



STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE INFLUENCE OF INTONATION IN ENGLISH ON CONVEYING THE MEANING OF SPEECH IN COMMUNICATION

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Abstract:

In communication, intonation plays an important role in conveying the meaning of a speech. In this article, we study students' perception of the influence of intonation in conveying the meaning of speech in communication to propose solutions to help students overcome intonation errors when communicating, as well as, help teachers have appropriate intonation teaching methods. Our data and analysis are based on research documents, surveys, and in-depth interviews with students. According to the study results, most students are well aware of the importance of intonation and of the factors affecting intonation, and they are also aware of the causes of intonation errors. However, students do not apply their knowledge of intonation to speech, they stop at the cognitive level. The study indicates that students often make intonation mistakes in Tag-question, Wh-question, and Imperative sentence in communication.

Keywords: students' perception, influence, intonation, English, communication

1. Introduction

Intonation is one of the closely related factors in daily communication in English. It determines the flow of our sentences and contributes to making our speeches catchy and rhyming. Wells (2006) argued that the role of intonation in conveying the meaning of a speech is enormous. Without it, our words will become monotonous and only literal. In other words, intonation is very important in conveying the meaning of a speech. Students, in addition to mastering the correct pronunciation, also need to pay attention to the importance of intonation when communicating. However, one of the mistakes that

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students of the English Language High-Quality Program at Can Tho University often make when communicating is intonation. The purposes of this study are to understand students' perceptions of the effects of intonation on conveying the meaning of speech and to analyze common mistakes students make with intonation during communication. From there, we will propose solutions to help students overcome intonation errors when communicating and find out effective learning methods. In addition, it also helps teachers find effective intonation teaching methods to improve the quality of education.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design

This study uses questionnaires and in-depth interviews to survey the perception of English language students about the role of intonation in communication in order to help Can Tho University students improve their language skills, especially English intonation.

2.2. Participants

The data is gathered at School of Foreign Language (SFL), Can Tho University (CTU) in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The participants were 130 English major students (high-quality program cohort 45- 46-47) at SFL, CTU who have taken an intonation course. Ten students participated in an interview to learn about the student's perception of the influence of intonation in English on conveying the meaning of speech in communication.

2.3. Instruments

2.3.1. Questionnaires

The 15-item questionnaire consisted of 2 main sections: Student's personal judgment on the importance of English intonation for conveying the meaning of speech in communication and their opinions on the causes leading to errors when using intonation for conveying the meaning of speech in communication. The questionnaire is used to collect data from English majors in SFL at CTU.

2.3.2. Semi-structured interviews

Ten students are invited to participate in an interview to provide issues related to intonation in English communication. An interview is conducted and recorded. Before the interview, the researchers had explained the reasons, and purposes and obtained permission from the participants to record the interviews. After that, the students speak six sentences provided by the research team to investigate the situation of using intonation in English language students (High-quality Program). As mentioned, the results of these interviews are helpful in describing the difficulties students face when learning intonation. This understanding will help students identify these problems and develop learning strategies for better intonation.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The importance of intonation in conveying the meaning of speech in communication

Table 1: The importance of intonation in conveying the meaning of speech in communication

Completely unimportant	Unimportant	Important	Very important
0.8%	1.5%	53.85%	43.85%

In Table 1, there are 70 students (53.85%) rate the role of intonation as important and 57 students (43.85%) rate the role of intonation as very important. Meanwhile, 2 students (1.5%) rate the role of intonation as unimportant, and only 1 student (0.8%) thinks that intonation is completely unimportant to communication.

3.2 Factors affecting the use of intonation

3.2.1 The importance of the intonation rules when raising and falling the voice on conveying the meaning of speech in communication

Table 2: The importance of the intonation rules when raising and falling the voice on conveying the meaning of speech in communication

Completely unimportant	Unimportant	Important	Very important
0.8%	3.08%	63.8%	32.3%

The results obtained from the survey are that 63.8% of students rate the rules of intonation when raising and falling the voice as important, and 32.3% of students rate it as extremely important. Meanwhile, there are still a few that underestimate the importance of the rules, specifically 3.08% of students rate it as unimportant and 0.8% of students rate it as completely unimportant.

3.2.2 The importance of context to intonation in conveying the meaning of speech in communication

Table 3: The importance of context to the intonation of conveying the meaning of speech in communication

Completely unimportant	Unimportant	Important	Very important
0.77%	3.08%	57.69%	38.46%

In Table 3, there are 57.69% of students rate it as having an important role and 38.46% rated it as having a very important role. However, 3.08% of students rated the context as unimportant and 0.77% rate it as completely unimportant.

3.2.3 The importance of the meaning of word to intonation

Table 4: The importance of the meaning of word to intonation

Completely unimportant	Unimportant	Important	Very important
0.8%	5.4%	60.8%	33%

In the criterion of the importance of the meaning of word to intonation in conveying the meaning of a speech, about 79 students (60.8%) chose the important level and 43 students (33%) chose very important level. Otherwise, there were 7 students (5.4%) choosing not to be important and only 1 student (0.8%) choosing completely unimportant.

3.2.4 The importance of volume to the intonation of conveying the meaning of speech in communication

Table 5: The importance of volume to the intonation of conveying the meaning of speech in communication

Completely unimportant	Unimportant	Important	Very important
0%	13.1%	62.3%	24.6%

The number of students who think that volume plays an important role in intonation accounts for 81 students (62.3%) and 32 students (24.6%) who think that volume is very important for intonation. Meanwhile, there are 17 students (13.1%) said that volume has no important role in intonation and there are no students who think that volume has a completely unimportant role in intonation.

3.2.5 The importance of voice quality to intonation in conveying the meaning of speech in communication

Table 6: The importance of voice quality to intonation in conveying the meaning of speech in communication

Completely unimportant	Unimportant	Important	Very important
3,85%	32,3%	43,85%	20%

The students considered voice quality to be an important factor for intonation, specifically 57 students (43.85%) made an important choice. However, unlike other criteria, about 42 students (32.3%) choose not to be important. This is 12.3% higher than the very important option of 20%. In the rest, there are about 5 students who choose that tone of voice is not important to intonation at all.

3.2.6 The importance of speed to intonation in conveying the meaning of speech in communication

Table 7: The importance of speed to intonation
in conveying the meaning of speech in communication

Completely unimportant	Unimportant	Important	Very important
0,8%	19,2%	58,5%	21,5%

In the survey on this factor, more than half of the students, accounting for 58.5%, said that speaking speed plays an important role, and 21.5%, equivalent to 28 students, think it is very important. There are 25 students, accounting for 19.2%, who think that this factor is not important and 1 student equivalent to 0.8% thinks that this factor is not important at all.

3.2.7 The importance of expression to intonation on conveying the meaning of speech in communication

Table 8: The importance of expression to intonation
on conveying the meaning of speech in communication

Completely unimportant	Unimportant	Important	Very important
0%	10%	55,4%	34,6%

According to this table, there are 55.4% of students rate expressiveness as important and 34.6% of students rate it as very important. However, still 10% of students said that this factor is not important and 0% of students are not important at all.

3.2.8 The importance of importance regular practice of intonation

Table 9: The importance of importance regular practice of intonation

Completely unimportant	Unimportant	Important	Very important
0%	2.3%	46.2%	51.5%

The statistics show that the total number of students think that regular practice of intonation is very important (51.5%) and important (46.2%). The remaining only about 2.3% of students think that this factor is not important and 0% of students think it is completely unimportant.

3.2.9 The importance of distinguishing between English intonation and Vietnamese intonation

Table 10: The importance of distinguishing between English intonation and Vietnamese intonation

Completely unimportant	Unimportant	Important	Very important
1.5%	17.7%	43.1%	37.7%

Through the above data table, there are 43.1% of students rate this factor as an important level and 37.7% of students rate it as a very important level. In contrast, 17.7% of students think that this factor is unimportant and 1.5% of students think that it is completely unimportant

3.3 Common students' intonation mistakes

Table 11a: Result of the interview

Correct intonation	Incorrect intonation	The number of students using correct intonation	The number of students using incorrect intonation
Sentence 1: Do you go to school today / ?			
The rising intonation	The falling intonation	9/10	1/10
Sentence 2: What is your name \ ?			
The falling intonation	The rising intonation	4/10	6/10
Sentence 3: You like to learn, don't you?			
Case 1: You already know the other person likes to study, but you want to confirm it. You like to learn, don't you \ ?			
The falling intonation	The rising intonation	3/10	7/10
Case 2: You do not know if the other person likes to study or not. You like to learn, don't you /?			

Table 11b: Result of the interview

The rising intonation	The falling intonation	6/10	4/10
Sentence 4: I'd like a cup of tea, please \ !			
The falling intonation	The rising intonation	2/10	8/10
Sentence 5: I like soccer /, volleyball / and basketball \ .			
The rise - fall intonation	The fall-rise intonation	10/10	0/10
Sentence 6: If you have any problems /, just contact me \ .			
The rise - fall intonation	The fall - rise intonation	9/10	1/10

In the interview of 10 high-quality English language students at Can Tho University, we used 6 types of speeches in English corresponding to each case where different types of intonation were used. The results from the data table show that:

- Yes/No question: 9/10 students use correct intonation and 1/10 students use incorrect intonation.
- Wh-question: 4/10 students use correct intonation and 6/10 use incorrect intonation
- Tag question:
 - + Case 1: 3/10 students use correct intonation and 7/10 students use incorrect intonation
 - + Case 2: 6/10 students use correct intonation and 4/10 students use incorrect intonation
- Imperative sentences: 2/10 students use correct intonation and 8/10 students use incorrect intonation
- Listed sentences: 10/10 students use correct intonation and 0/10 students use incorrect intonation
- Conditional sentences: 9/10 students use correct intonation and 1/10 students use incorrect intonation

3.4 Reasons students to make intonation errors

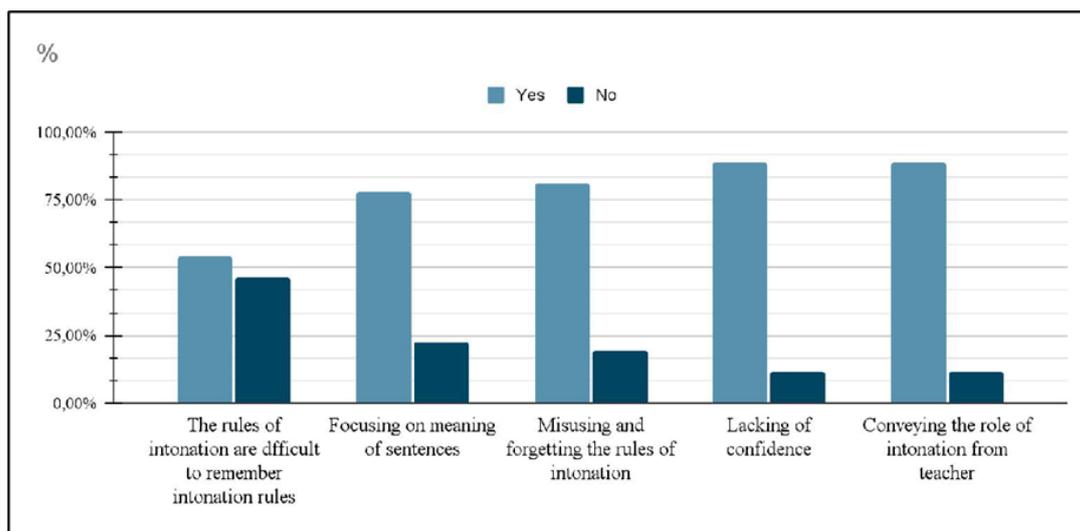


Chart 1: Student's perception of the reasons leading to errors when using intonation to convey the meaning of sentences in communication

The chart shows that 53.87% of the students think that the rules of intonation are often difficult to remember and complicated is one of the reasons leading to intonation errors. However, the remaining 46.15% of students disagree with this reason.

We can see from the second reason about focusing on the meaning of sentences that 77.7% of students accept that the meaning of intonation is more important than the rules of intonation, and 22.3% of students disagree with the proposed point of view.

The third reason, misusing and forgetting the rules of intonation illustrates the number of students who say that they often use incorrect misuse and forgetting

intonation rules, at 80,8%. However, 19.2% of students consider that they remember and use correct intonation rules in English.

The fourth reason is that the proportion of students who agree that confidence helps to develop intonation in a better way is 80,5%. However, 11.5% of students feel that being confident doesn't make their intonation better.

The final reason is that students are not conveyed the role of intonation, 11,5% agree with this cause. During the course of learning, 88,5% of students feel that the teacher conveys clearly the role of intonation.

4. Discussion

From the results analyzed in Table 1, we can see that the majority of students majoring in English study (High-quality Program) at Can Tho University understand the importance of intonation in conveying the meaning of speeches. Although, in Huyen's previous study (2017) on English pronunciation errors of first-year students of the University of Commerce, it was shown that Vietnamese students do not appreciate the importance of English intonation. In his book "English Intonation" by John C. Wells, published in 2006, it was confirmed that intonation plays an important role in the way the speaker conveys meaning. He argued that our speech would become monotonous and only literal without intonation. Meanwhile, intonation is as much a part of English grammar as different types of tenses, moods or forms of subordinate clauses that we are used to calling parts of grammar, helping to convey the difference in language. meaning in the same way, and at the same time, it is also a means of conveying the attitudes and feelings of the speaker (Bipin, 2022; p. 148).

The results obtained in Tables 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 respectively show that high-quality English language students at Can Tho University have a high awareness of the factors that influence the intonation of the speaker. We divide factors into two categories, one is direct factors and indirect factors. An average of 44% of the students rated it as important and 32.5% of the students rated it very important for factors that directly affect intonation such as intonation rules when raising or lowering voice, context, speaking speed, and ability to distinguish between English intonation and Vietnamese intonation. For indirect factors, such as the meaning of words, volume, voice quality, expression, and training ability, an average of 52.9% of students rated the level of importance and an average of 32.9% rated it extremely important.

Through the results of a high-quality 10-point in-depth interview, majoring in English at Can Tho University, we found out the intonation errors that students often make. For sentences such as list sentences, yes - no sentences, and conditional sentences, almost all students use correct intonation with a rate of more than 90%. However, for the familiar WH question, the rate of students making mistakes when using intonation accounts for 60%, the error rate for tag sentences is 70%, and the error rate for imperative sentences is 80%. The above analysis correlates with the study of Huyen (2017), the speeches with complex intonation students use correct intonation only account for about

40% -50%, the speeches with simple intonation such as sentences asked WH students tended to be less confused at a rate of 40%.

The data analyzed in chart 1 shows that one of the reasons for the misuse of intonation that high-quality English language students often encounter is because the intonation rules are difficult to memorize and complex. According to Taylor (1993), *"intonation is a transient phenomenon that is difficult to grasp or consciously put into awareness"* so students may have difficulty mastering the rules of intonation leading to the use of incorrect intonation when communicating. The second reason is due to the habit of focusing only on the meaning of words.

According to Albert Mehrabian's research on the 7-38-55 rule, only 7% have to do with words and content. Although it is right to focus on the meaning of the speech, when combined with intonation, body language, etc., the listener will understand the information conveyed more fully. Furthermore, it is easier for listeners to understand if speakers use appropriate intonation structures even if the speaker's English is not their native language (Pickering, 2004 & Wennerstomi, 2004; 1998). Although we are not native English speakers, we can convey content and messages accurately through the use of intonation when communicating. From there, it can be seen that focusing only on the meaning of the speech will contribute to the deviation of the overall content that the speaker wants to convey. The third reason is the misuse and forgetting of intonation rules, the students often face confusion when they have to communicate in a new language which leads to forgetting the rules of intonation in that language. However, this is a common situation for students, due to having to come into contact with a completely new language that is far from their native language, forgetting or using the wrong rules of intonation in that language is also understandable and can be overcome. Another cause is the lack of confidence in learners.

According to Littlewood (2007), language learning in class can cause low self-esteem and fear for learners. Because of the anxiety and fear of using the wrong intonation, it will be mocked, in addition to the fact that students have to talk about topics they often have very little knowledge about. From there, we can see partly the cause of students' lack of confidence leading to mistakes when using intonation. The last reason is that students are still not clearly communicating about the role of intonation.

Thuy (2016) said that *"teachers are the ones who guide the exploitation of lessons, guide reading documents, guide doing exercises and guide thinking about each specific problem"* help students understand the role of intonation and have the right awareness of intonation so that learners can make the best use of their abilities, however, in the learning process, sometimes students often do not pay attention. The idea of this leads to the loss of knowledge about the role of intonation. Or it may be due to factors coming from the lecturers such as the fact that the lecturers still do not have appropriate methods and teaching methods to help students acquire knowledge of intonation.

From the above four results, we conclude that most of the students have a high awareness that the role of intonation is very important for conveying the meaning of speech in communication. At the same time, the students all appreciated the influence of

9 factors on intonation. Besides, we found that most of the students made mistakes in sentence patterns such as Wh-question, tag question, and imperative sentence. Finally, the students became aware of what led to their misuse of intonation.

5. Recommendations

5.1 For the student

- Apply the “Shadowing” method: this is a method and technique introduced by Dr. Alexander Arguelles. This is one of the most used methods by students to improve their voice and intonation. Imitating a native speaker's voice can help develop intonation, tone, and speech. Learners only need to choose a video on a topic they love, then proceed to imitate what the people in the video say, gradually forming a habit of remembering and improving their listening skills, tone of voice, and sound. as well as self-confidence and intonation.
- In today's technologically advanced age, students can find many practice resources to improve intonation on the Internet. Postcards from the BBC or British Council are great sources of learning materials that are both good, useful, and free. In addition, YouTube is also another resource to practice English. When you listen, remember to note how the intonation in the speaker's voice changes.
- Self-talk: imagine and create a concrete conversation and talk to yourself in any topic and situation, this will help students improve their speaking skills and the ability to use their intonation when communicating, while also increasing self-confidence when students themselves encounter conversations with similar topics.

5.2 For the teacher

- Teachers should apply various teaching methods such as organizing games in the classroom, group discussions, role plays, singing, or awarding points. Giving bonus points during class makes students competitive so that they will actively speak, and participate in the communication process so that teachers can evaluate and correct intonation errors for you immediately.
- Open a training course for teachers on English teaching methods. Through these training courses, teachers will be equipped with teaching skills to be able to convey knowledge about intonation to students in the clearest, most specific, and most effective way.
- Teachers need to actively support and give suggestions to students when students make mistakes in the process of using intonation, especially in lessons related to phonetics, listening and speaking skills. Those contributions will help students draw lessons from experience and will limit the number of intonation mistakes later.
- In addition, the university as well as the teacher should equip the sound system such as speakers so that students can listen to the intonation and pronunciation of

native speakers in the lessons so that they can easily imitate and apply the theory taught to the actual communication process.

5.3 Limitations

The study also contains many subjective opinions, which partly affect the overall view of students' perception of the influence of intonation on conveying the meaning of speech in communication. In addition, we were limited in our literature search because there were too few detailed studies in this field.

6. Conclusion

Through the survey, interview and analysis, we have clearly understood that students' perception of the influence of intonation on conveying the meaning of speech in communication only stops at the awareness level. In actual communication, it is not successful and effective to apply the knowledge of intonation that has been learned. Therefore, we have proposed some solutions for English language students (high-quality program) as well as lecturers at Can Tho University to improve the above situation. Hopefully, this research paper can contribute somewhat to the process of learning and teaching about intonation

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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