Teaching prosody in EAP

- This session is largely a participatory workshop. It explores the diagnosis and possible solutions for student pronunciation problems in an EAP context.

- It should last about 80 minutes.
TEACHING PROSODY IN EAP

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Workshop Aims

• To explore what elements of pronunciation / prosody might be most applicable in an EAP situation - student academic oral presentations
• To present a simple diagnostic tool to help identify the key prosodic elements in this context
• For you to try out the tool and offer comments
• To discuss and share possible teaching strategies to help students improve in the elements above
• To briefly discuss potential areas for further research into this area
Session Outline

• General framework and previous research in this area
• Our ideas/research in this area
• The ideas underlying the development of our diagnostic tool
• Trying out the tool – feedback
• Implications – discussion of teaching strategies and possible further research
Introduction

Prosody – the patterns of intonation and stress in speech

… intonation is central to oral communication … it relates to discourse segmentation … information structure, discourse coherence and self-expression.

(Wennerstrom 2006, p.80)

But how important is prosody in helping to contribute to overall spoken academic discourse (SAD) in this context?
SAD Competencies for oral presentations

Phonological
  intelligibility
  fluency

Textual
  lexis, grammar
  cohesion
  coherence

Pragmatic
  context
  sensitivity
  audience

Impact
  body language
  control/speed
  visual support

(adapted from Pennington 1990)
Previous research

• Chafe (2006) – differences in prosody between spoken and read aloud conference presentations
• Wennerstrom (2006) – models of spoken language and role of intonation (not specifically EAP)
• Thompson (2003) – phonological paragraphs in lectures
• British Academic Spoken English [BASE] (2005) (see BASEplus, though mainly lecture/seminar) and Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English [MICASE] (2007)
• Derwing & Munro (2009) – the impact of ‘accent’ on intelligibility and comprehensibility – what we might expect of our students?
The present study (1)

Research questions

• What are the crucial elements of EAP prosody that students need to develop for effective communication in academic presentations?

• How might these elements differ from those identified for effective ‘general’ L2 oral communication?

• [What teaching strategies might be used to develop these elements in an EAP context?]?
The present study (2)

- Analysed 10 minutes of audio-visual recordings of 5 student presentations
- Variety of L1, disciplines and gender
- Different degrees of presentation effectiveness
- Constructed a basic diagnostic tool, using Gilbert´s (2008) ‘Prosody Pyramid’ as a basis
Initial ideas

The Prosody Pyramid

Peak
Stress
Focus Word
Thought Group

(Gilbert 2008, p. 20)
Some basic premises

- Students should be fluent and intelligible to audience in this context (i.e. not NS norms, cf. Jenkins 2000)
- ‘Accent’ not included (Derwing & Munro 1990)
- ‘Rhythm’ as in stress-/syllable timed distinction not considered (Ling Low 2006)
Developing ideas

**Spoken Academic Discourse: A scoring sheet**

Presenter: ____________________________________________
Topic: __________________________________________________________________

**General assessment of speech**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 (very effective)</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 (ineffective)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SAD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>1 (very intelligible)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 (unintelligible)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency</td>
<td>1 (very fluent)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 (disfluent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>1 (very high)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 (very low)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Detailed assessment of speech**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 (very strong)</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 (very weak)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thought group marking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak syllable stress</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word stress</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhythm</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First of all, I want to point out the food safety instance in China. I will give two examples.
First video extract

• Please watch the following student presentation and try to evaluate it, using the SAD scoring sheet

• Did you find it easy?

• How would you evaluate this student´s SAD phonological competence overall?
Second video extract

• Please watch the following student presentation and evaluate it, using the SAD scoring sheet

• How would you evaluate this student’s SAD phonological competence?

• Which prosodic features do you think could have helped this student deliver a more effective academic presentation?
Feedback on research tool

- Do you find the proposed research tool to be valid and reliable?
- Do you think the proposed scoring sheet does identify the most important elements of EAP prosody?
- Are there any other phonetic features you think are bound to be important in effective SAD?
Implications (1)

Teaching prosody for EAP

*Having identified student weakness in specific areas:*
- **What specific ideas/activities do you have/could you use to address them?**
- **What general strategies might be effective?**
- **What kind of balance between awareness raising and practice might there be?**
- **To what extent might ‘modelling’ be employed – and how would this be carried out?**
- **What kind of online/independent resources might be available?**
Implications (2)

Possible areas for further research into EAP prosody

• How do NS and NNS academic presenters differ in terms of prosody?
• Does EAP prosody vary by discipline?
• How far do NS and NNS tutors/audiences differ in their perception of what SAD phonological competence entails?
• To what extent do the concepts of thought groups and fluency overlap?
• How far can visual support counteract weak prosody?
• Which teaching methods seem to be most effective?
Conclusions

- Although not easy to isolate, prosody is a key component of overall SAD competencies for oral presentations.
- Communicating quite complex ideas/information in an academic presentation may require a different mix of prosodic elements from other contexts.
- The ‘thought group’ as a phonological concept seems a useful one in this context. However, the links between different thought groups (‘prosodic cohesion’) may also be important in academic contexts.
- Presented a tool - practical use in diagnosing key areas of phonological competence for student academic presentations which tries to take account of the above points.
- Discussed a number of ways of helping students improve in these areas.
References


