



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNDERSTANDING AND APPLICATION OF INTONATION RULES IN THE COMMUNICATION OF ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS

**Trieu My Duyen,
Nguyen Ha Thanh Ngan,
Duong Truc Ngoc,
Nguyen Huynh Yen Nhiⁱ**
School of Foreign Languages,
Can Tho University,
Vietnam

Abstract:

The purpose of this study is (I) to survey the EFL learners' understanding of intonation rules, (II) to investigate the EFL learners' application of intonation rules when learners communicate in English, and (III) to analyze the relationship between EFL learners' understanding and application of intonation rules when communicating in English. The subject of this study comprised 30 students majoring in English Studies at a university in the south of Vietnam. This study utilized a mixed-method approach – with qualitative and quantitative data. There were two instruments that were used for collecting the data: an understanding test and a practicing test. Thirty students majoring in English Studies participated in both two tests. After the study, the results revealed a relationship between students' understanding and application of intonation rules. The paper showed that the student's theoretical knowledge and how they applied it in practice were at odds. Most students grasped all the theories of intonation rules, and they used good intonation when they communicate in English. The research paper showed that students' theoretical knowledge and how they apply it in practice are compatible. These findings were beneficial for English language learning and teaching.

Keywords: intonation, intonation rules, relationship, understanding and application

1. Introduction

Globalization and the proliferation of intercultural communicative situations have played a critical role in the development of English as a worldwide and international language in today's society. In reality, there has never been a language that is so widely used by so many people and

ⁱ Correspondence: email nhib1909361@student.ctu.edu.vn

is firmly entrenched as the dominant language in so many diverse professions as academia, advertising, business, trade, international diplomacy, music, tourism, and transportation.

Apart from the fact that English is spoken by about 350 million native speakers (Crystal, 2003), it is now mostly utilized for communication among non-native speakers who do not share a common language. This connection has had an impact on our everyday lives, as well as the necessity to find a common voice to help us overcome linguistic obstacles. However, it is not easy to communicate fluently in the English language.

Consider the following features of language: language is a system of rules, language is learned behavior, and language is an arbitrary system of vocal symbols used to transmit ideas and express feelings among members of a social society (Rabiah, 2018). The conclusion drawn from the preceding features of language is that supra-segmental feature, particularly intonation, is the flavor that gives spoken language a sense of meaning, reflecting the speaker's and listener's thoughts and feelings. Intonation improves the flavor of language, makes it easier to understand, and makes a language more melodious.

Due to the multiple prosodic systems involved, including pitch, pace, rhythm, and loudness, intonation is not a straightforward notion, according to Johns-Lewis (1986). During a discussion, however, intonation is critical for transferring ideas, attitudes, and emotions. Wennerstrom (2001) defines it as the melody of the voice at the time of speaking. That is why, especially for EFL students who are not entrenched in the English culture, awareness and applying correct intonation are essential, as the chances of native speaker input are remote, and the dangers of unintelligibility or misunderstandings while speaking in the L2 are substantial.

At a university in the south, the researcher observed that there were many students majoring in English Studies who have learned about phonetics and phonology, but when communicating in English, they cannot apply stress and intonation in sentences, and sometimes they apply the wrong intonation. Students are often remarked on by teachers as being flat or using incorrect intonation when communicating.

If learners want to master and use a certain language fluently, in addition to having knowledge of the language, learners will use related skills such as writing skills, and reading comprehension skills, learners must be able to express themselves and absorb information through listening comprehension. In particular, the ability to speak English loudly, and clearly, using intonation in the process of speaking English can be appreciated, although, through the process of theoretical and practical research on language use, we find that this is also not a simple problem.

From the above situation, we proceed to determine the relationship between the understanding and application ability of students majoring in English. The results of the study will help learners realize the importance of the characteristics and rules of using intonation. This survey helps students realize the importance of learning intonation in improving intonation when communicating in English. Thereby, helping them invest a lot of time and effort to hone and practice to achieve the best effect in using intonation in English communication.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of intonation

According to Levis (1999), intonation is the quality, intensity, and prosody of one's voice. Levis (1999) demonstrated that intonation is defined as the different pitch movements that a speech might have on a discourse level (rise, fall, fall-rise). Intonation brings vitality to speech; without it, a person's verbal communication would be monotonous and lack vitality.

Tonality, tonicity, and tone are all language systems used in English and they have distinct functions. The six major functions of intonation, according to Wells (2006), are attitudinal, grammatical, focusing, discourse, psychological, and indexical function. It is because of these functions that explicit education to ESL students will equip them with knowledge and understanding of the similarities and contrasts between their L1 and L2.

To avoid misconceptions, it is necessary to grasp English tones. According to Roach (2009), English has three basic tones (level, fall, and rise) and two complicated tones (fall-rise and rise-fall). Although the tones mentioned above have some broad applications, EFL students should be aware that native speakers do not always adhere to "generic principles" in everyday language, especially in casual situations.

2.2. Types of intonation patterns

2.2.1. Rising intonation

This pattern may be identified by the voice rising from a very low note to a comparatively high tone on the last stressed syllable or the one that comes after it Celik (2001).

2.2.2. Falling - Rising intonation

According to Celik (2001) and others like Kumaki (2003), this tone frequently indicates dependency, continuity, and non-finality. It usually occurs in sentences or non-final intonation units.

When an English complex phrase comprises two intonation units, the first, or non-final, has a fall-rise, while the second, or final, has a falling tone, according to Brazil in Kumaki (2003). As a result, the tone in non-final intonation units can be described as having a 'dependence' tone, or a fall-rise tone. Rising and fall-rise tones indicate to the listener that the tone unit relates to a section of the message that both the speaker and the listener are familiar with. These tones are known as referencing tones because of this.

2.2.3. Falling intonation

By far the most commonly utilized tone is a falling tone. It conveys a sense of finality, completeness, and belief in the content of the speech, according to Celik (2001). A speaker might give the listener the opportunity to comment on, agree or disagree with, or add to his or her statement when the speaker uses a falling tone. Although this tone does not demand a reply, it is up to the listener to produce such a response if he or she so desires.

2.2.4. Rising - Falling intonation

These two tones (i.e. "fall" & "rise-fall"), like the prior one, are declaring rather than referring. Proclaiming tones, according to Kumaki (2003), implies that the tone unit as a component of the message has not yet been transmitted. When a speaker uses a proclaiming tone, it suggests that the speaker does not believe the listener has all of the knowledge that the speaker possesses. When someone asks a question, it signifies that the listener possesses information that the speaker does not. All queries are regarded to be asked without any expectations of responses when they are asked in a proclaiming tone. The rise-fall tone denotes not just the speaker's outcry, but also his or her purpose to dominate the discourse and his or her expectation of a specific response from the listener.

The rise-fall tone is generally used for giving out a list, a set of choices, or partial and conditional statements. According to Cauldwell & Hewings (1996), when stating a list, the intonation always goes down on the last item (to indicate that the list is completed) and goes up on all the things preceding it (to show that there are more to come).

2.3. Intonation rules in different types of statements

2.3.1. Intonation in Yes/No questions

For Yes/No Question, the neutral intonation contour is a rising tone (Baker, 2006). However, in a study of the intonation of Yes-or-No questions, Thompson (1995) provides a convincing account of the functional benefits of using rising versus falling intonation when asking Yes-or-No questions. According to her, questions that speakers feel they already know the answer to have dropping intonation.

2.3.2. Intonation in WH-questions

Contrary to Yes/No questions, it has been observed that WH-questions in English are not always formed with a final increase. In WH-questions, a final low pitch also appears rather frequently. The decision between a final rising and a final low pitch seems to depend on the speaker (Hirschberg, 2000).

2.3.3. Intonation in tag questions

According to Baker (2006), question tags often have a falling intonation. By using this, the speaker is expecting agreement. Down tags are used frequently to establish rapport and agreement between the speakers. However, sometimes the intonation in this question goes up. This means the speaker is unsure if the information is correct and asks the listener to check it. Before an up tag, there is often a slight pause.

2.3.4. Intonation in lists

The following is the rule that underlies intonation in lists: The final component always has a falling intonation (to show that the list is finished) and has a rising intonation on all the items before the final one (to show that there is more to come). (Cauldwell & Hewings, 1996, p. 328).

2.3.5. Intonation in exclamations

Radford (1997, p. 506) defines an exclamatory as “*a type of structure used to exclaim surprise, delight, annoyance, etc.*”. In exclamation sentences, we often express surprise by using intonation that goes up at the beginning of the sentence and then goes down at the end (Baker, 2006).

2.3.6. Intonation in suggestions

According to Baker (2006), the intonation in suggestions will go up and this shows politeness and friendliness.

2.3.7. Intonation in question with 'or'

The intonation in questions with the word 'or' will go up on things before the word 'or' and go down at the end of the sentence. (Baker, 2006).

3. Material and Methods

This study used a mixed-method approach – with qualitative and quantitative data collected from students majoring in English Studies at a university in the south of Vietnam. In this study, two tests were used: The first one is to test the students' understanding of intonation rules in English, and the second one is to investigate the students' application of intonation rules when they communicate in English.

The subject of this study comprised 30 fourth-year students majoring in English Studies (a High-Quality program) at Can Tho University – in the research context. They were all native Vietnamese speakers from 4 different classes of fourth-year students and learning English as a foreign language. These participants were purposefully selected since they have learned phonetics and phonology subjects at university. When studying in this course, students were provided with the knowledge of intonation (especially intonation rules according to particular statements or questions) and had the opportunity to practice using intonation in real communication. For that reason, they already have specific knowledge about speaking English in general and intonation in particular. The following is the two tests about students' understanding and students' application of intonation rules in English.

The first is a test about students' understanding of intonation rules in English. The participants took a test to investigate their understanding of the theory of intonation rules in English. Intonation tests were employed as the instrument to collect the data in this study. It was performed through Google form-based questions. To check their knowledge of the intonation rules, participants were required to answer 20 brief questions about the theory of intonation rules in English. Regarding the content validity of the test, the researcher took sample dialogues from the book "Ship or Sheep? Student's Book: An Intermediate Pronunciation Course" (Baker, 2006) which has been and is being used as a textbook on intonation in phonetics courses at this university, and related scientific articles. Next is the test about investigating the students' application of intonation rules when they communicate in English. After a week, the researchers used a second test to collect data on students' application of intonation rules when communicating in English. The language data was obtained from the recordings of the

participants. There were 30 people taking part in this 2nd test who took part in the previous test. The researchers divided 30 participants into 15 pairs. They were randomly paired and then they practiced a dialogue by acting as the characters in the dialogue. This dialogue is taken from the book "Ship or Sheep? Student's Book: An Intermediate Pronunciation Course" (Baker, 2006) and adapted by the researchers to cover the full range of intonations in the different types of sentences that this study targets.

While doing this test, the researchers used a voice recorder app on the phone and recorded the conversations between the pairs of participants. After recording the participants' recordings, the researchers synthesized the recording files and sent them to an IELTS Speaking teacher for grading. The scorer is an IELTS Speaking teacher who has achieved an average score of 7.0 IELTS. Therefore, he is able to listen to and grade the speaking files of the pairs. Fifteen script sheets were given to the teacher without the names of any of the participants. In order to protect identities, pseudonyms were used in this article instead of real names. They are only designated from N1 - N30 for each person as well as each script.

To point out the correlation between EFL learners' understanding and application of intonation rules, the researcher employed the SPSS software to run the data. Then, the data was able to show the correlation between the theory score and practice score clearly.

Three questions were used to figure out the answers to the research as follows:

- 1) Do EFL learners grasp the theory of intonation rules?
- 2) How do EFL learners apply the rules of intonation when communicating?
- 3) How is the relationship between EFL learner's understanding and application of intonation rules?

4. Results

4.1. Students' understanding of intonation rules

First, the researcher investigated the understanding of fourth-year students majoring in English Studies about the theory of intonation rules. The survey showed that 100% of the survey respondents learned about the theory and practice of phonetic rules through the practical phonetics course. In addition, this statistics table was also evidence to show the correlation between students' ability to apply intonation rules in their communication after learning through theory.

Table 1: Reliability statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.705	.706	20

According to the data from Table 1, when running the SPSS software on reliability from the questionnaire in the knowledge test consisting of 20 questions, the results show that the reliability of the questions is at a high level with a high level of reliability 0.705.

Table 2: Scores of the understanding tests

Band scores	Number of students achieved	Percentages (%)
Under 5	0	0.0%
5.5	1	3%
6	3	10%
6.5	3	10%
7	1	3%
7.5	1	3%
8.5	4	14%
9	1	3%
9.5	16	54%
Total	30	100%

The study was conducted using a language test to test students' theoretical understanding of intonation. Table 2 is the test scores that show that the majority of students' theoretical knowledge of intonation is at a good level ranging from 8.5 points to 9.5 points. The highest number recorded was 9.5 points with 54% equivalent to 16 students out of the total number of students surveyed and no one got a perfect score. Meanwhile, the lowest score recorded was 5.5 (3%) and no student scored below the average. This shows that through the practical phonetics course in the research context, most students have clearly understood specialized knowledge of the theory of intonation in English. Up to 71% of students got good marks (from 8.5 to 9.5) 21/30, which proves that phonics learning for students majoring in English is really effective. Students remember specialized knowledge and apply it to intonation theory tests.

Table 3: Questions that were answered incorrectly in the understanding test

Question types in knowledge test	Number of wrong answers	Percentages (%)
Intonation in Yes/No questions	15	14%
Intonation in Wh-questions	10	9%
Intonation in lists	13	12%
Intonation in exclamations	13	12%
Intonation in suggestions	12	11%
Intonation in tag questions	28	26%
Intonation in questions with 'or'	17	16%
Total	108	100%

Table 3 illustrates the percentage of incorrect intonation answers that participants did on the knowledge test. It is clear that students made the most mistakes on questions about intonation in tag questions. Meanwhile, when doing questions about intonation in Wh- questions, students made the fewest mistakes.

We can see that the number of incorrect answers about intonation in the tag questions accounts for the highest percentage, 26% (n = 108) of the total number of questions that students get wrong. In addition, in the questions about intonation in the question with 'or' students got 17 wrong answers (16%). For the question of intonation in the Yes/No question, students answered 15 questions incorrectly (accounting for 14%). Besides, wrong answers in the question of intonation in exclamation and in the lists were chosen by students, the figures of both are

equal, accounting for 12% (13 answers). Meanwhile, the intonation that students made the least mistake was the intonation in suggestion and in the Wh- question, which was 11% and 9%, respectively.

4.2. Students' application of intonation rules when communicating

Thirty students who took the understanding test before were required to continue to participate in recording conversations to test their ability to use intonation when communicating.

Table 4: Scores of the application tests

Band scores	Number of students achieved	Percentages (%)
6	2	7%
7	11	36,5%
8	11	36,5%
9	6	20%
Total	30	100%

According to this table, there were 6 students, or 20% of the students who participated in the survey, with achieved a score of 9. And 7 and 8 are the scores that most students get (both 36.5%). The application test did not have a score below the average, the lowest score was 6, and only 7% of the total number of students participated in the survey. This shows that the student's ability to use intonation in communication is very good.

Table 5: Student's intonation errors in application test

Intonation errors in application test	Number of intonation errors	Percentages (%)
Intonation in Yes/No questions	6	9%
Intonation in Wh-questions	8	12%
Intonation in lists	11	16%
Intonation in exclamations	4	6%
Intonation in suggestions	7	10%
Intonation in tag questions	12	17%
Intonation in questions with 'or'	21	30%
Total	69	100%

Table 5 compares the percentage of intonation errors that participants made in the application test. It is clear that when asking questions with the word 'or', participants made the most intonation mistakes. In comparison, when expressing intonation in exclamations, the participants made the least mistakes.

We can see that intonation errors in questions with the word 'or' account for the highest proportion, at 30% (n=69) of the total intonation errors that the participants made. The intonation in the type of statement that students make the second most mistakes is the intonation in the tag questions with 12 errors (17%). Besides, the number of intonation errors that students make when making the list is only 1 error less than the number of intonation errors in the tag question. Intonation errors in Wh- questions and in suggestions constitute 12% and 10% respectively.

Meanwhile, intonation errors account for the least percentage of total intonation errors is intonation in Yes/No questions and in exclamations with 9% and 6% respectively.

4.3. The relationship between students' understanding and application of intonation rules

4.3.1 Average score of the understanding test and the application test

Table 6: Average score of the understanding test and the application test

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Application score	30	6.00	9.00	7.7000	.87691
Understanding score	30	5.50	9.50	8.4167	1.42686
Valid N (listwise)	30				

According to the survey results, the average score on the understanding test (8.4) is higher than the average score on the practice test (7.7). This shows that students have a good understanding of the theory of intonation in English. However, in terms of applying intonation in communication in English, students have not used all the intonation rules they have learned, so when taking the application test, they made many intonation errors.

4.3.2 Correlation between the understanding test and the application test

Table 7: Correlation between the understanding test and the application test

		Application score	Understanding score
Application score	Pearson Correlation	1	.710**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	30	30
Understanding score	Pearson Correlation	.710**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	30	30

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Based on the results, pairwise correlation analysis of the understanding test scores and the application test scores showed a strong correlation. Correlation coefficient $r = 0.710 > 0.5$ with 99% confidence shows a high and positive correlation.

From the data analyzed above, we can easily realize that students majoring in English have applied a lot of phonological knowledge they have learned into practice when communicating. Although the average score of the practice test is lower than the theory test, and when practicing intonation, students still make some mistakes, but over 50% of students participating in the practice test get a score 8 and 9. This proves that learning the knowledge of intonation is very beneficial in helping students improve and enhance their intonation.

5. Discussion

In the understanding test, the results showed that the majority of students remembered and applied the rules of intonation well in this test. Most students did well on basic intonation theory

questions. However, there were some more advanced theories where some students got the answer wrong. The evidence is that the sentence with the highest number of wrong answers is "Sometimes in a Yes/No question, the case when the person asking the question knows more or less the answer and is looking for confirmation, they use _____." This question was compiled by the research team from a scientific article, so this was the question that students answered incorrectly the most. Up to 26.7 % of students answered this question incorrectly. From that, it can be concluded that EFL learners really understood and grasped the theory of basic intonation rules in English. However, EFL learners also need to improve this knowledge through scientific articles or other sources.

In the test of intonation application when communicating in English. Most of the participants applied well to the dialogue prepared by the research team. However, they made some intonation errors.

This section presents some similarities and differences in comparison to findings in previous studies about intonation errors made by EFL learners as well as learners' perceptions of intonation rules.

Currently, Vietnam has had a lot of research investigating the application of intonation when communicating with English learners. Specifically, Ngu & Le (2008) conducted research on some basic intonations in English of students at the Ben Tre Center for Continuing Education. The results of this study showed that most students do not properly demonstrate basic intonation, even though they have theoretically mastered it through classroom lessons. This result was similar to the results in this study. The similarity in these two studies is that the results of the practice test have intonation errors in Yes/No questions, WH- questions, and questions with the word 'or'.

However, the difference between this study and the study of Ngu & Le (2008) is that the researchers in this study conducted more surveys on students' intonation knowledge. And the results of this study also exploit more intonation errors such as intonation errors in lists, in exclamations, suggestions, and tag questions.

6. Conclusion

This study focused to answer 3 main questions (1) Do EFL learners grasp the theory of intonation rules? (2) How do EFL learners apply the rules of intonation when communicating? (3) How is the relationship between EFL learners' understanding and application of intonation rules? It can be drawn into the following three main conclusions: (1) Students' understanding of intonation rules, (2) Students' application of intonation rules in English, and (3) The relationship between EFL learners' understanding and application of intonation rules.

The first research question focuses on EFL learners' understanding of intonation rules. Through the survey, we can easily see that the level of understanding of philology students about intonation in communication is good. Thereby showing that the knowledge about intonation that students have learned at school is effective.

The second research question focuses on the application of EFL learners to the rules of intonation when communicating in English. The research showed that the ability to use intonation in the communication of language major students is good.

The third research question focuses on the relationship between EFL learners' understanding and application of intonation rules. The research paper showed that students' theoretical knowledge and how they apply it in practice are compatible.

In conclusion, the results from the study showed that most EFL learners grasped most of the rules of intonation and they well applied the intonation they have learned in English communication.

7. Limitations

Only thirty participants who are majoring in English Studies at a university in the south of Vietnam for quantitative and qualitative research would not be enough for the researcher to generalize to large-scale effect conclusions. Besides, this study only focuses on the intonation of seven types of statements in English, so it is still limited in the scope of research into the intonation of other types of sentences. Therefore, it is necessary to have more in-depth studies in this field to contribute to making the education system better and better.

8. Recommendations

The researchers completed this project as an overview of the relationship between understanding and application of intonation rules in the communication of students majoring in English Studies. This study serves as a trustworthy reference for future researchers and creates promotion for advancement for people with a strong interest in linguistics generally and intonation specifically.

As a recommendation for further researchers, the authors propose to investigate how people apply intonation or influence the application of intonation when communicating in English in other in-depth studies.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Trieu My Duyen is a senior student majoring in English at the School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Vietnam.

Nguyen Ha Thanh Ngan is a senior student majoring in English at the School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Vietnam.

Duong Truc Ngoc is a senior student majoring in English at the School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Vietnam.

Nguyen Huynh Yen Nhi is a senior student majoring in English at the School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Vietnam.

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