

Teaching Intonation to Second Language Speakers of English

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Abstract

Intonation is an essential prosodic feature of speech which occurs as a result of variations in the pitch of our voices when we speak. These variations do not change the lexical meanings of the words we employ but they alter their semantic and or non- dictionary meanings. Regardless of its importance however, many Nigerians and other non- native English speakers across the globe do not apply intonation properly and this affects their intended messages as comprehensibility is often distorted. Although many Oral English and Phonetics/ Phonology textbooks discuss intonation types and functions, not much is found on teaching techniques for intonation in those materials. In effect, relying mainly on secondary sources of information gathering, this paper presents a review on the ways through which English intonation can be taught in second language settings alongside the causes of its poor/ non- usage. The study concludes that teaching intonation in a practical, interactive and fun filled environment using modeling, controlled drilling and role playing, the visuals and other technological resources among other techniques, will help to demystify misconceptions about intonation and makes its teaching and learning very effortless.

Keywords: intonation teaching, suprasegmental, modeling, the visuals, kazoos

Introduction

Second language speakers of any language, also called L2 speakers are non-native speakers of the language who have acquired and currently speak their indigenous/ native languages or mother tongues also referred to as L1 and are learning the second language for other communicative purposes (Tamunobelem, 2018). Learning a second language as explained by Tamunobelem (2018), requires time and effort as it involves the mastery of every aspect of the parlance, which includes, its phonetics, phonology, grammar, semantics and vocabulary among others. Notably, of all the levels of language, speech is fundamentally paramount (Lyons, 2000). And of all the elements of speech, both segmental and suprasegmental, intonation stands out as the major element through which people's utterances are assigned the melody with which they are articulated and consequently assigned deeper meanings based on the speakers' inner feelings, mood etc. (Njemanze, 2014; Chukwu, 2014).

Most Nigerians are L2 speakers of English and as such are faced with the ever necessary task of conscious language learning. Although many are competent users of the grammar of the language and have repertoires which are loaded with the vocabulary of English language, they still struggle with its phonetics, which concerns mainly the description and proper articulation of English words, and worse still its phonology, which deals with the effect of prosodic features such as intonation on individual and connected speech units (Jowitt, 2000). This paper therefore presents L2 English users with the meaning, importance and usage of intonation, causes of poor usage of the concept and practical ways through which it can be taught by teachers of non- native speakers of English both in urban and rural communities.

Methodology

As a review study, the work employed the descriptive research design for the description of the meaning, features, importance and usage of the suprasegmental speech feature, intonation. It equally presents explanations for its poor or non-usage and provides practical guides on how it can be taught by teachers of English in second language contexts such as Nigeria. The research utilized secondary sources majorly as it used textbooks, journal articles, published and unpublished documents and internet materials for information gathering and review of concepts.

Conceptual Framework

Intonation: Intonation is an important suprasegmental property of speech which refers to the description of the rising and falling of voice pitch as people speak (Osisanwo, 2012). Brinton, and Goodwin (2010) define intonation as variations in pitch that convey statements, inquiries, or feelings. They explain further that "the rise and fall of pitch in speech is known as intonation. It can convey a distinct mood or alter the meaning of a sentence." For instance, the statement "I love ice cream" can be changed to a question, "I love ice cream? In addition to pitch, intonation employs the assignment of a wide variety of speech prosodies such as loudness, stress, voice quality and syllable lengthening for the generation of attitudinal, discursal, accentual and grammatical meanings and functions of utterances.

In view of the foregoing therefore, it is evident that intonation occurs as a result of variations in the levels of our voices during verbal exchanges. Although these variations do not affect or change the lexical meanings of the individual words we employ, they alter their semantic and or discursal meanings, or that of the entire sentence as they reveal explanations and messages which are often a reflection of not only the words of the speaker but also their mood, and attitudes during discussions. The following sentences illustrate this further. How horrible! (exclamatory remark), can you do me a favour please? (polite request), a cup of tea for you (speaker is being friendly), she wasn't promoted last month. It was last year (a wrong impression is being corrected). Thus, with intonation, meaning is realized not from what was said but the way it was said (Akinjobi and Oladipupo, 2010).

Intonation is learned unconsciously by native speakers of intonational languages like English (Cruttenden, 2014; Roach, 2010). However, second language learners often find employing the intonation of foreign words and longer utterances very intractable. As such, they apply pitch modulations wrongly or fail to apply them during verbal exchanges. Thus, questions like 'what do you mean?' 'Are you serious?' and so forth are asked after their utterances have been made. Many Nigerian learners have very little or no knowledge of the speech melody of English, technically referred to as intonation, despite their levels of education (Okon 2000, as cited in Ukam et al., 2017; Atoye, 2005). As a result of this, many L2 utterances have remained unintelligible, misleading, unmelodious and sometimes controvertible (Burns & Seidhofer in Schmitt, 2010; Chukwu, 2014; Cruttenden 2014; Okon, 2000, cited in Ukam et al., 2017). Consequently, as part of the study, the probable causes of lack of intonational knowledge and usage are examined as follows. .

Causes of poor intonational knowledge and usage

i) Most L2 speakers of English have their native tongues which are mainly tonal languages unlike English which is an intonation language. The assignment of tone in these local languages is lexically contrastive and offers no connotative interpretations. This implies, as earlier mentioned, that a change in the tone mark(s) on a particular word in most L2 tongues marks a change in its lexical meaning (Elugbe, 2015). Hence, the Hausa word 'fito' means 'come out' with high / high tone marks but means 'guinea corn beer' with low/high tone pattern (Elugbe, 2015). The native speaker of any Nigerian language bears this in mind and decodes the change intuitively but has little or no idea of the intonational modifications involved in spoken English. Hence, Okon (2000) in Ukam et al., 2017, avers that '... the rich information of standard British English (SBE) is neglected by Nigerian speakers as far as intonation is concerned.'

ii) Scholars, linguists and teachers often consider intonation a difficult aspect of English pronunciation for L2 learners to comprehend (Banjo,1979 cited in Asadu et al., 2019; Cruz-Ferreira,1989 in Atoye, 2005). As a result of this, the topic usually receives very little attention from lecturers of Phonology as well as teachers of Oral English or is completely avoided during teaching (Vilches, 2015; Grice & Baumann, 2002 cited in Ukam et al., 2017; Jowitt in Oladipupo et al., 2020). .

iii) When given attention, the teaching of intonation to L2 speakers of English is often a representation of the placement of needless emphasis on its structural analysis as opposed to its communicative or meaning related values (Atoye, 2005; Levis,1998).

Intonation teaching techniques for teachers of L2 English learners

Having identified and stated the reasons for the non- employment of intonation by second language speakers of English, the paper presents a discussion of ways through which intonation can be easily taught in the second language (L2) classrooms at all levels as presented by different phonologists and English as second language (ESL) teaching organizations as follows.

Underhill (2005) recommends demonstrating how intonation alters a sentence's meaning with recordings and real-world examples. One way to change a statement into a question is to use a rising intonation at the conclusion of the sentence, such as "You are a student." Might I ask, "you are a student?" Additionally, he explains that learners internalise intonation patterns more quickly when practice drills with visual assistance are used. In a related view, Grant (2014) suggests that students need to constantly engage in controlled drills where they practice transforming statements into questions or using intonation to convey a range of emotions. Pitch diagrams and intonation curves, which use rising and falling lines to illustrate various intonation patterns, are examples of visual aids that can improve learners' ability to see and understand these patterns.

Brown (1990) suggests using dialogues that reflect real-life situations to illustrate intonation in context. For instance, students can practice using a dialogue in which one person is surprised and the other responds with a flat intonation, such as 'you won the lottery!' or 'really?' 'Or That's amazing'. In addition, Brown maintains that students must be aware of their own development. Thus, in order to help students improve their intonation, constructive criticism is crucial. In the same vein, Kenworthy (1987), stresses that teachers should gently point out intonation problems and encourage students to practice employing proper intonation patterns using statements like 'your intonation was correct, but try to make the rise in pitch more gradual next time.' Such comments, he contends, have the power to inspire learners to perform better.

Burston (2013) encourages making use of speech analysis software or applications that offer visual cues regarding intonation patterns. For instance, it could be highly beneficial for students to use an app that gives them intonation feedback and indicates where their pitch should rise or fall. Furthermore, Roach (2001) stresses how crucial it is to motivate students to mimic the intonation patterns of native speakers by listening to them. He claims that learners' intonation becomes more natural as a result of this exercise. For instance, a learner should repeat a statement made by a native speaker while paying close attention to the speaker's application of intonation. Roach argues further that learners are likely to gain confidence in their use of intonations over time.

Using a more detailed approach, Busy teacher (2018), a language teaching platform accessible via <https://www.in.busyteacher.org> and whose concern is to help second language English learners (L2 / ESL) improve on their usage of the parlance, contends strongly that the concept should not be a difficult task for English teachers working with second language English learners in both urban and rural communities. To that effect, Busy teacher (2018) provides the following six (6) tips for teaching intonation as presented below.

1) Model: Oral English teachers are expected to employ correct intonation and stress often when speaking English and when teaching. They should avoid oversimplifying or losing their own intonation

when speaking to or teaching students, as the learners may not benefit maximally from the teaching when teachers make utterances that do not sound natural and rhythmic. On the contrary, a teacher can begin the teaching of intonation by speaking in slow and monotonous pattern for about five minutes after which they start to produce utterances with good intonational arrangement for different emotions. Then s/he, tries to find out from the learners which of their utterances (that is, the monotonous or the melodious) they found easily understandable after which they will explain to them (the students) that it will be difficult for listeners to understand English speakers if they speak in monotones.

2) Encourage authentic listening: Teachers should promote conscious and deliberate listening for improved pronunciation skill among their students. To achieve this, students should be encouraged to listen constantly to native speaker television programmes like sitcom and movies with robust conversational exchanges for improved intonational mastery. They should also ensure they write down the intonation patterns employed by some of the speakers and actors listened to and attempt putting the appropriate intonation marks (arrows) for those utterances. This, they should practice on a regular basis.

3) Teach the most common pattern: After the learners must have listened to conversation oriented programs by native speakers for some time and have learnt basic intonation patterning on their own (as this is the best way to learn intonation), the teacher can now begin to take them through the most commonly employed patterns of intonation by paying particular attention to the sentence final pattern first before looking at sentence initial and sentence medial pitch contours. The explanation shall be presented as follows.

(i) Falling intonation is used at the final positions in declarative sentences. For example, I need a bag of ↘ rice.

(ii) Rising / falling tones are used at sentence medial and sentence final positions in Wh- questions. For example, what quantity of ↗ rice do you ↘ need?

(iii) Rising intonation pattern is employed for yes/ no questions at the sentence final positions. For instance, do you need a bag of ↗ rice?

(iv) Either / Or questions (that is, alternative questions) take medial rising intonation and final falling pitch contour. For instance, do you need a bag of ↗ rice or a pot of ↘ soup?

(v) Rising, rising and final falling intonation patterns are used for items in a list or a series. For instance, get me some ↗ rice, ↗ pepper, fresh to ↗ matoes, on ↗ ions, ↗ curry, ↗ thyme and vegetable ↘ oil.

4). Use visuals: It is necessary to use visuals in the teaching of intonation so that the students can understand that utterances are said with different intonation patterns in English. The employment of wavy lines and arrows to indicate the way voice pitch rises and falls as humans speak is required when teaching intonation. Hence, teachers of English should draw these intonation markers against syllables and words in the sample sentences being used to model intonation patterning. Students should also be told to replicate such markers in their notebooks or worksheets both in the classroom and whenever they are learning the concept privately.

4) . Dialogue and emotions: Intonation helps speakers to express their emotions, feelings, intentions and attitude towards issues while speaking. Learners of English as a second language must therefore be taught that to achieve this, they must constantly practice the intonation learning skills which they have been exposed to by their teacher. They must also be informed that to be able to apply intonation patterns correctly, there is the need to use corresponding para-linguistic features like body language, facial expressions and gestures when they make utterances during day- to -day conversations. This way, listeners find it easy to comprehend the feelings, intentions and so forth which are being communicated beyond the spoken words. Teaching this aspect of intonational usage can be done by using a simple conversation / dialogue to indicate different situations. The teacher should write a sample dialogue like the following on the board for the students to act out.

A: Hey! It's been a while.

B: Yes, I travelled to my hometown.

A: Hope there was no problem?

B: Not at all. Just to pay my parents a visit.

A: I guess they are both well.

B: Very well, thank you.

After writing the dialogue, the teacher should instruct students to role-play the dialogue in pairs, each pair of students having been told the context to dramatise. Contexts in which the above discussion can occur include; between two friendly neighbours who haven't seen each other for a long time, between a senior staff and a junior colleague in an establishment, between a shop assistant and their customer or between a suitor and an uninterested lady.

The student must be duly informed that the only difference between the contexts being represented is the intonation pattern(s) and rhythm they are employing. They must therefore be encouraged to ensure that the melody and speech rhythm which typically accompany the falling, rising and other patterns are clearly revealed through their voice while they are acting in order for them to really express the required emotions and attitudes. They must also be taught how to display the facial expression and body gestures needed for such feelings. Other members of the class will then be asked to tell the situation represented by each of the pairs as soon as they finish performing.

6) Use Kazoos: To further help learners overcome the difficulties associated with fluency, intonation learning and the production of difficult speech units, the musical instrument known as kazoos can be employed to demonstrate to the students various intonation patterns and the myriads of meaning that can be generated without verbal utterances. With the use of a kazoo, intonation skills can be taught to learners in a seamless manner.

Conclusion

This paper stresses the need for the teaching of intonation in second language (L2) English language classes at all levels of education, as it has become evident through the study that the mastery of English language is incomplete without a good knowledge of intonational usage and interpretation. Having discussed practical methods (both similar and different) through which teachers of Oral English and Phonology can explain the concept to second language English learners regardless of where they live (as there are techniques suitable for learners in all communities), the study encourages them to arm themselves with these techniques whenever it is being explained as this will help to allay the fears of students concerning its learning and usage as well as the learning of English pronunciation in general.

English lessons will be enjoyed by learners whenever intonation is being taught. This is because using any or a combination of the above techniques like modeling, controlled drills, dialogue, the visuals and other technological resources, introduces a sense of humour to the lesson while the topic is being explained. And as a result of this creativity, the concept is readily learnt and internalised, learning the concept becomes a lot easier generally and speaking a fun. As a matter of fact, the teaching of intonation in language classes whether in isolation or during reading comprehension, vocabulary development or grammar related topics, increases students' willingness to learn the language and aids easy understanding of seemingly difficult concepts.

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