ENGLISH TRANSCRIPTION COURSE
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Phonetic transcription is widely used as a pronunciation teaching tool in many higher education institutions in Europe, where large numbers of advanced students in English language and linguistics programs are expected to acquire transcription skills, normally at the phonemic level, with some insight into allophonic variation. Broad transcription is also a regular component in MATESOL phonology-oriented courses in the U.S., as Murphy (1997) reports.

There has long been a need for a book that offered substantial practice in these skills, and English Transcription Course certainly seems to provide the means to achieve them. One may argue that doing transcriptions is not conducive to pronunciation learning per se, and there is to my knowledge no empirical evidence to support this idea, although there is some indication that students perceive transcription exercises as highly beneficial. For instance, Edwards (1992: 226) found that learners rank transcription activities as the most useful, only second to laboratory work. The authors of the volume claim, I think quite rightly, that phonetic transcription is particularly useful for raising learners' awareness of the radically different pronunciation of words in citation and in context (i.e. connected speech). A more questionable aim proposed for phonetic transcription is that of auditory training, a claim made by Ashby et al. (1995: 171).

The linguistic framework of the handbook is grounded on the transcription usage commonly known as the Gimson-O'Connor system, exemplified by two excellent

pronunciation dictionaries, Roach and Hartman (1997) and Wells (1990), taking so-called RP English as the accent model. Choosing this accent model has both advantages and disadvantages; on the positive side, as the authors point out in the Introduction, RP has been charted and described linguistically, and has been the teaching standard both in and outside of the U.K. for many decades. The sociolinguistic limitations of RP should not be overlooked; only an estimated 5% of the population of the U.K. are natives of this accent, and it is being increasingly challenged as a pronunciation model in ESL contexts.

Linguistically, the problem with this model is that idiosyncratic features like vowel monophthonging, smoothing, intrusive r, and plosive assimilation, all of them covered in the book, are restricted to (some versions of) RP, and are blatantly incompatible with other widespread accents of English.

The volume consists of an Introduction, a Glossary, a Bibliography, and 9 units labeled 'lessons', probably to stress its 'courselike' nature. The structure of each lesson includes a very clear and to-the-point presentation of a connected speech topic, supported with relevant examples. Then a sample transcription follows, which contains several instances of the process, conveniently highlighted. This sample transcription is supplemented with comments, as is the rest of the texts to be transcribed. Then more texts (sometimes sequences of sentences) for transcription follow. There is an answer key that is especially helpful because it provides the model transcription and relevant comments. There are over 40 texts for transcription; 82% of the exercises have a passage format, about 10% of the exercises involve sentence-level transcription practice, and 8% word level. The average length of these passages is between 450 and 500 words. A minor criticism in this respect is that in the Introduction "a number of exercises of various types" are announced (p. 1), an announcement not fulfilled in the subsequent chapters of the book, where the vast majority of activities are transcriptions of texts.

The Introduction and lessons 1 and 2 offer a succinct but very clear description of the phonetic symbols and basic terminology of phonetics. The important difference between citation and connected speech forms of a word is excellently explained, and each of the lessons deals with a single connected speech process. One problem I see here is that transcriptions are introduced assuming the reader's familiarity with sound to symbol correspondences, an assumption that in some cases will not be true. Because the volume is presented as a course, the reader should be provided with prior training in establishing the appropriate links between the notation symbols and the sound-letter relationships for which they stand, given that transcription is expected to happen from the very beginning of the course. Before transcribing passages, the learner in a transcription course should probably have the opportunity to master more basic tasks.

Lesson 3 deals with stress, rhythm and weak forms, but it focuses mainly on weak forms of function words. In the pedagogic tradition mentioned, a great deal of attention is devoted to describing and systematizing the form and function of these weak forms. It is not clear, however, whether failure to reduce function words hinders intelligibility in the speech of learners, at least when English is used among non-native speakers (Jenkins 2000: 146-148). Language produced by native speakers, on the other hand, is problematic for non-native listeners who typically have trouble with reduced speech that affects function words, some very frequent lexical words, and even entire phrases. Another criticism is that sentence stress is not explained but is marked in the transcriptions; the reader is left with no clear criteria for marking stress in utterances in the passages for transcription.

Lessons 4 and 5 respectively introduce shandhi r and syllabic consonants. Lesson 6, dealing with elision, could have been usefully related to Lesson 3; this would have assured a clearer association between this connected speech feature and rhythm, and more generally with stress. In addition, only schwa deletion is mentioned, while the broader concept of unstressed vowel would be more helpful (cf. "medicine" or "aspirin"). Lesson 7 covers assimilation phenomena, mostly within plosives in contact, and Lesson 8 introduces glotalling. The final unit, Lesson 9, offers exercises for further practice, all of them in the form of passages to transcribe.

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Exercises make up the bulk of the book (79 pages), and the remaining 77 pages constitute an Appendix, with answers to the exercises. This means that half of the text is devoted to the answer key. A volume that is entitled "course" and whose chapters are called "lessons" should include some type of testing of the material and exercises, perhaps in the form of self-evaluation at the end of each unit.

Despite the minor criticisms noted, this book is an excellent resource for transcription practice, is clear in its layout and content, and responds to the needs of learners and teachers who want to acquire or improve on their transcription skills.

Works cited

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