

Making Contrasts in English

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Level: Intermediate to advanced

Time: One 20-minute class, one 1-hour class, and 1-3 hours of homework

Resources: Paper, pens, cassette recorders, copy machine

Goal: To learn to make contrasts using intonation

Description of the Activity

The following set of activities can help ESL or EFL students learn to make contrasts in English, using intonation to “focus” the key words. The activities are “discourse-based”; that is, learners draw examples from their own interactions and then do an analysis of the contrasts.

There are four parts to the lesson: An initial introduction, data collection and transcription, small group analysis, and debriefing. The first step is a brainstorming session to preview the topic: How do you make a contrast in English? After eliciting what students may already know and asking for a few examples, the instructor summarizes the facts: In English, intonation is used in making contrasts. When a word is used in a contrast, it has a higher pitch. If the word has more than one syllable, the most stressed syllable has the highest pitch. This syllable may also be louder and longer than surrounding ones. As a quick illustration, the instructor can ask the students a series of questions to which the answers are likely to be “no,” as in:

Are you from China? No, I’m from JaPAN.

Is your birthday in January? No, in SepTEMBER.

In their negative responses, students are encouraged to raise their pitch on the stressed syllables of the contrasting words.

The next step, which may be done outside of class, is for students to tape record themselves in conversation. They may pair up and converse with each other, or they may be assigned to find a native speaker to converse with. The goal of this activity is to collect a sample of spontaneous interaction. Since most conversations naturally involve a number of contrasts, almost any topic is appropriate. It is recommended that students tape 10-15 minutes of speech from which they then select a smaller section to use for the transcription activities. The instructor should explain that “mistakes” are natural in casual speech and can help learners to study their language development in progress.

Next, learners transcribe a 2-3 minute section of their taped conversation that contains a contrast and make 4-5 copies of the transcript to bring to class. I recommend that the instructor choose one student’s tape to demonstrate the process of transcription the first time. Transcription is time consuming and it may be necessary to stop and replay the tape several times. However, the more details they transcribe, the more accurate a picture of their interlanguage they obtain. If portions of the tape are not clear, students can write X symbols (XXX) in their transcripts. (For the purpose of identifying contrasts, it is not necessary to transcribe pauses, overlaps, laughter, and so on. However, if instructors want to go further with detailed transcription, a good list of basic symbols is available in Riggensbach (1991, p. 213) as is a description of other activities using transcripts.)

The third step, analysis, takes place back in the classroom. In small groups of 3-4, students take turns analyzing each transcript to identify contrasts. If there are enough tape players, they can play the original excerpt while following along in the transcripts. If not, two students can read the transcript aloud taking parts. Thereafter, students work as a group to identify the important contrasts in the text and to understand why each contrast is being made.

The contrastive words can then be underlined or highlighted in the transcript. Once the group has determined what the main contrasts are, students take parts and practice reading the transcript aloud using contrastive intonation. The teacher's role during the analysis work is to circulate among the groups, answering questions and resolving disagreements.

In the final debriefing step, each group takes a turn to share some of the more interesting contrasts with the rest of the class, reading portions aloud. The instructor can also model how the intonation should sound and the class can discuss why the contrasts work.

As an illustration of a typical text, the following is a portion of a transcript made from a conversation between an ESL student (Keiko) and a native speaker (Linda) about art schools in Japan. The contrasts are underlined:

Linda: Well, so you're an artist. Did you go to art school in Kobe?

Keiko: No uhh I went to art- uh I went to University- uh Osaka University of Arts.

Linda: Oh really? Okay.

Keiko: mm hmm, and actually Kobe doesn't have- nnn art school.

Linda: Really? That surprises me.

Keiko: mm hmm. Just design school and two-years school. Yeah they have-

Linda: Yeah.

Keiko: Art school is um Kyoto or-

Linda: or Osaka.

In this transcript, the native speaker erroneously assumes that there is an art school in Kobe. Thereafter, contrasts are made between Kobe and the cities in Japan that do have art schools, Osaka and Kyoto. Contrasts are also made among various kinds of schools – art, design, and

two-years school. As this transcript shows, the structure of the whole conversation is developed along the juxtaposition of these key ideas.

Procedure

1. Introduction (20 minutes in class)
 - a. Brainstorming Session: How do we make contrasts in English? Examples?
 - b. Teacher explanation and modeling of contrastive intonation.
 - c. Practice exercises: Negative questions elicit contrastive responses.
2. Data Collection and Transcription (1-3 hours outside of class)
 - a. Taping of conversation: Students find a conversation partner, tape a 10-15 minute conversation
 - b. Transcription: Students transcribe 2-3 minutes of conversation; make copies
3. Small group analysis of contrasts (45 minutes in class)
 - a. Presenting data: Students play tapes or read transcripts to group
 - b. Analyzing contrasts: Groups identify, discuss contrasts, underline in text
 - c. Oral practice: Partners read transcripts aloud with contrastive intonation
 - d. Instructor input: Instructor troubleshoots as needed
4. Debriefing (15 minutes in class). Groups share findings with rest of class.

Rationale

Contrasts can be made with even the simplest vocabulary and everyone can understand the concept. However, the contrastive intonation of English is by no means a language universal. Research on second language intonation shows that nonnative speakers from other language backgrounds may not use intonation to make contrasts at all, or at least not to the extent that native speakers of English do (Wennerstrom, 1994). Therefore, it is worthwhile to explicitly

point out the role of intonation in contrasts, as has in fact been done in several recent pronunciation textbooks (such as Gilbert, 1993; Grant, 1993).

Presenting the idea of contrasts in real conversations is advantageous if students are to understand their discourse-level function. As was evident in the sample transcript, a contrast was introduced in the beginning and then taken up again in several subsequent turns across speakers. Single-sentence exercises out of context cannot offer as rich an understanding of contrasts as can an extended conversation. Thus, a focus on the overall coherence of the text rather than on individual sentences is emphasized in this discourse-analytic approach.

Furthermore, encouraging students to analyze the language of their own encounters can increase their motivation. Riggenbach (1999) believes that:

. . . providing learners with the tools to develop language research skills can appeal to their autonomy, build confidence, and tap into their natural inquisitiveness. If learners invest in their own learning process by observing ‘real’ language interactions (spoken and written), by reflecting critically on these and their own language exchanges, and by collaborating on and reviewing what they have observed, the result can be an energizing and validating experience (p. 15).

Moreover, because it is the student’s own language that forms the “text” of study, the level of English is bound to be appropriate for the individual that produced it. In sum, these activities provide engaging material derived from a social situation in which the students really wanted to express themselves, an extended context in which to study contrasts, and a method of studying each individual learner’s own language development in progress.

Alternatives and Caveats

These activities can be adapted easily to other language learning settings. They are appropriate for both ESL and EFL classes because in the latter case, students can select each other as conversation partners. If it is not possible to procure tape recorders, movie scripts or plays can be used in place of the transcripts and analyzed in the same way to identify contrasts. Thereafter students can read these scripts aloud, or even perform them for the class.

For a more academic focus, classroom discourse rather than casual conversation can be tape recorded. I have used this activity with international teaching assistants, asking them to tape record themselves giving short lectures in their fields of study and analyze the resulting transcripts for contrasts. For example, in a lecture setting, a speaker might discuss “the x axis” of a graph and then move on to “the y axis.” This contrast can be more distinctive if contrastive intonation is used on the key words x and y.

This approach can also be readily integrated with the teaching of other skills. Transcripts of student speech collected from actual encounters can be used to teach grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, as well as other pragmatic aspects of conversation such as agreeing and disagreeing, giving one’s opinion, and changing the topic. The mechanics of conversation -- turn taking, making repairs, and keeping the floor -- can also be discussed. Overall this approach fits well into any course involving spoken communication because of its reliance on real language in social contexts drawn from the students’ own personal lives.

References

- Gilbert, J. (1993). *Clear speech: Pronunciation and listening comprehension in North American English* (2nd ed.) [Student's book]. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Grant, L. (1993). *Well said: Advanced English pronunciation*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

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