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TEACHING TIP

INTONATION BRIDGING ACTIVITIES: MEANINGFUL PRACTICE FOR FINAL INTONATION

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INTRODUCTION

This Teaching Tip combines three variables in creating activities that both highlight this pronunciation feature (final intonation) and provide tasks demanding that language learners pay attention to something more than just the pronunciation form. The first variable is manipulation of an original task, in this case, written dialogues. The second variable involves the use of spoken language structures, especially incomplete syntactic units (e.g., Ready? Not yet.) that are commonly used in spoken conversations. The third variable includes learners' need to simultaneously decide on meaning carried by rising or falling intonation and respond to their interlocutors while both producing the appropriate language form and responding meaningfully to the other people in the dialogue.

Dialogue activities are traditionally highly controlled because they involve little more than reading aloud. As controlled activities, they also are a good first step for practicing a pronunciation feature whose meaning is most noticeable in discourse, in this case, final intonation. Dialogues by themselves can be, however, problematic for practicing intonation because of the common use of full syntactic units (e.g., yes/no questions, WH questions). These full units, especially yes/no questions with inversion, make intonational differences less important to listeners (Levis, 1999; Thompson, 1995) since questions remain questions regardless of intonation and meaning differences between rising and falling intonation are subtle rather than salient.

With short or elided sentences, meaning differences in the use of rising and falling pitch are magnified. Learners who are used to meaning being carried in the lexico-grammar of fully formed sentences are challenged to use and understand intonation which now carries grammatical meaning in the elided sentences. This demands greater creativity in production and interpretation while also focusing on intonation as a significant carrier of communicative intent.

What are bridging activities?

Bridging activities combine control and flexibility in the same activity. This is important for all language learning, but it is especially important for pronunciation because it requires both cognitive understanding and automatic motor control. Bridging activities are called "Guided Practice" by Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin and Griner (2010) and are

the middle step of their three stages of pronunciation production activities (Controlled, Guided, Communicative). Thus, bridging activities are in-between controlled and communicative practice, having some elements of both. They have enough control to allow learners to pay attention to the pronunciation topic, but distracted control because learners must also pay attention to something else such as meaning, task demands, pragmatics or other linguistic features (Figure 1).

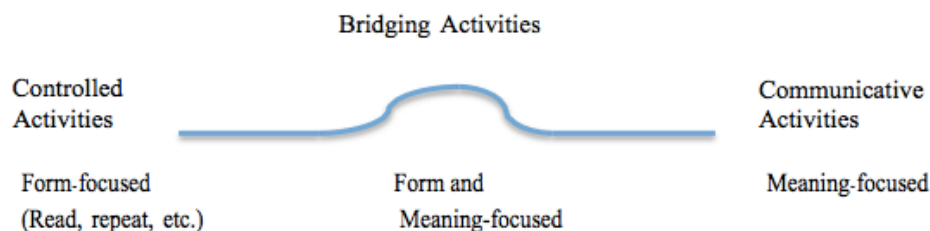


Figure 1. Bridging activities.

Because bridging activities allow some focus on form but at the same time raise the cognitive load of the activity by forcing learners to pay attention to other issues, they are harder than controlled activities which allow full attention on pronunciation form but little on meaning. In contrast, communicative activities focus fully on the creation of meaning, but do not attend to form in general. Bridging activities may look communicative or they may look controlled, but they always allow for some, but not full, attention to form.

Final Intonation in full and short sentences

The direction of voice pitch at the ends of sentences (final intonation) communicates meaning in English, especially in interactive contexts. However, intonation is often hard to hear and its exact contribution to meaning may be hard to tease out, especially with fully formed sentences (as in the traditional dialogue below). Changing the normal dialogue exercises to elided sentences (as in the short sentence dialogue) can help learners focus on intonation and its meaning. As in any dialogue that is not created by the learners themselves, the short sentence conversational context should be discussed. For example, it is helpful to ask questions such as Who are the speakers, where is the conversation taking place, what intonation should they use, and what information do they already share. These activities are based on ideas from Allen (1971), one of the best early pedagogical treatments of intonation in TESOL, and Levis (1999).

We use full sentences and questions in normal speech, but we also use short sentences. These elided units are common in spoken language because we often do not speak in syntactically complete units. It's normal and natural in speech to do so, especially in conversations. The advantage of short sentences in teaching is both that they are a common, natural part of speech and that they highlight the contribution of intonation to the interpretation of the utterance. See the examples below.

Traditional Dialogue

A: Are you going?
 B: Yes, but I'll go later.
 A: When do you think you'll go?
 B: I guess I'll go around 8.
 A: Are you driving?
 B: Yes. Do you need a ride?
 A: Yes, I'd like a ride, thanks.
 B: OK. Should I meet you here?
 A: No. I'll be at the library.

Short Sentence Dialogue

A: You going?
 B: Later.
 A: When?
 B: Around 8.
 A: You driving?
 B: Need a ride?
 A: Yeah. Thanks.
 B: Ok. Meet you here?
 A: No. At the library.

Creating short sentence bridging activities

As teachers, we are used to using and creating dialogues to teach pronunciation and a variety of other language features. For intonation, it is useful to change full-sentence dialogues into short sentence dialogues to emphasize the contribution of the intonation to the meaning. We will show four different ways to do this, but there are likely to be many others. In each case, we suggest changing just one thing: focus on memory, changing language demands, changing task demands, or increasing the attention to meaning.

Bridging Activity 1

Change your focus on memory (Short-sentence conversation)

In the first variation, we suggest changing the locus of attention from the written word to the spoken by removing the written word as a stimulus after practice. Two learners practice the dialogue several times, paying attention both to the content and to the intonation used for each utterance. After they have practiced, they should turn their papers over or the teacher's projected version of the dialogue should be turned off. Then the two learners should do the dialogue again from memory. Doing the dialogue from memory, especially if they did not know in advance to fully memorize it, creates a bridging activity in which they remember the intent of the dialogue and some or most of the lines, but may have to improvise the rest. They also have to use appropriate intonation to communicate what they want to say.

Short Sentence Conversation

Pairs. Speaker A and Speaker B read the dialogue several times using the intonations listed. Then Speakers A and B practice the dialogue again from memory, paying attention to intonation.

A: You going? ↗

B: Later. ↘

A: When? ↘

B: Around 8. ↘

A: You driving? ↗

B: Need a ride? ↗

A: Yeah, thanks. ↘

B: OK, meet you here? ↗

A: OK. ↘

Bridging Activity 2

Change the language demands (Mixed-up conversation)

In the second variation, learners can challenge their locus of attention by having to create a reasonable conversation from mixed-up lines. Because the turns involve elided sentences, the task involves more decisions and more complex language demands. First, the learners have to decide what the meaning of each utterance is likely to be and therefore what their order should be; then they have to negotiate the likely intonations that each line will use. Depending on the group of students, teachers can encourage learners not to write their order down, thus increasing memory demands as well. Finally, after trying out sections of the conversation, they have to try out the full conversation, using their chosen order, trying to remember how the conversation is constructed, with the intonation that is most appropriate. This makes the task far more complex than a controlled reading task.

Mixed-Up Conversation

Pairs. Work together to form a dialogue between two people using these utterances.

- The first exclamation starts the conversation.
- Decide on a sensible order of turn-taking for the rest of these utterances:
 - Probably not.*
 - Bad?*
 - Cut myself.*
 - How?*
 - Bandage?*
 - Stupid knife!*
 - Not too bad.*
 - What?*
- Practice the conversation.
- Decide what intonation to use for each short sentence.
- Perform the conversation first reading it, then perform it again from memory.

A: *Darn!*

B:

A:

B:

A:

B:

A:

B:

A:

Bridging Activity 3

Change the task demands (Build a conversation)

The next task uses a version of sentence construction activities where learners must add their own information. The first speaker uses a line from the “Openers” column, and the other speaker responds with something from the “Initial Response Words” column. The first speaker must then improvise a response (as in a normal conversation, which is co-constructed by speakers). The speakers can then start a new conversation, reversing roles. Each speaker has an opportunity to shift each conversation in one way or another. This kind of mental challenge changes the task demands. Speakers may have an idea how to start and respond with the given short sentences, but the third turn asks them to add their own response. This means that intonation choices are increasingly difficult given that speakers are focusing more on meaning. Teachers can encourage learners to use short sentences.

Build a Conversation

Pairs.

- Speaker A starts a conversation with one of the words under “Openers”.
- Speaker B responds with an appropriate “Initial Response Word”.
- Speaker A should then respond with their own words,
- Speakers should use rising (↗) or falling (↘) intonation as appropriate.
- When you are finished, start a new conversation with a different Speaker A.

Openers		Initial Response Words		Response
Coming	Going	No	Very	(Create your own response.)
Ready	Wow	Yeah	Really	
Trouble	Difficult	What	Almost	
Fun	Happy	Kind of	Later	

Example 1

Speaker A: Going? ↗
 Speaker B: Yeah. ↘
 Speaker B: Soon? ↗

Example 2

Speaker A: Going? ↗
 Speaker B: Later. ↘
 Speaker A: OK. ↘ See you there. ↘

Bridging Activity 4

Change the attention to meaning (Responses)

The final bridging activity suggestion allows less planning for both people. Speaker A chooses any short sentence from the list and an intonation, using it as expressively as desired. Speaker B has to come back with a response, Speaker A has to then reply to B, and so on. The conversation should continue at least 6 turns. This kind of activity uses some control to start each conversation, but the second speaker doesn't know what's coming. So speaker B has to create a response without preparation, as does Speaker A in the next response. The conversation ends after the speakers reach at least 6 turns, and the pairs repeat the task with a new beginning. This task's attention to meaning mirrors that of free speech without long utterances. Short sentences also have to be spoken with some kind of intonation, and the brevity allows listeners to pay attention to the pitch movement as well.

Responses

Pairs.

- Pick a short sentence to start a conversation and say it with your choice of intonation (and any other expressiveness you wish).
- Your partner has to come back with any response
- Reply to their response in any appropriate way if you can.
- Continue at least 6 turns. Then start again with a new short sentence.

Example	Speaker 1:	Darn!	(short sentence)
	Speaker 2:	Again?	(response)
	Speaker 1:	I can't do this.	(response)
	Speaker 2:	What?	(response)
	Speaker 1:	The sink.	(response)
	Speaker 2:	Call a plumber?	(response)
	Speaker 2:	Not yet.	(response)

Short sentences to start a conversation

Funny?	How much?	Darn!	Ready?
Cool!	Dessert?	What for?	Shoot!

CONCLUSION

One of the most important, yet infrequent types of activities to practice pronunciation are bridging activities. Controlled activities allow complete attention to the pronunciation feature being practiced, and communicative practice allow full attention to meaning but rarely lead to correct production of challenging pronunciation forms. Bridging activities allow learners to pay attention to both form and meaning, providing challenges in producing form while attending to other elements of language at the same time. Controlled activities can usually be changed to make them less controlled and more meaningful, leading to a wide variety of bridging possibilities. The activity ideas provided here are for one of the most challenging pronunciation features, final intonation. The tasks are constrained rather than controlled; they are also meaning-oriented, fun and challenging.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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