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Evaluating the Communicativeness of Pronunciation Activities within the ELT Textbook At The Crossroads

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Abstract: The present research paper seeks to inquire into one of the skills related to the productive aspect of oral communication, namely pronunciation. The aim is to assess the communicative value allotted to pronunciation in the prescribed textbook, to weight its status in at the Crossroads and the extent to which it is used to foster communication, and to examine the methodology underlying the handling of pronunciation and its user-friendliness. An evaluation grid is designed based on the reviewed literature of communication criteria, the competences synthesised in communicative language ability, the three aspects of context, integration and interaction that make up the representative language, and the constituting elements of pronunciation. The evaluation also addresses the degree of interaction and integration of the teaching of pronunciation with other skills and aspects of language learning. The results show that communication is of minimal concern. Instead, a prescriptive and almost textbook-centred approach predominates. Learners are learning more about the features of the pronunciation of the English language than really learning pronunciation.
Key words: *communicativeness, oral communication, pronunciation, speaking, teaching.*

***Résumé :** Cet article vise à interroger le statut de l'aspect productif de la communication orale, à savoir la prononciation. L'objectif est d'évaluer la valeur communicative allouée à la prononciation dans le manuel prescrit, pondérer son statut dans **At the Crossroads** et la mesure dans laquelle elle est utilisée pour favoriser la communication, et d'examiner la méthodologie adoptée pour le traitement de la prononciation. Une grille d'évaluation est conçue sur la base de la documentation examinée concernant les critères de communication, les aspects du contexte, l'intégration et l'interaction, et les éléments constitutifs de la prononciation. L'évaluation porte également sur le degré d'interaction et d'intégration de l'enseignement de la prononciation avec d'autres compétences et les aspects de l'apprentissage de la langue. Les résultats montrent que la communication est une préoccupation minime. Au lieu de cela, une approche normative et presque manuelle centrée prédomine. Les apprenants apprennent plus sur les caractéristiques de la prononciation de la langue anglaise que l'utilisation effective de la prononciation.*
Mots clés : *communication, enseignement, expression orale, prononciation.*

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1. Introduction

The field of language teaching in general and English as a foreign language teaching in particular has witnessed the implementation of a variety of approaches and methods. Macro and micro skills have been treated differently. Similarly, the aspect of pronunciation has been an issue for decades, which has resulted in different and varying consideration of pronunciation and its teachability. Although pronunciation is important in enhancing comprehensibility and intelligibility, it is often secondary within EFL syllabi, textbooks and classroom practices.

It is noteworthy that there is no agreement upon a framework for deciding what pronunciation elements to teach and how to teach them. It is of paramount importance to define its constituent elements in terms of segments and suprasegments. Besides, Applied Linguistics research has documented changing paradigms and patterns on pronunciation teaching which argue in favour of an approach or another, whether it be the top-down approach or the bottom-up approach.

A growing chorus of scholars (Field, 2005; Grant, 2010; Morley, 1991; O'Brien, 2004; Pitt, 2009; Savignon, 1997; Walker, 2010) emphasises the role of intelligible pronunciation to achieve successful communication. Despite minor mistakes in grammar and vocabulary, learners are more likely to communicate effectively when competent in pronunciation and intonation. (Burns & Claire, 2003)

2. Relevant Literature

Being able to interact and communicate comfortably and effectively in spoken English is of considerable importance. In that sense, communication has been accepted to be the main objective of teaching (Careless, 2006; Littlewood, 2004; Littlewood, 2013; Widdowson, 1978; Widdowson, 2001). Despite textbook writers' endeavour to design useful material to learners and teachers, textbooks need improvement to bolster both pronunciation attainment and communicative proficiency. Pronunciation cannot and must not be separated from communication. Without it, oral communication cannot take place. Another reason why it cannot be separated is that it communicates in the same way as morphology, syntax or discourse organisation.

Inspite of this remarkable insight being universally accepted in the literature, pronunciation is too often neglected (Derwing, 2010; Lord, 2010) and does not have the status it deserves in teaching materials. It is left to be picked up by the learners. At best it is 'taught' in the form of isolated instances to be memorised, leaving the learners to develop their own learning strategies.

The language in the textbooks, therefore, should not aim at learning *per se*, but should embody a philosophy that prioritises language as and for communication. Cauldwell and Hewings (1996) argue that coursebook rules on intonation are "inadequate as descriptions of what occurs in naturally occurring speech" (p. 327). Taking an example from intonation, they state that textbooks "allow us to describe only a fraction of intonation choices made in the language as a whole" (p. 333). This is why textbooks and classroom practices ought to provide learners with better models to allow them to understand the communicative significance of the features of pronunciation.

Pennington and Richards (1986) highlight this treatment of pronunciation as incidental to communication and rightly declare: *"It is artificial to divorce pronunciation*

from communication and from other aspects of language use, for sounds are a fundamental part of the process by which we communicate and comprehend lexical, grammatical, and sociolinguistic meaning." (p. 208).

It is of paramount importance to define what is meant by the ability to use language communicatively. Canale remains the undisputed father of the components of communication, and his production is the standard reference in the field. He describes seven criteria for successful communication. They are (1) the continuous evaluation and negotiation of meaning on the part of the participants, (2) social interaction, (3) a high degree of unpredictability and creativity in form and message, (4) clues as to correct interpretations of utterances, (5) a purpose, (6) authentic language and (7) success being judged on the basis of actual outcomes (1983: 3-4).

This notion of communicative language ability encompasses a wide range of abilities and competences. Most theoretical and empirical research on communicative competence is based on three models defining communicative competence: the model of Canale and Swain (1983), the model of Bachman and Palmer (1996), and the model of the Common European Framework (2001).

The concepts of communicativeness and communicative language ability cannot help represent authentic communication if the element of representative language is not taken into consideration. The latter fleshes out the two former concepts. Representative language can be explained by defining three aspects: connected speech, integration and interaction.

When people speak naturally, they do not use lists of words, lists of sounds, lists of structures, or lists of stresses. They combine various sounds, intonation patterns, lexical items, structures to convey the meaningful messages they intend to convey. Cauldwell (2002) warns how a citational form approach, in the form of sequences of *"words bounded by pauses, stressed, with falling tones"* (p. 18), misrepresents speech and that "in pursuit of segmental accuracy, students practise disfluent speech" (ibid.:18).

Integration means to focus on the implementation of pronunciation in the teaching learning process at the level of the curriculum, textbook and classroom. It also means integrating both segmental and suprasegmental features; and associating the instruction of pronunciation with the teaching of lexis, spelling, syntax, morphology, etc., with every macro skill and at every phase of the teaching process: presentation, manipulation, consolidation, assessment, remedial teaching, creative writing, etc. Hedge (2000) highlights the importance of striking the right balance between 'holistic and atomistic approaches' with her preference for the prevalence of the former. Pronunciation as a competence should be linked with other skills in order to maximize learning outcomes.

Listening and pronunciation are core elements to enhance communicative competence. Unfortunately, the impact of pronunciation on listening and vice versa is largely underestimated and underused in textbooks. Brown (1994: 233) declares that *"the importance of listening in language learning can hardly be overestimated. Through reception, we internalize linguistic information without which we could not produce language".* Underwood (1989) adds that exposure to authentic listening material that provides a genuine picture of spontaneous speech is essential if we wish to help the learners to cope later with real-life speech. She advocates its use from the very early stages.

The teaching learning process involves teachers interacting with learners and learners with other learners. That implies that learners reinvest the input and language resources they have acquired to produce "comprehensible output" (Swain, 1985). Leading learners to produce output reinforces their communicative competence and helps them "cope with their lack of language knowledge by struggling to make themselves understood" (Hedge, 2000: 13). She advocates having recourse to pair and group work where learners talk to each other to negotiate meaning.

3. Method

The present study has employed the explanatory mixed method design which has enabled us to gather qualitative and quantitative input. The corpus for this research is based on the content from the textbook *at the Crosswords* (ATC). It is the prescribed textbook by the Algerian Ministry of Education to be used with year one in secondary schools.

We have opted for a checklist which has been constructed based on twenty-five evaluation criteria. These criteria are of varying degrees of objectivity and measurability. They are derived from the components of communication and language ability competences, as well as the features of integration, interaction and representative language. The checklist was pre-tested by myself as the one and only informant for this tool and it was re-written in the form of quantitative questions to kill three birds with one stone: first decide whether the criterion is met or not; second, if it is met, calculate how many times it appears in the textbook; and third indicate in which unit it appears.

For impending processing purposes, it has been decided to reorganise the twenty-five criteria in the checklist under five convenient headings, selected to cover thoroughly all the aspects of the literature under our concern, as explained under each heading.

- Heading 1: Nine questions, numbered from 1 to 9 have been elaborated to cover the Communicative Language Ability criteria.
- Heading 2: Nine other questions, numbered from 10 to 18 cover the communicativeness concept.
- Heading 3: Questions 19 and 20 refer to the traditional aspects of pronunciation. Heading 4: Two more questions, 21 and 22 focus on the integration or isolation of the skills and the presence or absence of interaction.
- Heading 5: The last three questions, numbered 23 through 25, tackle the listening aspect of phonology.

4. Results and Discussion

The implementation of the checklist has helped draw a clear picture of the elements of pronunciation and their treatment in *ATC*. The Checklist and the criterion processed appear under Appendix A. The main results are presented and discussed below.

4.1. General vs. Pronunciation Tasks in ATC

Most researchers regret the fact that many syllabuses and textbooks have side-lined and marginalised the instruction of pronunciation because of pseudo arguments such as 'irrelevance', 'unteachability' and / or 'unlearnability'. Hopefully, At the Crosswords does

not share such views, and has opted for the implementation of the formal teaching of pronunciation to high school freshmen[1], in continuity with what was done in the previous four English textbooks. In the present book, out of an overall number of 373 tasks, 45 (or 12.06%) have pronunciation as their main focus.

The next step is to make a quantitative examination to find out, within the 45 Pronunciation tasks, how many are segmental and how many are suprasegmental. We end up with 13 in the first category and 32 in the second. These 45 pronunciation tasks are distributed fairly equally among the five units of the book. Each unit has a pronunciation focus section designed to raise the learners' awareness of selected features of pronunciation of the English language[2], as shown in the table below.

	Overall	Pronunciation	Segmental	Suprasegmental
Unit One	83	10	04	06
Unit Two	73	07	00	07
Unit Three	71	10	02	08
Unit Four	71	09	05	04
Unit Five	75	09	02	07
Total	373	45	13	32
Overall %	100	12.06%	03.48%	08.57%
Pronunciation Tasks		100%	28.88%	71.11%

Table 1. The Distribution of Pronunciation Features within ATC

From the table above, we notice that segmental tasks represent 03.48% of the total number of tasks in the textbook, and 28.88% of the pronunciation tasks. The suprasegmental tasks represent 08.57% of the total number of tasks in the textbook, and 71.11% of the pronunciation tasks.

4.2. Eliciting Learnable Phonological Rules

The processing of the tasks which meet criterion 1 identifies 17 tasks (or 37.77%) to impart to the learners a number of phonological rules. *At the Crossroads* provides learners with opportunities to practise different features of pronunciation, individually, in pairs or groups, on their own or under the guidance of their teachers. Learners are guided in confronting the intricacy of pronunciation making recourse to learning by induction[3] in order to synthesise some phonological rules, which they are expected to reinvest to produce speech based on correct, acceptable, appropriate pronunciation.

Even though the rules drawn from the activities under the guidance of the teacher may not be comprehensive, they help ease the burden of the complexity of pronunciation. Several rules contribute to raising the learners' awareness about some of the features of

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[1] The phrase 'High School Freshmen' is preferred to the longer 'First Year Students of Secondary Schools'.
[2] Phonetic transcription activities have been excluded from our inventory because (a) they are written not oral tasks, (b) they are limited to sounds and word stress (c) intonation and connected speech are ignored.
[3] Unlike what happens for grammar, "where the student is no longer asked to 'work it out' for himself but is given the relevant rule straightaway." (Page VIII To the Teacher § 2)

pronunciation such as stress placing (e.g. Task #3 p.100), rising and falling intonation (e.g. Task #1 p.6) and some assimilation aspects.

4.3. Context and Book Controlled Drilling

Communication does not appear to be 'the major element' in the tasks dealing with pronunciation. Only 4 tasks out of 45, or 08.88% are found to convey communication as "the major element", whereas 29 tasks out of 45 or 64.44% are recorded to involve controlled performance. This reveals structural audio-lingual influence with *Listen and Repeat* or *Listen and Substitute* as one of the main forms of instruction in tasks dealing with pronunciation. We have nothing against eclecticism, but the textbook offers mainly activities which never go beyond that drilling phase and fall short of genuine communication.

It should be made quite clear that there is no immodest intention on our part to belittle the effectiveness of such a practice. Drills are 'a necessary evil' when dealing with the instruction of certain features of language, pronunciation included. The point is that the use of drills should not be an end in itself. Drills should be a starting point, to boost the learner's self-confidence, before moving to a truly communicative activity. The approach adopted by the textbook designers of *ATC* is more mechanical than functional and suggests little cognitive involvement of a higher level.

A considerable control of the textbook over language is identified in answer to criterion 14. In as many as 97.77% of the tasks, no room is left for creation by the learners as the language is entirely prescribed. This does not give learners much opportunity and freedom to generate language in off the cuff interaction on their own, which kills spontaneity in communication, and hence communication itself.

The features of pronunciation are presented and practised in a string of isolated unrelated independent items to be memorised, viz they do not show the use of these features in real contexts of use. This is confirmed by criteria 2 and 3 scoring 75.55% and 17.77% respectively.

4.4. Meaning, Negotiation of Meaning and Interaction

Apart from seven tasks that meet criterion 10, meaning does not characterise the majority of the tasks in the textbook. There is focus on accuracy of the linguistic form, which restricts attention towards meaning and negotiation of meaning.

In the area of pronunciation, *At the Crossroads* does not seem to encourage interaction among learners. It is probably left to the teachers to decide when to have pair or group work. Criterion 12 denotes only one task (*At the Crossroads*. p.38) displaying interactive aims. Apart from this task however, the others do not grant learners much opportunity to talk about what is of interest to them: they just have to follow prescribed patterns.

An attempt at interaction is made via pair or group work in four tasks where reading dialogues predominates. Not only is it insufficient quantitatively, but pair work or group work alone cannot render a mechanical activity interactive and truly communicative.

4.5. Predictability of form and message

According to the results obtained with criterion 13, only one task (Task #4 p.38) includes an element of unpredictability according to the data shown for criterion 13. This suggests the dictatorial rule of the textbook depriving learners from exerting choice. This differs from real-life communication where speakers adapt their language continually as the conversation goes on. Most of the tasks in ATC carry a prescribed dimension that stop short of true communication as defined earlier when all the substitution options are offered, and at no time, are the learners encouraged to use their imagination and previous knowledge and volunteer their own answers.

4.6. Consciousness raising about discourse

The data collected using criterion 15 shows that six tasks only are meant to raise consciousness as to the on-going nature of discourse. For the rest, there is a decontextualised presentation of form and book controlled drilling. There appears to be little regard for the correlation between certain phonological patterns and on-going nature of communication.

4.7. Authenticity and Communicative Purpose

In a true communicative setting, authenticity and purpose go hand in hand. Criteria 16 and 17 deal with just this aspect. No more than two tasks (Tasks #1 and 2 p.130) are found to be connected to a communicative purpose while only eight tasks (Task #1 and 2 p.27, task #5 p.27, task #4 p.38, task #1 and 2 p.57 and tasks #1 and 2 p.130) make use of authentic language being comprehended or produced. In all the others, neither authenticity nor communicative purpose does prevail. Most activities under scrutiny contain language which consists of simple display of words or sentences containing little focus on meaning and communication. This is evidenced by Task#3, p.88; a string of isolated unrelated utterances, unthinkable in an authentic communication.

4.8.Communicative Outcome

Criterion 18 shows two activities only (Task#3 p.88, and Task#2 p.130) that have a communicative outcome depending on correct communication. Most outcomes are predetermined, in the sense that all the options are supplied by the textbook, and hence there can be no frustration due to breakdown in communication, nor that incommensurable satisfaction and aura the mastery of a foreign language can confer. This situation prevents learners from experiencing the importance that pronunciation has in spontaneous communicative contexts.

4.9. Integration

Criterion 21 reveals that 42 tasks or 93.33% show the predominance of pronunciation as a subject in its own right treated most of the time in isolation from other aspects of the language. This isolation is corroborated by the results shown with Criterion 22. It reveals that no more than 15.55% of the tasks are linked to other teaching points on the page or the very unit in which they are displayed. That implies that the remaining 84.45% are by no means linked with any other skills in the textbook.

4.10. Listening and Audio Material

There exist scores of listening activities in *ATC*. Most salient amongst them are the passages in the Listening and Speaking section of *ATC* with accompanying tasks. The scripts appear between pages i and viii at the end of the book. Unlike activities such as for example Task #3 p.130, Task #3 p.100, Task #2. p.68, the others have been excluded from the research because their primary concern is listening comprehension and not phonology.

Criterion 23 shows that nearly half the tasks (48.88%) focusing on pronunciation include listening. Most of the listening follows the same pattern, that is *Listen and Say* or *Listen and Check*. Moreover, as shown in criterion 25, the listening provides little exposure to a true representation of genuine spontaneous speech. On the contrary, the listening shows orientation towards structured non-contextual language. The tasks are more test-like than actual samples of real-life communication.

Through the evaluation, several tasks including listening have been identified. However, there is no audio-taped material accompanying the textbook. Any textbook including listening with a focus on pronunciation should have recourse to audio-taped material by native speakers. The quality of the listening model is directly linked to the teacher's competence. The teacher is the one and only model expected to convey the notion of correctness, not to mention features such as intonation and connected speech.

5. Conclusion

Pronunciation is no longer the 'Cinderella' of EFL teaching. The textbook designers of ATC have given pronunciation and its instruction a considerable share. This reveals the assumptions held by the textbook designers when they give the lion's share to features such as intonation, word and sentence stress or juncture in connected speech. This is a clear recognition on their part of the pivotal role these features play in genuine communication.

The data clearly show that communication according to the definition displayed in the review of literature is of minimal concern. Instead, a prescriptive and almost textbook-centred approach predominates. Students are learning more about the features of the pronunciation of the English language than really learning pronunciation. They are not given much opportunity to try out the components of pronunciation in context. Most pronunciation tasks are mere token contributions to the feature to which they are connected, making them hardly re-usable in another context. The material concerning pronunciation in the textbook is context-reduced if not context-free, mostly based on modelling and isolated practice. This approach focuses on pronunciation for pronunciation's sake, depriving the learners of the impact it can have on other skills and functions.

At the term of the evaluation of the phonology content of the textbook and given the results arrived at, we are provided with insights into the understanding of this teaching material as far as pronunciation is concerned. Some of the revelations bring comfort to the partisans of pronunciation and the teaching of pronunciation as an important element to achieve intelligibility. Both segmental and suprasegmental features are given a share in *At the Crossroads*. However the findings shed some doubts about the effectiveness of the tasks devised and the pedagogical gradation followed by the textbook in achieving communicative objectives. A prescriptive and almost textbook-centred approach

predominates. The identification of strengths and weaknesses aspires to help enhance teachers' capacity to select suitable material. This can help adapt, modify and eventually improve on the material dealing with pronunciation in the textbook. Therefore, much needs to be done on the part of teachers to exert their expertise and experience in bringing out the most substantial results in the teaching-learning process. The teaching of pronunciation is hard and demanding. It requires great competence on the part of teachers. One of the challenges is to be an exemplar worth following for the learners, especially that there is no audio-taped material accompanying the textbook.

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Appendix (1): *Results of the Textbook Evaluation*

Criteria	Unit number					Total	%
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**		
A. Communicative Language Ability							
1. How many times does the task transmit globally applicable and learnable phonological rules?	4	3	4	3	3	**17**	**37.77**
2. How many times does the task practice pronunciation in isolation (i.e. as a list of independent items)?	6	4	9	9	6	**34**	**75.55**
3. How many times does the task include pronunciation features in context?	4	2	0	0	2	**8**	**17.77**
4. How many times does the task raise the learners' awareness of sociolinguistic, discursive or strategic rules of use?	2	1	0	0	2	**5**	**11.11**
5. In how many tasks is communication "the major element" in the task?	1	1	0	0	2	**4**	**08.88**
6. How many times does the task represent an opportunity for purposeful language to be expressed?	1	1	0	0	2	**4**	**08.88**
7. How many times does the task prepare the learner for language use through follow-up tasks?	0	2	0	0	2	**4**	**08.88**
8. How many times does the task involve mechanical performance?	9	4	9	9	8	**29**	**64.44**
9. In how many tasks does the content create learner awareness of the "stochastic" nature of discourse?	0	1	0	1	2	**4**	**08.88**
B. Canale's Components of Communication **10.** How many times does the task focus on meaning or negotiation of meaning?	2	1	1	1	2	**7**	**15.55**
11. How many times is the task genuinely interactive (do learners talk about what they want to)?	0	1	0	0	0	**1**	**02.22**
12. How many times does the task require pair work or group work?	1	1	0	0	1	**4**	**08.88**
13. In how many tasks is there a degree of unpredictability concerning form or message?	0	1	0	0	0	**1**	**02.22**

14. In how many tasks is language in the task entirely textbook controlled?	10	6	10	9	9	**44**	**97.77**
15. How many times does the task raise the learner's consciousness as to the ongoing nature of discourse?	2	1	1	0	2	**6**	**13.33**
16. In how many tasks is there a communicative purpose connected to the task?	1	1	0	0	0	**2**	**04.44**
17. In how many tasks does the context involve authentic language being comprehended or produced?	2	1	1	1	3	**8**	**17.77**
18. How many times does the task have a communicative outcome dependent / based on correct pronunciation?	1	1	0	0	0	**2**	**04.44**
C. Aspects of pronunciation **19.** How many times is the task primarily segmental?	4	0	2	5	2	**13**	**28.88**
20. How many times is the task primarily suprasegmental?	6	7	8	4	7	**32**	**71.11**
D. Integration/Interaction **21.** In how many tasks is pronunciation the main focus of the task?	10	5	9	9	9	**42**	**93.33**
22. In how many tasks is the task linked to other skills on the page or unit?	0	4	0	0	3	**7**	**15.55**
E. Listening **23.** In how many tasks does the pronunciation task involve listening?	5	3	4	6	4	**22**	**48.88**
24. In how many tasks is the listening accompanied by audio-taped material?	0	0	0	0	0	**0**	**00,00**
25. In how many tasks does the listening provide "a true representation of real spontaneous speech"? (Underwood, 1989)?	2	0	0	0	1	**3**	**06.66**

The numbers under columns 1 to 5 represent the number of times the criterion under study occurs