

TEACHING ENGLISH INTONATION: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

English intonation plays an essential role in intelligibility between interlocutors in communication. However, teaching and learning English intonation is not paid much attention by both teachers and learners. The neglect of teaching and learning intonation may put bad impacts on the effectiveness of communication. Learners of English language also feel unconfident in exchanging information with English speaking foreigners. This paper aims to help teachers and learners have a general view about the importance of intonation via summarized theories related to English intonation as well as teaching and learning English intonation.

Key words: *Teaching English intonation, Intonation, Teaching and learning English.*

1. Introduction

It cannot be denied that English plays an important role in modern society. English is a means of communication, a common language used in most international conferences, a popular language spoken in many countries all over the world. Teaching and learning English have also become essential in Vietnam in recent years because English is one of the factors that helps Vietnam get closer to the global world. However, how to help learners feel confident in making effective communication with English speaking foreigners is still a question without any precise answers. One of the reasons that should be mentioned is the lack of knowledge and application in using English intonation to make the conversation more effective.

To solve this problem, this paper draws out theories related to intonation, as well as teaching and learning intonation, focusing on the necessary roles of intonation in daily communication. This effort aims to help teachers and learners have an accurate view on English intonation.

2. English intonation

2.1. Definition of English intonation

There is no clear definition of English intonation because different authors define intonation in different views. The common points among the authors come to the use of “melody” or “music” to describe intonation, i.e. speakers may use rising or falling tunes to change their voice as they are singing a song (O’Connor, 1989:108; Avery and Ehrlich,

1995:76; Hewings and Goldstein, 2000: 89; Lujan, 2004: 11, Reed and Michaud, 2005: 221). These changes of voice are called “tune” (O’Connor, 1989), or “intonation contour” (Wong, 1987), or “intonation pattern” (Avery and Ehrlich, 1995), or “pitch” (Lujan, 2004). Furthermore, these authors add key function of intonation in expressing the communicative message and speakers’ attitudes and feelings (O’Connor, 1989: 108; Wong, 1987: 55; Avery and Ehrlich, 1995: 192; Underhill, 1998: 74; Kelly, 2000: 86). Especially, some authors consider intonation as part of suprasegmental at a subconscious level (Underhill, 1998: 75; Kelly, 2000: 86).

Overall, intonation can be understood as a combination of falling and rising tunes in speaking English aiming to express speakers’ attitudes and feelings when exchanging information, and intonation is considered as a subconscious level in pronunciation, belonging to suprasegmental.

2.2. Functions of English intonation

Different authors hold different views on functions of English intonation. Brown and Yule (1983) states three functions of English intonation, namely grammatical function, informational function, and attitudinal function. Kenworthy (1987) lists eight functions called foregrounding, backgrounding, signaling ends and beginnings, showing whether a situation is open or closed, showing expectations, showing involvement, showing respects, showing relationship between the parts of a speaker’s message. Crystal (1995) gives out six major functions of English intonation: emotional function, grammatical function, informational function, textual function, psychological function, and indexical function. Roach (2000) mentions four functions named attitudinal function, accentual function, grammatical function, and discourse function. Wells (2006) suggests six functions, including attitudinal function, grammatical function, focusing function, discourse function, psychological function, and indexical function.

Although there are various views on English intonation, most of the authors agree on four main ones, including attitudinal function, grammatical function, accentual function, and discourse function.

First, by using different intonation to convey the speaker’s feelings, emotions, and attitudes, intonation is believed to have attitudinal function. This belief is normally criticized. For example, McCathy (1991) holds the view that it is impossible to reliably label a tone contour as displaying a particular attitude or emotion. Couper-Kuhlen (1996) states that emotions can be expressed via facial expressions or other body language; thus, using intonation to express attitude may have no use. Though there are some disagreement on attitudinal function of intonation, it is clearly that, to some extents, intonation can help speaker express attitude. That is the reason why this function cannot be rejected.

Second, intonation has its grammatical function because it can be used to identify grammatical structures in speech like punctuation in writing (Wells, 2006; 12). Intonation can also be used to recognize the boundaries between phrases, clauses, sentences, as well as the difference between kinds of questions, and statements (Roach,

2000: 183). This belief is also criticized by some authors. McCarthy (1991) states that although there are some rules for intonation so as to mark its grammatical function, for example, yes/no questions have rising tones, Wh-word questions have falling tones, these rules are not completely true in reality. In real conversation, both falling and rising tones can be applied to either type of question depending on the specific contexts.

Third, intonation has its accentual function as it can be used to signal the most important words by putting most stress on these words in a tone unit. This can help listeners recognize the most important information conveyed by a speaker. Among the four functions, this function is accepted by most authors. Thus, it can be concluded that discourse intonation approach must be meaningful in teaching and learning English whereas the other three can only help fulfill the function of intonation academically.

Last but not least, in broader context, intonation can help listeners identify the information that is already known as well as recognize the new information.

2.3. Components of English intonation

It is commonly believed by most linguists that components of English intonation must include pitch, word stress, sentence stress, and tone unit.

Pitch may refer to the relative frequency of vibration of the vocal cords, in which high pitch is rapid vibration; low pitch is slow vibration. Because of habitual pitch level, gender, and age, different speakers may possess different pitches (Kreidler, 2004: 164). Pitch can be also understood as the highness or lowness of an utterance and there is no explicit rule for assessing the voice of a speaker (Roach, 2000: 133).

Word stress means one syllable of a word is pronounced louder than other syllables (Kenworthy, 1987: 10; Kelly, 2000: 86; Yoshida, 2013: 99). The characteristics of a stressed syllable include loudness, pitch, length, and quality (Roach, 1991: 6; Yoshida, 2013: 102). This means a stressed syllable is pronounced louder than unstressed ones; a stressed syllable is longer than unstressed ones, pitch will change noticeably compared to unstressed ones; the syllable will be prominent if it contains the syllable that is different in quality from neighboring ones.

Kelly (2000: 69) suggests simple rules to achieve better stress when pronouncing words. First, two-syllable nouns and two-syllable adjectives are stressed on the first syllable; for example, FATHER, TEACHER, BREAKFAST, NOISY, LIVELY, HANDSOME, etc. Second, prefixes and suffixes are not normally stressed. Third, compound words are stressed on the first syllable; for example, TEAPOT, POSTMAN, NEWSPAPER, etc. Fourth, words having dual role are stressed on the first syllable if they function as nouns, and stressed on the second syllable if they function as verbs; for example, BROADCAST (n) and broadcast, INCREASE (n) and increase (v), RECORD (n) and record (v), etc. Yoshida (2013: 104) also suggests some main features of unstressed syllables. First, unstressed syllables are shorter in duration than stressed ones. Second, unstressed syllables are a bit quieter than stressed ones. Third, unstressed syllables are lower in

pitch than stressed ones. Fourth, the vowels in unstressed syllables can mostly be reduced to become schwa.

Sentence stress means some words in a sentence receive more prominence over other words (Kenworthy, 1987: 11). Yoshida (2013) considers stressed words in a sentence as “content words”, i.e words having lexical meaning, and conveying the most vital ideas of the whole utterance; unstressed words in a sentence can be called “function words, i.e. words having grammatical meaning but not having much meaning in themselves. According to Yoshida (2013), content words include nouns, main verbs, adjectives, possessive pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, question words, not and negative contractions, adverbs, and adverbial particles; function words include articles, auxiliary verbs, personal pronouns, possessive adjectives, demonstrative adjectives, prepositions, conjunctions, and relative pronouns.

Tone unit is defined as “a unit that is generally greater in size than the syllable is needed” (Roach, 2000: 144). An utterance must consist of at least one tone unit in which one syllable, the accented syllable or the tonic syllable is more prominent than any other (Roach, 2000; Kreidler, 2004; Yoshida, 2013). The first part of a tone-unit is tonic syllable, that is “syllables where the main pitch movement in the utterance occurs” (Kelly, 2000: 88), or “the point of strongest stress” (Roach, 2002). The second part of a tone unit is onset, that is “the syllables that establish a pitch that stays constant up to the tonic syllable” (Kelly, 2000: 88). There are additional parts of a tone unit suggested by Roach (2000: 146-147), including head, pre-head, and tail. Head is all that part of a tone unit that extends from the first stressed syllable up to the tonic syllable; pre-head composes of all unstressed syllables in a tone unit preceding the first stressed syllable; tail is any syllable between the tonic syllable and the end of the tone unit.

We can summarize the components of the tone unit as follows:

(Pre-head) (Onset// Head) Tonic syllable (Tail)

Let us consider the following example:

//She VISITED the capital of Holland on **SAT**urday.//
(pre-head) (onset// Head) **Tonic** (Tail)

In the sentence above, “She” is the pre-head since this word is unstressed in the sentence. From the first stressed syllable (onset: VIsited) to the tonic syllable (visited the capital of Holland on) is head. The most important part of the tone unit is tonic syllable (**SAT**urday). The unstressed syllable after the tonic syllable is tail (**SAT**urday)

In brief, understanding parts of the tone unit is meaningful for speakers in using the right pattern of intonation to make the conversation effectively and avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.

2.4. Patterns of English intonation

Different linguists mention various intonation patterns. All intonation patterns are originated from falling and rising tunes. Of all authors, the view of Yoshida (2013)

about intonation pattern may be relevant. Yoshida (2013) states intonation patterns for each type of sentences.

Statements (including positive and negative sentences) normally end with a falling intonation; the prominent word bears the highest point and the intonation stays low after that.

Commands and requests usually end with a falling intonation; however, if the request is a question, it is treated like a yes/no question, and has rising intonation.

Yes/no questions end with a rising intonation. The tonic syllable is marked by a change in pitch, higher or lower, depending on the speaker.

Wh-questions often end with a falling intonation. The intonation first stays at a constant level, then rises on the tonic syllable and last falls down until the end of the sentence.

Tag questions can end with either a falling intonation or a rising one. If the speaker is not sure of what will happen next and looks for the answer, rising intonation is used. If the speaker has already known the answer and wants to ask for confirmation, then falling intonation is used.

A list of three or more thing can have intonation pattern of rising, rising, falling. The intonation will rise on the tonic syllable of each one of the list and fall down at the end of the sentence.

Generally, intonation patterns are not fixed rules, but they play an essential role in helping English learners produce a natural utterance and feel more confident in exchanging information with English speaking foreigners via speaking.

3. Techniques of teaching and learning English intonation

3.1. Using videos

With the development of technology, videos beome one of the most effective ways to help teachers and learners practise English effectively. Damar (2014: 228) believes in the effectiveness of using videos in teaching English, stating that videos can be used as a tool to motivate learners' comprehension of the target language. Thus, videos must be useful in teaching learners intonations. Via videos, learners can widen knowledge in various aspects. First, learners can experience language in use; when learning intonation, learners can feel speakers' attitudes and emotions through facial expressions and other body languages so as to learn how to produce intonation naturally. Second, learners can experience intercultural feathers via the way of greeting, eating, drinking, wearing, etc. Third, videos can be a good tool that helps learners to be more creative (Harmer, 2001: 28).

Overally, teaching English intonation by using videos can be an effective way. Learners can experience conversation in daily life with natural intonation from speakers. What is more, videos can help learners study English in a relaxing and interesting learning environment instead of boring classroom with board and chalk.

3.2. Using softwares

Nowadays, there are several software packages for the analysis of speech signals available free of charge via the Internet. These softwares are believed effective tools to help learners get improvements in studying speaking, esp. With more accurate pronunciation.

Speech Analyzer created by SIL International is a useful tool for recording, transcribing and analyzing speech sounds. Learners can mimic the acoustic sounds from this software. The display format is flexible and easy to change between monochrome and color spectrograms; its pitch-tracker can be set to be restrained within a particular frequency range; the labelling of segments can be done with proper IPA symbols; and it can be used in conjunction with other phonetic softwares downloaded from the Internet. By using this software, teachers can analyze learners' intonation by showing waveform of learners' voice so as to help them correct mistakes in intonation if have.

SFS software is a powerful, well-documented with frequent updates. It can help users so speech analysis and experiments with speech recognition. However, it is a little bit complicated for those who are not good at computing skills. For the suitably skilled, this software can be used as a programming language, and many programs can be pinelined together so that a particular research application can be tailor-made. In case that users face to any problems, users can ask the support team for assistance via users' emails.

WaveSurfer is an open source tool for sound visualization and manipulation. This software has a simple and logical user interface so that anyone with a limited computing skills can use it. WaveSurfer can be used alone for awide range of tasks in speech research and education. Additionally, it can be used as a platform for more advanced applications. This software can be extended through plug-ins or be embedded in other applications.

Coolspeech developed by ByteCool Software with a clear instruction available at www.bytecool.com. This softeware can read sentences that learners type into it, then learners can listen to the typed sentences pronounced by native speakers. This may help learners recognize the intonation pattern and correct the mistakes if have.

4. Conclusions

English has become more and more important all over the world. It is considered as a tool of international communication, a tool of mastering academic life. However, how to be confident in exchanging information with foreigners naturally is a question that needs an appropriate answer.

It cannot be denied that speaking must be an important skill to master for those who would like to communicate effectively under the global environment. However, in order to be confident in speaking English, learners must be equipped with various aspects related to effective English speaking, and the knowledge of intonation is a must.

Without the knowledge and appropriate practice of intonation, learners may lack of confidence in producing natural conversations with English speaking foreigners.

One of the most serious problems comes to the fact that English teachers seems not pay much attention to intonation when teaching speaking, and learners do not realized the importance of intonation in producing natural and effective pieces of conversations. That is the reason why though studying English for many years, most of English learners fail to speak naturally, and more or less, feel unconfident when talking with English speaking foreigners, esp. Native speakers.

The paper summarizes theories related to English intonation, aiming to help English teachers and English learners have a more appropriate view on the role of intonation in making effective conversations. The paper also draws out some popular techniques in teaching and learning English intonation under the era of technology. These techniques may create a better teaching and learning environment so as to master English speaking skill more easily.

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