

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE INTONATION AS A SECOND LANGUAGE ENGLISH SPEAKER

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Abstract

Most non-native English speakers are first language speakers of their indigenous languages, many of which are tonal, as opposed to English which is an intonational language. As a result, earlier investigations have shown that they often find it difficult to properly utilize intonation in their discourse, making their utterances lack the depth and melody of spoken communication. This paper therefore seeks to address the problem by presenting step-by-step approaches to personal intonation learning as most non-native Oral English textbooks do not adequately address this concern. This work is a review study that relies on both published and unpublished sources to establish a distinction between the application of tone in tonal languages and its use in intonational languages. The study concludes with the hope that user's application of techniques such as pausing, reducing unstressed syllables, practicing imitation and using intonation in context will lead to improved intonation usage.

Keywords: Tone, tone units, Pausing, feedbacks, tonal languages, intonational languages

Introduction

Intonation is an essential feature of speech, as it enhances fluency, speech proficiency and comprehensibility in addition to revelation of intention and emotions. According to Muniem (2015), intonation refers to the different manners in which the pitch of our voice is used to reflect messages and feelings. To him, intonation performs different speech related functions which include attitudinal and grammatical functions. The attitudinal function, he explains, involves revealing inner feelings of interest, surprise, anger, appreciation, frustration and so forth using the final rising intonation pattern to end sentences like a friendly or expressive 'thank you' or the expression 'hmmmm' and a falling tone for a flat and unhappy 'thank you'.

He reveals further that the grammatical function deals with the use of different intonation patterns to make our utterances correspond with specific syntactic structures which include ending a Wh - question with a falling tone, and a 'yes -no' question with the rising intonation pattern or mid / high pitch contour.

Intonation depends mainly on voice level variations or modifications commonly referred to as pitch to generate meaning, and the term used to describe these modifications is tone. Thus, we have the falling, rising, fall-rise or falling/rising, rise fall or rising/falling and the level tones (Cruttenden, 2014; Jones, 2011; Quirk and Greenbaum, 2000; Awonusi, 2009; Osisanwo, 2012). These tonal functionings differ clearly from that of tonal languages.

The assignment of tone in tonal languages is lexically contrastive and offers no connotative interpretations. This implies, that a change in the tone mark(s) on a particular word in most tonal 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 pitch modifications involved in intonational languages

like 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.’

Second language English speakers of all ages and statuses need to possess a solid mastery of the concept intonation itself, and be able to distinguish between the application of tone in tonal languages and its usage in intonational languages. This distinction is essential for proper arrangement of speech segments, into consistently melodious, rhythmic and intelligible speeches, which in turn enhances the smooth flow of communication among interlocutors. In view of this, the discussion on the differences between these two forms of pitch modulation usage will be treated first and is presented as follows.

Tone in Intonation Languages and Tone in Tone /Tonal Languages

Application of tone in intonational languages: In intonation languages like English, Swedish, Russian, Finnish, Japanese and Hindi, tone refers to the term employed for the description of the overall behavior of the pitch. It represents the variations in pitch levels which results in variations in the meaning of lexical, sentential and longer linguistic structures largely conditioned by the speaker’s feelings and attitudes (Jones, 2011). This explains why the word ‘fine’ for example, represents ‘wellness’ with a sense of finality when spoken with the falling tone, but depicts interest/approval when pronounced with the rising tone. This description also accounts for the difference in the meanings of the following sentences by Jones (2011 pp. 567).

- 1) ‘It was ↘ cold’. (With ‘cold’ said in a falling tone, the sentence is declarative and it means ‘ it was cold’).
2) ‘It was ↗ cold’. (This utterance is interrogative as ‘cold’ was said with a fall- rise tone. Hence, it simply means, ‘was it cold?’).

Basically, tone patterning in intonational languages results in the following basic phono-linguistic arrangements:

- i. They signal the compartmentalization of utterances into distinct phonological units being referred to as tone units, tone groups or intonational phrases.
- ii. They present a distinction between primary and secondary accents realizable in both isolated words and longer structures.
- iii. They reveal the different roles / functions of intonation in day-to-day communications by speakers of languages.

Additionally, when analyzing tone in intonational languages, an utterance is usually divided into tone units (also referred to as tone group or sense group) which are separated with tone unit boundaries (/ /), which in turn show where a tone-unit ends and where another begins. The tone unit as discussed earlier is the basic unit of an utterance being employed for intonational purposes. It represents the segment of a speech and the extent to which a distinct intonation pattern spreads. It is ‘a group of spoken words which make up a single information unit (Elhamel, 2020).

Each tone unit is often a combination of different words with only one idea or message and the focus of the message or utterance is usually assigned to the last major(prominent) word or one of its syllables. This most prominent word in the tone group is referred to as the ‘nucleus’ as it is the focal point of the utterances within the tone unit. The most prominent syllable/ word is so called because it has been assigned additional stress or contains the syllable with an additional stress known as the ‘tonic accent’ with its vowel often made longer than those of the surrounding syllables (Cook, 2012; Elhamel, 2020). The syllable with the tonic accent or additional stress is called the tonic syllable (Cook,2012). The following utterances exemplify this.

(Tonic) (Tonic)
A. You! // You said that?

(Tonic) (Tonic)
B. I will return // in a second.

(Tonic)
C. I am aware.

Utterances are split into tone units basically as a result of pitch modulation (change in tone) either at the end of a preceding tone unit or at the beginning of a succeeding tone unit. It is common to pause now and then when producing a long utterance. This is to enable the interlocutors breathe in and out as speeches progress (Yadugiri, 2013). And often times when this occurs and a syllable before the pause is assigned remarkable prominence, the structure is referred to as a tone unit.

Application of tone in tone / tonal languages: In tone languages however, the tone is a segmental device physically linked to the phonological unit called syllable. Thus, analyzing the tone in tone languages is mainly a syllable by syllable issue (Roach 2010). A tone language, as earlier mentioned, is a language in which the application of tone marks on a particular syllable of a word determines its meaning and substituting one tone (mark) for another on particular words or morphemes alters completely the lexical meaning or grammatical categorization of same. For instance, Yoruba is a tone language with high-H (/), mid-M (-) often unmarked and low - L (\) tone levels (Laniran & Clement, 2003 as cited in Atoye, 2005). In this language, the monosyllabic word ‘wá’ with ‘high’ tone mark means ‘come’ while ‘wà’ with ‘low’ tone mark means ‘to harvest/ uproot’. Also, ‘igba’, a word with two syllables with mid/ mid tone marks stands for the number ‘200,’ while ‘igbà’ with low/ low tone marks means ‘time, period or season.’ Also, in Igbo language, which is another tone language, the word ‘ákwá’ means ‘cry’ when it has high/high tone marks and means ‘cloth’ with high/ low tone marks ‘ákwà’ (Anagbogu et al., 2010; Elugbe, 2015).

Similarly, in Mandarin Chinese which is also a tone language, the word ‘ma’ means ‘mother’ when said on a high tone and ‘hemp’ when said on a low tone. In Shona, another tone language spoken in Zimbabwe the word ‘Kutshera’ means ‘to draw water’ when it has low/ high/ high tone marks but means ‘to dig’ with low/ low /low tone marks (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2011; Aina & Akinjobi, 2020, as cited in Oladipupo et al.). Many Nigerian indigenous languages are tone languages. This change in the lexical meanings of words as a result of pitch modulation occurs in many native languages spoken across Africa, Asia and Europe and other continents of the world as they are tonal languages (Roach, 2010).

Hence, individuals seeking literacy in the English language must take care to equip themselves with information about these differences in order to consciously avoid assigning incorrect or potentially offensive interpretations to expressions in English, which is their target language. However, despite the differences highlighted above, phonologists such as Ladefoged and Johnson (2011) and Yadugiri (2013), maintain that both intonational and tonal languages employ intonation to realise stress related contrasts, thereby using pitch modulation to convey attitudinal and other non- lexical meanings.

Steps to Improve Intonation for Second Language English learners.

As an aid to easy intonation learning, this study offers practical ways through which intonation can be mastered by an average learner of English as proposed by Tharpe (2017); Poe (n.d.); Muniem(2015).

According to Tharpe (2017), six aspects of intonation learning must be given serious consideration. They are discussed as follows.

I. The Sounds: As a second language learner of pronunciation and intonation, you must first identify the sounds of English that are not present in your indigenous language. You should equally note the sound units of your native parlance that are not found in English and ensure you master the correct pronunciation of the English phonemes which are not present in your mother tongue and avoid using the sounds of your native language that are not replicated in English when speaking the language. These will help improve your intonation and boost your intelligibility level.

II. Specific stress patterns: Words are stressed in English according to stipulated patterns which speakers must carefully learn and adhere strictly to while using the language. These patterns can be applied to almost all English words. These patterns must be internalised for easy application during verbal activities for interactants' utterances to be readily comprehensible. Being able to pronounce 80 - 90% of English words with appropriate prominence, coupled with good knowledge and application of phrase / sentence stress right from the inception of your English learning trainings are markers of proper intonational usage. However, using the wrong stress constantly on words and sentences prevents the mastery of intonation.

III. Unstressed syllables: You should learn early that unstressed syllables as well as their vowels should be reduced when you are speaking English. This in turn helps you to give accentuated syllables the required prominence. And as you observe this in speech (that is making sure stressed syllables are highlighted while their unstressed counterparts are pronounced in a noticeably weak manner), your utterances will possess the necessary rhythm with which English is spoken.

IV. Highlighted words in phrases and sentences: In most English utterances, there is a very vital word which bears the message of the unit. The focal word is always assigned prominence which differentiates it from neighbouring words. English words which are phonologically made prominent like the nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs are usually carriers of additional information in the tone unit. As such, they must be pronounced with the needed stress so that listeners can be aware of their significance in the entire utterance.

V. Pausing: Pausing is a primary aspect of English intonation. It helps to group certain words in longer utterances together as though they are in a parenthesis and must be understood as a separate aspect of the speech. This makes verbal exchanges more understandable. On the contrary, it is not often utilised by speakers who are still learning languages.

VI. Intonation: It is referred to as the flow of English speech sounds which enhances fluency and intelligibility among interlocutors. English speakers often begin their speeches at the mid pitch level, then they increase the pitch of their voices as the utterances progress after which their voice pitches gradually decrease to the lowest level towards the close of the sentence. Nevertheless, English sentences are not always limited to simple phrases and clauses but are often long and connected, usually requiring the employment of conjunctions and other linking speech items to connect phrases and clauses of different types into unified and meaningful utterances. Thus, native speakers of English language apply tone variations for the arrangement of speech segments to enable their hearers appreciate the link between those units. This aspect of human oral activities must be learnt by second language English users who desire to be masterly and effective speakers of English.

Tharpe (2017) stated further that arriving at good intonational application is not a difficult task for L2 speakers. However, he maintained that the problem is learners' unwillingness to switch over from the inherent tonal nature of their native tongues (which has always influenced L2 English usage since it is through it that the users perceive the sounds of other people's languages including English, as well as their own voices, when they communicate via other languages) to English intonational arrangements. He explained further that it is very important for second language speakers to be aware of the six aspects of English intonation discussed above in relation to their own native parlanges. They need to clearly identify the areas of similarities and differences in the application of intonation in the two languages so they can work on the areas of difference. It is also advised that L2 English speakers should visit speech production coaches for better mastery of English intonation.

In the view of Poe (n.d.) there are five practical steps to be taken by any L2 learner of English to attain a mastery of intonation, They are presented below.

I. Listen to native English speakers: To have a clear understanding of the arrangements and rhythm of English intonation, you need to constantly listen to its native speakers.

II. Practice imitation: Listening to short and long utterances by native speakers of English and repeating them the way they were spoken by the original interlocutors with particular attention being paid to the falling and rising of the pitch of their voices will enhance your usage of intonation during verbal exchanges.

III. Use intonation in context: Endeavour to apply intonation in your normal day- to - day communications as this will help to boost your intonation. Identify the alterations that occur in the messages presented by different speech units as a result of variations in intonational patterns, then, consciously apply the same patterns to similar speech items / arrangements you employ when speaking.

IV. Get feedback: Native English speakers and teachers of English language can provide you with feedbacks on your performance in intonation usage. They can also help you identify your weak points and offer you guidance on how to improve your intonation skills.

V. Use resources: You can also explore technological instructional materials and tools such language learning apps, pronunciation websites and books specifically focused on English language teaching and speech production. These platforms are often filled with samples of pre- recorded utterances and exercises designed to enhance intonation proficiency. Although improving your intonation may be time-consuming, it is important to persevere while working to master this aspect of English, as a second language learner.

The last set of suggestions on this issue were presented by Munien (2015). Intonation as described by this author is a vital aspect of speech production which is applied by speakers of all languages. It was also referred to as speech melody which when altered or modulated affects the meanings of human utterances. and must carefully practise the following.

I. Listen constantly to original and fascinating recordings of fluent English speakers' (like actors and journalists) verbal exchanges like interviews, dramatic conversations and discussions on topics and issues which are of interest to you. These can be found on You Tube, British Council Podcasts, TV series and other internet sources. And in case you are the type of person who takes delight in watching episodic television programmes and movies, be careful to look out for the actors'/ panelists' employment of intonation when reacting to funny questions, when they are discussing unpleasant matters and when treating topical issues. You will find that doing this helps you become conversant with the way native or very proficient speakers of English modulate their pitch / intonation pattern whenever there is a change in the subject matter or information focus.

II. Practise intonational usage regularly by carefully patterning your speeches after those of the speakers you have repeatedly listened to. By imitating native speakers' application of intonation, you will gain confidence and accuracy in your use of the concept in day to day oral interactions.

III. Record and listen regularly to your own utterances. Record your speech during conversations with other interlocutors using phone audio and video recorders. These recordings often reveal your actual use of intonation, which may differ from your expectations. Additionally, because recordings can be replayed multiple times, deleted and replaced with new ones, they allow you to track your progress over time. After listening to several conversations by proficient speakers, you can assess your improvement and identify areas that still require development.

Munien(2015) explains that any second language English speaker who desires to learn proper intonational usage needs a good knowledge of the different aspects of the concept as explained above alongside other areas, like the various functions of intonation and so forth.

Conclusion

The need for individual non-native speakers to improve their intonation has been carefully addressed in this paper. To better underscore this point, a distinction was made between the usage of pitch variation in tone languages and its application in intonational languages. It was particularly revealed that pitch modification in tone languages is *lexically contrastive* and word-related while in intonational languages, it is *semantically and pragmatically contrastive* and tone unit-related. This distinction helps explain why many non-native English speakers struggle with intonation: they often lack awareness of these features due to the absence of this form of pitch usage in their native languages. In view of the foregoing, the study emphasizes that the **tone unit** also referred to as the **tone group or intonational phrase** is crucial for speech demarcation in intonational languages. It reveals the extent to which a distinct unit of information spreads within an utterance.

Furthermore, various intonation learning techniques suitable for private English learners were presented. It is therefore expected that individual English users will take advantage of the insights provided in this study to gain a clearer understanding of the features and techniques of intonation learning. Learners are encouraged to adopt the techniques such as **pausing, imitating native speakers and regularly recording their own utterances during conversations with others and listening to them later**, or to combine these methods in their subsequent verbal activities, for more effective intonation use.

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