaking, whether it takes place in a formal public setting or in a relaxed social context, involves more than pronunciation, of course. It is nevertheless in this area of proficiency that many learners tend to locate their problems. Their awareness of real, and sometimes imaginary, shortcomings, are inhibiting: they need a course which will remove some of the uncertainties they feel about how they perform when called upon to speak English.

2 THE NEED FOR CONFIDENCE

The importance of confidence building can scarcely be exaggerated. The course tries to be positive about pronunciation: it avoids presenting 'good pronunciation' as simply a matter of not making mistakes. Greater awareness of how the pronunciation system works is presented as an addition to the learner's resources, not as a collection of pitfalls to be avoided. It does not follow the perfectionist tradition, which demands native-speaker-like control of the sounds of

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a particular accent, and which regards everything else as an 'error'. Instead, users are encouraged to see pronunciation from the point of view of how it can best enable them to make their meanings and intentions clear to a listener.

The learners we have in mind will usually say, if asked, that their problems are of two kinds. There remain a number of English sounds – the vowels and consonants they have been working at for so long – that they have still not fully mastered. And there is a largely unexplored area of potential errors that they are likely to label 'intonation'. This course deals with both of these, and seeks to treat them as matters closely related both to each other and to the end of efficient communication which they serve.

Confidence building requires that we approach the two areas in different ways. Uneasiness about intonation arises largely because learners know little about it. Its reputation for difficulty and for slipperiness leads to its being neglected in most teaching programmes. There is nevertheless a widely-held, and often disabling, belief that it is 'very important': that failure to get it right can make one's speech unintelligible, offensive, laughable, and so on. The best way to remedy this worrying situation is to provide some insight into just how the intonation system really works, something that can be done without the enormous expenditure of time and effort that it is commonly believed to require.

Concern about particular sounds is tackled in a different way. Here one is covering ground that *will* have been covered before. Reducing anxiety consists largely, not in teaching something new, but in developing learners' powers of self-appraisal. It is helpful if they can be made aware, firstly of how much they are getting right, and secondly of the particular sounds they really do need to work on. If they then focus their attention upon the latter, the results will probably be more noticeable because they are working with a limited and clearly perceived objective in mind.

It remains to be said that there are advantages in working in the two areas simultaneously. Certain facts about the treatment of particular sounds can be more easily appreciated, and their execution more easily practised, if they are set in the context of a communicative utterance whose intonation we are able to take into account. This consideration, more than any other, has been responsible for the distinctive organisation of the course.

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3 INTONATION AND SEGMENTS

A special feature of this course is that students work on intonational matters in conjunction with segments (particular sounds). By bringing them together we can show their interdependence. We can also ensure that the work students do in one area supports and reinforces the work they do in the other.

The overall framework is, in fact, designed to give systematic treatment to **intonation**, since this is the area in which advanced learners are most likely to feel that they are deficient. The terms and categories used in the course to describe intonation are those of what has come to be known as the *Discourse* description. This is presented in detail in *The Communicative Value of Intonation in English*, Brazil, D. C., E.L.R., University of Birmingham, 1985. An outline of this description is provided in Section III below.

The developing intonational framework then provides a basis for isolating *potential problems with particular sounds* and for working on them in a communicative context.

The function of the **tone unit** is central to the work in both areas. The notion of speech as a step-by-step progress through the message the speaker wants to communicate, each step being prepared for mentally before being embarked upon, is fundamental to the course. An appreciation that speaking involves one in adding *tone unit to tone unit* as one proceeds, not, as one tends to think, word to word, is an important part of the awareness on which its successful use depends.

4 LISTENING FOR MEANING

All the units begin with some recorded material to which students are asked to listen as they would to a meaningful and interesting piece of communication: that is to say, in the way they would normally listen to something that they wanted to hear about. Students may need to listen more than once in some cases before proceeding to the activity that follows.

This activity is best carried out in pairs or small groups. Its purpose is to engage students in some kind of verbal interchange about what they have heard. This will ensure that they are thoroughly involved with the content, that is to say with *what* was being said, before they go on to attend to *how* it was said. You may find that other kinds of discussion will do this equally well. There are, however, two important

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reasons why some such preliminary activity should not be neglected.

One reason is that we do not normally attend consciously to the pronunciation of the language we hear or speak. It consequently requires considerable concentration to do so. It is better, therefore, if students are not compelled to do it at the same time as they are having to cope with the quite demanding business of putting together or responding to what is being said. It is better if they have recent working experience of the vocabulary and also of the grammatical organisation of the communicative event in question. The kind of task suggested is intended to give them a chance to make active use of as much of the language as possible and to be thoroughly at home with the content of that event, so that it has all become as 'automatic' as possible before they embark upon the much less natural business of listening for, and reproducing, particular sound patterns.

The other reason is the stress laid, throughout the course, on the way every aspect of pronunciation is related to the communicative context. The emphasis is not upon pronouncing words, or even sentences. It is rather upon speaking language *which is carrying a message*, and doing so in some situation in which that message matters to both speaker and listener. In this way it contrasts, for instance, with the practice of using lists of words to perfect the pronunciation of particular sounds. Some students may well want to focus upon the pronunciation of uncontextualised words – the 'citation forms' they find in dictionaries – but this course is designed to minimise that practice. The initial involvement in each unit with language as meaningful message – with matter that can be absorbed into one's own world of interest and talked about to others – is intended to start things off on the right foot.

5 LISTENING TO INTONATION

The opening recording of each unit is designed to provide a suitable context within which to focus upon the use of one feature of the intonation system. The 'Listening to intonation' tasks enable students to approach this feature in a number of ways: aural discrimination, imitation, prediction and free use of the feature are all involved in varying degrees. No attempt is made to incorporate a standard progression from one kind of activity to another, however, since the perception of what other speakers do, and the ability to do likewise oneself, are regarded as inseparable aspects of the same process of increasing awareness.

The approach is inductive. Students are encouraged wherever

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possible to discover 'rules' and other regularities for themselves, and formulate them in their own terms, before these are stated in their institutionalised form. This is considered important as a general principle. It also seems to be the most suitable way of proceeding for students who are seeking such rules solely in order to be more in control of their own performance; that is, students who are unlikely to be interested in mastering a particular descriptive system for its own sake. One consequence of adopting the inductive approach is that, in the Student's Book, summaries of the content are held back until the end of each unit.

6 PAIRWORK

Pairwork and/or small groupwork is an important part of the suggested programme. The most obvious reason for this is that it is the best way of creating opportunities for the necessary practice, and particularly for practice in settings where students can regard themselves as being in either real or simulated interaction with someone else.

Practice apart, it is suggested that the various investigations, predictive exercises and problem-solving tasks that are prescribed from time to time should be done cooperatively. This is not just a way of helping students to clarify their understanding for themselves; it has the additional advantage that talk *about* the extracts and examples contained in the course is almost certain to involve quotation *from* them: students can therefore get invaluable experience of articulating the language they are quoting within the 'genuine' context of their own discussions.

7 INTONATION TRANSCRIPTS

The transcription conventions that are associated with the Discourse approach to intonation are introduced progressively throughout the course and the tasks require that students can both interpret and use these. This is seen as the best way of pinning down the otherwise elusive nature of intonation and so avoiding the vagueness that can so easily undermine one's confidence when working with it.

It is important, however, that when transcription tasks are set they do not have an effect that is the opposite of the desired one of confidence building. The 'model' transcripts given, both within the units and in the Answers, represent a version that has been agreed by a number of experienced transcribers. You, or your students (or both!), may sometimes disagree with them. Experience shows that when we

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are using recorded data it is not always possible, even for practised ears, to agree about what is happening. It is both honest and expedient to admit that there is sometimes room for doubt. If and when disagreement becomes an issue, it is best to represent it to students as a reason for reassurance: if the experts can't *always* agree, there is nothing to worry about if *they* can't! For them, transcription conventions are learning tools; and the attempt to transcribe is *first and foremost a learning activity*: there is no question of testing their ability to produce a perfectly accurate transcript.

8 LISTENING TO SOUNDS

While much of the content of Part 1 of each unit is likely to be new to most students, the use they need to make of Part 2 is far less predictable and likely to vary from student to student. The problems that advanced learners have in the pronunciation of segments are usually confined to a limited number of sounds which, for a variety of reasons they have always found – and continue to find – difficult. The design of Part 2 is intended to help them towards:

- 1 making an accurate diagnosis of these problems;
- 2 using the standard phonetic analyses that are available to find out what causes them.

The emphasis is upon making a *systematic examination of their own performance*.

Each unit provides material that can be used to discover exactly where difficulties lie. Tasks are set to ensure that students do actually *hear* the differences and similarities upon which the sound system of the language rests. Once problems have been identified, students are directed towards practice exercises which are appropriate to their individual needs.

The way in which Part 2 of each unit is used will depend to some extent upon whether the class is mono- or multilingual. If the former, problems are likely to be shared, and some of the more conspicuous problems can be dealt with in class teaching; if the latter, they may be different for every student. In either case, however, much of the work suggested can well be carried out outside class time, problems being brought back for teacher guidance at the next session. It might be expected that advanced learners will want to take responsibility for their own improvement in this way and to seek help only when it is needed.

Again, the purely negative implications of this kind of problem spotting should be avoided. For most students, the systematic

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recognition of how much they can already get right can remove a lot of the generalised anxiety under which they probably labour, and they should be encouraged to take this positive view of things.

9 PROMINENT SYLLABLES AND TARGET SOUNDS

The most obvious overlap between Parts 1 and 2 of the units resides in the attention given to **prominent syllables** in both of them. The significance of these for anyone who is pinpointing and practising particular segments is of considerable importance. The reasons for this are set out in Section IV below. It is sufficient if we say two things in anticipation here.

One is that the peculiar importance attaching to prominent syllables in any act of communication results in their being singled out for a special kind of emphasis. But a very similar kind of emphasis tends easily to get attached to *any syllable in which a particular segment is made the focus of attention*. Being concerned both with the placing of prominence *and* with the quality of a particular vowel or consonant can, therefore, pull the speaker in different – and frequently incompatible – directions. The problem is avoided if we *focus upon sounds when they occur in prominent syllables*. In this way, giving conscious attention to one aspect of pronunciation produces a result that is consistent with the requirements of the other.

The other point is that an approach that begins with prominent syllables enables us to give appropriate attention to the so-called 'reduced' vowels of English. The pronunciation of these vowels and its relationship with prominence is acknowledged to be one of the main sources of difficulty for foreign learners. Taking this way in enables us to see the matter in a new, and hopefully more helpful, light. In targeting sounds for special attention, we shall consistently have regard to whether they are in prominent syllables or not.

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10 THE DESCRIPTION

There is no generally agreed method of describing how the intonation system of English works. It is likely that some teachers who make use of this course will be familiar with a method which differs from the one used here. It is therefore necessary to provide an account of its main features. What is given here is no more than the kind of outline

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summary that teachers will need in order to guide users successfully through the units.

Descriptive categories and transcription conventions

11 THE TONE UNIT

The basic building block of speech is the **tone unit**. The beginnings and ends of tone units are marked by the symbol // :

// the bus stopped // we'd got to the terminus // and everyone got out //

12 PROMINENT SYLLABLES

Each tone unit of ordinary speech has either **one** or **two prominent syllables**. Prominent syllables are indicated by the use of upper-case letters:

// it was DARK // and DRIZZling a little //

// we were SOMEwhere in the coMMERcial district // but i WASn't sure WHERE //

13 TONE

The last prominent syllable in each tone is also a **tonic syllable**. The tonic syllable is the place at which a significant pitch movement or tone begins. There are five tones: **the falling, the rising, rise-fall, fall-rise** and **level**. The tonic syllable is underlined in transcripts and the tone is indicated by means of a small arrow placed at the beginning of the tone unit:

// ↘ and TURNed into an Alleyway // ↘ and STARTed to WALK //

// ↗ LET me see if i've got it RIGHT //

// ↗ i CAN't remember anyone called MAry //

// → WELcome // → to our regular aTTENders //

(The rise-fall is not included in the course as it is not used much. The falling tone is nearly always a safer alternative.)

14 KEY

While each of the tones is realised by a different **pitch movement**, an entirely different set of meaningful choices is realised by **pitch level**. A meaningful pitch-level choice is made at each prominent syllable.

The pitch level of the first prominent syllable establishes the **key** of the tone unit. It may be **high**, **mid**, or **low**. High and low keys are indicated in this course by means of an upward or downward arrow, which is placed immediately before the relevant prominent syllable. Mid key is indicated by the absence of an arrow in this position.

// the MOtor car // re \uparrow DUces mobility //

// the OLD LAdy // was \uparrow SItting in the PAssenger seat //

// she ASKED for the street she WANted // \downarrow MARket street //

// the SCOrer // was MARcos // the \downarrow SPANish CAPtain //

(The pitch level of the last prominent syllable in the tone unit determines the termination of the tone unit as high, mid or low. Termination is not treated in this course, but can be marked, if necessary, by means of an upward or downward arrow placed in front of the last prominent syllable. If there is only one prominent syllable, key and termination cannot be chosen independently.)

Recognising and imitating the intonation features

15 PROMINENCE

A starting observation can be that prominent syllables are 'highlighted' in some way, or made to be more 'noticeable' or 'sound more important'. It is not easy to go beyond this and say exactly what it is that we hear as prominence. Neither, therefore, is there an immediately simple way of telling learners what they should do when prominence is needed.

Complex changes of various kinds – changes in pitch, loudness, length and perhaps other features – all seem to be involved. Nor does it seem very helpful to focus upon a single syllable and ask whether, in any absolute sense, it can be said to be prominent or not: prominence is better regarded as something one can recognise only within the overall pattern of the tone unit of which it is part.

There is, however, a fairly easy way of getting a working understanding of the matter. Many words are given in their dictionary

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forms with a number of degrees of 'stress' marked. A common pattern is represented by the kind of word that has, besides a number of 'unstressed' syllables, a so-called 'secondary stress' towards the beginning and a 'primary stress' towards the end, e.g.:

'co²mmuni¹cation'.

Dictionary users are expected to know what is meant by this kind of notation without its being necessary to define 'stress', and it seems that most do, in fact, know. The physical nature of what is involved is actually just as complicated as that which enables us to perceive the two kinds of prominence. Indeed, it is exactly the same.

The stress pattern of such a word is no more nor less than the prominence pattern we give to that word when we speak it as a tone unit:

'co²mmuni¹cation' is the same thing as // coMMUniCAtion //.

Therefore:

- 1 secondary and primary stress are both equivalent to **prominence**;
- 2 primary stress additionally singles out its syllable as the **tonic syllable**.

We have seen that tone units do not necessarily have two prominent syllables: that is to say, a single syllable is designated both tonic syllable and sole prominent syllable. Correspondingly, many words have only primary stress, and here the same equivalence applies:

'no¹tation' is spoken as a tone unit as: // noTAtion //.

Helpful though this way of looking at the matter may be, it can encourage us to overlook one important fact. For the stress pattern given by the dictionary is intended to be thought of as a permanent property of the word. When we quote

'co²mmuni¹cation'

we always put the secondary and primary stresses in the same place. But there is no guarantee that these 'stressed' syllables will be prominent when the word is used in an act of communication and in conjunction with other words. Stress placement remains automatic only so long as words are cited rather than used. The allocation of prominence is not automatic: it is both variable and meaningful. The word/tone unit analogy is useful, therefore, only as a means of getting started. Further comparison between the two involves us in a consideration of, among other things, protected vowels. (See Notes 34 and 37 on protected vowels on pages 27 and 29.)