Discourse intonation attempts to explain how intonation patterns in English affect the communicative value of speech, through the use of falling and rising tones along with changes in pitch. The teaching of intonation seems to sit naturally with communicative language learning, but it is not an easy aspect of English to incorporate into the EFL classroom. Discourse intonation, with its emphasis on communicative value, is appealing theoretically for instructors and for practical reasons (aiding in understanding naturally spoken English) for learners. This paper reports on a study conducted at a language school in Japan, which aimed to establish a balance between the aspects of discourse intonation that could survive in the classroom and those that would help students to better understand spoken English. The study finds support for the teaching of some features of discourse intonation but also suggests that some features are too subtle to survive in practical teaching.

**Introduction**

The teaching of intonation is a problematic area for EFL teachers. While many instructors and students feel it is an important aspect of language to incorporate into a curriculum, it is difficult to teach and often resistant to learning. Modern textbooks frequently include sections dedicated to intonation; however, it may be difficult for learners to see any connection or generalization between these sections. This random treatment of intonation in teaching materials (Dalton and Seidlhofer 1994: 75) may partly explain the challenge learners face when attempting to gain control over native-like intonation patterns. One model of intonation patterns does present students with a clear set of guidelines regarding intonation in English: David Brazil’s two works—
Pronunciation for Advanced Learners of English (1994a, 1994b) and The Communicative Value of Intonation in English (1997)—introduce learners to how intonation affects the communicative value of an English utterance. Brazil considered the previous descriptions of intonation affecting grammatical and attitudinal properties as flawed in that they were difficult to generalize from one sentence to another. To provide a finite set of guidelines, which work in each and every occurrence of the intonation feature in question, Brazil looked at how they reflect the shared understanding between speaker and listener in a conversation. Brazil attempted to design a general explanation of intonation that provides a finite set of guidelines to illustrate a consistent interpretation of an intonation choice each and every time it occurs.

There is support for the idea that awareness of the features of discourse intonation will contribute to the development of learners’ listening comprehension. Gillian illustrates the dangers of learners not being exposed to the natural features of spoken English:

‘From the point of view of understanding ordinary spoken English the failure to move beyond the basic elementary pronunciation of spoken English must be regarded as disastrous for any student who wants to be able to cope with a native English situation.’

Gillian 1990: 158

Rost (1990) and Celce-Murcia (1996) also propose learners be made aware of the main features of discourse intonation: tone units and prominence. (See below for an explanation of the features of discourse intonation.)

Rost suggests that intonation can help listeners overcome grammatical misunderstandings of an utterance. Celce-Murcia goes further in claiming that intonation can overrule grammar in many cases; strengthening the claim for the teaching of intonation. She outlines the uses of intonation as including ‘an important conversation management function, with the speaker being able to subtly signal to the interlocutor to quit talking, to respond in a particular fashion, or to pay particular attention to a piece of highlighted information’ (1996: 200).
Dalton and Seidlhofer also emphasize the role of key and pitch in conversational turn taking with the fact that ‘intonational turn-taking clues can overrule syntactic ones,’ (op. cit.: 57). These features of intonation are unlikely to be acquired by learners in a traditional classroom environment, where the teacher is in control of the class and will dictate when an activity is finished and a new one begun. Learners are likely to have relatively few opportunities to practise taking control of a conversation.

Brazil, Coulthard, and Johns (1980) along with Celce-Murcia (op. cit.) have raised the question of whether learners are likely to acquire an understanding of the English intonation system simply by being exposed to natural speech. Their findings are largely negative; as Celce-Murcia (ibid: 226) points out ‘intonation unit signals are not universal.’ She goes on to say that ‘we can predict that many learners will need extensive practice in recognizing (and producing) intonation units’.

The features of discourse intonation
The following section presents a summary of the main features of discourse intonation: the tone unit, prominence, proclaiming and referring tones, and high and low key. The tone unit Brazil sees speech as a stream of words that communicate the speaker’s ideas and the main building block of speech is the tone unit, which aids the comprehension of the whole message. For example, (Brazil 1994a: 7) the following utterance would be produced as: //the bus stopped//we’d got to the terminus//and everyone got out//. (The symbol // is used to show where there is a tone-unit boundary, indicated by a break in the continuity of speech.) Brazil’s work concentrates on explaining how different intonation features within the tone unit affect the interactive event of speech.

Prominence
Within all tone units there will be one or two prominent syllables, helping the listener understand which part of the utterance to pay attention to. Brazil(1997: 22) uses the following example to illustrate the use of prominence:
Q: What card did you play?
R: //the queen of hearts//
In the response, ‘of’ is the only word that could link ‘queen’ and ‘hearts’ so is not made prominent. Both queen and hearts represent a selection by the speaker where the use of a different word would have altered the meaning of the utterance. The final prominent syllable in any tone group is called the tonic syllable. The syllables made prominent depend upon the understanding between speaker and listener at the time. If the speaker believes that the listener is not aware of a point that is to be introduced, then prominent syllables will be used to highlight this point for the listener. Making learners aware of this and training them to listen for prominent syllables will enable them to be better listeners and help them to decode the stream of speech. There is no right or wrong in the placing of prominent syllables, the speaker chooses according to ‘the special circumstances of the moment’ (Brazil 1994b: 37). The words the speaker chooses to select as prominent depend on the context of interaction. The features that make up this context are summarized by Cauldwell and Allan (1999: 20).
1 Shared awareness of the language system (how the language works).
2 Shared awareness of what has been said before—this can be cumulative over time or it may be unique to one interaction.
3 Shared awareness of cultural events.
4 Shared awareness of very local events/circumstances.
Referring and proclaiming tones

The information conveyed in the tone units of speech can serve a speaker’s purpose in one of two ways: either the speaker is saying something that the listener is already aware of through the context of interaction, or the speaker may be introducing something that is not yet shared between the speaker and listener.
Referring tones (rising intonation) are used in the first case and proclaiming tones (falling intonation) in the second case. The falling or rising tone is determined by the change in pitch at the tonic syllable (the last prominent syllable in the tone unit). The fall-rise tone is also a referring tone; the difference between the rising tone and the fall-rise tone is one of speaker
dominance. The use of the rising tone indicates that the speaker holds a dominant position in the discourse. It is sometimes not especially important whether the speaker uses the dominant form of the rising tone or not, but there are certain occasions where a distinction is significant. If you are making sure of something for your own benefit the fall-rise tone is more suitable; conversely, if the speaker is offering to help then the dominant form, the rising tone, is used.

When a speaker is giving specific attention to the language they are producing rather than the message being communicated, level tones are used. This happens in two cases: firstly, when the speaker is thinking hard about what to say while in the process of speaking, secondly, when the language being used does not serve a communicative purpose but is formulaic.

High and low key. The communicative function of high key (an increase in pitch at the first prominent syllable) in a tone unit is to signal that the utterance is different from what the listener may expect to hear. For example: We expect it to increase mobility // and it reduces it //
We know the environment is threatened // but we overlook it // The use of low key (a fall in pitch at the first prominent syllable of a tone unit) is used in the opposite case, where the utterance is just what the speaker is expecting to hear. For instance:
Traffic congestion// is just as serious // out of town// as in the country
Our next meeting // the march meeting // is the annual general meeting

Assessing the practicality of teaching discourse intonation
Brazil’s work helps to organize and demystify the teaching of intonation, but incorporating discourse intonation into the EFL classroom remains challenging for teachers and students. Discourse intonation requires intensive listening for changes in intonation patterns, which can be demanding even for native speakers.
This paper reports on a study conducted at a language school in Japan. The purpose of the study was to assess which aspects
of discourse intonation were most helpful for students at upper-intermediate and advanced levels and which aspects were practically teachable.

Methodology
A group of six teachers (all native English speakers) at a language school in Japan agreed to take part in a study to assess the effectiveness of discourse intonation within the EFL classroom. The instructors all worked at a school targeting high-level learners. The overall purpose of the school is to prepare students for entry into professional training programmes for translators and interpreters. The students at the school have to understand spoken English delivered naturally if they are to succeed. Students are streamed into seven levels by proficiency and only students who reach the seventh level can apply for entry into the translation and interpreting programmes. Students at this level are advanced, with TOEIC scores generally in excess of 900 or TOEFL scores in excess of 600. All of the classes involved in the study were taught at levels six or seven; hence, this environment was considered suitable for the teaching of Pronunciation for Advanced Learners of English (PALE) and the features of discourse intonation described above. During a nineteen-week course in 2002, six teachers incorporated elements of discourse intonation into their classes. Each of the teachers was issued with a copy of PALE and the accompanying audio cassettes as the basis for how they would teach discourse intonation. During this period, the six teachers had a total of eleven courses at levels six and seven. The total number of students involved in these courses was 104. The six teachers agreed to incorporate all the units of PALE and all the features of discourse intonation into their courses. The classes met once per week for two hours each time, making a total of thirty-five hours of classroom time (with two classes for counselling and one for testing). The teachers in the study agreed to allot a minimum of five hours per course to discourse intonation, although how that time was distributed throughout the nineteen weeks was left to the discretion of
the individual instructor. The teachers recorded the difficulties and successes of teaching discourse intonation and reported their findings on a weekly basis to the author in a face-to-face meeting. During and after each class featuring a section on discourse intonation, instructors noted their own and their students’ reactions. The instructors were encouraged to focus on their own ability to complete the listening exercises, along with how the students performed on these exercises. The aim was to identify if any of the listening exercises were overly complex and which activities were successful in raising students’ awareness of the features and usefulness of discourse intonation. In the nineteen-week course, students and teachers met twice for a performance review and counselling. Each meeting lasted approximately fifteen minutes and the teachers used this time to solicit students’ opinions on the discourse intonation elements of the curriculum. None of the participants had previous experience of teaching discourse intonation and they were not familiar with the text used (PALE).

Results
All of the instructors reported difficulty for themselves and their students in completing listening exercises within PALE and found some attempts to identify proclaiming and referring tones and prominence as little better than guesswork. These problems were most significant when learners had to listen to a dialogue and transcribe the intonation patterns they heard on to paper. Such exercises proved frustrating for the native-speaker instructors as well as the learners. On a more positive note, activities which utilized a more inductive approach were found to help in the understanding of how discourse intonation aids communication. Pre-listening activities were especially useful when learners were encouraged to speculate from a text which intonation patterns would occur. Instructors noted that such tasks greatly aided learners when they came to listen and note the actual intonation patterns occurring. Accuracy rates for completing listening tasks after text speculation were reported as higher. Problems with discourse intonation instruction
Students reported difficulties with all aspects of discourse intonation. The most consistent source of difficulty raised by learners was in identifying whether tones were rising or falling. A majority of the students (93%) involved in the study reported that they could not consistently identify tones as rising or falling. Even within isolated sentences, students complained that the distinction between falling and rising tones was too subtle for them to hear. Typical comments from students were: ‘I was only guessing at the falling and rising tones. I had no confidence in my ability’, and ‘It was interesting to listen for the different tones, but I could not agree with the answers given by the teacher. Even when I listened after the answers, I could not understand my mistakes’. Some students reported that they gave up trying to hear the differences between tones after the introduction of fall-rise tones and level tones. Some of the stronger comments from students were ‘I had no idea about all those tones. I was very confused and did not want to do it anymore’. Also ‘the tones we heard about later in the course (fall-rise and level) were just too much. I know how they are used but I could not hear them clearly’. There was less consistency in student opinion over difficulties with tone units and prominence. While some students (51%) also reported problems with identifying tone-unit boundaries accurately, they were far more positive about this feature of discourse intonation than with listening for different tones. Teachers also reported problems with identifying accurate tone-unit boundaries and prominence. The tone-unit boundaries were only clearly identifiable for two of the teachers when there was an obvious pause. Four of the instructors reported low accuracy rates in identifying whether they heard rising or falling tones in isolated sentences. Even with repeated practice, this skill continued to elude these teachers. Greater difficulty was noted after the introduction of the fall-rise tone and later tasks became quite frustrating for the instructors. Difficulties were also reported in identifying level tones. Comments from the teachers included: ‘As I could not hear the distinction between the different tones, I had little confidence in presenting this material for the class. As a result, the students began to find these exercises frustrating, even though I think we all recognized the usefulness of these
communicative features of intonation’. One teacher reported only being able to identify tones accurately when he had read the dialogue prior to listening. He added that ‘I was generally able to predict accurately from a text which intonation feature would be present in the tone unit. I suspect this ability might be lacking in a non-native speaker. It would seem unlikely that a non-native speaker would be able to process the dialogues for meaning and then ascribe the appropriate feature of intonation. Surely the purpose of studying discourse intonation is to help learners to decode the stream of speech more effectively. I was using what I read to work out the intonation feature, but this would seem to be the opposite of the aim of discourse intonation; to use the intonation feature to interpret the meaning of the message’.

Both students and teachers were in agreement over the difficulty of identifying subtle differences in tones and there was no support for including this aspect of discourse intonation in the classroom on a regular basis. There was a mixed response to other features of discourse intonation and the benefits will be described below.

**Benefits of discourse intonation instruction**

Despite listening exercises based around the features of discourse intonation being difficult for learners and teachers alike, an approach was developed to mitigate the problems. Activities that did not require the identification of tones were reported as beneficial by the teachers. Speculating from a text dialogue as to how the tone-unit division and prominence would sound and then listening to compare was stimulating and helped to draw attention to the specific intonation feature in question, without the frustration of attempting to identify exactly what was heard. A student commented that, ‘thinking about what we were going to hear before listening to the tape really helped me. I felt a lot more confident about hearing the different intonation’.

All the teachers agreed with a conclusion drawn by one participating instructor: ‘Using this task-based approach really makes the exercises more approachable and meaningful. I did not feel
uncomfortable in class with this approach and the students had so much more success in hearing the prominence and tone changes’. The following example is typical of this approach:

// there was no answer // i rang again // it was getting cold so I decided to go back I should have come in the daytime this was hopeless I could be walking about all night and never find market street I went back to where the shops were it was raining hard and the precinct was deserted I felt very miserable . . .

Working on your own, decide how you would read it aloud. Mark your tone-unit boundaries with //, and use circles to mark your prominence syllables (remember there may be one or two of these in a tone unit).

Read out to a partner the script you have prepared and listen to your partner reading her or his script. Compare your version with the one on the cassette.

Brazil 1994a: 12

Tasks where the learner was asked to speculate about why certain words contain prominent syllables helped the learners to create their own understanding of the use of prominence. Tasks where learners were presented textually with sentential intonation patterns and then attempted to reproduce the appropriate intonation were of value in attempting to tune the ear to specific tones. Learners found little difficulty in hearing whether the tone was a rise or a fall when they knew what to expect but lacked confidence when they had to decide for themselves what they had heard.

Discussion
The problems raised with regard to the teaching of discourse intonation have also been mentioned by other authors. Brazil (1994b: 6) admits that native speakers often cannot agree on what they hear regarding intonation patterns and that students should not be expected to be able to transcribe a conversation perfectly.

Dalton and Seidhofer (op. cit.) raise similar concerns, and while accepting that intonation does have value for learners, question whether it is too difficult to teach. They suggest that the aspects of
intonation that can be generalized and hence learnable may be too trivial to bother with. Referring to a general lack of attention inmost textbooks they suggest that:

‘We seem then to be confronted with a somewhat paradoxical situation: on the one hand, there is widespread consensus about the significance of intonation for successful communication; on the other, intonation is the ‘problem child’ of pronunciation teaching, for materials writers and teachers alike.’

Dalton and Seidlhofer 1994: 76

There are also theoretical concerns over some aspects of the model of discourse intonation described by Brazil. One area of difficulty is the accuracy of the description of proclaiming and referring tones in the discourse intonation model. Maidment (1990) has claimed that there are many cases of falling tones being used when the information contained within the utterance is already known to both parties. Maidment characterizes the fall/rise distinction differently to Brazil: What Brazil refers to as new vs. common ground might be more accurately characterized as foreground vs background information.

‘This does not commit the speaker to any precise assessment of the knowledge he shares with his listener; rather, it allows him to structure his utterance in a way which will reflect simultaneously his own current assumptions, and his assessment of what is appropriate to present as background or foreground, for the benefit of the listener.’ Maidment 1990: 41

While both teachers and learners reported similar difficulties with discourse intonation, it should be borne in mind that the instructors participating in the study were using these teaching materials for the first time. Discourse intonation was also an unfamiliar concept to the teachers. Although all of the instructors have considerable experience teaching EFL it is possible that some of the difficulties reported could be partly attributable to teaching new skills with unfamiliar materials. A longer term or follow-up study would be helpful in establishing the extent to which the reported difficulties were
substantive rather than circumstantial.

Conclusion
This paper has argued that there are theoretical arguments in support of certain areas of discourse intonation, namely the use of the tone unit and prominence in aiding listening comprehension and the use of pitch in aiding conversation management. This paper has also presented some evidence, albeit limited and preliminary, that suggests it may not be advisable to teach all aspects of discourse intonation, even when working with relatively proficient learners. Participants’ inability to identify falling and rising tones coupled with the doubt cast over their consistent correspondence to new and given information leads to a recommendation to omit this feature from classroom teaching. The notion of dominance is also of questionable value due to difficulties in accurately identifying the dominant rising tone in contrast to the fall-rise.

In summary, learners should be encouraged to be able to recognize tone unit divisions and the occurrence of prominence within the tone unit in natural speech. They would also benefit from an awareness of how native speakers use pitch variation to manage conversations. These aspects of discourse intonation would provide learner with a realistic and generalized view of how native speakers use intonation for communicative purposes. They are also practically teachable, using a task-based learning approach, and ready to be acquired by learners at an upper-intermediate level of English proficiency.

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