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Perception of the Attitudinal Function of Intonation in Responding to Yes/No Questions: A Study of Non-Native English Language Teachers

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Abstract

This study highlights the importance of intonation and its function for intelligibility in communication, particularly amongst teachers in ESL classrooms. It was carried out to ascertain non-native English language teachers' awareness of the attitudinal functions that intonation carries in responding to yes/no questions. Thirty Malay English language teachers working in a language centre were taken as the sample. Two different tasks, a listening test and an open-ended questionnaire, were provided to test their knowledge and perception of the attitudinal functions of intonation with regards to the responses given to yes/no questions. The findings from this study suggest that these teachers demonstrated an intermediate level of knowledge about intonation and its attitudinal function. However, they were in agreement about the importance of intonation for communication in classrooms, with students from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The implication of this study is that teachers should provide students with sufficient exposure to the proper use of intonation in order to avoid miscommunication. Students must be made aware that correct intonation facilitates correct interpretations.

Keywords: Intonation, attitudes, interpretation, miscommunication.

1. INTRODUCTION

In communication, the attitude of the speaker can be represented through the different intonations used. Listeners who fail to comprehend intonation may have difficulty understanding the speaker's intended meaning, consequently leading to

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miscommunication. The issue of pronunciation and intonation among non-native learners of English has become a growing concern among teachers and linguists. Clennell (1997) said that intonation has been neglected in language learning classrooms, though comprehension of intonation and its functions is essential in the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) or as a Foreign Language (EFL). The inability to recognise the attitudinal function that intonation carries can cause miscommunications, particularly in a classroom setting.

Intonation plays a crucial role in delivering a person's message. By listening to a person's intonation, the listener is enabled to decipher the speaker's intention or attitude, such as showing surprise, sarcasm or finality. Numerous studies (Beaken, 2009; Shuying & Quan, 2017; Volskaya, 2015) suggest that miscues and misunderstandings occur mainly due to improper expression of intonation. Consequently, teachers play an essential role in raising students' awareness of the functions of intonation, particularly in ESL or EFL classroom settings. In cases where teachers fail to acquire knowledge of intonation and its different functions, or when they possess the knowledge, but lack conscious awareness of these attitudinal functions, intonation may be wrongly used or interpreted, thus causing miscommunication to occur in the classroom.

Intonation serves a number of different functions. Tench (2003) elaborates on the functions of intonation in the English language, which are communicative, attitudinal, informational, syntactic and textual functions. The communicative function of intonation may address the state of the speaker's certainty or hesitancy during the communication process, whereas the informational function of intonation indicates the units of information being expressed in the discourse. The syntactic function of intonation refers to tones adopted to distinguish a grammatical category, while the textual function of intonation describes the use of tone in longer texts such as in paragraphs that is above sentence structure. The attitudinal function of intonation is especially pertinent in the language classroom as the use of different and varying intonation patterns in conveying the same message may indicate a number of different attitudes of the speaker.

Numerous studies have been conducted concerning intonation in general, but there seems to be a dearth of research regarding the attitudinal function of intonation. The inability to recognise the attitudinal function that intonation carries may cause miscommunication, particularly in English language classrooms. In light of this problem, this research was conducted for the purpose of investigating Malay English language teachers' knowledge of the attitudinal function of intonation as well as their perceptions regarding its role in classroom communication. Additionally, the scarcity of research regarding intonation in responding to yes/no questions is what piqued the author's interest to conduct further research. This study attempts to examine teachers' perceptions of the attitudinal functions of intonation in responding to yes/no questions in order to understand their awareness of intonation and its importance.

1.1 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were:

1. To ascertain Malaysian non-native English language teachers' awareness of the attitudinal functions that intonation carries in responding to yes/no questions.

2. To investigate the perceptions of these teachers of the attitudinal functions that intonation carries.

1.2 Research Questions

This research addressed the following questions:

1. To what extent can Malaysian non-native English language teachers identify intonation patterns in yes/no questions?
2. How do these teachers perceive the role of attitudinal functions of intonation in the teaching-learning of English?

1.3 Significance of the Research

According to [Grabe et al. \(2003\)](#) and [Kudriavtseva \(2013\)](#), intonation appears to be one of the many aspects of the English language that is difficult to comprehend in the process of foreign language acquisition, and consequently contributes much to miscommunications amongst native and non-native speakers of English. [Wong \(1986\)](#) in [Tannen and Alatis \(1986\)](#) and [Wong \(1987\)](#) asserts that rhythm and intonation play a fundamental role in communication as they direct the listener to the centre of attention in speech, and can provide and maintain social harmony. As teachers play a vital task in ensuring communicative harmony in the classroom, it is thus crucial for them to possess an accurate perception of intonation. This study is potentially beneficial for English language teachers in general as it inculcates consciousness of the importance of acquiring knowledge of intonation and its functions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Intonation in the English Language

Linguists have had much difficulty agreeing on a precise definition of intonation as many have differing viewpoints regarding the subject. Among them, [Brown et al. \(1980\)](#) and [Brazil \(1995\)](#) have suggested that intonation is used to indicate that the speaker is anxious to continue or withdraw from his turn in the conversation. Intonation can also change when the speaker intends to emphasise something or express disapproval and hesitance. [Wong \(1987\)](#) claims that intonation serves as a melody for speech, whereby it enables words to stand out by occupying pitch in the speaker's utterance. [Ladefoged \(2001, p. 99\)](#) shares Wong's view in relation to pitch, noting that "the intonation of a sentence is the pattern of pitch changes that occurs". [Roach \(2000\)](#) confirms this notion by describing intonation as a supra-segmental part of phonology for which its definition should include the role of the pitch of the speaker's voice as an integral criteria for identifying intonation. Based on the definitions mentioned, it can therefore be said that intonation holds a significant relation to the varying degrees of the speaker's pitch in their utterances.

2.2 Attitudinal Functions of Intonation

As proposed by Roach (2000), intonation possesses a number of functions which are mainly attitudinal, grammatical and accentual as well as discourse functions. For this study, the main focus of the function of intonation is the attitudinal function. Under the attitudinal function, the attitudes of speakers can be expressed by looking at the different voice qualities and pitch ranges in their intonation Roach (2000). Additionally, attitudes can also be recognised by deciphering facial expressions, gestures and body movements. From Roach’s viewpoint, one of the major purposes of intonation is to convey the speaker’s attitude and emotions. One would be able to recognise the speaker’s feelings through their use of intonation in their utterances such as expressing joy, boredom, sarcasm, anxiety and so forth. For example, “She obtained straight A’s in her examinations,” where, “Straight A’s /↓” (being impressed) and “You can’t have that. It is for me! ↓” (expressing finality). It is therefore essential to recognise the correct tone used to indicate the speaker’s feelings in order to establish successful communication.

2.3 Intonation and Sentence Type

Intonation can be discerned from two sentence types: question intonation and statement intonation (Bartels, 1999). These sentence types are distinguished by identifying the different tones apparent for each sentence. Question intonation for instance would most commonly adopt the final rise tone as indicated by Bartels (1999) in one of her examples, “Paul arrived, all by himself? ↑” The rise in the speaker’s pitch level ↑ ... ↓ at the end of the utterance indicates that the sentence type has question intonation. As for statement intonation, Bartels (1999) states that one should be able to recognize a statement or declarative sentence by listening to the speaker’s tone. Speakers usually apply the final fall tone to indicate a statement as evidenced in another of Bartel’s (1999), “Paul arrived all by himself ↓”. For the aspects of question intonation, Bartels (1999) demonstrated several varieties of questions including yes/no questions, W-H clauses, alternative questions, non-interrogative questions as well as non-question interrogatives. Bartels (1999) claims that alternative questions normally end with the final fall tone as in the example, “Would you like mineral water ↑, ice tea or lemonade? ↓”

Kelly (2000) has also demonstrated the intonation patterns used for specific sentence structure. Examples are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sentence structure and intonation patterns.

<i>Sentence Structure</i>	<i>Intonation Pattern</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Wh-questions	Fall	Where is the house?↓ Who built the bungalow?↓ How did he get there?↓
Yes/No questions	Rise	Can we leave now?↑ Is she ready?↑
Statements	Fall	The salon is just a block away.↓ You can walk there.↓
Imperatives	Fall	Please sit down.↓ Wash it.↓

Table 1 continued...

Question tags (expecting confirmation)	Fall	She's going, isn't she?↓
Question tags (showing less certainty)	Rise	The bookstore opens at 8.00 a.m., doesn't it?↑
Listing	Rise, rise, rise and finally fall	I bought a skirt↑, a blouse↑, a t-shirt↑ and a pair of shoes↓.

However it must be noted that these intonation patterns given by Kelly (2000) serve as guidance. According to him, they are not specifically rules of grammar but mere generalizations.

For this particular study, the subject of interest is the response to yes/no questions. This response can be characterised as statement intonation. Speakers exert various tone patterns in their responses to indicate their feelings towards the subject matter at hand. Roach's (2000) most suitable framework for analysing the tones used for different attitudes expressed in speakers' responses concerns the attitudinal functions of intonation. Roach puts forth five general categories of intonation with regards to its attitudinal functions as listed in Table 2. When responding to yes/no questions, speakers typically adopt any of these tones to indicate their emotion. By paying close attention to these tones, listeners are able to understand the speaker's true attitude. Hence, intonation functions as a tool to assist interlocutors in understanding speech acts.

Table 2. Intonation patterns according to attitudes.

No.	Tone	Symbol	Attitude/Emotion	Response
1.	Level	[-]	routine, boredom, disinterest	Yes [-]
2.	Fall	[↓]	finality, certainty	Yes [↓]
3.	Rise	[↑]	invitation to continue, request for information, offer to provide information, excitement	Yes [↑]
4.	Fall - rise	[↘ ↗]	limited agreement, hesitation, pleading, having reservations.	Yes [↘ ↗]
5.	Rise - fall	[↗ ↘]	strong feelings of approval, disapproval or surprise, agitation, sarcasm, being impressed	Yes [↗ ↘]

3. METHOD

3.1 Design of the Study

The study involved both quantitative and qualitative approaches in collecting and analysing data. A listening test was employed and a survey was carried out with the participants involved. The listening test comprised *listen and identify tasks* using a set of multiple choice questions. For the analysis of the multiple choice questions in the listening test, Roach's (2000) framework was adopted as a guideline. The expressions selected by the participants for the questions were analysed according to the framework; tones such

as the fall, rise, level, fall-rise and rise-fall tones that are associated with certain expressions that the speakers connote when responding to yes/no questions, for instance, surprise, boredom, certainty, hesitance and limited agreement. The respondents were to decipher these attitudes or emotions by listening to the tones.

Frequency counts and percentages of the correct answers were calculated. In addition, the answers were individually examined to evaluate the individual performance of the teachers. The results helped to determine their knowledge of English intonation with regards to its attitudinal function. A high percentage of correct answers for all of the conversations represented a linguistically and phonetically knowledgeable group of teachers, whereas a low percentage count indicated otherwise. Similarly, a high percentage of correct answers for each teacher indicated a commendable performance rate, while teachers who scored a low percentage showed poor performance.

A descriptive analysis was conducted to analyse the feedback provided by respondents in the open-ended questionnaire. The responses given were classified into themes for further discussion. This encompassed the areas of English Phonetics that the teachers possessed such as intonation, word stress, accents and the segmental features of English, namely consonants and vowels.

3.2 Sampling

The respondents who participated in this study were 30 non-native teachers of English from a Language Centre situated in an urban setting. These teachers were all from the Malay race. Selection of these teachers was made based on the convenience sampling method. The selection was made based on these criteria:

1. English language teachers who have taught pre-sessional students Basic English language receptive and productive skills, namely listening and speaking, reading and writing.
2. Age range between 25 to 30 years.
3. Possess knowledge of English Phonetics through formal instruction.
4. Possess experience in teaching students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This criterion is pertinent as dealing with students from diverse backgrounds may offer greater insight to the probability of miscommunication caused by intonation.

3.3 Instruments

Two instruments were prepared for data collection: (i) a listening test and (ii) an open-ended questionnaire. For the listening test, the instrument used was a set of ten audio conversations between two speakers with different intonational representations. The audio conversations were selected and adapted from [Jakeman and McDowell \(2004, 2008\)](#). For the purpose of this study, ten conversations were selected indicating different sets of attitudes when responding to yes/no questions. The selected audio conversations contained distinguishable tones that indicated distinctive attitudes on the speakers' part in a clear and unambiguous manner. The audio conversations only involved yes/no questions and different responses presented through the speakers' varying tones. The context for

each conversation was discarded to eliminate possible clues for tone identification since some individuals tend to identify the speaker's feelings not by the tones used, but by the context or situation discussed in the conversation. Due to this possibility, the context was eliminated from the entire conversations so that the listeners had to focus solely on the tones of the speakers.

A set of multiple choice questions were provided for selection of the correct tones based on the listening test. The selection of plausible alternatives and distractors was based on the observation that certain tones are closely related to each other. For instance, the rise tone which signals an offer to continue the conversation may be misinterpreted as a fall-rise tone which connotes hesitation on the speaker's part instead. These different types of tones were given as alternatives for each multiple choice question in order to test the participants' ability to distinguish and match varying tones of English intonation to the different attitudes the speakers attempted to carry. To establish validity of the instrument, the audio conversations and answers to the multiple choice questions were verified by a native speaker of Standard British English.

A pilot study was conducted on a different group of non-native English language teachers to test for reliability of the multiple choice test questions used for the listening test. Ten teachers in the same department teaching pre-sessional students were involved. The Cronbach Alpha value was calculated to measure the consistency of the scores and this returned an alpha co-efficient of 0.75, which is considered an acceptable reliability index.

The second instrument used for this research was an open-ended questionnaire consisting of five open-ended questions on their knowledge of intonation, understanding of the functions and perceptions of the importance of intonation for communicative purposes. Content validity of the open-ended questionnaire was gauged through feedback from a native speaker expert.

3.4 Data Collection

The setup for the listening test required access to computers and ear-phones for each participant. A technical test of the audio installed in the computer was done beforehand to minimize technical failures during the test. Participants were then given the set of multiple choice questions with choices of four attitudes for each conversation. While listening to the audio conversations, participants were required to identify the most suitable attitude of the speakers based on their tone of voice.

The second task involved responding to the open-ended questionnaire. The questions were related to their knowledge of English Phonetics in general, their understanding of intonation, perceptions regarding the attitudinal functions of intonation as well as their classroom experience with regards to the use of intonation.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Results

4.1.1 Listening Test

The results of the listening test are presented through two scopes, namely the frequency of correct answers for the multiple choice questions followed by the performance of each teacher. Figure 1 indicates generally the results of the participants from the listening test. It was found that only four questions (Q2, Q4, Q7, and Q8) received a higher frequency of more than 50% of correct answers compared to the remaining six questions, which obtained a lower frequency count of less than 50%. Findings showed that the frequency of correct answers given by respondents was marginally low, with just four questions attaining a high frequency of correct answers while the other six questions had a low frequency of correct answers.

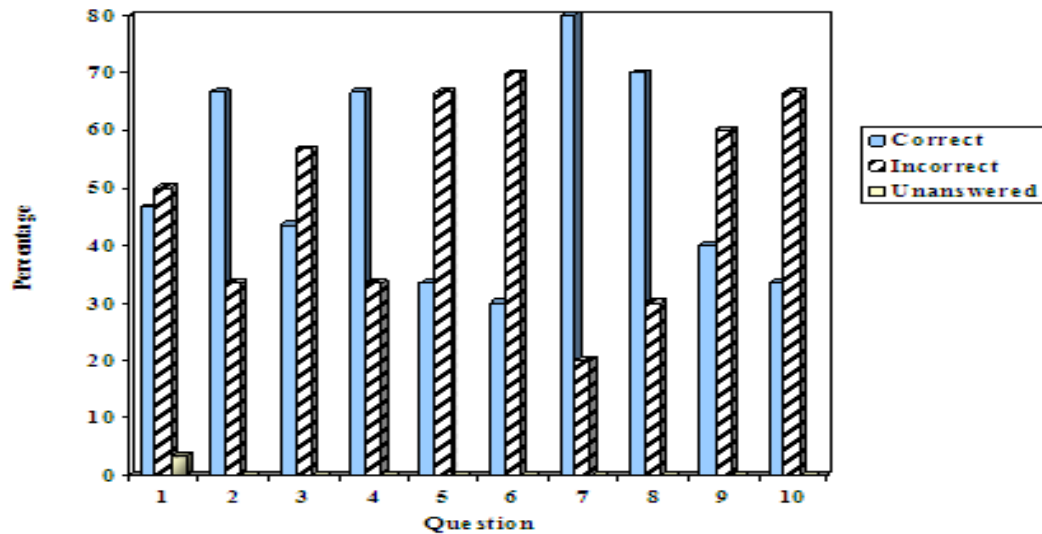


Figure 1. Results for the listening task.

The second scope of analysis for the listening test was to investigate each teacher's performance during the given task. This was evaluated as excellent (60% or more correct answers), satisfactory (50% correct answers) or poor performance (40% or less correct answers) in the listening task given for identification of the correct tones. Table 3 indicates the teachers' performance for this task. It could be deduced that 43% of the teachers involved in the study performed slightly above average for the listening test, which is relatively commendable. Only 17% of the respondents showed satisfactory or average knowledge of intonation.

Table 3. Teachers' level of performance for the listening task.

<i>Performance</i>	<i>Result</i>	<i>No. of Teachers</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Below average	30%	3	40%
	40%	9	
Average	50%	5	17%
Above average	60%	8	43%
	70%	5	

n=30

4.1.2 Survey: The Open-Ended Questionnaire

Feedback from the survey showed that the teachers perceive intonation as an important element to ensure and enhance communicative intelligibility. They conveyed their thoughts and concerns on the need for awareness of the attitudinal function of intonation to assist communicative harmony, particularly in the language classroom setting. They also provided possible ideas for dealing with miscommunication due to incorrect use of intonation. Based on their feedback, the data was analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis. The themes (refer to Table 3), were deduced based on keyword tagging of the responses. Three prominent tagging were identified, namely:

- i. Knowledge of respondents on phonetics, intonation patterns and their functions.
- ii. Concerns of respondents in relation to the role that intonation carries, emphasising its importance for communication.

Ideas and suggestions from respondents to overcome challenges of understanding and interpreting different intonation patterns conveyed by students from diverse linguistic backgrounds in their classrooms.

Table 4 below, summarises the respondents' views from the survey results.

Table 4. Themes of responses in teachers' answers to questionnaire.

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Samples of Responses</i>
Knowledge	<i>I took a course called Phonetics and Phonology when I was doing my Undergraduate studies in English Language and Literature so I am familiar with phonetic transcriptions as well as some basic knowledge of English phonetics and phonology. (T17)*</i>
	<i>The meaning of intonation is the level of sounds produced by a speaker, it has a rise and fall level. There can be variations in pitch sequences within the speech. (T16)</i>
	<i>Intonation refers to the manner of producing/uttering tones, especially in terms of accuracy of pitch. It deals with the stress and unstressed sound in the sentence. (T26)</i>
Concerns	<i>I agree that intonation can bring misinterpretations towards communication because intonation conveys both speaker's attitude and intention or meaning, thus if a person gets the intonation wrong, she or he will be misunderstood or sometimes can be considered rude or impolite. (T5)</i>
	<i>As for me, because we (sic) are not a native speaker, to be aware of the role of intonation is not that vital as long as the intended meaning can be understood. (T12)</i>
	<i>Intonation is important to the extent of how you want yourself to be understood by the others. Sometimes the intention of the speaker is blurred by a number of reactions such as facial expressions, hand gestures, body language and of course your voice i.e. your intonation. (T30)</i>

Ideas to help avoid mis-communication	<i>Sometimes when the students fail to understand the tone, I will focus on using gestures or body language (and repetition) to express my intended meaning or to emphasise my point. (T8)</i>
	<i>Repeat the questions with the same tone until they answer them with the correct tone (the ones that we wished for). Or simplify our statement and emphasise the intended tone all over again. (T11)</i>
	<i>As a teacher, if students do not understand my choice of tone, I would repeat it again to make sure. If there are no changes, I would help my intonation with facial gestures, body gestures so that if the students do not get the correct tone of what I'm saying, perhaps he or she (sic) would understand from my facial expressions or body gestures. (T24)</i>

*T = Teacher

4.2 Discussion

The results from the study showed that these teachers were aware of the attitudinal function of intonation. The extent of their knowledge, however, demonstrated merely an average level of knowledge. The frequency of incorrect answers, which accounted for 40%, indicated that these teachers had an average knowledge of intonation which was confirmed by 43% of these teachers demonstrating above average (43%) and 17% with average performance. This implies that these teachers had demonstrate a table knowledge of intonation and its attitudinal role. Given that only 40% of questions were answered correctly and only 40% of these teachers demonstrated below average performance, it can be concluded that the respondents as a whole demonstrated an average level of knowledge of intonation and its attitudinal functions.

A possible factor contributing to such results, is that these teachers were all Malaysian, non-native speakers of English. It must be highlighted that Malay speakers use a variety of intonations to indicate their emotions or attitudes when speaking, changing their tone to indicate their emphasis. A level tone in English most likely indicates a feeling of boredom or disinterest, whereas adopting the same tone in Malay does not necessarily indicate the same intended attitude. Due to this factor, it is possible that language transfer between Malay and English may have contributed to the teachers' sub-par performance in this study. Hence, it is not uncommon for non-native teachers of English to face difficulties in achieving native-like proficiency, especially relating to the intonation patterns of the English language. Furthermore, a number of English tones appear to bear close resemblance, one to another. This is a likely cause of confusion for the respondents, who appeared to be familiar with the English intonation system, but not enough to distinguish closely connected yet differing characteristics of tone choices in native speakers' speech.

The themes derived from the analysis of the open-ended questionnaire items generally showed that most teachers agreed that intonation is crucial in ensuring communicative intelligibility while only a few regarded intonation as unimportant. Three themes emerged from the data reduction process: (i) the teacher's knowledge of intonation, (ii) their concerns about the importance of communicative intelligibility, and (iii) ideas put forward to help avoid miscommunication due to varied tones and intonation in speech acts. Despite the fact that meaning-making is more important compared to intonation-making in communication as expressed by a respondent (T12), intonation is an

essential feature that should not be dismissed in our attempts to achieve effective communication. Couper-Kuhlen (1986) stated that intonation plays a vital role in expressing attitudes and emotions. It carries a significant contribution to the meaning-making processes in communication. Hence, awareness of its role in communicative intelligibility should be highlighted in language classrooms.

The role of intonation is salient in ensuring success in classroom communications. Undeniably it adds colour to the whole speaking event and provides a platform for ease of comprehension in two-way communications. Specific strategies were employed by teachers when confronted with intonation-related problems in their pedagogy. Such strategies included repeating the tones used when giving instructions and improvising the tones used to ensure that their students would understand them as well as adopting suitable facial and bodily gestures to accompany their speech.

4.2.1 Pedagogical Implication and Recommendations

As intonation plays an essential role in successful communication especially in the ESL classroom setting, it is pivotal for teachers to provide students with sufficient exposure to proper use of intonation. Teachers should also be aware that miscommunications can arise due to different assumptions and conclusions made by interlocutors. These assumptions, especially with regards to the attitudes attached to the speaker's use of intonation, may be interpreted incorrectly by the listener. It is therefore recommended that teachers make students aware that correct intonation facilitates correct interpretation.

Another strategy for the pedagogy of intonation is to reformulate the different speech tones to convey the intended meaning. Teachers should understand and recognise that the use of the same tone in their speech may be interpreted differently by students. Teachers should therefore be able to improvise and reformulate their tone to deliver their intended message in order to avoid misinterpretation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Some may think that correct native-like pronunciation is not of primary concern for ESL learners as long as the intended message is delivered and understood. However, we cannot dismiss the fact that pronunciation and intonation are vital for minimising misinterpretation during communication. Intonation serves as a tool to assist interlocutors with communicative intelligibility. Hence, students should be provided with adequate exposure to English phonetics as with all other areas of the language.

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