

Evaluating Pronunciation Textbooks

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present an evaluation of six textbooks on pronunciation, specifically on how intonation is treated in each textbook. Intonation has been chosen because as Kelly (2000) states: “There are languages in which intonation has quite a specific meaning function...” (p. 87).

Thus, English teachers should attempt to understand these functions and help students cope with these particularities. Learning how to pronounce words in isolation can be attainable when the learners are familiar with the phonological alphabet, have a reliable dictionary or a teacher that can provide guidance, but the pragmatics of words have to be learned in context; at least in the context of a sentence, or when possible in the context of discourse.

1. The Role of Pronunciation in Teaching Methods

Pronunciation is a component of language learning, which presents teachers with many challenges. Throughout the history of language teaching each method or

approach has given a different emphasis to pronunciation, and some have even decided that it does not deserve any emphasis at all. Before evaluating pronunciation textbooks, we consider it important to review this information. Richards and Rodgers (1998) and Brown (1994) present an accurate overview of the most significant methods in English teaching and the way pronunciation is conceived.

The first method, Grammar Translation (GMT), had no interest in pronunciation, since the goal of this method was simply to provide learners with the vocabulary needed to access written texts. Speaking did not have a place here and pronunciation was neglected.

In the 19th century the dominant trend was the Direct Method. Contrary to GMT, in the direct method oral communication was very important, in fact correct pronunciation is very important and students listen to contextualized language along with the lessons. Furthermore, correction is encouraged to avoid fossilization.

The goal of the Audio Lingual Method

(ALM) is to develop in students the same speaking ability as that of native speakers. Pronunciation is learned by means of pattern drills, which are taught without explanation. On the other hand, there is explicit instruction about the phonological aspects of language.

Some other approaches that were built on the Direct Method include Total Physical Response (late 1970s) and Natural Approach (1980s). The basis of these methods consists of intensive listening comprehension before encouraging learners to speak.

Then, the Cognitive Approach (1960s) states that aiming for a native-like pronunciation was unrealistic. Instead, the goal is to master structures and vocabulary and develop an adequate performance in the L2.

Finally, Communicative Language Teaching (1960s) considers pronunciation important, although it is not an explicit feature in this approach. Pronunciation is learned by using active communication in the classroom and by conveying meaning. This is the basic premise for CLT. Thus, pronunciation is essential in order to be intelligible.

This overview of the different trends that have led teaching during the last centuries will be useful to identify the orientation of the textbooks and to know if their objectives have been accomplished. It is important to take into consideration the year of publication of the textbooks to have a general idea of the methodology or approach that guided their philosophy.

Method/Textbook	Stress and Intonation Part 2 (1967)	Ship or Sheep? (1977)	Clear Speech (1993)	English Pronunciation for International Students (1993)	Pronunciation Plus: Practice through Interaction (1998)	Pronunciation Matters (1999)
Grammar Translation Method						
Direct Method						
Audio Lingual Method	X	X	X			
Communicative Language Teaching				X	X	X
Uncertain						

Note: Some books may have activities that belong to more than one method. For instance Clear Speech and Pronunciation Plus combine drills with communicative activities.

2. Setting Parameters

In order to define some parameters for this evaluation, some authors like Celce-Murcia et al (1996), Chambers (1999), Ellis (1997), Kelly (2000), Sheldon (1988) and Williams (1983) have been considered.

In relation to the importance of teaching intonation Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) note: “Since the suprasegmental features of a language are perhaps even less ‘visible’ to the learner than the segmental features, we need to explore ways to make students aware of them” (p. 193).

Suprasegmental features then, deserve special attention when teaching English because these are patterns that you cannot learn unless you hear native speakers of the L2 constantly and you have a model as a guide. Following the arrows or trying to raise intonation when there are capital letters in a word is not enough. Teachers have the responsibility to provide abundant practice and modeling in which intonation patterns become visible to contrast them with the patterns in the students’ L1.

Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) and Kelly (2000) coincide on the topics in which intonation has a significant role and should be taught. These topics include:

Information questions
Yes/No questions
Statements
Question Tags

Having this in mind, and taking into account the classification suggested by Chambers (1997) the parameters selected to evaluate the pronunciation textbooks are presented in the following classification.

3. Essential Features

Illustration of the relationship meaning – intonation

As stated before, knowing how to write and pronounce a phrase or a sentence only conveys a partial meaning. A good textbook should include an explanation on the interpretations a message can have according to the intonation of the speaker.

a. Sufficient, coherent practice

There must be a balance between theory and practice. Some books may have long explanations and just a few sentences to listen to. There should be a balance between these two elements, and the sentences should be meaningful or at least, logical. Sentences like “there is a sheep in the ship” do not really mean anything to students who live in a city and have never been on a ship or seen a sheep.

Intonation should not only be practiced by means of listen-and-repeat dialogues. To avoid monotony and in order to present the possible situations in which an intonation pattern is present, textbooks should include different types of tasks.

b. Clear representations of intonation

Students will try to adapt their own intonation patterns to the L2, and it is useful to have marks that guide students to monitor their intonation. Of course, those marks should be comprehensible and easy to interpret. Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) include some notational systems like capitalization, circling the prominent element in a sentence, using dots under each word in a sentence, and using arrows. It is advised for students with a higher

proficiency to only circle or mark the prominent syllables of each sentence.

4. Desirable Features

a. Adaptable Material

Although the adaptability and exploitation of materials depends greatly on the resourcefulness of the teacher, it would be positive to have vocabulary and structures that cover different levels.

b. Clearly differentiated types of intonation

Not all questions have the same intonation patterns, it would be better for pedagogical reasons, to have a set of expressions that have falling intonation first and then move on to all the expressions that have rising intonation. This avoids confusion among students and makes it easier to notice the patterns.

5. Additional Features

a. User friendly layout

Due to time constraints, or simply because pronunciation is taught as part of laboratory sessions, the learners should be able to approach the textbooks without the direction of the teacher.

b. Variety of exercises

In order to avoid monotony and in order to expose learners to different contexts in which a type of intonation occurs, exercises

should be varied and go beyond listening and repeating.

The features mentioned before refer to the text itself, but there are other considerations that influence the selection of a textbook. Skierso in Celce-Murcia (1991) comments on the importance of the audience, their age, their level of English proficiency, their goals of learning, and the background of the instructor among others.

In this case, the possible audience is composed by college students at the University of Nariño in Pasto, Colombia whose age ranges from 17 to 35 years old. Their objective is to become English teachers, and the instructors are professors that have been in an English speaking country or have an appropriate knowledge of the L2.

The evaluation of pronunciation textbooks will be made considering the parameters listed before and also reflecting on the pedagogical and psychological views that had influenced on the structure of each textbook. In order to note the differences among these approaches, the following textbooks have been selected:

1. Stress and Intonation, Part 2 (1967)
2. Ship or Sheep (1977)
3. Clear Speech (1993)
4. English Pronunciation for International Students (1993)
5. Pronunciation Plus: Practice through Interaction (1998)
6. Pronunciation Matters (1999)

To facilitate the organization of the results, a score from 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent) has been assigned to each book. The book with the highest score will be selected as the most appropriate in this particular case. In case two books have the same score, the decision will be made considering how easy it is to find them and how recent they are.

The following table illustrates the scores obtained by each book.

Book/Parameters	Meaning and Intonation	Coherent, Sufficient Practice	Clear Graphics	Adaptable Material	Subdivisions for Intonation	User Friendly Layout	Varied Exercises	Total
Stress and Intonation Part 2 (1967)	2	2	1	3	2	1	1	12
Ship or Sheep (1977)	3	2	4	4	3	2	2	19
Clear Speech (1993)	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	28
English Pronunciation for International Students (1993)	4	2	3	3	3	3	2	20
Pronunciation Plus: Practice through Interaction (1998)	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	28
Pronunciation Matters (1999)	4	1	2	3	1	2	1	14

Highest score: 4 (Excellent)

Next score: 3 (Good)

Next score: 2 (Average)

Next score: 1 (Poor)

6. Comparing Textbooks

The chart above shows the books with the best scores. Let us see why they are considered the best.

6.1 Essential Features

The first feature in this part is the

Relationship meaning–intonation.

The textbook, *Stress and Intonation Part 2* (1967), combines grammatical explanations with intonation. But meaning is not stressed. Actually, there is no explanation about meanings at all, and the examples are likely to confuse learners. There are sentences like *I think I can do it* and *I thought I could do it*, which belong to two different types of intonation (falling and rising). This

book could be used to review intonation, but not to introduce it. Similarly, *Ship or Sheep* (1977) presents some explanations along the first units, but beginning from unit 16 these explanations simply disappear. *Clear Speech* (1993), *English Pronunciation for International Students* (1994) and *Pronunciation Plus* (1998) are the most adequate because they provide clear explanations that are reviewed in posterior units. In the following unit of the book there is a concise explanation on falling and rising intonation. The vocabulary is not complicated and some

examples are included. There are more short explanations along the following units to help students understand when and why a speaker uses a type of intonation (e.g., to ask for repetition, to express certainty).

On the other hand, *Pronunciation Matters* (1999) presents a passage with some words in bold. These words indicate the type of intonation to be learned. However, there is no explanation on the cases in which you use falling or rising intonation and the exercises are not very helpful. This textbook would not be very useful for self-study.

English Pronunciation for International Students includes possible pronunciation problems in each unit, but they are not based on differences among languages and the explanations are rather vague or similar to those found in other books that are not intended for “international students”.

Regarding the next feature, sufficient and coherent practice, one can say that practice is seen differently across the books. Given their audiolingual background *Ship or Sheep* (1977) and *Stress and Intonation Part 2*, feature drills and repetition to acquire the intonation patterns. A common feature is the use of short dialogues designed to elicit pair practice. *Pronunciation Matters* (1999) presents a dialogue followed by very few exercises and more examples to be repeated.

In *Clear Speech* (1993) we also find a section for pair practice in which students not only have to repeat but they also have

to fill in the blanks, draw arrows, identify thought groups and read poems, which are more motivating activities. The degree of difficulty of the exercises matches the type of explanations provided. The same can be said about *Pronunciation Plus* (1998). First, learners notice prominent words in a sentence, but there are no explanations. In the next part prominence is reviewed and this time students have to make their knowledge explicit. For instance, they have to explain why words like *them, us, him, her* are not prominent. They can also arrange sentences into dialogues according to the intonation, create their own questions, notice the type of intonation used in a dialogue and decide the intention of the speaker according to what they hear. Personally, I prefer these exercises because the mere repetition may help, but will it be useful when students find different words or different dialogues? It is better to have students notice and draw their own conclusions. *English Pronunciation for International Students* (1994) includes three self-tests, but the exercises are somewhat short.

The last essential feature is the Clear Representation of Intonation.

Even though concise explanations and abundant practice can help students understand intonation, the way it is represented also plays an important role because it may lead to confusion or students may begin to “sing” in order to follow the graphics of the book.

In general, the six textbooks had similar ways to present intonation. All of them

make use of arrows (\longrightarrow), and capitalization (WHAT'S your FAVORITE color?). The arrows are usually above, next to or in front of the sentences. The books that may be somewhat confusing are *Pronunciation Matters* (1999) because the arrows are next to the title; and *Stress and Intonation Part 2* (1967) because they use a symbol to indicate the pitch that has to be used and the instructions to read it are not very clear either. For example: "The declarative intonation pattern steps down from pitch 3 to a lower pitch if one or more syllables follow the one with primary stress in the phrase". This can be used in a course taught to teachers who are already familiar with the terminology and the language itself, but not with beginners. *English Pronunciation for International Students* (1994) makes use of arrows in the middle of the sentences making it easier to visualize what words have a falling or rising intonation.

6.2 Desirable Features

The first one is the adaptability of the material.

The explanations provided by *Ship or Sheep* (1977), *Clear Speech* (1993), *English Pronunciation for International Students* (1994), and *Pronunciation Plus* (1998) are suitable for any audience because they are short, the language is simple and the examples complement the 'theory'. Some of the topics that involve grammatical topics like Question Tags can be postponed until the students have learned them but this is not a problem. Although for advanced learners it would be desirable

to have longer pieces of discourse, the dialogues presented are useful to recycle information and they can be the basis to analyze other texts like radio commercials or an excerpt from a TV show. For intermediate or advanced learners it would be advisable to use the readings found in *Pronunciation Matters* (1999) or the sentences found in *Stress and Intonation Part 2*, which have a wide range of grammatical tenses.

The next desirable feature involves having clearly differentiated types of intonation. As seen above, some topics are too advanced for beginners and it would be good to have a book that can be used for two or more semesters. It would be desirable first of all to give continuity to pronunciation, and also because each grammatical topic would have complementary practice.

Most of the books that offer a fairly defined distribution: *Clear Speech* (1993), and *Pronunciation Plus* (1998) use classifications considering meaning and linking (e.g., asking for repetition, thought groups). *Pronunciation Matters* (1999), *Ship or Sheep* (1977) and *English Pronunciation for International Students* (1994) present the unit simply as "Intonation" without taking into account vocabulary or grammatical topics. *Ship or Sheep* uses vocabulary taken from the minimal pairs of each unit to illustrate intonation. Thus, the sentences used sometimes look too artificial. *Stress and Intonation Part 2* (1967) has an "eclectic" classification under the heading of pronunciation: *That-Clauses, Verbs followed by*

to, Other Substitute Sentences, Pitch 4 and Tag Questions. Finally, Pronunciation Matters (1999) simply presents the readings and further explanations are found in an appendix at the end of the book.

6.3 Additional Features

When evaluating textbooks for an institution it is difficult to find consensus regarding the essential features, but sometimes, additional features are a bigger problem. While some prefer little or no illustrations others find it motivating for students. While some like diagrams of the mouth and phonological symbols, others prefer to focus on context and practice. We believe that students should have an accessible book that can be used outside the classroom because individual practice is also very necessary to learn pronunciation. Clear Speech (1993), Pronunciation Plus (1998), and (partially) Ship or Sheep (1977) and English Pronunciation for International Students (1994) feature headings, a readable type of font, and an organization of the units or the lesson that remains invariable across the book. Pronunciation Matters can be used to show how textbooks illustrate the way sounds are produced, but as part of a Phonetics or a Phonology class when practice is not aimed at learning intonation.

The final feature is the variety of exercises. A book may have a hundred exercises, but if the only variation is the words in the sentences, the practice becomes meaningless. Pronunciation Matters (1999) provides only one or two exercises in each unit and they are very simple. For example,

mark the sentence that the speaker says or read three sentences. This is helpful when we are introducing a lesson not as the main part of it. Stress and Intonation Part 2 includes a set of four sentences to be repeated. The same sentence is pronounced with four different pitches and that followed by more sentences. Again, monotony is something that should be avoided when working with sounds. If the activities are not engaging, students will just pronounce the best they can without making any further effort to improve.

Ship or Sheep? (1977) follows a similar pattern, but when the dialogues get longer, the practice on intonation is suppressed. English Pronunciation for International Students (1994) has reading and listening exercises, but there are only a few in each unit. We think that when texts are longer, intonation helps us get the most important ideas and words and long dialogues could be of use. Again, Clear Speech (1993), Pronunciation Plus (1998) offer consciousness-raising exercises as well as cloze exercises, repetition drills and short readings.

7. Conclusions

- The book selected as the best is Pronunciation Plus (1998). Clear Speech obtained the same score, and it is also a good book that we would like to use in our classes. However, only one should be chosen and Pronunciation Plus was selected because it is the most recent, and Clear Speech (1994) has already been used at our institution.
- The textbook selected after analyzing

the features may not be the best for another instructor in different circumstances. In addition, it can be said that graphics to identify intonation, examples and pictures are not that important or that the instructor can prepare extra activities. However, all these small details count when instructors are trying to make teachers-to-be improve their pronunciation and get familiar with textbooks that they will be using in the future.

- Most of the books have a clear affiliation to a method or approach, and it is interesting to notice that a book like *Ship and Sheep* which was written more than two decades ago, still offers advantages over new books like *Pronunciation Matters* (1999). While the former has a clear-cut organization, the latter is fairly indistinct, and it could have a communicative orientation. In any case, it is better to have a consistent book than one that takes a little bit of every trend.

- The most important thing in evaluating books is not the evaluation per se, because it simply tells whether a book has or does not have a feature. The most interesting part is deciding on the essential features, connecting the approach of the book with how practice is seen and reflecting on the audience that will be in contact with that textbook. It is very probable that another person will give different scores to the same books analyzed here, and that is acceptable because professionals wrote them, and all of them must be outstanding and useful in one way or another.

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