Original Paper

Intonation Patterns and Their Place in Teaching Pronunciation for Azeri-Speaking English language Learners

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Abstract

Although there has always been controversies around the importance of two levels of phonology (segmental and suprasegmental) in language teaching history, today there is a general consensus that both levels of phonology (segmental and suprasegmental) should be taken into consideration to reach the goals of pronunciation instruction. However time shortage is a factor that forces us as teachers to set priorities and be selective of materials that have more crucial role in understanding and being understood than others both in segmental and suprasegmental level. Our touchstone in this way is the degree to which these features affect the comprehensibility of materials. The current study examined the degree to which intonation patterns affect comprehensibility. The results of the study supported the initial prediction that Intonation patterns play no crucial role in pronunciation teaching to impede comprehension.

Keywords

intonation patterns, teaching pronunciation, listening comprehension

1. Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Where is the place of pronunciation instruction in language teaching programs?

Which level of pronunciation – segmental or supra segmental – should be emphasized?

Pronunciation instruction has had a changing status in language teaching history. In Jones' words (1994), it has waxed and waned within different approaches. Today, this field is experiencing a new period in which segmental aspects are emphasized along with suprasegmental feature. Longman Dictionary of Teaching and Applied Linguistics (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992) defines suprasegmental features as units which extend over more than one sound or utterance, while segmental features are related to vowels and consonants. Where suprasegmental levels are concerned, we can describe them by reference to variations in stress and pitch. Variations in length are also usually considered to be

supra segmental features, although they can affect single segments as well as whole syllables (Ladefoged, 2006). Regarding intonation, which is the main focus of the current study, Roach (2001) believes that no definition is completely satisfactory, but any attempt at a definition must recognize that the pitch of voice plays the most important part. Richards et al, 1992 described intonation as the phenomenon in which people raise or lower the pitch of their voice, forming pith patterns, or the case when they give some syllabuses in their utterance a greater degree of loudness or change the speech rhythm.

1.2 General Goals of the Research

In teaching pronunciation, the goal of instruction is threefold: to enable our learners to understand and be understood, to build their confidence in entering communicative situations, and to enable them to monitor their speech based on input from the environment (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Today there is a general consensus that both levels of phonology (segmental and suprasegmental) should be taken into consideration to reach the three-fold goals of pronunciation instruction (Fraster, 2003; Bukowski, 2011). However time shortage is a factor that forces us to set priorities and be selective of materials that have more crucial role in understanding and being understood than others both in segmental and suprasegmental levels. Our touchstone in this way is the degree to which these levels affect the comprehensibility of materials. To the degree that it is concerned with the current study, we want to challenge the degree to which intonation patterns affect comprehensibility. According to Richards et al, 1992 intonation patterns have three main roles, namely they:

1- Have grammatical function, for example they may show that an utterance is a question and not a statement.

2- Give additional information to that given by words of an utterance

3- Indicate the speakers' attitude to the matter discussed or to the listener.

However it should be taken into account that often intonation is one factor among many that communicate any attitude, since word choice, grammatical structures, situational context, facial expressions and body movement all contribute infusing an utterance with emotions (Goodwin, as cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001). So the main aim of the current study is to examine the possible impact of intonation patterns on comprehensibility to help language teachers in their decisions about their place regarding the existing controversy among pronunciation teaching specialists, some of whom consider intonation as vital and significant for intelligibility while others regard it as completely unimportant. Yet here are those for whom intonation is both significant and insignificant at the same time.

2. Literature Review

An important area of study in the field of phonetics, which has practical implications for teaching pronunciation, is applying contrastive analysis techniques to the sound segments of the L1 and L2 to identify areas where L1 transfer errors are likely to occur (Jenkins, 2004). Once the main emphasis of

such researches were only on comparing and contrasting inventories of vowels and consonants, that is, the segmental aspects of language (Beebe, 1984; Flege, 1992; Brown, 2000). Unfortunately, this approach may underestimate the true nature of pronunciation (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994). New approaches to language teaching shift the focus of attention in language instruction from individual phonemes to suprasegmentals and other features of the larger context of utterances. These include prosody, phonological fluency, voice quality, and gestures. A basis is provided for instruction and student practice of the entire communicational complex in which pronunciation is situated (Pennington, 1989). As a result of this shift, researchers' focus has also been changed from segmental features to suprasegmental characteristics of pronunciation. By way of Cross (2002) seeks to compare the suprasegmental features of Japanese with English to illustrate that an analysis of the similarities and differences between English and Japanese pronunciation is a useful, and perhaps necessary, starting point for gaining a better understanding of those suprasegmentals in English which require particular attention. In another study Shelton (2008) tries to raise awareness of how voice quality and intonation can convey meaning. Among other researches which relate to the role of suprasegental features in pronunciation teaching reference should be made to Jones and Evans's (1995) study dealing with the role of voice quality in pronunciation teaching. The authors in this study explore the role of voice quality in the **teaching** of pronunciation and argue that since voice quality encompasses so many aspects of phonology, it provides a useful point of departure for pronunciation work. They describe a teaching technique in which the concept of voice quality is used in communicative practice to give students the opportunity to identify meaningful aspects of suprasegmental pronunciation, and see how they fit into the overall pattern of connected speech. Yet many controversies do arise from other research into intonation patterns, where substantially different opinions are made as whether or not intonation should be taught .And this in turn leads to a confusion about the place of intonation in pronunciation syllabuses (Bukowski, 2011; Dalton and Seidlhofer ,1994; Jenkins,2000). Against this background, then, the main purpose of this study is to determine the degree to which intonation patterns are important in the comprehensibility of listening input in order to specify the status of intonation patterns in pronunciation instruction. To this end, this study is set along the following research question and hypothesis:

- What is the role of intonation patterns (as a suprasegmental feature) in the Comprehensibility of listening input?

- Intonation patterns do not play such a crucial role in pronunciation as to impede comprehension.

3. Methods

Participant of this study were 60 students, affiliated to an English language institute in Iran, who were assigned to experimental and control groups within four segregated male and female classes. It is worth noting that the homogeneity of groups was tested beforehand. To do the study students were tested on

their degree of comprehension of listening materials - experimental group with faulty intonation patterns and control group receiving listening input with native-like input. For testing listening comprehension teacher made test, whose reliability was verified beforehand, was used. Statistical procedure T- Test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference between the comprehension of experimental and control groups and between male and female participants.

4. Results

Bearing in mind the main research question asked whether intonation patterns affect comprehensibility of listening materials. To determine this, independent sample T-test was conducted for both male and female groups separately. The results supported the initial prediction, demonstrating that there was no significant effect for intonation patterns (table 1, 2) which is nearly same for both male and female participants (table3, 4). As it is shown in the table (2) Levene's test for the homogeneity of variances was firstly performed to observe if the variance in scores was the same for all the four groups involved. The significance value (Sig.) for Levene's test was .22 which is much larger than .05, indicating that we have not violated the assumption of homogeneity of variances. The results also confirm that there is no significant difference between the mean scores on the dependent variable for each of the two groups. Mean comparisons of the control group (M = 14.7667, SD = 2.254) and the experimental group (M = 13.6897, SD = 2.76591) proves intonation pattern have no significant effect on comprehensibility (p=.106). Statistical analysis also proves that there is no significant difference between the performance of male and female participants (p= .244).

Table 1. Group statistics

	Intonation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. ErrorMean
comprehension	1	30	14.7667	2.25424	.41157
	0	29	13.6897	2.76591	.51362

Table 2. Independent samples test for experimental and control groups

		Levene's Test forEquality of Variances		t-test forEquality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
comprehension	Equal variances assumed	1.541	.220	1.642	57	.106	1.07701	.65588
	Equal variances not assumed			1.636	54.004	.108	1.07701	.65817

Table3. Group statistics forgender

	gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Erro Mean
comprehension	2	32	14.3125	2.58329	.45667
	3	27	14.1481	2.56760	.49414

Table 4. Independent samples test forgende

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test forEquality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
comprehension	Equalvariances assumed	.000	.988	.244	57	.808	.16435	.67319
	Equal variances not assumed			.244	55.452	.808	.16435	.67284

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Since Munro and Derwing's (1999) observation concerning the significance of prosodic errors (errors in stress, intonation, and rhythm) on intelligibility in comparison with phonetic errors (single sounds), research on teaching of pronunciation have moved from an exclusive focus on the sounds of language (vowels and consonants) to include suprasegmentals (Crystal, 2003). However there are controversies in this regards and some scholars like Underhill (2005) and Jenkins (2000) believe that the teaching of intonation is characterized by a greater uncertainty and lack of confidence than the other areas of practical phonology. The findings of the current study are in line with this second group. However despite these findings and the previous researches dealing the justifiability or unjustifiability of intonation teaching, as noted before, this element of prosody should not be overlooked completely in foreign language instruction. Consequently the results of the current study might help language teachers with limitation in terms of time or funds to sort out their priorities, designing syllabuses for teaching pronunciation in Iranian L2 classroom context.

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