

TESTING
PRONUNCIATION
STRESS
&
INTONATION

Testing Pronunciation

10.1 Introduction

To master a language, one has to learn which sounds occur in the language and how they pattern according to the rules of that language. Perfect or near perfect mastery of the foreign language sound system i.e., phonetically acceptable, is a desirable goal, but it is not an important aspect of the learning process. As a matter of fact, English native speakers do not consciously make all the possible phonetic discriminations; they are so familiar with certain patterns and contexts that they can understand what is being said even if they do not pay close attention to every word they hear. Also, it is possible for two non-native speakers of English to have a productive conversation in English without an accurate pronunciation. As a result, it appears that the criterion of accuracy for general tests of pronunciation be placed upon comprehensibility. Obviously, setting higher standards of pronunciation accuracy depends on the purpose of language learning.

Pronunciation tests, consequently, attempt to assess the examinees' ability to recognize and produce the sounds, stress patterns, and the tunes of the language in a phonemically acceptable way. Specifically, pronunciation tests are utilized with beginning and intermediate examinees. With higher-intermediate and advanced examinees testers are more concerned with assessing listening comprehension. The following illustrate some of the most common ways of assessing testees' recognition and production of the sounds and their combination patterns in English.

10.2 Recognition

Testing recognition of sounds, stress, and intonation can best be accomplished through such item types as multiple-choice and true-false that relieve the testees from reading much and allow them to focus on the oral stimuli.

10.2.1 Sound Discrimination

Sounds can be tested via pictures or in isolation from their references. The examiner, for instance, reads a word or a short statement and the examinees choose from two or more pictures the one that corresponds to the oral stimulus:

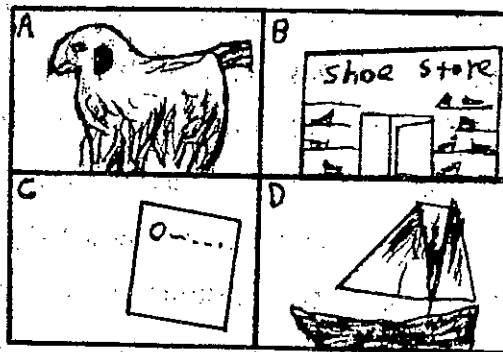
Example 1

examinee hears

That's a ship.

examinee reads

A B C D



Pictorial items are particularly useful with beginners and children; they provide an efficient tool for conveying information to the testees without requiring reading or writing, and children enjoy them. However, pictures can be ambiguous if they are not drawn clearly. Sometimes pictures do not focus immediate attention on the object or action being tested. Indeed, some words cannot be drawn. In addition, good pictures can be expensive and time-consuming to prepare. Under such an unfavorable situation, sounds can be tested in isolation. In this type of item, the examiner reads a word, the examinee listens carefully and then chooses the word he has heard from

among the four or more options on his answer sheet:

Example 2

examinee hears

sheep

examinee reads

A) shop

B) ship

C) sheep

D) shape

A variation of this type involves an oral stimulus which consists of a set of three or more words, and the examinee has to identify the one that is different from the others:

Example 3

examinee hears

eat, it, eat

examinee reads

A B C

Since such an item type is easy to prepare and administer, it can serve useful functions. Yet, this type of item has no concern for meaning and does not match any activity in real life. A test type that does not have these limitations is dictation.

In a dictation test, the examiner reads a text to the testees and asks them to write down what they hear. Of course, because the testees have to produce language in writing to show their perception of the sounds of the language, dictation has its own shortcomings. A detailed description of dictation and what it measures in addition to perception of sounds is presented in later Chapters.

10.2.2 Stress Recognition

Stress has been traditionally tested in isolation. The examiner reads words of two syllables or more and asks the examinees to indicate the prominent

syllable:

Example 4

<i>examinee hears</i>	<i>examinee reads</i>
English	1 2
Láboratory.	1 2 3 4 5

Along the same lines, sentence stress is tested by the examiner reading a sentence and asking the examinees to mark the word that receives the primary stress:

Example 5

<i>examinee hears</i>	<i>examinee reads</i>
The teacher will téach Lesson Two.	1 2 3 4 5
or The téacher will teach Lesson Two.	1 2 3 4 5

However, testing of examinees' identification of stress patterns is best achieved contextually using contrastive stress placement. A sentence such as "Good boys and girls study hard." can represent different meanings, depending on what element is stressed. For example, if the primary stress is placed on "boys", the sentence could mean "both good boys and good girls study hard." However, if the primary stress is put on "and", the statement could mean that only good boys and all girls study hard:

Example 6

<i>examinee hears</i>	<i>examinee reads</i>
Good bóys and girls study hard.	
Good boys ánd girls study hard.	Same Different

Example 7

examinee hears

Good boys and
girls study hard.

examinee reads

- A. Boys and girls study hard.
- B. All boys and good girls study hard.
- C. Only good boys and all girls study hard.
- D. Both good boys and good girls study hard.

10.2.3 Intonation Recognition

Recognizing intonation patterns is an important ability. Yet, because the range of possible intonation patterns is extremely wide and varies from person to person, it is not fair to ask for examinees' interpretation of personal speech characteristics. Hence, the examiner has to approach testing of intonation with great caution.

Two types of formats are commonly used. In the first format, the examiner reads two or more utterances and asks the examinees to indicate which in the set is different:

Example 8

examinee hears

²Why did he ³leave¹?

²Is he ³there³?

²What are you ³doing¹?

examinee reads

1 2 3

Example 9

examinee hears

²Where are you ³going¹?

³Where are you going³?

²Where are you ³going¹?

examinee reads

1 2 3

In the second type, the testee hears an utterance and is asked to choose the best meaning from among three or more choices printed in his test booklet:

Example 10

examinee hears

²Why is Mary ³watching², ²Tom¹?

examinee reads

The speaker is asking,

- A) "Why is Mary watching Tom."
- B) "Why is Tom watching Mary."
- C) "Tom, why is he watching."
- D) "Tom, why is Mary watching."

10.3 Production

Testing production of segmental and suprasegmental phonemes presents more problems for the examiner than that of recognition. The problems are mainly due to the inherent nature of the spoken responses with their consequences of test administration and scoring. Although the best way to test one's ability to produce the phonemes of a language is through an interview test, this is not always the easiest. The examinee, for instance, may avoid a certain sound or combination of sounds because he has not yet mastered them. Because of this problem (and several other limitations that are brought up later), it is customary to employ various elicitation procedures to stimulate the examinees to produce the language orally. This is accomplished in a number of ways. The following illustrate some suitable test formats that are most common.

10.3.1 Imitation

The examinee is presented with short spoken phrases and is asked to imitate them as closely as he can. Depending on the purpose of the test and the proficiency level of the testee, vowels, diphthongs, vowel reduction, consonants, assimilation, consonant clusters, stress, and intonation can be evaluated. To

avoid difficulty in identifying the testees' mistakes in scoring, it is recommended that each item include just one point:

Example 11

- a. blúe bók
blúe book
- b. Visiting péople frightens him.
Visiting pèople frightens him.
- c. Tom shot the bláck bird.
Tome shot the bláck bird.
- d. ²I'm going ³home¹.
²I'm ³going home¹.
³I'm going home¹.

A limitation of this procedure is that the ability to imitate a given sound accurately right after hearing it may not match the ability to produce it with similar precision when the model is absent.

10.3.2 Reading Aloud

In this type of test, the examinee reads aloud a set of words, sentences, or a passage of connected discourse and the examiner evaluates his control of specific points included in the reading stimuli. The testee is given a short time to glance through the stimulus material before being asked to read it aloud. The test materials should comprise real-life aloud reading stimuli such as letters, notices, and announcements. Certainly, since this test format does not represent everyday reading tasks—silent reading—it has to be used with this limitation in mind.

Example 11

examiner checks

[ɔ]

[ə]

[1 stress]

[st]

[kɪ]

[sl]

examinee reads aloud

The children next door often play soccer in the yard and sometimes break my window. Yesterday afternoon, I stayed at home and read a book. After a while, I closed my eyes and went to sleep. A sound at the door made me get up quickly.

10.3.3 Retelling

In this format, the examinees are asked to retell a story, an anecdote, or an incident they are given to read prior to being tested. The reading text should be carefully chosen to include the points the examiner wishes to test. Evaluation is mainly focused on the testee's pronunciation of specific segmental and suprasegmental phonemes.

10.3.4 Talking about Pictures

Pictures are used to elicit verbal responses. In this format, the examinee is presented with pictures and asked to describe or tell a story about them. The testee's performance may indicate diverse deficiencies; however, the examiner is only concerned with pronunciation problems.

10.4 Guidelines for Constructing Pronunciation Items

The foregoing procedures were suggested with notes on their limitations. Such procedures should, therefore, be used with caution and never as the only means of appraising language ability. To ensure a reliable and valid assessment of the ability to pronounce, the following general guidelines for

item preparation and scoring are recommended:

1. Proper selection of the stimulus materials is of utmost significance. First of all, the materials should represent informal spoken English with words of very high frequency. Care should be taken to relieve the examinees from too much reading or writing so they can focus on the oral stimuli.

Second, not all sounds or stress patterns should be chosen. The test constructor should identify those points in the English language that have no counterparts in the testees' native language and include a cross-section of them in the test. Of course, it should be noted that such items are merely useful for group testing when the testees come from the same language background. If the testees are of different native tongues, items should be universal, i.e., sampled without respect to any particular language.

Third, testing the phonemes of the language in isolation is far from any real-life activity. It is recommended that the points be contextualized to the extent possible. The context should be relevant to real-life activities. For instance, we rarely—if ever—read a literary prose passage aloud, but we do often read out letters, notices, news, or recite poetry to our friends and the people in our company. Materials from such sources can best constitute oral stimuli for test items to be used in loud reading.

Finally, care should be exercised in preparing pictures if they are to serve useful functions. Pictures must be simple and free from any ambiguity generated by a difference in cultural background, age, or socioeconomic status.

2. Production tests should be administered to examinees individually, unless the examiner has at his disposal a well-equipped laboratory to record each testee's spoken responses. The former requires evaluation of the responses at the same time of test administration (simultaneous), whereas the latter, if well recorded, allows (delayed) scoring at any time the examiner wants to. If simultaneous scoring is to be carried out, predetermined standards of scoring are vital. The examiner should avoid evaluating every phoneme the testee utters; it is much better if the assessment is limited to a few specific points so that the examiner knows exactly what to look for. If, however,

delayed scoring is used, the examiner has a better chance for evaluating several phonemes. With repetitive playbacks, he can check on the testees' pronunciation of stress groups, rhythm units, juncture, assimilation, and reduced forms.

3. Scoring tests of production demands a criterion. Phonetic accuracy would ideally be assessed using native speaker judges whereas phonemic acceptability could well be tapped by non-native speaker examiners. Moreover, to ensure rater reliability, it is suggested that at least two examiners collaborate in assessing production ability.

Activities

1. The following are also recommended as other possible procedures for testing pronunciation of segmental and suprasegmental phonemes. What is your evaluation of each item type? What are the advantages/limitations of each?

A. One device, for instance, presents carefully selected words and phrases in the examinee's native tongue and asks him to pronounce their¹ equivalents in English that include the points to be tested. Here is one example with which the examiner wants to test a Farsi testee's command of English consonant clusters:

examinee hears

Say aloud in English the
equivalent of /maedrese/:

examinee responds

school

B. Listen carefully to the following text which will be read only once. When it is finished say it back:

Mr. Smith was feeling so sick that he visited the doctor immediately.

C. Study each item below and then choose the word or the syllable you would stress:

Tom's at the library .

A B C D

Ph o t o g r a p h y

A B C D

D. Find the vowel sound that is different from the others in the set:

said head net seat

A B C D

E. Which pair of words "do not" rhyme?

A) said, head

C) bate, bait

B) bought through

D) believe, receive

F. Look at the picture and tell whether the sentences you hear about it are true or false:

examinee hears

examinee reads

The driver is filling the car.

T F

The man is feeling the car.

T F



2. The following items are designed to test recognition of consonants and vowels of Persian learners of English in the third grade of the Guidance School. Point out the major weakness(es) in each item. Be specific:

examinee hears

examinee reads

1.

Deep

A) Jeep

B) Sheep

C) Keep

D) Deep

2.

Loiter

A) Lighter

B) Loiter

C) Later

D) Liter

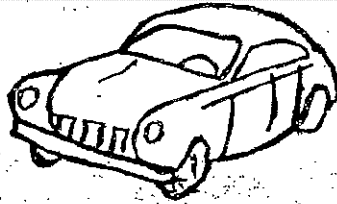
3. Point out the major weakness(es) in the following item. The testee is required to look at the picture and determine whether the sentence he hears is true or false:

examinee hears

I saw him buy the car.

examinee reads

T F



4. Find two pictures that each illustrates one pronunciation problem. Design one item on each, one testing recognition and the other production. Here is an example.

examinee hears

He's filling the car.

examinee reads

A) He's feeling the car.

B) He's filling the car.

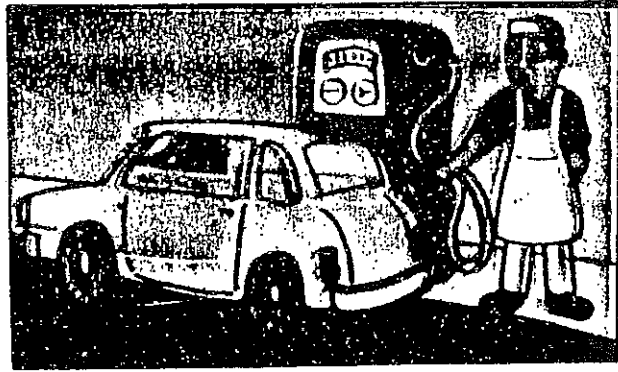
C) He's feeling the tank.

D) He's filling the tank.

or: Where's the driver sitting?

(He's sitting) in the car.

(The examiner is mainly interested in the vowel quality of "car".)



5. Think of other procedures for testing recognition and production of sounds and groups of sounds. What are their advantages/limitations?

