Assessing the pedagogical applicability of four intonation British models: O'Connor-Arnold, Armstrong-Ward, Halliday and Brazil et al

1. INTRODUCTION

The intonation phenomenon is an expressive mean in our speech. The differences which arise when interpreting intonation have led to the existence of diverse intonation models. One of the factors giving rise to these different systems is the presence or absence of the pedagogical criterium when designing the model in question.

Some models can be considered to be more suitable for the teaching and learning of intonation because of their straightforwardness and clarity. The model being clear may be seen as more important than its being strong in functional terms. Likewise, others may be stronger in this sense but they are too complex and weak in the pedagogical sense. Therefore, they may be less recommended for students. All this needs to be put in a balance by teachers when assuming the hard but, at the same time, rewarding responsibility of teaching.

In this paper four well-known intonation British models, namely, O'Connor-Arnold, Armstrong-Ward, Halliday and Brazil et al. will be analysed by taking into account their pedagogical side, if any, and they will be ranked in view of their pedagogical value.

2. PEDAGOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE FOUR INTONATION MODELS

2.1. O'Connor-Arnold

If we leave aside other criteria needed to assess an intonation model, such as its theoretical basis or other factors, and we only focus on the pedagogical applicability of the models in question, O'Connor and Arnold’s is considered to be the most applicable in pedagogical terms. Actually, according to Gutiérrez (1999), this model is probably the most influential one as reflected by the fact that it has been used for many years by EFL students, especially in the summer courses held in the United Kingdom. As said by its own authors (1961), this model was born with a pedagogical aim.

Despite the weaknesses it may have and which, in fact, has, namely, the way it approaches the attitudinal question, it must be emphasised that, as far as pedagogy is concerned, its approach of the structural elements of the tone unit is very accurate and helpful for the teaching/learning of students. The degree of detail it provides the students with is not excessive. After becoming used to it, the pupil will have a better idea of the descriptive theoretical framework of the model without becoming overwhelmed to learn too many labels or difficult terms. In fact, postgraduate students at the University of Murcia who are interested in phonetics and they are doing their PhD on phonetics, as it is my case, begin their studies in intonation by having a broad view
of O'Connor and Arnold’s model. Therefore, in this ranking, O'Connor-Arnold would be included in the first place.

2.2. Armstrong-Ward

If we are to assess these four intonation models in terms of their pedagogical applicability, that of O'Connor and Arnold would be followed by Armstrong-Ward’s model due to its straightforwardness and clarity for students. According to its authors (1926), this model is faithful to the pedagogical aim. As a result, it has been very often employed by EFL teachers.

Its success is based on certain factors which characterise it and make it different from other models which are much more complex. Firstly, as defended by Gutiérrez (1999), its straightforwardness is of value: only two tone patterns or tunes are used and the parts they are composed of are not labelled. They are just suggested, which prevents the student from knowing a very complicated theoretical and descriptive background as done in other more twisted systems. What is more, the materials are introduced with a functional and semantic framework and the few formal categories are introduced at hoc in relation to those functions. Armstrong and Ward do not intend to use as much detail as Palmer’s model and they show it by avoiding certain elements and just mentioning others, without paying much attention to them. Thus, the students do not need to tackle a very difficult theoretical background before practising the model. Their system consists of giving a large number of examples in an average size font so that the students do not become overwhelmed with too much detail.

However, the only fault which is found in this system is that it is too straightforward and not as deep as O’Connor and Arnold’s.

2.3. Halliday

Halliday’s model could be ranked in the third place, if we bear pedagogy in mind. As shown in Halliday (1961), it takes rhythm into account because it joins rhythm and intonation in the same analytic framework by reflecting the uncontroversial issue of the systematic interaction of both components due to their common function of focalising information. Consequently, it is said that it has a strong theoretical basis which derives from its formal straightforwardness and its predictive power. Actually, according to an empirical study by Gutiérrez and Conde (1990), the model of the rhythmic foot, which is used by Halliday, is more effective for the teaching of rhythm than that of the “rhythmic group”. The rhythmic model makes it attractive in pedagogical terms.

Nevertheless, we must not forget that there is a serious problem pedagogically speaking: the numerical notation employed. The fact that the numbers are abstract and the lack of iconic connection between the numbers and the tones make the reading of the materials hard. It is often difficult to guess the way the tone is aligned with the text if we look at the numerical notation.

For this reason, the model, which was firstly edited in 1970 as a pedagogical offer, was not so willingly accepted. In contrast, O’Connor and Arnold’s model, which was edited twice, the second edition being reprinted, was much more accepted despite Halliday’s system being stronger in theoretical terms as it was based on the systemic grammar.

As can be seen, the tonetic notation has a major effect if we are to assess how this model is taught and learnt. Halliday’s system has a strong theoretical basis but it has some weaknesses which seem to have more
importance for pedagogy. The pedagogical difficulty arises from its numerical notation, which has priority over its success in the way it approaches the rhythm.

2.4. Brazil, Couthard and Johns

The model by Brazil, Couthard and Johns is proposed for the teaching/learning of English speaking students who study English phonetics and also for EFL students who have an advanced level of English. This is so because it is composed of abstract and complex categories. This is the only limitation the authors see in their proposal, as reflected in Brazil et al (1980). They consider it to be an exclusive pedagogical model which excludes others, such as those previously explained.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that it is suspicious that the authors allude to that audience, as defended by Gutiérrez (1999). The model should be proposed for those students who have a basic or intermediate English level because it does not make much sense to teach intonation to English students who already know how to intone (another issue is whether they know the labels used by these authors). Besides, to address advanced students is not very logical either because, if they do not know how to intone, the level of English they have is not so important. Both advanced students and beginners are in similar conditions.

The problem in the pedagogical sense is that it has a very twisted conceptual and terminological framework which is necessary to know in order to interpret the meaning of tones. The authors’ intention seems to be to hide this weakness by suggesting the method for English students and EFL students with an advanced level. Therefore, this system has an obstacle which is virtually impossible to overcome.

What is more, the grammatical and attitudinal meanings are also hidden or explicitly excluded in this method and a pedagogical intonation model should bear these meanings in mind.

Another problem with Halliday’s system is that the intention the speaker has is always taken into account despite it not being always explicit.

In addition, the discursive intonation only covers one of the several possible intonation functions. So far there is no intonation model which can comprise all the functions of intonation, though.

Therefore, its complex theoretical framework, the suspicious audience it seems to be addressed to and the fact that the speaker’s intention, which is not always explicit, is given importance, leads to its being ranked in the last place of these four intonation models which have been discussed in this paper.

3. CONCLUSION

As has been seen, the pedagogical criterium leads to a special ranking of intonation models. It is crucial for teachers to pay attention to which model adapts to their students’ situation and objectives. We should always keep in mind that each model has advantages and drawbacks and a good teacher should be able to balance them in order to choose what is better for his/her students to learn.

References


