DIFFICULTIES IN COMPREHENSION OF L2 INTONATION: DIAGNOSIS AND PREDICTION IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a general test of intonational comprehension of English which may be used by learners of any language. Three alternative interpretations are provided for each sentence, the learner having to match each sentence with only one of the interpretations. It is proposed that the test may be enlarged and/or modified so as to be applicable in diagnosing and predicting difficulties with the intonation of any language.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a general test of intonational comprehension of English which, it is assumed, can be used by learners of any native tongue. It is an enlarged and more comprehensive version of an English and Portuguese test presented earlier to Portuguese and English speakers, respectively, in /1/. This is not only a practical test and theoretical discussion is reduced to a minimum. For discussion on the testing of native intonation see /2/, /3/, /5/, /15/, /28/ and /29/. The reasons for the presentation of the test can be summarized in three main points:

- Intonation is still the last stronghold of a foreign accent in speaking any L2.
- Intonation has only recently begun to be seriously and systematically taken into account both in the literature devoted to foreign language learning and in teaching itself.
- The test will not only help in detecting these difficulties but also, through the setting up of a typology of errors, help to correct them.

It is assumed that the first difficulty faced by non-natives with the intonation of L2 lies in comprehension and not in production. In the first stages of learning, a faulty comprehension of intonation will determine difficulties in production and vice versa. There is no point in trying to elicit a "correct" intonational form from a non-native, by imitation or otherwise, if he does not perceive it as such and is specific to the foreign language. This paper presents therefore a comprehension test.

The test is proposed both as diagnostic and as predictive. Diagnostic in the sense that it enables the teacher to ascertain in a straightforward way the difficulties of the learners - what these are and where they are. For a more accurate evaluation of the results, the format of the test is such that statistical treatment of the replies of the learners is quite easy. The test is also meant to be predictive, in the sense that each sentence presented is typical of a range of sentences where the same correspondence intonation pattern-meaning applies. One point needs explicit clarification: I do not believe that intonation works, that is, means, independently of the lexico-grammatical sentence it occurs in, rather, interacts with, it does not therefore believe that intonation can be profitably learned or taught independently of lexico-grammatical structures. This is the real sense in which I mean the word "predictive". The difficulties in interpreting a sentence such as she won't drink any coffee, for instance, is quite easy. The test is also meant to be profitably learned or taught independently of the structural relationships in the foreign language. The learner, knowledge of these interactions occurring in the native tongue of the learner, knowledge of those structural relations in intonation, if only the strict lexico-grammatical meaning of the sentence is taken into account. For example, the written sentence she won't drink any coffee will be given the interpretation associated with a high-falling tone rather than with the falling-rising (see /2/ for details on this).

The interpretation of the sentences as presented in the test is thus predicted to present the highestdegree of difficulty for the learners. But it is also clear that they depend to a large extent on the interactions of intonation and lexico-grammatical structures occurring in the native tongue of the learner. Knowledge of these interactions in the foreign language and accordingly the test may be modified for each sentence and should leave no blank answers. In other words, they are forced to make a decision and one decision only as regards the meaning. A majority of c. replies will in principle show that the intonation pattern of the sentence is not understood.

The analysis of the typical replies of the learners with respect to the test will give a clear picture of the following:

- the nature of the difficulties - that is, what are the difficulties that the learners have in understanding the test
- the extent and degree of the learners' difficulties, and thereby help in the setting up of adequate corrective procedures.

What are the difficulties - that is, what type of errors has emerged from the results?

TEST PROCEDURE

The test sentences should be presented to the learner through listening only, ideally through headphones in a language laboratory. The learners are given answer sheets where only the sentence numbers and the interpretations a., b. and c. are written. The learners should give one answer only for each sentence and should leave no blank answers. In other words, they are forced to make a decision and one decision only as regards the meaning of each sentence. The forced choice left important for the establishment of a typology of learners' errors and difficulties.

APPLICATIONS AND USES OF THE TEST

The test has been designed to typi-cally be used as an intonational diagnostic instrument, together with other EFLS (grammatical, lexical, phonetic) which may be part of regular teaching instruments of evaluation. It can further be used in any situation where assessment of fluency and proficiency in any language is required, and it can be supplemented by intonational production tests.

The predictive component of the test will help the teacher in establishing a typology of errors and/or difficulties, and thereby help in the setting up of adequate corrective procedures.

The analysis of the typical replies of the learners will give a clear picture of the following:

- what are the difficulties - that is, what type of errors has emerged from the results?
- which may be used by learners of any native tongue, and thereby help in the setting up of adequate corrective procedures.
The design of the test is such as to be easily understood and used by both learners and teachers, and its design easily lends itself to statistical treatment of the results. Its format can also be easily modified, adapted or enlarged according to the proficiency level of the learners and to the purposes of the teaching.

In the version presented in this paper, the test is meant to be used by learners of English from any mother tongue. But it is also assumed that its underlying design is suitable for use in the assessment of learners of any other language. It is hoped that the results provided by the test can be profitably used in the setting up of a typology of intonational errors and difficulties according to the L1 of the learners, and thereby provide insights into adequate and systematic correction procedures.

REFERENCES


/3/ Cruz-Ferreira, M., Non-native comprehension of intonation patterns in Portuguese and in English, unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Manchester, 1983


