

A Discourse Approach to Intonation: Can it Work in Japan?
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1.0 Introduction

Teachers express their frustration with "advanced" L2 learners who read and write well in English, yet lack the confidence to speak. Brazil (1994:3) suggests that many learners feel insecure because they cannot pronounce words properly. Brazil attempts to fulfil this need in Pronunciation for Advanced Learners of English (PALE). PALE was " . . . 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" (p. 1).

PALE introduces Brazil's systematic treatment of Discourse Intonation (DI) " . . . from the point of view of how it can best enable them to make their meanings and intentions clear to a listener" (p. 2). The aim is to teach advanced L2 learners how to use intonation to communicate the implied meanings of spoken language. Japanese learners have been typically portrayed as proficient readers, marginal writers, and unsuccessful English speakers (cf. Ellis 1991, Finkelstein et al 1991, Wadden 1992, Cohen 1995, and Law 1995). If Brazil's discourse-based approach to intonation can accomplish its goals, then PALE would be a welcome resource in Japanese EFL classrooms. The question is, has Brazil been able to make the jump from linguistic theory to classroom practice? This paper will review Brazil's organization of DI, and examine PALE by comparing it to other well-known ELT textbooks commonly used in Japan. We will then discuss PALE's applicability and potential contributions to Japanese ELT.

2.0 Discourse Intonation: An Overview

Let us begin by defining what we mean by the word *intonation*. Roach (1992) says intonation has:

"...two rather different meanings: (1) in a restricted sense, the variations in the pitch of a speaker's voice used to convey or alter meaning. (2) in a broader and more popular sense, equivalent to **prosody**, where variations in such things as voice quality, tempo and loudness

are included . . . The approach most widely used in Britain takes the **tone unit** as its basic unit and looks at the different pitch possibilities of the various components of the tone unit" (p. 56).

While our learner's pedagogic needs will undoubtedly cause us to include *prosodic features* (voice quality, stress, rhythm, loudness, tempo, etc.), for better understanding Brazil's system, we will focus on intonation's restricted sense.

Brazil, building on the work of Halliday (1973) and Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), has developed his own unique way of analyzing and transcribing tone units. Brazil defines a tone unit as "the basic building block of speech," which consists of "either **one or two prominent syllables**" (1994:8-9). According to Coulthard (1985:101) Brazil's tone unit consists of four options: *prominence, tone, key, and termination*.

Prominence refers to the changes in stress, pitch or emphasis that allows for added meaning to be inferred in what is being spoken. The last prominent syllable in a tone unit is called the *tonic syllable*. Brazil defines it as " . . . the place at which a significant pitch movement or tone begins" (1994:8). Tone is divided into five types: Falling, Rising, Rise-Fall, Fall-Rise, and Level. Similar to Halliday's system, these tones either *proclaim* some new information, or *refer* to a common experience already shared between the speakers.

Brazil's system contains three levels of Key: High Key, Mid Key, and Low Key. Coulthard (1985:111) explains that High Key conveys the meaning that something has happened contrary to one's expectations. Mid Key signals that a person has completed a series of tasks simultaneously: "he did this *and* that." Low Key implies that an action resulted in something that was already expected. The choices a speaker makes in tone, key and prominence are all decided beforehand in what Brazil calls *termination*. Except for termination, Brazil attempts to teach these concepts and also his system of transcription in PALE (see Figure One), which was designed to be a practical application of Discourse Intonation.

Warning! The phonetic symbols in this box have become distorted

Tone Units are delineated by the symbol "'//".

ex: //The other day//I went to the store//and bought a tool kit//

Prominent Syllables are shown in all capital letters. The last prominent syllable in a Tone Unit is called the Tonic Syllable.

ex: //it was a DARK//and STORMY NIGHT//

Tones are shown by small arrows at the beginning of the tone unit. The Tonic Syllable is underlined.

ex: //Ø WENT into the ROOM//

//ÖLET me see if i CAN//

//Øi don't THINK so//

//®FLASHlight//ØCHECK//®ROPE//

ØCHECK//

Key and Termination are demonstrated by upward or downward arrows.

//i was -FLYING//in the AIR//

//it was ⁻ BROKEN//

3.0 Examination of PALE

Before introducing their learners to the latest developments in applied linguistics, teachers would do well to keep Cohen's (1995) advice in mind:

"...if we do decide to introduce discourse analysis into our classes on anything but the most

superficial level, we should have clear ideas as to our aims in doing so and a clear sense that our students' ability to use the L2 will become enhanced in some way. If this is not the case then we can only conclude that we have been using our students as some sort of applied linguistic guinea pigs and have failed in our responsibility as language teachers" (p. 27).

In keeping our learner's pedagogic needs at the forefront of our discussion, we can better decide if Brazil has succeeded in making DI accessible to learners. We will review PALE from the perspective of its applicability to the classroom.

3.1 Course Layout

Each chapter in PALE begins with a Listening for Meaning section. This is a pragmatic part of the text where the learners listen to a variety of anecdotes and/or conversations. This is followed by Listening to Intonation, where aspects of the tone unit are taught. Learners are also taught in this section how to use Brazil's system of transcribing various phonological items (see again Figure One). The next section, Listening to Sounds, requires students to listen and repeat more examples of the tone unit elements that were presented earlier in the chapter. Each chapter contains pairwork and group tasks that ask the learners to discuss their transcriptions with each other.

PALE's course layout is graded, well-planned, and differs little from most existing ELT texts. However, as we lay PALE side-by-side with other texts, we begin to see that, despite the surface similarities, PALE differs significantly from textbook typically used in Japanese EFL classrooms.

3.2 Comparison With Other ELT Texts

Most of the tasks used in most textbooks are also found in PALE. The main difference is in the attention given to intonation. The overwhelming bulk of PALE features the transcription, analysis, discussion and oral repetition of tone units. Only Interchange 2, English for Medicine and Listen for It give any regular attention to intonation. Except for Listen for It, these texts deal with intonation as a peripheral issue. The main approach of these texts is to simply present phonological features to the learners. Sometimes the texts will provide brief explanations of the meaning implied in the intonation, but more often than not, the learners are encouraged to infer the meaning for themselves. For example, unit three of Listen for It and Interchange 2 briefly

introduce prominence. In both tasks, learners are required to listen for the prominence and repeat it. Interchange explains that "we stress words that carry the most important information" (p. 18), while no explanation as to the significance of prominence is given in Listen for It. Neither text requires students to learn a system of transcription nor other theoretical ideas. PALE, on the other hand, devotes the entire first chapter to the concept of prominence, giving many examples, and explanations of its significance in spoken discourse. However, the system of transcription seems to detract rather than aid in the teaching of this idea. We will return this issue later.

While the content matter in PALE's Listening for Meaning section is similar to the other textbooks surveyed, the group and pairwork assignments differed greatly. Most textbooks focus on conversational topics such as cross-cultural discussions and social issues. For example, unit fourteen, task six in Atlas 2 requires students to read a newspaper article on stereotypes on American lifestyle patterns, and to discuss the differences and similarities of their culture to American culture. PALE's pair and group tasks were much more cerebral, and focused on the technical and theoretical aspects of intonation. A typical example is found in section 3.15 of Chapter Three in PALE:

"Listen to the tone units from Task 3.14, this time spoken by someone who often produces a final NLA sound. Then try saying them both with and without a final /w/, /j/, or /r/. Make up your mind which you find easier and try to use it consistently" (p. 40).

As we move forward to discuss PALE's relative strengths and weaknesses, it will become more apparent if Brazil's discourse-based approach to intonation can work in the Japanese ELT context.

4.0 Positive Aspects of PALE

PALE makes great efforts to present DI in a well-planned, step-by-step manner. It consistently builds upon earlier lessons. PALE provides learners with many extra listening activities to supplement the lesson material. The tapes feature a variety of native speakers, all with different accents and speech patterns. PALE emphasizes several important goals in spoken discourse, namely, 1. Focusing on listening and speaking for *meaning*, 2. Focusing on language as a set of *units*, not words, and 3. Emphasizing the role of intonation as part of successful communication.

4.1 Focusing on Meaning

Advanced students of English often devote large amounts of time listening to radio or television broadcasts. Their normal motivation in listening is to understand what is being said. However, a great deal of meaning can be lost through such a mechanical "dictionary-style" approach to learning. Brazil's concern is for students to focus on *how* the discourse is being said.

Considerable attention, especially in the Listening for Meaning sections challenges learners to focus more on what is implied rather than what is actually said. In other words, Brazil attempts to teach the *ho_e* (Japanese for "true intention") of spoken English discourse.

4.2 Units, not "Puzzle Pieces"

Many textbooks concentrate on teaching the proper of pronunciation of single words. While this may be gratifying to some students, this focus on the mere form of phonology has very little value for communication once the student is out of the classroom and in an unpredictable conversation.

A student well-versed in the pronunciation of single words or a difficult vowel sound is similar to a student of Karate, who can perform the *kata* with perfection, but unable to defeat an opponent while sparring.

Brazil highlights the fact that spoken language is not understood in words, but in information units. These phrases are used to confer meaning. PALE presents language as an organic whole, not as pieces of a puzzle to put together. In the listening section, speakers are using the language for communication, such as getting directions to one's house by telephone, or telling a frightening story. The aim is to get students out of the habit of trying to understand every word individually, and begin to appreciate the interconnectedness of language.

4.3 Intonation for Communication

PALE attempts to show that intonation of words and tone units change according to what the speaker wishes to express. After being shown the potential meanings of intonation patterns (for example, making an invitation more urgent by using a rising tone Brazil, 1994:68), learners are encouraged to listen and repeat tone units rather than simple words or long sentences. Students are then called upon to attempt to use proper intonation themselves in the pairwork and group

discussions. In other words, the learners are encouraged to learn through application of the principles introduced in the text.

5.0 PALE's Shortcomings

Yet despite these admirable points, Brazil's treatment of intonation has several serious weaknesses. The main concerns center on the following points: 1. The difficulty of Brazil's system for teachers and learners alike, 2. unreliable transcriptions, and 3. No common standard for learner levels. I see these as problems facing any advanced learner, not only Japanese learners attempting to study PALE while residing in Japan.

5.1 Difficulty of Brazil's System

Because the nature of discourse is complex, it is natural to assume that any system of discourse analysis would also be complex. However, as stated earlier, I found the process of remembering Brazil's system for transcription a distraction rather than an aid in understanding intonation. Learners must first master a metalanguage of concepts, terms and transcription symbols before even starting the task of intonation. The group discussions on their transcriptions, the combinations of prominence, tone and key would be seen as tedious and irrelevant to many. Especially after the first two chapters, the demands on learners to remember the correct place to put tonal unit marks, arrows, underlining for prominence, etc., while listening to the taped dialog becomes challenging. Brazil's transcription system is very helpful, and I am not suggesting that it be discarded. However, being asked to transcribe according to his system while listening to tape transcripts is tedious.

This difficulty is not limited only to students. Feeling daunted by the complexity of the transcription tasks myself, I contacted several teachers familiar with PALE. All agreed to the difficulty of transcribing tapescripts in PALE. If learning the transcription framework is this difficult for trained, well-educated native teachers of TEFL, I suspect it would be even more difficult for many of our learners.

5.2 Unreliability

Brazil (1994:6) admits that "it is not always possible, even for practised ears, to agree about what is happening" in the listening samples provided in PALE. This is an understatement. Similarity in the transcription intonation in Brazil's (1994) teacher's key, Cauldwell and Allen's (1995) commentary and my personal research occurred only when the actors on the tapes were artificially trying their best to produce certain tonal qualities. In later sections where the actors spoke more extemporaneously, there was little or no agreement in our transcriptions. Cauldwell and Allen (1995) admit that it is this variation in the opinions of trained listeners that cripple any serious attempt to teach intonation in a classroom setting:

"An inherent problem in the study of intonation is that it is often very difficult to hear intonation patterns and many people are very unconfident of the ability to listen to intonation with any degree of success. This is possibly one reason why intonation is such a neglected issue in language teaching" (p. 3).

Japanese learners, as well as students from other Asian countries with a Confucian-based educational system, have been disciplined all their lives to find "the answer" to a question made in a classroom setting. In Japan, most learners refuse to answer a question unless they are confident of the correctness of their answer. The inherent unpredictability of potential answers endemic in DI is an issue that would be difficult for many students (or teachers) in a Japanese setting to feel comfortable with.

5.3 No Common Standard

Brazil's course is designed for advanced learners. Yet, how do we define an "advanced learner?" Brown (1994) recently discovered in his survey of international publishers' eighteen most popular EFL textbooks that there is no general measure for deciding the level of L2 learners:

"Clearly the idea of level when not grounded in any well established set of standards takes on certain characteristics more typical of a mirage. This lack of standards in levels is one that plagues [the] professional evaluation of many aspects of the ESL/EFL profession and one which should be addressed in its own right" (p. 71).

Certainly, tests like TOEFL and TOEIC are available to measure the level of a student's ability in English, but the applicability of such tests for a learner's actual speaking, phonological, reading

and written ability is questioned by many experts in testing (cf. Brown and Yamashita, 1995). An "advanced" Japanese learner on the TOEIC test might be only mid-intermediate according to TOEFL (Gilfert, 1995).

While there is no real measure for gauging what level of learner that Brazil envisioned as able to study PALE or another discourse-based text, I would venture that, at least for the Japanese context, a learner would probably come from the upper echelons of Japanese society: university professors of English or Linguistics, medical researchers who present regularly at international conferences, professional interpreters, or those needing to talk on complex, technical levels with native speakers for long stretches of time, such as media correspondents or embassy staff. However, most EFL teachers rarely have the opportunity to work with this level of learner in Japan. With no disrespect intended to our learners, the overwhelming number of Japanese students could not even hope to handle a text of PALE's level, which is challenging even for educated native speakers.

6.0 Application for the Classroom

While Brazil's approach in PALE is potentially-valuable for linguists interested in the field of discourse, it seems ill-suited for the classroom in its present form. However, this does not mitigate against the success of a discourse-based approach to intonation in Japan. Instead of transcribing the tape dialogs, I suggest that we do away with that part of the course all together. Brazil's transcription system could still be taught to learners, but presented as already written on a tape transcript sheet (according to the interpretation of the teacher). Students could listen while following along with the provided transcript. In pairs and as a class, they can be asked to repeat following the intonation provided on the tapescript. In information gap activities, Brazil's system could then be incorporated into the material. When learners provide information to their partners, they could follow the suggestions for intonation on their information sheet, thus making the activity even more communicative. In role play activities, abnormal or contrived pronunciation patterns could be included so that students could become more aware as to the importance of intonation for meaning and communication. Instead of lengthy, cerebral explanations of the

meanings of various intonation patterns, DI might better be used as a consciousness-raising (CR) tool, similar to the approach in Listen for It, but with a little more explanation. If Brazil's ideas could be further incorporated into present teaching practice along lines such as these, then a DI approach would find a welcome home in Japanese EFL classroom.

7.0 Conclusion

My past five years of teaching in Niigata has taught me that students of all levels show great interest in pronouncing English correctly. Unfortunately, I suspect that inordinate number are interested in pronunciation merely as a skill that can set them apart from others in terms of style and status. By taking many of Brazil's ideas as our lead, we can encourage our learners to move away from focusing on the "form" of good pronunciation merely as stylistic perfection, and focus on the need for intonation for improved communication.

We must keep in mind that Discourse Intonation is still a new field in linguistics, and there are more questions than answers as to the proper way to analyze and teach it. It is this fragmented understanding of discourse that relegates DI and other discourse "grammars" to the same position that the structuralist "armchair grammars" held forty-five years ago. Perhaps in another forty years, with the arrival of more advanced computers, projects similar to COBUILD will be developed to reliably show the frequently-occurring patterns of intonation existing in spoken discourse. If such information were made available to learners, perhaps then Discourse Intonation would flourish.

But that day is still a long way off. Today, while DI has great potential in the classroom, we must stay conservative in our opinion of it until more information becomes available.

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