

## Talking on a Second Channel Using Parentheticals in English Discourse

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**Level:** Advanced level students

**Time:** 30 minutes

**Resources:** Teacher-prepared text materials, handouts and/or overheads to use in the exercises

**Goals:** To learn to pronounce a range of parentheticals appropriately (Parentheticals are expressions used to direct a message, to tell a listener how the speaker feels about a message, to manage the interpretation of the main message, to exemplify something, or to show deference or express something politely.)

### Description of the Activity

The teacher helps learners understand what parentheticals are, what kinds are typical, what functions they have in discourse, and what they must sound like to be understood as parentheticals. For this purpose, the teacher gives examples of different types of parentheticals in dialogues, emphasizing their unique pronunciation. Students may also offer examples. The teacher models spoken parentheticals in context and asks for group and individual mimicry. Students then work in pairs to embellish pre-fabricated dialogues with phrase-final parentheticals selected from a range of choices. They rehearse their respective turns in order to achieve the desired sound qualities then use the dialogues as roleplays for the class. The teacher and classmates monitor the quality of delivery, offering suggestions and corrections as necessary.

### Procedure

1. The teacher prepares an overhead and/or handout listing the types of phrase-final parentheticals common in conversation, with examples of each. Six of 10 types of parentheticals are listed in the following table, with examples. (See the Alternatives section for the remaining four).

<b>Final address forms</b>  ...(student's name)  ...sir ...Dr. Evans	<b>Final reporting expressions</b>  ...she said ...he whined  ...he replied ...they shouted
<b>Final assessment expressions</b>  ...I expect ...I'm afraid  ...I hope ...I'll bet	<b>Final exemplifiers</b>  ...for example ...and the like  ...and so on ...for instance

<b>Final sentence adverbials</b>	<b>Final polite expressions</b>
...fortunately ...actually	...thank you ...if you could
...though ...in fact	...if you would ...please

- 2.
3. The teacher comments on the function of these final parentheticals, emphasizing their role as a secondary message channel to direct the message (address forms), to tell the listener how the speaker feels about message itself (assessment expressions, sentence adverbials), to manage the interpretation of the main message (reporting expressions, exemplifiers), and to show deference (polite expressions).
4. The teacher demonstrates the four auditory clues speakers use to tell listeners to switch channels from the main message to the secondary message. In final position, parentheticals (1) occur after a slight pause, (2) do not carry primary stress (the heaviest stress of the phrase), (3) are spoken with low volume, and (4) stay in the low pitch range, having no major pitch change except, possibly, a very slight rise at the end. The teacher makes the point that listeners depend on these cues to interpret a word or a word string as a parenthetical. Without these clues, listeners will at first take the word or word string as part of the main message. When the main message does not make sense, listeners will have to try to sort out primary from secondary messages. This process may interfere with understanding.
5. The teacher gives to pairs of students dialogues containing hints about the appropriate category of parenthetical to use at the ends of phases, and the teacher provides a list of the parentheticals for each category from which students may make a selection . The lists can be on an overhead for all to see. Students are directed to be appropriately expressive in their use of the parentheticals they select, to rehearse the dialogue aloud using appropriate sound characteristics, and to prepare to roleplay their dialogue. An example dialogue illustrates the task.

<b>Bare-Bones Dialogue with Hints</b>	<b>Choices for Parenthetical Categories</b>
[Two friends talking]	<b>Final Address Forms</b>
A. How's your uncle? (address form)?	...(student's name)
B. He's doing better. (assessment expression). The accident wasn't as serious as it might have been. (sentence adverbial).	<b>Final Assessment Expressions</b>
A. Can I help in any way? I could	...I suppose ...I guess
	...I think ...I believe
	<b>Final Sentence Adverbial</b>

<p>bring over some food, do the shopping, pick up his mail. (exemplifier).</p> <p>B. It's nice of you to offer. But I think we can manage OK., (polite expression).</p>	<p>...thankfully ..fortunately</p> <p>...actually ...though</p> <p><b>Final Exemplifiers</b></p> <p>...for example ...for instance</p> <p>...etcetera ...and so on</p> <p><b>Polite Expression</b></p> <p>...thanks ...thank you.</p>
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- 6.
7. Students perform their rehearsed dialogues in pairs while the teacher and students monitor the quality of delivery, focusing on the presence of clear clues to the listener that a parenthetical is present. Feedback is provided.

### **Rationale**

Conversationalists communicate their attitudes and feelings through the use of parenthetical comments attached to their phrases and sentences. When removed, the basic message remains intact. When present, these brief additions offer a variety of information that enlivens and personalizes the interaction, develops solidarity, and provides intimate glimpses into the relationship of the co-speakers.

Learners of English have a natural tendency either to stress heavily or equally all content words (main nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) or to stress the last content word in a phrase more heavily. When they do so with final parentheticals, the parentheticals sound like part of the main message rather than like part of a tangential communication. For example, in the dialogue above, a speaker who puts heavy stress on the addressee, "How's your uncle Charles?" will appear to be referring to Uncle Charles, rather than addressing the question to Charles, "How's your uncle, Charles?" This interpretation occurs because listeners expect the main message to have heavy stresses and final parentheticals to be destressed and spoken quietly on a low pitch.

Without drawing special attention to the sound features of parentheticals, learners will miscue listeners unintentionally, signaling them to stay on the main message channel rather than switch to the secondary message channel. The consequence for listeners of not switching is that the mix of main and parenthetical messages on the main channel may not make sense. The primary phrase stresses are in the wrong place so that incorrect inferences may be drawn about what listeners should pay attention to. Communication is disrupted as listeners try to sort out the mixed messages. In the course of the conversation, intelligibility can suffer as the listeners' attention is diverted from the ongoing flow of messages.

Conversational parentheticals are not unique to English; they are part of the language experience all learners of English bring to class. Therefore the idea of a parenthetical is not new. What is new is the means of communicating the presence of a parenthetical in a fashion recognizable by native English listeners. The means -the low pitch, low volume, monotone delivery - runs counter to the natural inclinations of most learners. For this reason, explicit guidance in the area of pronunciation is needed. Although few pronunciation textbooks deal with this topic, the kind of guidance that students need is straightforward and clear. Furthermore, the task of creating materials can be minimized because most existing dialogues can be embellished with parentheticals. Once students gain control of the appropriate signals, they begin to hear parentheticals more accurately and use them more effectively in conversation.

An early discussion of the sound characteristics of parentheticals can be found in Bing (1980). A more recent and fuller discussion of the topic from the point of view of ESL/EFL instruction, is in Dickerson (1999).

#### Alternatives and Caveats

Another way to begin the lesson is to present a dialogue with or without the stress marked and have the students read it aloud, as in the following colloquial dialogue:

A: What were you doing on Saturday?

B: I was looking for a ten speed bike--a used one.

A: So you cruised the garage sales.

B: You're right, and I found a really nice one.

A: What did you pay for it?

B: 35 bucks!

The dialogue can then be presented a second time, expanded to include parentheticals. In this second model, the stresses are marked to show the students that the stress remains on the last content word of the sentence or phrase. Students also read this dialogue out loud practicing the intonation pattern. After this step, learners can take over the creative combination of parentheticals that indicate their own intentions and interpretations of dialogues as outlined above.

A: What were you doing on Saturday, Bill?

B: I was looking for a 10-speed bike--a used one, of course.

A: So you cruised the garage sales, I'll bet.

B: You're right, as a matter of fact, and I found a really nice one, luckily.

A: What did you pay for it, you skinflint?

B: 35 bucks, can you believe it!

In a follow-up lesson or lessons, learners could be introduced to the four additional types of parentheticals: final solicitations, final epithets, final exclamations, and mid-sentence and final repair phrases. Final solicitations tend to follow a question and function as an invitation for the listener to take a turn. These include examples such as "Is it okay, do you think?," "What makes it so difficult, would you say?," and "How long is it, would you guess?" (See also the following table.) Final epithets characterize the addressee, often in a pejorative or deprecating way (as in the use of "you skinflint" in the dialogue above. Final exclamations often show speakers' feelings about what they have said, and they are often idiomatic as in "What more does he want, for crying out loud? and "I've had enough of that nonsense, for goodness sake." Finally, mid-sentence and final repair phrases give speakers, including learners, a way to signal a repair and to inform the listener to disregard the indicated portion of the spoken utterance and to substitute different content as in "We'll start with the classical, I mean, the traditional art form" and "She's the last...the only candidate, that is." Because these last four types of parentheticals have such distinct functions, they might be integrated into different conversational lessons. What links all 10 types of parentheticals is their stress and intonation, which provides instructions for listeners on how to interpret the expression.

<p><b>Final solicitations</b></p> <p>...do you think?</p> <p>...would you say?</p> <p>...would you guess?</p> <p><b>Final epithets</b></p> <p>...silly</p> <p>... you klutz</p>	<p><b>Final exclamations</b></p> <p>...for crying out loud</p> <p>...for goodness sake</p> <p>...if you can believe that</p> <p><b>Mid-sentence and final repair phrases</b></p> <p>let's make that</p> <p>that is</p> <p>I mean</p>
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### References and Suggested Readings

Bing, J. (1980). Aspects of English prosody. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Linguistics Club.

Dickerson, W. (1999). The sound and substance of conversational commentaries. In L. Bouton (Ed.), Pragmatics and Language Learning Monograph Series, 9, pp. 163-172.