Rightside-up Pronunciation for the Japanese—Preparing Top-down Communicative Lessons

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Most teachers think about and attempt to teach pronunciation in an "upside-down" manner, that is, beginning with and placing most emphasis on those aspects which often affect intelligibility the least: the phonetic segments. This article introduces another way of conceptualizing pronunciation—a top-down approach—which places most emphasis on upper-level, suprasegmental aspects. Examples of both skill-specific and integrative activities for developing these upper-level pronunciation skills within the framework of communicative language teaching are included.

日本人学習者の為のフレーズ単位発音教授法
——意志伝達を目的とするトップ・ダウン法を取り入れた授業——

教師の多くは『アップ・サイド』(すなわち意味の明瞭さに余り影響を与えるとは思われない音節重視) 方式で発音を教授しようとしたり、考えてきた。

本稿では、前述とは異った1つの発音教授法を概念化し提起する。その『トップ・ダウン』教授法とは、フレーズ等意味のある超分節面の発音に重点をおく言語学習方法である。ここでは又、コミュニケーション達成を目標とする語学教授法の枠の中で、このレベルの発音技能を伸ばすのに役立つ技能別演習法や統合的演習法の例も提案する。

1. Introduction

Among speakers of English as a second language that I have instructed, the Japanese have demonstrated some of the most serious pronunciation difficulties. Oral communication is often impaired even when the speaker possesses adequate semantic and syntactic knowledge of the language. The reasons for this seem to be that Japanese learners do not acquire English through a communicative, aural approach in which oral production is delayed long enough to allow the phonological system to be acquired in a natural fashion as advocated, for example, by Krashen & Terrell (1983). Instead, large quantities of vocabulary and complex grammatical rules are memorized without regard for the development of communicative competence. True, some highly motivated learners do succeed in converting this formal learning into accessible patterns that eventually serve them reasonably well in speech

production, but without the solid foundation of a naturally acquired English sound system, they may fall back on the sounds and phonological patterns of Japanese. Hence, the resulting speech can lack several of the English consonantal phonemic distinctions (e.g., /l/ /r/, /θ/ /ð/, and /f/ /v/) as well as over half of the English vowel phonemes.

As distressing as this situation may appear, I hold that it is neither the only nor the central issue involved in Japanese pronunciation problems. In fact, in the overall spectrum of pronunciation skills, absolute accuracy of phonemic segments may be much further down the list of priorities than several other higher-level aspects of pronunciation. Even so, it seems that whenever teachers do attempt to provide remedial pronunciation instruction, the segmental level is where their efforts are directed. This represents an upside-down approach.

What I call a **rightside-up approach** to pronunciation focuses on the phrase, or thought-group, as the basic unit of speech comprehension and production. The crucial question for learners, then, is not "How do I make this sound?" or "How do I pronounce this word?" but rather, "How do I say this phrase?" At this level, errors in segmental phoneme production are less significant to overall intelligibility than higher-level errors, that is, those in the suprasegmental domain (Halle & Stevens, 1962; Stevens, 1960). Pennington and Richards (1986) agree that segmental accuracy should not be the fundamental aim of teaching because "accurate production of segmental features does not in itself characterize native-like pronunciation, nor is it the primary basis for intelligible speech" (p. 218).

This is not to say that phonemic accuracy is unimportant or that is should be abandoned as a goal, especially in regard to vowel phonemes, which are particularly problematic to Japanese learners, and which interact most intimately with higher-level pronunciation skills. Until the time comes when Japanese students are afforded the opportunity to acquire English in a more natural manner, pronunciation difficulties of all types will persist, and remedial measures will be necessary. But we teachers need to be aware of the entire spectrum of pronunciation skills and devote an appropriate amount of time and energy to the development of crucial higher-level skills. We should approach pronunciation teaching from a top-down as well as bottom-up perspective, while, as much as possible, remaining within the framework of communicative language teaching.

2. What Does Top-Down Mean?

Top-down processing refers to a system of analyzing and comprehending language that depends primarily on the larger units of meaning. Figure 1 illustrates skills speakers use to produce phrases of oral English. A top-down

approach to pronunciation teaching would begin with and place most emphasis on the skill areas in the upper portion of the chart: thought-group chunking, intonation (terminal pitch direction), focus, stress, and rhythm. A bottom-up approach, conversely, takes the opposite perspective.

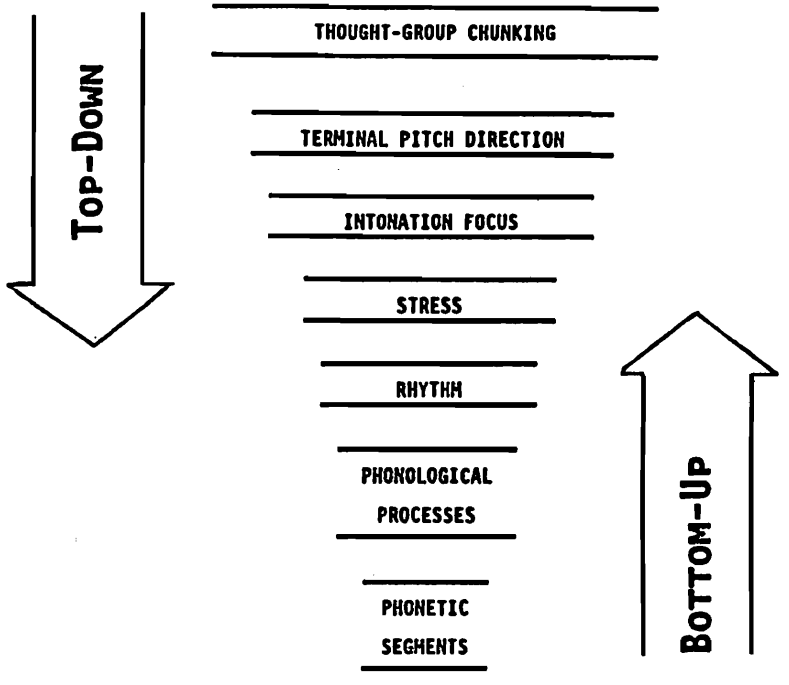

Figure 1.
Skill Areas of Phrasal Language Production

In decoding speech signals, we rely on both bottom-up and top-down processing. Although bottom-up processing serves as a base point for comprehension, it must operate in conjunction with top-down processing. We do not process the individual phonetic segments in real-time linear fashion, but rather engage in a process of sampling and reconstruction (i.e., phonemic restoration) that takes into account expectations based on semantic, syntactic, and general knowledge, and relies very heavily on the regular rhythmic patterning of stress and focus syllables (Clark & Clark, 1977; Kess, 1992). If these higher-level features are not accurately produced, the comprehension process becomes exceedingly taxing and communication often breaks down. Japanese, as it happens, lies at the opposite end from English on a continuum of differences in the use of syllable structure, vowel reduction, and phonetic

influence of stress (Dauer, 1983). Hence, higher-level skills are not only important but particularly difficult for Japanese learners.

Errors in suprasegmental aspects of language have been shown to cause more miscommunication than do errors in individual consonant or vowel sounds (Dirven & Oakeshott-Taylor, 1984). These skills seem to operate on a less conscious level of awareness than do the segmental features or other aspects of language production (Evans, 1982; 1990). While errors in segmental phonemes are readily perceived as errors and either glossed over or sometimes corrected by the listener, suprasegmental errors are most often not recognized as errors and almost never corrected. They often lead to misunderstandings or vague feelings of uneasiness on the part of the listener.

In addition to aiding top-down processing of phonetic signals, higher-level skills play other crucial roles in determining the communicative force of messages. The attitudinal information conveyed by intonation is well documented (e.g., Brazil, Coulthard, & Johns, 1980; Crystal, 1975; O'Connor & Arnold, 1973; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartik, 1972). In addition, higher-level skills shed light on syntactic relationships (see Halliday, 1967; Hirst, 1977) as demonstrated by the fact that the following string, with five thats in a row, causes little confusion when delivered orally:

He said that that "that" that that woman said ought to have been "which."

Brazil, Coulthard, and Johns (1980) emphasize the interactive role of higher-level skills, stating that "intonation choices carry information about the structure of the interaction, the relationship between and the discourse function of individual utterances, the interactional 'given-ness' and 'newness' of information and the state of convergence and divergence of the participants" (p. 11).

In my experience, higher-level pronunciation skills seem to be little understood by teachers and almost entirely neglected in most language training programs. Consequently, pronunciation teaching has traditionally taken a bottom-up perspective. Typically, a pronunciation curriculum begins by providing instruction and practice in distinguishing and producing the array of meaningful phonetic segments (phonemes) of the language. Students may well labor hour after hour over minimal pairs such as sheep/ship, cheat/sheet, liver/river and the like. Although practice such as this is not totally without value, the sad fact is that in many cases here is precisely where pronunciation teaching not only begins, but also ends.

3. What is a Thought-Group?— How to Mark a Text for Oral Presentation

A thought group is a group of words which are uttered together in one breath, with one intonational contour, and with one intonational focus, or most

prominently stressed syllable. For example, in answer to the question "What is your favorite fruit?" the sentence "Grapes are my favorite fruit," would normally be uttered as one thought group:

o . .
1. Grapes are my favorite fruit\

The boundaries of thought groups are clearly marked by pauses and one of three types of intonation behavior: terminal, non-terminal, and question intonation. In example 1, \ indicates terminal intonation. That is, the voice falls, indicating the thought is complete.

If the topic of "favorite fruit" had not previously been introduced into the discourse, the speaker would likely set off the new topic in a thought group of its own, appropriately emphasized:

o . o
2. Grapes| are my favorite fruit\

Now, with the utterance expressed as two thought groups, the boundary following the first thought group is a non-terminal, indicated by the symbol |. For non-terminal intonation, the voice does not fall to a lower pitch, but rather remains basically level, or even rises slightly. The third possibility is that of a yes-no question, for which the pitch rises significantly. (Rising pitch may be indicated by the symbol /.)

Note, in example 1, that the emphasized information, "grapes," contains the most prominently stressed syllable (i.e., intonation focus), and is marked with "o." Two other stressed syllables, marked by "." complete the rhythmic structure of the thought group, with approximately the same amount of time occurring between the stressed syllables. This rhythmic stress, extremely important to the comprehension process and the other higher-level skills, may be taught by using communicative lessons. The simple marking system allows teachers or students to mark written or printed sentences on a document itself. Writing the marks in red ink, through which letters may be read, is the ideal way to call attention to stress in a marked text.

4. What Are Communicative Lessons?

Communicative activities play a very important role in the development of productive language skills. They are designed to create opportunities for students to put their acquired linguistic skills to use in a variety of simulated real-life situations, and to develop all the aspects of communicative competence: not only to produce intelligible, grammatical utterances, but to decide what to say when and to whom.

Pronunciation work, in which the focus, by definition, is on form rather than (or at least in addition to) content, effectively excludes the possibility of

totally communicative activities by most definitions. However, it is possible to create activities for the development of pronunciation skills that contain most of the characteristics of communicative activities. The essential elements, as I define the term, are as follows:

1. The utterances/discourse used possesses the characteristics of natural communication, that is, that the language is plausible and presented in contexts that are likely to occur in real life. This requirement would eliminate "The rain in Spain . . ." type of material.
2. The students have at least some creative input into the content of the language and/or are expected to respond to it. That is, the language should not be entirely textbook- or teacher-generated. If this is the case, then surely the third requirement will be fulfilled:
3. The students focus on the content of the message at least as much as on the form.

Communicative activities solve the "carry over" problem. It is a relatively easy task to get a student to mimic accurate pronunciation in class, when the focus is entirely on the form of the utterance. But for that correct pronunciation to become a part of the student's regular speech outside of the classroom, when the focus reverts entirely to content, is a quite different story. Communicative activities in the classroom are an essential bridge to accuracy outside the classroom.

5. How Is Pronunciation Change Effected in Adult ESL Learners?

I believe three basic dimensions are involved in changing pronunciation habits of adult second-language learners: (a) the affective dimension, including both positive attitudes toward the target culture and people, as well as strong motivation to improve language skills the student recognizes to be deficient; (b) the practical dimension, in which the various component skills of pronunciation are practiced and developed; and (c) the monitoring dimension, in which strategies are developed by the student to monitor both the speech of native speakers and the student's own speech with regard to pronunciation skills (Evans, 1990).

Following are descriptions of several types of activities designed to develop students' "upper-level" pronunciation skills. Of course these activities fall into the practical dimension. However, all three dimensions are connected. By engaging in practical activities which emphasize upper-level skills, for example, the student's affective dimension is also influenced. Students will realize the importance of these aspects of pronunciation, of which they most

likely were not even aware before, and their motivation will be enhanced. Likewise, these practical activities, especially when they are communicative, will also serve to develop monitoring strategies that will lead to continued refinement of skills outside the classroom.

6. Types of Top-Down Activities

It is possible to divide top-down activities into two main categories: skill specific, which focus on one skill area at a time; and integrative, that is, those which incorporate all the skills at once.

6.1 Skill-Specific Activities

Before engaging students in integrative top-down activities, the teacher should introduce the various upper-level skills and provide opportunities for communicative practice which focuses on the specific skill.

Emphasis-Shift Activities: Emphasis-shift activities are designed to provide practice in shifting the intonation focus of utterances depending on the new/given status of information during the development of discourse.

Jack O'Diamonds (adapted from Woolward, 1988, p. 7) is a simple card game that can be played with a variable number of players (3 to 6 recommended). The jack of diamonds is placed face-up on the table. Then the rest of the cards in the deck are dealt to the players. Play begins when the dealer calls out "Jack of **DI**amonds." Intonation focus naturally falls on the stressed syllable of the final content word, according to the "basic emphasis rule" (Gilbert, 1984). (In this and further examples, bold capital letters are used to indicate intonation focus.)

The player to the dealer's left then can either play or pass. A play can be made by matching either the suit or the number/name of the card and putting the matching card on top of the card on the table while calling out its name. Any card of the diamond suit would be a match for the jack of diamonds. Likewise, any other jack would be a match. If, for example, the player is holding a jack of hearts, he or she could play it, calling out, "Jack of **HEARTS**." In this case the intonation focus remains on the final content word, as that is the new information. However, if the player played, say, a five of diamonds, he or she would call out, "**FIVE** of diamonds," with the intonation focus shifted to the front of the utterance to highlight the new information.

Play proceeds around the table until one player has played all cards in his or her hand. A typical sequence of emphasis shifts might be as follows:

Jack of Diamonds.
TEN of Diamonds.
Ten of **SPADES**.
ACE of Spades.

Ace of **HEARTS**.
KING of hearts.

Mission Impossible, developed by Rie Tajiri, also develops the skill of shifting focus. Students work in pairs. Student A receives a mission card—which has several interrogatives (who, where, when, what, etc.) written on it in a specific order—and a sentence card—on which is printed one sentence which includes several adverbial elements. An example is Tom went to the park by bus this morning. A's task is to repeat the sentence several times, varying the position of intonation focus each time according to the order of interrogatives on the mission card. For example, if Student A's card reads "Where—Who—How—When" in that order, she would utter:

Tom went to the **PARK** by bus this morning.
TOM went to the park by bus this morning.
Tom went to the park by **BUS** this morning.
Tom went to the park by bus this **MORN**ing.

Student B's task, then, is to write down the appropriate interrogatives in the correct order as suggested by A's delivery (and, of course, to practice saying the sentence appropriately). If B matches the order of interrogatives correctly, the pair earns a point. Play continues with other sentences. The pair with the most correct matches at the end is the winner.

Contrastive Activities: Contrastive or emphatic stress adds an extra level of stress to the intonation focus of utterances. This type of stress is used when a piece of information is contrasted with something said previously, or when mistaken information is being corrected. For example,

MY dad is tougher than **YOUR** dad.
The meeting is not to**DAY**, it's to**MOR**row.

Numerous possibilities exist for exercises on contrastive stress, such as those based on picture differences (Ur, 1981; Yorkey, 1985) or mistaken world trivia, in which students make intentionally incorrect statements about world geography, history, or any other subject, and other students correct them with appropriate contrastive stress. For example,

Tokyo is the capital of China.
Oh no! Tokyo is the capital of Ja**PAN**.
Bei**JING** is the capital of China.

The **Wrong Utensil Activity** operates on the same principle. Materials required consist of sets of plastic knives, forks, and spoons in assorted colors. Have a student ask for a particular utensil in a particular color. For example,

Please give me a red spoon.

Then the teacher (or partner) "mistakenly" hands the student either the wrong utensil in the correct color, or the correct utensil in the wrong color. The student then makes an appropriately stressed statement.

That's not a **RED** spoon; it's a **PINK** one.
That's not a red SP**OON**, it's a red **FORK**.

An interesting combination of mistaken world trivia and picture difference activities is **Earth Reconnaissance Mission**, developed by Neal Peterson. In this activity, students create spontaneous, creative discourse using information about world geography in a simulation of a visit by extra-terrestrials. Students are divided into groups of nine. Three students play the role of space travellers from another galaxy, while the other six become experts on the six inhabited continents of the Earth. Information sheets are provided for the experts giving facts about the continents and their countries. Space travellers receive blank sheets on which certain data must be filled in. A space traveller is put together with experts on two continents, say, Europe and Africa, and must interview the experts in order to fill in the data sheet. During the activity a great deal of contrastive stress would be employed. For example:

Africa's population is six hundred and fifty million.
Oh, Europe has six hundred and **EIGHT**y million people.
The longest river in Africa is the Nile.
Really? The VOLga is the longest river in **EU**rope.

Group membership and roles can be shifted frequently in this activity. Tape recording is suggested in this (as in other communicative activities) to allow students to monitor their speech for accuracy of contrastive stress.

Rhythmic Activities: Many types of metrical material emphasize and practice the rhythm of English, such as poems, limericks, songs, and jazz chants (Graham, 1978). A communicative element can be injected into activities of this type if students contribute to the content of the material, as by filling in missing words or lines, and/or by responding in some way to the content.

Both criteria are met in the activity **Geography Jazz Chants**, suggested by Mamiko Okuma. This activity follows a study of the names of the 50 U.S. states, with particular emphasis on placement of word stress. Groups work together to make up short chants about states. This is done by filling in blanks in a model, as follows:

Where is _____?
It's next to _____.
It's north of _____.
And south of _____.
What's _____ known for?
It's famous for its _____.

Students are free to vary the model in any way. They can add syllables by "un-contracting" contractions, or by using expressions with more syllables

such as *to the north of* rather than *north of*, and so on. They can also add other types of statements.

The students then compete with other groups by reciting their chant, substituting the name of the state with the appropriate number of "da" syllables, stressed appropriately. The other team would then try to figure out the name of the state. For example:

Where is da-da-**DA**?
It's next to Indi**AN**a,
It's south of Wis**CON**sin,
And north of Ken**TUCK**y.
What's da-da-**DA KNOWN** for?
It's famous for Abe **LIN**coln.

Another fascinating example of the use of metrical material is Beatta Ballard's **JAM (Japanese-American) Raps.** The concept is to employ the style and rhythm of rap music to provide practice for ESL students in the suprasegmental elements—especially rhythm—of English. The communicative aspect comes in the development of personalized rap material. The student communicates personal information such as likes, dislikes, special interests, ambitions, and the like with the teacher. The teacher then works with the student to develop his or her own, individualized rap. The student rehearses the rap to the accompaniment of bongo drums or music, and finally presents it to an audience. Competitions for best performance could be held. The following is an excerpt from "Searching for Mr. Right," created by a student at Saint Michael's College.

Yo, everybody! Everybody yo!
My name is Aya but I'm also known as Ayako!
I'm a serious student from faraway Japan
And I came to the West with a serious plan—
I came to travel, I came to study,
And I came to find me a man!

You wanna hear about it? Here we go!
But I'm warning you now, it's a tale of woe!
So get out your handkerchiefs and hold on tight
And I'll tell you 'bout my search for Mr. Right!

Mr. Right, Mr. Right!
I've searched for him both day and night.
From Istanbul to Dublin to the Isle of Wight,
So many wrongs but no Mr. Right!

6.2 Integrative Activities.

A detailed look at an integrative-type activity illustrates more precisely how the various upper-level skills operate in English. The general pattern involved in such activities is (a) textual analysis followed by (b) intensive practice leading to (c) best-effort production. It is also strongly recommended that a text-creation stage precede this pattern.

News Broadcast: In this activity, the class or small groups work together to create and produce a news broadcast. The content of the news can be determined by the students—either real current events on the local, national, or international scale, or news of their campus or intensive English program. Obviously the first stage, developing the script, integrates all the communication skills of English, including much discussion, interviewing, reading, writing, editing, and proofreading.

After scripts have been written and polished, the textual analysis begins. Appendix 1 (a–d) provides an example of a fully marked text after all steps in the analysis have been completed. It uses the system described in section 3. Here the text is (a) divided into thought groups and (b) the pitch direction at the end of each thought group is marked. Next, (c) the focus of each thought group is determined and marked. Finally, (d) each stressed syllable in the thought group is indicated for purposes of assigning rhythm to the phrase. This analysis can be done as a group consensus-reaching communicative activity in consultation with the teacher. Analyzing and practicing bits of actual radio or TV news broadcasts can serve as intermediate steps to the creation of student written scripts.

In the practice stage, each student rehearses his or her part, concentrating in turn on each of the upper-level features, until the student is able to deliver the script in the most natural and most intelligible way possible. Finally, during the production stage, the "news show" would be taped—either on video or audio tape.

Activities of this type are especially effective because (a) they provide top-down integrated work on all the features of pronunciation; (b) they have a built-in purpose in that they simulate the process which actual broadcast journalists go through to get the news on the air; and (c) the student generated content stimulates interest and motivation.

Any number of variations on this type of activity can be developed. Several ideas are suggested below:

Interview: Students roleplay famous personalities, either living or dead.

Talk Show: This is similar to the interview but with more participants, for example, a talk-show host and a panel of guests.

Documentary: This is very similar to the news broadcast except that a more in-depth presentation of various aspects of a theme is presented.

Skit: This heading includes any type of dramatic or comic acting ranging from the simple 5-minute skit to a full production of a play complete with costumes and scenery.

CCVD: CCVD is an acronym for **Cross-Cultural Video Drama**, a special type of humorous skit, which groups of students create, practice, and produce on video tape. The content of the skit concerns cultural misunderstandings that occur when two cultures come into contact. Typical situations for Japanese students could involve Japanese tourists in the U.S. unfamiliar with the custom of tipping, or an American exchange student meeting his or her host family in Japan (not removing shoes, not knowing bathing customs, etc.). The procedure for this activity, which is an on-going unit comprising work over several class meetings, is virtually identical to that of the news broadcast. However, after videotaping the skits a "film festival" is held, in which all the various skits are shown and awards for categories such as Best Skit, Best Performance (male, female, supporting, etc.), Best Props/Costumes and the like are presented.

7. Conclusion

This article has presented what may well be, for many teachers, a different way of thinking about pronunciation. It is an approach which, in effect, inverts the more common practice of equating pronunciation solely with segmental phonemic accuracy and, in fact, places greater emphasis on the higher-level aspects of thought grouping, focus, stress, intonation, and rhythm. It is meant not to neglect but rather to enhance development of phonemic accuracy.

In order to help learners effect real, significant improvement in intelligibility that will carry over from the classroom to "real-life" communicative situations, communicative exercises, both skill-specific and integrative, are recommended. Those described in this paper were developed and are being used in language classes at Saint Michael's College.

The author wishes to thank Beatrice Ballard, Mamiko Okuma, Neal Peterson, and Rie Tajiri for allowing me to describe pronunciation activities they have developed in the Center for International Programs, and Antonio Esteve for his news broadcast script.

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Appendix 1

Student Text Marked for Thought-Group Division, Intonation Contours, Focus, and Stress

\ = terminal falling intonation; | = non-terminal intonation; / = rising intonation; · = normal stress; o = most highly stressed syllable in a thought group

Christmas Postponed this Year

by Antonio Esteve

Last Friday evening| a death took place| in Vermont skies.\ While taking Santa back home,| flying over Chittenden County,| Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer| was shot| by an unscrupulous hunter.\

"I didn't know what was going on.\ After the blast,| I almost lost control of the sled,"\ Santa said.\

No one was hurt| in the rough landing.\ As soon as Santa went to see what was going on,| he saw poor Rudolph| shot in the neck.\ "He was bleeding terribly,"\ Santa said.\

Rudolph died| five minutes after getting to the veterinarian.\ As his nose slowly stopped shining,| his final words| were "Santa,| it's about time| you bought some bulletproof vests,| before the hunting season| is over.\

After the funeral services,| sadness| was the only feeling| among Rudolph's friends.\

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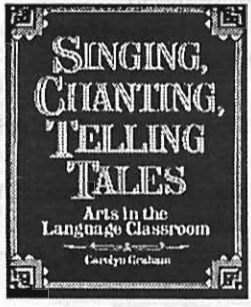

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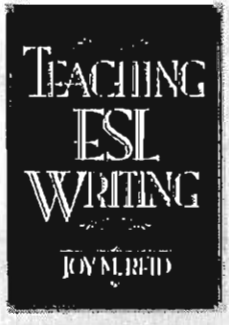

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Conv. & Dialogues in Action
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