INTONATION AS A MEANS TO BETTER UT-HCMC STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE
GIẢNG DẠY NGỮ ĐIỆU – GIẢI PHÁP NÂNG CAO NĂNG LỰC GIAO TIẾP CỦA SINH VIÊN TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC GIAO THÔNG VẬN TẢI THÀNH PHỐ HỒ CHÍ MINH

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Abstract: Although recognized as one of the significant constituents of English pronunciation, intonation has been one of the most neglected areas not only in classroom but also in materials purposely designed for teaching and learning English, which inevitably leads to a worrying result - learners' regular failure in conversational exchanges with native speakers of English due to misunderstanding and/or being misunderstood caused by their inadequate awareness of intonation. Without any exceptions, students at University of Transport in Ho Chi Minh City (abbreviated to UT-HCMC) have to suffer the same problem. This paper, therefore, attempts to highlight the fact that teaching intonation to students at UT-HCMC does work in enhancing their communication competence. By presenting communicative values of basic intonation patterns and recommending some effective and applicable strategies for teaching intonation drawn from a long process of study, observation and experimental teaching done with the participation of 36 students of the English-4 class, the paper is hoped to bring both teachers and students at UT-HCMC a new way of teaching and learning intonation, which hopefully will release both of the subjects from the burden of time- and effort-consuming process of intonation teaching and learning.

Keywords: Communication, fall, fall-rise, intonation, intonation patterns, pitch, rise, rise-fall.

Classification number: 3.4

Tóm tắt: Dù được công nhận là một trong những thành tố quan trọng trong hệ thống phát âm tiếng Anh nhưng ngữ điệu lại là một trong những yếu tố ít được quan tâm nhất trong lớp học cũng như trong các tài liệu được thiết kế cho mục đích dạy và học tiếng Anh, dẫn đến một kết quả rất đáng lo ngại – người học thường xuyên thất bại trong giao tiếp với người bản xứ do không hiểu về ngữ điệu dẫn đến hiểu nhầm hoặc bị hiểu nhầm. Không phải là ngoại lệ, sinh viên trường Đại học Giao thông Vận tải Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (Viết tắt là UT-HCMC) cũng gặp phải vấn đề tương tự. Bài viết này nhằm nhấn mạnh rằng việc dạy ngữ điệu cho sinh viên sẽ giúp nâng cao năng lực giao tiếp của họ. Bằng cách trình bày giá trị giao tiếp của các mẫu ngữ điệu cơ bản và đề xuất một số cách dạy ngữ điệu thiết thực và hiệu quả được rút ra từ quá trình nghiên cứu, quan sát và dạy thực nghiệm lâu dài với sự tham gia của 36 sinh viên lớp Tiếng Anh 4, bài viết này hy vọng sẽ mang đến cho giáo viên và sinh viên trường ĐH GTVT TPHCM một cách dạy và học ngữ điệu mới, giúp giáo viên và sinh viên giảm bớt thời gian và công sức trong việc dạy và học ngữ điệu.

Từ khóa: Giao tiếp, ngữ điệu xuống, ngữ điệu xuống - lên, ngữ điệu, mẫu ngữ điệu, cao độ, ngữ điệu lên, ngữ điệu lên – xuống.

Chỉ số phân loại: 3.4

1. Introduction

Intonation makes a linguistically significant role in English pronunciation since in English, "different pitch patterns can signal very different meanings for the same sentence" (Avery & Ehrlich, 1995, p. 77). With a good command of intonation, English speakers can find it a bit easier to make themselves properly understood and to precisely perceive "information over and above that which is expressed by the words in the sentence" (Richards *et al*, 1987, p. 148). Thus, mastering communicative values of intonation patterns and being able to naturally apply these patterns in conversational exchanges are essential to any learners of English who aim at improving their communication competence. However, "English intonation is English, it is not the same as the intonation of any other language" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 108). Learning English intonation, therefore, requires Vietnamese learners of English whose mother tongue's tunes are quite different from those of

English, a considerable amount of time and effort to seriously learn and to regularly practice the shapes as well as the meanings of the English tunes. Unfortunately, students at UT-HCMC have very few chances to be exposed to intonation, and thus, do not know how to employ this aspect of supra-segmental phonology as one of the efficient means to avoid regrettable breakdowns in their oral communication. It is strongly believed that the inclusion of intonation in the English curriculum officially applied at UT-HCMC is of urgent needs to (improve) the current situation of intonation teaching and learning at this institution.

2. Intonation and its role

2.1. Definition of intonation

To understand what *intonation* is, it is first necessary for us to understand what *pitch* is. *Pitch*, as defined by Celce-Murcia; Brinton and Goodwin (2002, p. 184), is "the relative highness or lowness of the voice".

If *pitch* represents the individual tones of speech, then "*intonation* can be thought of as the entire melodic line. Intonation involves the rising and falling of the voice to various pitch levels during the articulation of an utterance" (Celce-Murcia; Brinton and Goodwin, 2002, p. 184). People can mean differently by using the same group of words, arranged in the same order, but saying them with different tones. For example, the utterance *Close the door*, if produced with a rising pitch contour from middle to high, could signify the question *Do you want me to close the door*? If produced with a falling pitch contour from high to low, however, these same words could signify a command. Clearly, speakers are able to make a group of words mean what they want it to mean by choosing the right intonation. That explains why in real oral communication, fluent speakers of English always produce utterances with moving tones rather than level tones.

2.2. Rationale for teaching intonation

What would happen if we produced utterances in which every syllable was said on the same level pitch, with no pauses and no changes in speed or loudness? This is the sort of unnatural speech that is rarely used in real communication. According to Roach (2000), there are at least three reasons why intonation should be taught in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes:

- Intonation enables us to express emotions and attitudes as we speak, and thus adds a special kind of meaning to spoken language.

- Intonation helps to produce the effect of prominence on syllable that marks out the word to which it belongs as the most important in the utterance.

- Intonation can signal to the listener what is to be taken as "new" information and what is already "given".

Obviously, intonation is not only central to conveying meaning in spoken English but also important in conveying the attitude of the speaker towards what is being said. Only by using correct intonation can speakers make themselves properly understood, and only when mastering intonation patterns can listeners correctly understand what others imply in their utterances. Therefore, English users must be consciously aware of intonation and properly apply it in face-to-face conversation.

2.3. Intonation patterns and their communicative values

An *intonation pattern* is "the movement of pitch within an intonation unit" (Celce-Murcia *et al*, 2002, p. 185). According to Roach (2000), English intonation comprises of four main tones: the rise-fall, the rise, the fall and the fall-rise.

2.3.1. The rise-fall

The rise-fall is the tone in which the pitch rises and then descends again (Roach, 2000). Example 1:


∧ **All** of them•went[1]

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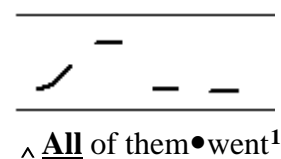
[1] *The bold underlined letters indicate tonic syllables; the dots identify prominent syllables and the interrupted lines refer to the tones chosen.*

Being characteristic of simple statements, commands and wh-questions, the rise-fall is one of the most common patterns in English (Avery & Ehrlich, 1995; Celce-Murcia *et al*, 2002). In addition, these scholars also note that when the voice falls to the bottom of the pitch range, it usually indicates a complete thought, i.e. the speaker has finished speaking while a fall that is not to the bottom of the pitch range indicates that we still have more to say. Besides, Halliday (1978) asserts that surprise may be expressed through this tone. Tag questions, as Avery and Ehrlich (1995, p. 80) add, "when produced with the rise-fall intonation, indicate that the speaker already knows the information and he/she is merely eliciting confirmation from the listener," and thus, are often referred to as rhetorical questions to begin conversations like *Cold, isn't it*.

2.3.2. The rise

Roach (2000) states that the rise is the movement from a lower pitch to a higher one.

Example 2:

ᵥ **some** chairs
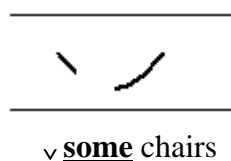
Despite their different perspectives, Avery and Ehrlich (1995), O'Connor (1986) and Halliday (1978) do share the point that the rise is the characteristic of yes/no questions; we can, through the use of rising intonation, turn a declarative sentence into a yes/no question. In addition, these linguists also assert that doubt, surprise or disbelief can be expressed by means of rising intonation. Tag questions, they add, when spoken with a rise, mean the speaker genuinely does not know the information and therefore, wants the listener to provide it. Being used with lists is another function of the rising contour mentioned by Avery and Ehrlich (1995) who state that the pitch of the voice rising slightly on each noun of the list indicate that we are not yet finished speaking.

2.3.3. The fall

As stated by Roach (2000), the fall is the tone which descends from a higher to a lower pitch.

Example 3:

\ **Why** did you •go
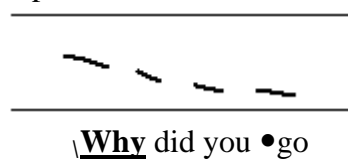
O'Connor (1986) emphasizes that short yes/no questions used as responses like *Are you*, *Did he* are frequently uttered with the fall. Bradford (1992) and Brazil (1997), however, state that the fall, one of the two most commonly found tones in English, is used when the utterance contains information which the speaker thinks is new to the hearer.

2.3.4. The fall-rise

Roach (2000) defines the fall-rise as the tone in which pitch descends and then rises again.

Example 4:
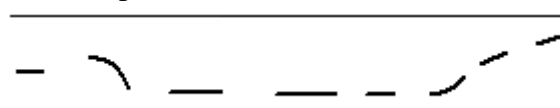
I ᵥ **might** have •thought of •buying it

According to Lujan (2004) and O'Connor (1986), the fall-rise is to signal an incomplete thought, i.e. by means of fall-rise intonation, the speaker means that he/she has something more to say. Statements that are a correction of what someone else has said or which are warnings are also characteristically expressed with the fall-rise (O'Connor, 1986). To make a command sound pleading, more a request than an order, the fall-rise ought to be selected, adds the author. Bradford (1992) and Brazil (1997), however, from different perspectives, assert that the fall-rise is used when the utterance contains known information - ideas the speaker thinks his/her hearer already knows about or has experience of.

3. Experimental teaching of intonation

To make sure the intonation-teaching strategies recommended do work with UT-HCMC students, the researcher conducted a study with 6 steps:

Step 1: The students were asked to do an in-class written diagnostic test which aimed to check how much they knew about intonation as well as its function in specific contexts.

Step 2: The first recording of the students' oral performance was carried out, the objective of which was to measure how well they produced English intonation.

Step 3: The students' papers were marked, their performance was evaluated, their problems were identified and score groups were established. Students' results were divided into 4 groups including A, B, C, D with the scores ranging from 9 – 10, 7 – 8, 5 – 6 and 0 - 4 respectively.

Step 4: The experimental teaching was done for 9 weeks. During the process, different techniques were applied to help the students (1) recognize what intonation is and how this supra-segmental aspect helps convey meanings and the speaker's attitudes in specific contexts, (2) master the communicative values of some common intonation patterns, and (3) effectively use the patterns in their oral communication. While the students got used to, acquired and produced intonation patterns, first in isolated utterances and next in complete dialogs, careful observation was made and detailed notes were taken.

Step 5: The in-class written achievement test which was aimed to check the students' ability to recognize intonation patterns used by other people as well as what is conveyed by means of these patterns was done. Right after that, the second recording was made. The purpose of this was to measure how better, if ever, the students produced English intonation compared with the first time.

Step 6: Students' papers were marked. The results gained from the comparison between the students' two tests and two recordings provided reliable data for subsequent treatment which, in its turn, served as the foundation on which the researcher based to make evaluations on the students' progress and the techniques employed.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Results from the two tests

A test was designed to be used twice, first as a diagnostic test, called pre-test, done at the pre-experimental teaching stage and then used again as an achievement test, called post-test, which was done after the teaching had finished. The researcher's decision for one test to be used twice, instead of two different tests, is due to the fact stated by Brown (2005, p. 3) that "diagnostic tests and achievement tests, by their very nature, belong to the same test family - criterion-referenced test, i.e. they share a number of features in common including type of interpretation, type of measurement, purpose of testing, distribution of scores, test structure and knowledge of questions, and thus it is quite possible for one test to be able to be used twice". The test was designed to check the students' ability to recognize common intonation patterns and their communicative values. It has 3 sections.

▪ Section I, which contains 10 statement-word-order utterances, was meant to check whether the students (1) can distinguish the rise tone from the rise-fall tone and (2) know that a statement-word-order utterance, when produced with the rise-fall tone, functions as a declarative statement, but when spoken with the rise tone, can be used as a question that requires a yes/no answer.

▪ Section II, which has 10 utterances with either finished or unfinished lists, was to check if the students know how to use the rise and the rise-fall tones in lists.

▪ Section III, which is a dialog with eight one-word utterances, was to test students' ability to recognize different patterns used in a simple conversational exchange.

Below are the results of the two tests.

Table 1. *Students' results obtained from Section I of the two tests.*

Test	Results	A	B	C	D
Pre-test	Number	9	7	8	12
	%	*25*	*21.2*	*23*	*30.8*
Post-test	Number	28	8	0	0
	%	*77.7*	*22.3*	*0*	*0*

As seen from Table 1, in the pre-test, the students in group D outnumbered those who form Group A or Group B. However, the results from the post-test had noticeable changes. To be more specific, 25% of the students were grouped in A and 30.8% in D in the pre-test, but these figures respectively soared up to 77.7% and plunged to the minimum of 0% in the post-test.

Table 2. *Students' results obtained from Section II of the two tests.*

Test	Results	A	B	C	D
Pre-test	Number	6	3	3	24
	%	*16.7*	*8.3*	*8.3*	*66.7*
Post-test	Number	8	21	3	4
	%	*22.2*	*58.3*	*8.3*	*11.2*

Like Section I, Section II also saw big differences in the tests' results. In the pre-test, Groups A and B made up only 25% and Group D 66.7% while their corresponding percentages went up to 80.5% and went down to 11.2% in the post-test.

Table 3. *Students' results obtained from Section III of the two tests.*

Test	Results	A	B	C	D
Pre-test	Number	0	12	6	18
	%	*0*	*33.3*	*16.7*	*50*
Post-test	Number	24	11	1	0
	%	*66.7*	*30.6*	*2.7*	*0*

As shown in Table 3, in Section III, the number of students in Group A increased dramatically from 0% in the pre-test to 66.7% in the post-test while the number of students in Group D fell down remarkably from 50% in the pre-test to 0% in the post-test. It can be concluded from the students' scores of the two tests that the students did make some progress in their recognition of the use of intonation in oral communication. After 9 weeks of being exposed to intonation, the students showed their improvement under two evidences: the number of below-average scores had sharply fallen while the number of average and above-average scores had considerably increased.

4.2. Results from the two recordings

As intonation can only be applied and perceived in oral communication, the test would be said to lack its face validity if the researcher just relied on the results from the written one (Hughes, 1996). The recording, targeted at measuring the students' progress in intonation production in particular and in their oral skills in general, was also done twice right after the written tests were finished. Not meaning to challenge the students, the researcher only asked them to read out loud the dialog in Section III of the written tests. By this means, the researcher could tell whether the students remembered how different intonation patterns are used in specific contexts, and how well they produced English intonation. Below are some of the students' dominant problems found in the two recordings.

Table 4. *Students' dominant problems as found in the two recordings.*

Problem		Pre-test (times)	Post-test (times)
Wh-questions	Rise	50	19
	Level	11	1
Yes/No questions	Rise-fall	10	3
	Level	11	10
Tag questions	Rise	10	6
	Level	4	1
Alternative questions	Rise	18	3
	Level	3	0
Statements	Rise	16	11
	Level	4	2
All utterances	Level	28	3

Excluding all the sound-related matters which are out of the scope of the study, the researcher only examined problems concerning the students' production and their understanding of how intonation patterns are used in the conversational contexts provided by the two tests. Table 4 showed the students' dominant problems the researcher had found out after spending a considerable amount of time patiently listening to each of their oral performances in comparison to the model performance of a native speaker of English.

Problem 1: Misuse of the rise tone in unmarked wh-questions

As seen from Table 4, misuse of the rise tone in unmarked wh-questions was the students' most common mistake with 50 times counted in the first recording. The figure, however, decreased dramatically in the second recording with only 19 cases.

Problem 2: Misuse of the rise-fall tone in unmarked yes/no questions

While most EFL learners mistakenly think that all kinds of questions should be pronounced with the rise tone, there were still 10 cases found in the first recording in which the students used the rise-fall tone in unmarked yes/no questions. The situation seemed to be brighter in the second recording with only 3 cases ever found.

Problem 3: Misuse of the rise tone in tag questions for confirmation

The choice of tone used in tag questions for confirmation also posed a considerable difficulty to the students who might misconceive that all kinds of questions, including tag questions, end with the rise tone. Affected by this misconception, 10 cases related to this kind of mistake were found in the first recording. The situation was a little improved in the second recording with a slight decrease to 6 cases.

Problem 4: Misuse of the rise tone in closed-choice alternative questions

Being no exception, the selection of tone used in closed-choice alternative questions was also influenced by the myth that the rise tone is the only choice for questions in English, irrespective of what kind they are. Up to 18 mistakes of this kind were found in the first recording. Optimistically, the figure significantly reduced to only 3 cases in the second recording.

Problem 5: Misuse of the rise tone in statements

The misuse of tone in statements was also common among the students. In the first recording, as many as 16 cases used the rise tone, instead of the rise-fall tone, to indicate the finality of a declarative sentence. Fewer mistakes of this kind were recognized in the second recording, however.

Problem 6: Misuse of the level tone

Failing to be aware of the fact that the level tone is the least commonly used by native speakers of English, more than half of the students, in their first performance, mistakenly used this tone in all kinds of utterances. Others occasionally used the level tone in wh-questions (11 cases), yes/no questions (11 cases), tag questions (4 cases), closed-choice alternative questions (3 cases) and statements (4 cases). In their second performances, however, there was a noticeable fall in these figures respectively down to 1, 10, 1, 0, and 2 case(s). There also existed a sharp decrease to just as low as 3 students who chose the level tone in all kinds of utterances.

It can be concluded from the above-presented figures that the students made a considerable progress in their use of intonation, in the limited contexts of the tests though. In other words, they were able to select the tones appropriate for specific kinds of utterances in the given contexts. Although their production of intonation was not natural enough and their pronunciation of sounds was not as good as expected, the improvement they made in their oral skills was undeniable.

4.3. Comments on techniques applied in the experimental teaching

Carefully observing the students' reactions to the teaching and learning of intonation in general and to each of the in-class activities in particular, the researcher took notes from which some helpful comments were then drawn:

▪ The concrete ways the researcher employed when explaining such abstract notions as pitch or such complicated concepts as intonation and intonation patterns made it easier for the students to get a thorough grasp of these intrinsically troublesome jargons.

▪ By systematically dividing English intonation, which is definitely the target item, into smaller units, each of which has its own focus, the researcher helped the students well distinguish the differences in the production as well as the communicative values of English common intonation patterns. Accordingly, the students managed to approach these patterns with very little difficulty.

▪ The use of audio and visual aids like CDs and movies helped create a stress-free learning environment, leading to the increase in the students' participation in the lesson,

which enabled them to approach the target items in a less burdensome, and thus, more effective way. Moreover, these materials provided the students with good opportunities to see how intonation is used naturally in daily conversational exchanges by native speakers of English.

▪ Given step-by-step practice including guided, controlled, free, communicative helped the students gradually absorb intonation, which is by its nature complicated and challenging to most EFL learners, including the student subjects. Especially, during the communicative practice, the students were provided with situations they may encounter in their daily life, which made the practice more meaningful and motivating to them.

▪ By using such visual techniques as conducting, exaggeration, backward buildup, etc. as a practice guide for producing intonation patterns, the researcher helped the students concretize the invisible changes in the pitch of their voice; this enabled the students to recognize and then imitate producing these pitch changes more comfortably.

▪ The inclusion of games and storytelling as parts of the in-class activities to some extent aroused the students' interest in the lessons. The more eager they were, the more easily they absorbed the target language items.

In short, all of the techniques employed during the experimental teaching, though bearing some unavoidable constraints, were proved to be fairly effective in intonation teaching; therefore, if flexibly applied in different teaching environments with different learning subjects, the strategies will definitely bring some satisfying results to both teachers and learners of English.

5. Recommendations on intonation teaching strategies

Meant to facilitate both teachers and students at UT-HCMC in intonation teaching and learning, a number of practical teaching strategies which are either suggested or adapted by the researcher are suggested as follows.

5.1. Employing concrete ways to explain abstract concepts

The notions of *pitch* is too abstract for the students to understand thoroughly; pitch changes in intonation patterns are so invisible that they can pose great difficulties to students not only in recognition but in production as well. By concretizing these abstract concepts, teachers can help students notice pitch changes in the target intonation patterns better and thus, produce the patterns more accurately. Counting is interesting way of practicing pitch range. Teachers ask students to count from 1 to 5, first with each number being on a higher pitch than the previous one, then, with the pitch and the numbers descending from 5 to 1. After that, teachers count lowering the pitch with each number from 1 to 5 and then return to the starting pitch.

5.2. Applying various visual techniques in intonation production practice

To help students recognize and get familiar with producing pitch changes in different intonation patterns, teachers should apply such visual techniques as conducting (moving the arms and hands with the rhythm, stress and intonation of a word, phrase or sentence), tapping (doing with a fingertip or with a pencil, resulting in a series of sounds to demonstrate patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables of a sentence), exaggeration (exaggerating the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables by putting more stress on stressed syllables), acceleration (saying a sentence slowly at first and speeding it up gradually until the natural tempo is reached) and backward buildup (starting with the final word of a sentence and adding to it the preceding words one at a time). These techniques can not only create fun in intonation classes but also help build up the students' confidence in intonation practice.

5.3. Using audio-visual aids

In introducing the notions of intonation, pitch changes or presenting intonation patterns, it is effective to use audio-visual aids like movies or songs. However, teachers

should be selective in choosing this kind of aids because not all movies or songs are suitable for the purpose in question. A good piece of movie or song must meet the following requirements:

- It must be of the students' level.

- It must contain the intonation pattern in question and the pattern must appear quite often in the selected movie or song.

- The sounds or the images must be clear enough for the students to perceive and catch any pitch changes in intonation patterns.

- It should not be too serious or students will feel tense; accordingly, their enthusiasm will be lost.

5.4. Using games

Games with intonation are very attractive to learners. However, the difficulty level of the games to be employed should be taken into special consideration. For one thing, over-challenging games may destroy the students' motivation and decrease their active participation. For another, games of little challenge may become boring shortly after they are started. Another thing is that small rewards can bring big success in games and activities alike.

5.5. Telling stories

Telling stories is beneficial in the intonation class. However, to make full use of stories in intonation class, teachers should seriously consider the selected story's content, difficulty level and length since these elements are of great significance to the success of the activity.

5.6. Using sound recorders

Recording their voice when practicing producing intonation patterns is one of the best ways that help students know how well their production is. This is quite applicable nowadays since the recording can be done with mobile phones. Once finishing recording, students can play the recorded item again, listen, and compare their own performance with that of their partner or of native speakers. This can be done several times until students feel satisfied with their own performance. This kind of practice can be done either in class, under teachers'

guidance, or at home, by students themselves. Therefore, teachers should encourage their students to bring mobile phones into the intonation class for this purpose.

6. Summary

Evidently, intonation plays an important role in English pronunciation. Thus, a good understanding of intonation does help enhance communication competence of English learners. Therefore, UT-HCMC teachers should consider including this supra-segmental feature in their English lessons, helping to improve their students' communication competence❑

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