

Chapter 10

A Pedagogical Investigation Into the Teaching of Prominence to Advanced EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative paper reports the results of a teacher training study involving the teaching of prominence (Brazil, 1994) to three Syrian teachers of English, tracing their reported cognitive processes in their attempt to make sense of this feature. Using in-class learner interaction, learner notes, as well as reflective diary entries as data collection tools, this research confirms some of the claims made in the literature (e.g. Chapman, 2007) to the effect that prominent syllables are relatively feasible to identify in listening, while it also challenges other claims to the effect that prominence functions at a conscious level (e.g. Jenkins, 2000); arguing instead that an attempt to fully understand what prominence is and how it contributes to meaning can be more challenging even for advanced learners of English. Recommendations include a focus on the visualisation of non-linguistic features when teaching prominence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Syrian teachers of English operate in an EFL context in which they teach language skills e.g. to those wishing to improve their English for employability purposes, or focusing on specific skills, e.g. as EAP. Clearly, the needs of learners are a major determinant of such foci, but in these scenarios Syrian teachers need to have a satisfactory grasp of English Linguistics and descriptions of the English Language to be able to meet the various needs of various stakeholders including both learners, the job market, and the formal requirements identified in Governmental Higher Education policies and regulations. While certain teacher qualifications (the bare minimum being a BA in English Language Teaching) are officially a prerequisite for teaching English, more often the requirements are a Diploma or an MA in English Language Teaching as a stronger indicator of expertise needed to be an English teacher who can meet

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many of learner needs. This adds pressure on Syrian teachers to ensure their training is thorough enough to be competitive in the job market.

The study takes place at the Language Institute (Al-Baath University), an ESP centre where various skills are being taught, including general pronunciation, speaking and listening skills, as well as such academic skills as presentations and seminar discussions. Such instruction places emphasis on the segmental aspects of English pronunciation, with less emphasis on the suprasegmental aspect, particularly intonation. The learners the Institute trains tend to be either English major graduates and/or EFL speakers aiming to improve their English either to improve their employability skills or to seek undergraduate and postgraduate studies in an English-speaking country. The Institute's teachers tend to be graduates from the English Language and Literature Departments of one of the country's universities, though often certain qualifications would be required for them to be teachers, predominantly a master's degree in ELT.

Against this background of Syrian teachers and learners in general and at the Institute in particular, one question arises as to the efficacy of pronunciation instruction, particularly because of the focus on pronunciation as phonemes and word stress, with barely any serious treatment of other prosodic features, particularly intonation. Perhaps the Institute's lack of treatment of intonation reflects a major controversy in EFL settings. Some scholars believe in the need to teach intonation irrespective of the context it is used in (e.g. Brazil et al., 1980). However, more pedagogically oriented writers hold a distinction and suggest that non-native speakers may not need to be taught intonation wholesale if they are going to speak English in an EFL context (e.g. Jenkins, 2000). A finer distinction exists, however, suggesting that even learners in EFL settings may legitimately aim for a more systematic 'treatment' of intonation if they aim to engage with native speakers (e.g. Jenkins, 2004). In this respect, the latter view seems closer to the reality of the Language Institute since its learners have a wide range of aims in availing themselves of its language teaching provision. The Institute's teachers need to exhibit a certain level of 'expertise' with the pronunciation of English to effectively teach it e.g. to help their students improve their academic presentation and seminar skills. The Language Institute, thus, is an example of what Levis (2005a, p. 371) describes as the fluidity between ESL and EFL settings in relation to pronunciation instruction. Generally, the literature abounds with evidence that shows intonation contributing significantly to intelligibility (e.g. Pickering, 2001; Hahn, 2004).

In response to this gap and the need to draw attention to it, a course aiming at introducing a theory of Discourse Intonation (DI) at the Institute investigated the feasibility of training its teachers in this area. The purpose of the current study, specifically, is to report on one stage in the course delivered to a select group of in-service teachers. This stage focuses on a specific intonational feature, stress (see the Literature Review section), intended as an attempt to help these teachers develop their professional knowledge and skills in a CPD (continuous professional development) fashion. Research on the topic of stress is abundant (e.g. Roach, 2011; Wells, 2006; Cruttenden, 1997; McCarthy, 1991), though in terms of how its linguistic insights translate into pedagogy remains less understood. This becomes an urgent line of enquiry when the use of English is intended for effective oral communication, including listening and presentations, as is the case at the Language Institute, Al-Baath University. For this reason, this paper aims to examine the teachability and learnability of utterance stress and determine the extent to which this feature has a place in the EFL/EAP classroom.

The paper will first review the various definitions and examples found in the literature on the meaning of stress, and then discuss its pedagogical implications by way of justifying the need for this interventionist case study; then the findings will be presented and their significance discussed, before finally making a list of recommendations.

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