

An Activity for Teaching Intonation Awareness to ESL/EFL Students

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What we teachers are looking for are ways to generate conversation and communication in class-and hopefully beyond. Getting learners to say something-anything at all-in a conversation class is great, but it must be built on. One way to achieve this is by sensitising students to the conversational tactics they use naturally when talking in their native tongue: turn-taking, supporting, challenging, questioning, expanding on statements, and so on. They don't tend to use these when interacting in English.

While the students in a conversation class must be exposed to the above conversation strategies they also must be made aware that the language they use in class owes part of its impact to aspects teachers do not normally work on: tone, facial expressions and body language. The words students employ in class often come together in sentences and the message gets across eventually, with a little help from teacher. However the message is very often tone-less and emotion-less, but nobody complains because the students are opening their mouths. In fairness, this lack of emotion and tone is more prevalent in the the lower levels, where students are still coming to terms with the new language.

As I found that many verbal exchanges in my classes were a little too polite, perhaps because of the neutral tone employed by the speakers, I decided to experiment with tone. To this end, I devised the following, very experimental, conversation idea.

The Intonation Awareness Activity

This activity could be used as a good ice-breaker or, if developed, could form the basis of a whole class. It would then combine conversation with a certain amount of conscious learning.

This activity does not need a huge amount of preparation and may help students to loosen up while speaking. The idea also hopes to sensitise students to the concept of tone and lessen the amount of monotonous, seemingly un-emotional exchanges which occur between learners. It could inject a bit of life and humour into the class. I used it as a warm-up.

Working on the assumption that some expressions or words can have as many as 9 or more different meaning or connotations depending on how they are said, try the following activity:

- Say the following in five different ways.
 - Goodbye
 - Hello
 - How are you?
 - Do we have to speak English, teacher?
 - I never watch TV
 - Etc. (Add more expressions liable to spark several interpretations when delivered with a different tone)

Your students will be inhibited at first, so the best thing to do is let them know what you are talking about. That is, give them a sample of how to use different tones when you want to insinuate different meanings. I did the following after the class had begun to grasp what I was looking for:

- Me: John, say "Hello" to me
- John: "Hello" (neutral, polite tone)
- Me: John, now say "Hello" to a friend
- John: "Hello" (much more upbeat tone)
- Me: John, say "Hello" to a 6-month-old-baby!!!

- John: "Hello" (contorted face, exaggerated fall-rise tone, etc)

Needless to say, there were laughs all round. I think the point was beginning to be made.

These expressions must be said with different settings and contexts in mind, ie police control; shopping check-out; a polite meeting; a romantic setting; a separation (holiday); Monday morning in the office; drunk-talk; condescending; nervous; an interview; talking to a baby; a funeral; an exam; ironic; a long-lost friend.

Note: Much of the "extra" meaning will derive also from facial expression and even body-language.

Examples

When I did "I never watch TV", I told them to imagine that the sentence was being uttered by a condescending intellectual to a TV addict! (It's just one example).

When I did "How are you", I told them to imagine they knew something very personal about the addressee involved. Or that they had not seen the person in 30 years, and so on.

At the end of the day, perhaps all you achieve is an enjoyable class without (perhaps) much interactional content. But at least the students relax a bit more and actually experiment with the language they are learning to use.

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