Introduction

Who is this course for?

Intonation in Context aims to help learners of English to perceive the system of intonation used by native speakers and ultimately to incorporate the system into their own performance.

It is designed to be used with upper-intermediate and advanced learners, as a supplement to a communicative coursebook. Learners who have reached a comparatively high level of proficiency in other aspects of English all too often seem to reach a plateau in their oral ability. There is, accordingly, no separate presentation of lexis or grammar in this course; it concentrates exclusively on the perception and practice of the system of intonation.

Intonation in Context is designed with two main groups of learners in mind: those working in groups with a teacher, with classroom listening facilities or a language laboratory, and those studying privately, with the use of a cassette recorder.

Basic problems in teaching intonation

There are at least three main problems in teaching intonation and in designing materials for the purpose.

First, intonation is an aspect of language not usually brought to the level of consciousness. In the speech of native speakers intonation patterns are planned at a deeply subconscious level, the units and contours being mapped out in the speaker's mind before he/she decides which words he/she will use. It is, therefore, intrinsically difficult to make a learner manipulate intonation *consciously* without running the risk of destroying the naturalness of his/her speech. Yet, if we are to help learners to avoid giving the kind of faulty signals which lead to social as well as linguistic misunderstanding, we need to give some training in the perception and imitation of models. By encouraging the learners to concentrate on the contextualised meaning and function of messages the course minimises the risk involved.

Secondly, intonation is fleeting and, therefore, inherently difficult to

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analyse. Native speakers respond intuitively to the intonation used by
other native speakers. Foreign learners may need to discuss this seem-
ingly complex phenomenon, and we must, therefore, find some way of
enabling the learner to capture the fleeting moment and analyse it.
Furthermore, in order to discuss intonation, we need access to a descrip-
tive system which provides the necessary labels by which to refer to its
parts. Then the learner will be able to discuss and come to understand
what he/she is seeking to build into his/her own communicative com-
petence.

Thirdly, there is the question of how to represent intonation on the
printed page and, further, whether or not we should seek to represent all
the phonetic detail. *Intonation in Context* attempts to represent only the
meaningful (phonological) contrasts and adopts a simple method of
transcription. The symbols have to be explained and understood from
the outset and, although no claim is made that they are better than any
other method of transcription, they represent a finite set of meaning
contrasts and are eminently learnable. Thus, with this simple but
comprehensive method of transcription, the learners have an analytical
tool which they can use independently for discussion and study
purposes.

The theory

Earlier approaches to the teaching of intonation have related it either to
grammatical features or to attitudes. This course excludes all such
attempts, and, in contrast, takes as its base a description of intonation
which is derived from a study of the pragmatic use of linguistic forms to
convey meanings in spoken discourse.

   Intonation in Context is based on the descriptive system presented by
David Brazil (1978, 1980 and 1985), which views intonation primarily
as a feature of discourse and the developing interaction between
speakers. Throughout the course intonation is demonstrated as an
aspect of spoken language which is used systematically and which
fundamentally affects the meaning of utterances and their function in
conversation.

   Brazil's description of intonation presents a system which itself is very
simple. Yet, because it is finite, it enables us to account for all the choices
that speakers make when they select the *forms* of intonation which will
convey the meanings they intend. These choices can be seen to take into
account the contextual features of the conversation.

   The system has been slightly adapted here and, therefore, the material
in the Student's Book does not cover the whole of Brazil's theory (Brazil,
1985). The features which were selected were those found to be the most

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frequently occurring in conversation and the most teachable. However, as a result of this selection, some important features have necessarily been omitted.

The eight units of the Student's Book cover the main communicative functions of intonation. Speakers realise these functions by selecting from options within the three components of the system: prominence, tone and key. Native speakers are able to use these three sub-systems simultaneously, but they are treated separately in this course for the purposes of teaching one feature at a time.

Prominence is the element of intonation which determines the 'noticeability' of words. A speaker makes a word more noticeable by making the accented syllable of that word stand out more than others in the context. This is achieved by making systematic use of such phonetic variables as vowel lengthening, increased volume and pitch variation.

The result is that certain stressed words in an utterance have a further degree of emphasis and become the focus of the hearer's attention. A speaker chooses to focus on these words because they carry the information which is most crucial in the message being conveyed. To illustrate this we might think of speakers on a bad telephone line. The words they would emphasise – mainly by increasing the volume – are those they would make prominent in a conversation in more normal circumstances.

Tone is used in this course to mean the rapid gliding movement of pitch which begins, and is often completed, on a prominent syllable (tonic). Three tones: the rise, the fall and the fall-rise have been selected here as the most frequently occurring in conversation. Each tone has a particular communicative value, and a speaker's choice of one rather than another has significance in the developing conversation.

Key refers to the relative pitch levels of utterances or parts of utterances. By sometimes raising or lowering small chunks (tone units) of what they say, speakers convey some aspect of meaning.

Brazil's theory also provides us with the descriptive labels which are needed in order for teachers and learners to be able to talk about intonation. They are listed and explained in a simple glossary on page 9 of this book. Please note that learners are not required to perceive or explain all the parts of the system represented by these terms.

Structure of the Student's Book

The Student's Book presents intonation as a system; the component features are dealt with one at a time. The book has eight units:

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Unit 1   Highlighting

This unit is about prominence and the decisions a speaker makes in distributing prominence to give an utterance its intended meaning. By assigning a prominent syllable to a certain word (at a particular point in the developing conversation) the speaker foregrounds or 'highlights' that word. Decisions to highlight the selected words are influenced by the conversational context.

e.g. Did you take your motorbike?   NO. I HIRED a motorbike.
     Did you hire a car?   NO. I hired a MOtorbike.

Word accent and prominence   A prominent syllable is always an accented syllable of a word, but the converse does not apply. So, any accented syllable could become prominent if the speaker chooses to highlight the word containing it. The syllables *hired* and *mo* of motorbike will always have word accent in the above examples, but whether either or both of them also has prominence will depend on the context.

Unit 2   Telling and referring

This is the first of three units which demonstrate the use and meaning of tone. It introduces the simple distinction between the two types of tone – finally falling and finally rising – and selects the most frequently occurring of each type – the fall and fall-rise. The distinction can be simply explained in this way: when speakers choose to present what they say in any part of an utterance as new for their hearers they choose a falling tone.

    If, on the other hand, they present what they say as already common ground between them at that point in the conversation, they choose a fall-rise:

e.g.   A: Can you tell me when the last bus leaves, please?
       B: // ∨↗ Well toDAY's SUNday // ↘ so it left an HOUR ago //

Unit 3   More telling and referring

This second unit on tone concentrates on the fall and fall-rise tones again but extends the work of Unit 2, requiring the students to manipulate longer pieces of discourse.

Unit 4   Revision and practice

This unit reactivates and consolidates what has been learnt in Units 1–3. The exercises are designed to give further practice in the perception and use of prominence and the two tones (↘ and ∨↗), and can be used by

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students requiring 'remedial' work or by those who are keen to make
further progress and gain greater self-confidence.

The selection of activities includes some for recognition of the
features: ear training and discrimination exercises, and analysis of dia-
logues. It also includes production activities, some tightly controlled,
some less controlled, and some which combine the features which have
been learnt.

Unit 5   Roles and status of speakers

This third unit on tone introduces the distinction between the two
finally-rising tones (↗ and ⤵) and the notion of conversational domi-
nance. In discourse where the speakers have unequal status by virtue of
their roles, occupations, etc., the dominant speaker may choose to reflect
his/her status by using the ↗ instead of the more frequent ⤵. In conver-
sations between 'equals' one speaker may establish temporary domi-
nance over the other by choosing to use the ↗ tone.

e.g.   Lisa: // ↘ But TOny // ↗ surely you REALised //
          // ↘ You OUGHT to have known BETTer //

Unit 6   Low Key information

This is the first of two units which demonstrate the sub-system of into-
nation which we call key. The use of Low Key, i.e. a drop of pitch level
from mid to low on the first prominent syllable of a tone unit, marks
that part of what is said as being in some way equivalent in meaning
to what was said just before (or sometimes what is said immediately
after).

e.g. // Only a couple of WEEKS ago // at the be_{GINNing of the MONTH} //

Unit 7   Contrasts

This is the second of the units demonstrating key: High Key. The use of
High Key involves a move up in pitch level from mid to high on the first
prominent syllable of a tone unit. High Key marks what is said at that
point in the conversation as being in some way contrary to the expecta-
tions of the hearer(s).

e.g. John: // But you didn't LIsten //

       Tony: // Yes I ^{DID} //

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Unit 8   Revision and practice

This unit revises, practises and consolidates everything that has been covered in the course. There are recognition, production and development activities of a similar kind to those in Unit 4.

Structure of the units

Each of Units 1–3 and 5–7 is divided into five sections and follows a standard pattern which represents a progression from receptive to productive activities:

1   Sensitisation

A particular feature of intonation is demonstrated in context. By means of questions and tasks the students have to recognise and discuss the use of the feature. The purpose of this section is to make the students aware of its communicative value.

2   Explanation

The significance of the feature and its communicative value are explained using examples from section 1. Where possible spectrographs showing the intonation contours of the example utterances, which have been heard in context, are displayed here.

3   Imitation

This involves the simple repetition of models derived from section 1 to encourage the students to produce the feature with accuracy and confidence. The section is kept short but the items can be repeated as often as is necessary.

4   Practice activities

These include a variety of activities which provide practice in recognition, discrimination and production. Where it is appropriate, answers are provided in the Teacher's Book.

5   Communication activity

The activity is designed for pair work and is based on an information gap between the students. Each activity has been designed to exploit the feature which has formed the focus of the unit. However, the full range

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of intonational features will come into play, so teachers should try to ensure at some stage that the focus feature is used appropriately.

Using the course

The course contains the Student's Book, the Teacher's Book and a cassette. It is designed to be used alongside a coursebook, ideally in lessons timetabled exclusively for intonation work. It is suitable for students working in a group or for students working alone.

The teaching notes which accompany each unit indicate the ways in which the material can be used in a class. They also contain the transcripts and answers to exercises, and it is therefore necessary for a student working alone to have the Teacher's Book. The notes which follow outline the approach and procedures.

The approach is
a) incremental: that is to say, the whole system of intonation is built up step by step. It is suggested, therefore, that the units are worked through in the order 1 to 8. Similarly, the sequence of the sections in each unit is designed to be worked through from section 1 to section 5. In some cases it may be necessary to leave out parts of sections, or you may wish to return to some parts for reworking, but the sections should initially be tackled in the order in which they are presented.
b) inductive: that is to say, the tasks and activities enable the students to acquire the rules underlying the practical use of intonation. As a consequence of this feature of the course, time must be allowed for valuable discussion and drawing conclusions.

Time Each unit contains material for a lesson of about 50 minutes. If time is limited, or if students experience difficulty with any part of the units, the work should not be skimped or rushed. It is preferable to work on shorter stretches of the material – if possible at frequent intervals. In this case, what has been said about working through the sections of a unit in sequence should be kept in mind.

The revision and practice units offer flexibility of use; you can work through the activities as they are presented or you can select the ones which are most appropriate to your students' needs and interests.

Omissions have been necessary in adapting Brazil's description of the system for teaching purposes. A regrettably necessary omission is the feature Brazil calls *Termination*. This relates to the significance of the choice of pitch level at the tonic syllable and has a very important function in shaping discourse. This omission has meant that tonic syllables in

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the transcriptions are usually represented as being at the same pitch level
as the onset of the same tone unit.

Transcription   Unfamiliar transcription conventions have been kept to
a minimum. Throughout the course prominent syllables are indicated by
using small capital letters. Full-sized capital letters have been used for
the personal pronoun 'I', when it is non-prominent, and for the initial
letter of sentences and of names. Full stops and other punctuation marks
have frequently been left out of transcriptions.

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Glossary

TONE UNIT

This is a division of natural speech which corresponds to the speaker's
organisation of what is said into units of information. Each tone unit has
a single pitch movement. There is no direct relationship between the
tone unit and any grammatical or discourse unit.

Transcription　　Tone unit boundaries are indicated by the use of two
　　　　　　　　　parallel lines: //

PROMINENT SYLLABLE

The tone unit will have, as a minimum requirement, one prominent
syllable. It may have two, but very rarely more. The distribution of
prominence is relative to the communicative value of the word (some-
times the syllable) at that point in the developing discourse. Thus, by
assigning a prominent syllable to it, the speaker marks it as significant:

Transcription　　Prominent syllables are written in small capital letters.
　　　　　　　　　e.g. // TURN slightly toWARDS me //

ONSET

The first prominent syllable of a tone unit.

TONIC SYLLABLE

The tonic syllable is the minimum element, the defining characteristic, of
the tone unit. It is the place where the major pitch movement begins, and
marks the focal point of the message. If there is only one prominent
syllable in a tone unit, it is also tonic. If there are more, the last one is
tonic.

Transcription　　Tonic syllables are written in small capital letters and
　　　　　　　　　underlined.
　　　　　　　　　e.g. // TURN slightly toWARDS me //

TONES

The pitch movement that begins at a tonic syllable is called a tone. There
are two broad classes of tone: those which finally fall (proclaiming), and
those which finally rise (referring). This binary system represents the
main meaning contrast, each of the tones having a particular communi-
cative value.

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Transcription   An arrow indicating the direction of the pitch movement which begins at the next tonic syllable is placed at the beginning of the tone unit.
e.g. // ↘ TURN slightly to<u>WARDS</u> me //

KEY

This system operates between successive tone units, and involves the varying of the pitch level beginning at the onset, compared to the preceding tone unit. For any speaker there is a 'normal' pitch level, easily perceived by interlocutors, which Brazil calls 'mid'. The raising of this level is called High Key, the lowering of it Low Key.

Transcription   Vertical arrows indicate the raising or lowering of pitch level at the onset.

e.g. Low Key: YES // to a ↓ LARGE ex<u>TENT</u> // it ↑ IS

  High Key: // I ↑ THOUGHT you were in <u>PA</u>ris //

References

Brazil, D., *Discourse Intonation II*, University of Birmingham, Discourse Analysis Monographs No. 2, 1978.

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Brazil, D., Coulthard, R. M. & Johns, C., *Discourse Intonation and Language Teaching*, Longman, 1980.