INTONATION AND STRESS IN ENGLISH ORAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: This article discusses the importance of stress and intonation in English speaking and their role in effective oral communication. It focuses on the difficulties Uzbek-speaking learners may experience when using these features in English and considers the influence of differences between the two languages. The article also highlights the importance of giving greater attention to stress and intonation in English language teaching.

Keywords: stress, intonation, English pronunciation, suprasegmental features, Uzbek EFL learners, first language influence, language teaching.

Introduction

Speaking is one of the key aspects of English proficiency, allowing students to express their thoughts freely and communicate with others. Effective speech consists of several important components. It involves more than grammatical accuracy and a wide range of vocabulary. Students should also use pronunciation features, stress and intonation, which contribute to the accurate understanding of messages by listeners. Although they are necessary for communication, they are often overlooked in English lessons. Usually, more attention is paid to grammatical precision, vocabulary development, and the pronunciation of individual sounds. As a result, some students can produce grammatically correct and understandable speech, but still struggle to sound natural and fluent. This may be due to differences between learners' first language and English pronunciation patterns, as languages vary in the way they use stress, rhythm, and intonation. Therefore, understanding stress and intonation is an important part of improving speaking skills. This article explores the key features of

stress and intonation, their role in oral communication, the difficulties faced by students in their acquisition, and teaching methods.

Intonation in English

Intonation refers to the rise and fall of voice pitch during speech. It is a suprasegmental feature of pronunciation that enables speakers to express meaning, emotions, and attitudes.

Common English intonation patterns include falling, rising, and fall-rise contours. Falling intonation occurs when the pitch decreases at the end of an utterance and is commonly used in statements, commands, and Wh- questions. Rising intonation occurs when the pitch increases at the end of an utterance and is often used in Yes/No questions. Fall-rise intonation combines falling and rising pitch movements and may express hesitation, uncertainty, politeness, or an unfinished idea.

Intonation performs several important functions in spoken communication (Bolinger, 1986). One of its main functions is to distinguish between different communicative purposes, such as making a statement or asking a question. For example, the sentence “You went to the hospital” with falling intonation is understood as a statement that provides information. However, the same sentence with rising intonation suggests a question or a request for confirmation. Intonation also allows speakers to express emotions and attitudes, including happiness, surprise, anger, and uncertainty. As a result, appropriate intonation patterns can make speech clearer and more effective.

Word and Sentence Stress

Stress refers to the emphasis placed on a particular syllable in a word or on certain words in a sentence. A stressed element is usually produced with greater loudness, length, and clarity compared to unstressed elements.

The two main types of stress are word stress and sentence stress. Word stress refers to the prominence given to one syllable within a word. A change in stress

placement can sometimes affect the meaning or grammatical category of a word. For instance, stress movement alters grammatical roles in word pairs like the noun contrast /ˈkɒntrɑːst/ and its corresponding verb /kənˈtrɑːst/. Sentence stress refers to the emphasis placed on important words in a sentence, especially content words such as nouns, main verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

Stress plays an essential role in effective communication because incorrect stress placement can make words difficult for listeners to recognize. It also helps speakers highlight important information and express their intended meaning. For instance, in the sentence ‘She bought a new book,’ stressing she emphasizes who performed the action, while stressing new contrasts the book with an old or used one. Therefore, accurate use of stress improves intelligibility and allows speakers to communicate more effectively (Field, 2005).

Challenges Faced by Uzbek Learners

Uzbek students may face some obstacles in mastering stress and intonation in English. These difficulties often come from differences in the pronunciation systems of the two languages.

The first issue is the influence of students' native language. Stress in English is variable and can fall on different syllables depending on the word (Tokar, 2017). In Uzbek, stress follows different patterns (Ostonova, 2025). Students accustomed to this pattern tend to carry it into English, which leads to incorrect stress in longer words. In addition, English uses vowel reduction in unstressed positions (where vowels weaken to /ə/ or /ɪ/), but Uzbek does not reduce vowels the same way (Ostonova, 2025). For this reason, learners tend to give equal timing, weight, and clarity to every syllable. This may contribute to a more syllable-based rhythm in learners’ English, making it difficult for them to reproduce the reduced vowels and rhythmic patterns characteristic of natural English speech (Lowry, 2021). Furthermore, Uzbek learners may experience

difficulties with English intonation patterns, as changes in pitch are used in English to express emphasis, attitude, and meaning.

Stress and intonation may not always be given sufficient attention in English lessons. Beginner and intermediate learners often focus more on pronouncing individual sounds correctly. As a result, while students work on these segmental features, suprasegmental aspects like stress and intonation may get less attention. This limits their ability to understand these features and apply them in their own speech.

Teaching Methods

Teachers may also need clear explanations to help learners understand and practise stress and intonation. For example, word stress can be added to daily vocabulary lessons. When learning new words, teachers can visually indicate stress using visual symbols, such as o O o for computer, or stress marks, such as /kəmˈpjuːtə/. In addition, teachers can deliberately stress the wrong syllable and then contrast it with the correct pronunciation, helping students notice and produce the natural stress pattern.

Contrastive exercises for sentence stress can be effective (Levis & Levis, 2018). It can be helpful to ask learners to shift the emphasis to different words within the same sentence, explain the differences between content and function words, and show how changing the emphasis changes the purpose of the sentence.

Intonation should be linked to predictable grammatical structures using visual arrows. Additionally, audio tasks help students identify changes in pitch, volume, and pauses. Role-playing activities also allow learners to practise stress and intonation in different situations and apply them in realistic contexts.

Conclusion

Stress and intonation are important features of English pronunciation. They affect how accurately a message is understood and how natural speech sounds. For

Uzbek-speaking students, mastering these features can be somewhat difficult, since there are certain systemic differences between the two languages.

These features can be mastered through targeted instruction. Clear explanations of stress patterns, visual aids for marking emphasis, exercises comparing Uzbek and English, and regular exposure to natural English speech all help students achieve more precise and natural speech. Role-playing activities and audio tasks let students apply these features in real situations rather than in isolated exercises. With regular practice, students can develop speech that is not only accurate but also clear and effective in communication.

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