

THE ROLE OF TEACHER'S INTONATION AND WORD STRESS IN MAKING SUCCESSFUL SPEECH

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Abstract

Effective communication in the classroom goes beyond vocabulary and grammar; it involves how speech is delivered. Intonation and word stress are critical prosodic features of spoken English that shape meaning, indicate speaker intention, and affect student comprehension. This paper explores the pedagogical importance of these features in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). Drawing on linguistic theory and classroom-based studies, we examine how intonation and word stress enhance speech clarity, support meaning-making, and influence student engagement. The paper also recommends strategies for integrating intonation and stress training into teacher education programs to improve oral instruction.

Keywords

Intonation, Word stress, Prosody, Spoken English, Pedagogical phonology, Teacher talk, Listening comprehension, Suprasegmentals

Аннотация

Эффективная коммуникация в классе выходит за рамки словарного запаса и грамматики; она также зависит от того, как произносится речь. Интонация и ударение — важнейшие просодические особенности английской речи, которые определяют значение, намерение говорящего и влияют на понимание учащихся. В данной статье рассматривается педагогическое значение этих особенностей при обучении английскому языку как иностранному. На основе лингвистической теории и исследований в классе анализируется, как интонация и ударение улучшают восприятие речи, помогают осмыслению и вовлекают учащихся. В заключение приводятся рекомендации по включению тренировки интонации и ударения в программы подготовки преподавателей.

Introduction

In the realm of language education, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, the effectiveness of communication depends not only on the selection of words or grammatical structures but also on how these words are delivered. Intonation and word stress—collectively known as suprasegmental features—play a crucial role in conveying meaning beyond the literal words. These elements influence the rhythm, melody, and emphasis in speech, thereby affecting how listeners interpret a speaker's intent, emotion, and clarity.

Teachers, as the primary linguistic models in the classroom, have a direct impact on students' ability to comprehend and acquire the prosodic features of English. When teachers speak with varied intonation and correct stress patterns, they provide students with authentic and comprehensible input, which is essential for developing listening and speaking skills. Conversely, flat or improperly stressed speech may lead to student confusion, loss of attention, or misunderstanding of content.

Furthermore, intonation signals various functions in spoken discourse—such as indicating a question, showing surprise, or marking the end of a statement. Similarly,

word stress can differentiate between nouns and verbs (e.g., 'record vs. re'cord), clarify meaning in sentences, and guide listeners toward the most important information. For learners whose native language may have different stress and intonation rules, mastering these features is often challenging. Thus, it becomes the teacher's responsibility to model them accurately and purposefully.

This paper aims to analyze the role of a teacher's use of intonation and stress in promoting successful speech. Through classroom observation and a review of relevant literature, the study seeks to demonstrate that when used effectively, these prosodic elements enhance communication, engagement, and language acquisition. It also underscores the need for including suprasegmental training in teacher education programs.

The Role of Intonation in Classroom Speech

Intonation functions to express emotion, indicate sentence type, show emphasis, and structure information. For example, rising intonation at the end of a sentence can signal a question, while falling intonation indicates finality. Teachers use intonation to:

Emphasize important instructions or key vocabulary

Express enthusiasm or seriousness

Cue students to respond or reflect teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). Drawing on linguistic theory and classroom-based studies, we examine how intonation and word stress enhance speech clarity, support meaning-making, and influence student engagement. The paper also recommends strategies for integrating intonation and stress training into teacher education programs to improve oral instruction.

When used skillfully, intonation becomes a tool for guiding student attention and fostering interaction. Research shows that varied intonation sustains attention and makes teacher talk more engaging (Neuliep, 1997).

Importance of Word Stress for Comprehension

Word stress plays a vital role in ensuring intelligibility and comprehension in English speech. English is a stress-timed language, meaning that stressed syllables occur at roughly regular intervals, and unstressed syllables are shortened to fit this rhythm. When learners misplace stress in words or sentences, it can significantly alter the meaning and confuse listeners. For example, stressing the wrong syllable in a word like ‘phoTOgraph’ instead of ‘PHOto·graph’ can lead to misunderstanding or make the word unrecognizable to a native listener. This is especially true for minimal pairs that differ only in stress, such as ‘INsult’ (noun) vs. ‘inSULT’ (verb), or ‘CONtract’ vs. ‘conTRACT’.

In sentence-level communication, incorrect stress can obscure which information is important. For example, in the sentence “He gave her the book,” stressing gave emphasizes the action, while stressing her emphasizes the recipient. If a student misplaces this stress, listeners may misinterpret the intention of the message. Native speakers often rely on stress to extract the key elements of a sentence, especially when the sentence is long or delivered quickly. Therefore, improper stress can lead to loss of key information and failure in communication.

From a pedagogical point of view, teachers who model appropriate stress patterns not only improve learners' pronunciation but also enhance their listening comprehension. Exposure to correct stress enables students to recognize familiar words in fast speech and decode sentence meaning more efficiently. Research shows that learners who are trained to perceive and produce stress correctly are more likely to develop better listening skills and show improved oral fluency. Moreover, awareness of stress patterns also aids in vocabulary acquisition, as students begin to associate the correct form with meaning and usage.

Ultimately, word stress is not merely a pronunciation feature—it is a core component of spoken language understanding. When ignored or poorly taught, students risk

sounding unnatural, being misunderstood, or failing to understand others. Therefore, effective instruction in word stress is essential for comprehensive language development, and teachers must emphasize it regularly during speaking and listening activities.

Conclusion

Intonation and word stress are indispensable components of effective teacher speech. They make spoken language more meaningful, understandable, and engaging. For students learning English, the teacher's use of prosody serves not only to communicate but also to model target pronunciation. To foster successful speech in the classroom, teacher training programs must address these suprasegmental features explicitly, equipping educators with the tools to speak, teach, and inspire effectively.

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