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## Sociolinguistic Perspective on Teaching English Intonation for Adult Learners

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### Abstract

In this paper, we aim at identifying the efficiency of teaching English intonation at the university level. We show how sociolinguistic approach with the focus on conscious control of using intonation can enhance the communicative performance of linguistic students at Novosibirsk State Technical University. We present a teaching model based on appealing to senses, on making students' egos more permeable and on creating favorable socio- and psychological conditions conducive to the acquisition of the second language intonation. Finally, we make some suggestions on how to integrate cognitive, emotional and psychological perspectives in the language learning process.

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*Keywords:* Sociolinguistic approach; intonation; adult learners; motivation; identity; self-esteem

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### 1. Introduction

Because intonation performs a linguistic function, plays a key role in regulating discourse and serves as an important indicator of a speaker's identity, age, gender, psychological state and sociolinguistic community, researchers have become concerned about the way foreign language learners acquire English intonation (Wrembel, 2007; Hirschfeld & Trouvain, 2007). This concern has led to a number of studies on L2 production of intonation, underlying mainly the errors made by learners from various language backgrounds (Gut, 2007; Mennen, 2007; Cunningham, 2009).

These errors provoke confusion; especially native speakers often react emotionally and even accompany their reaction with stigmatization. For instance, as Walker (2001) indicates, "learners fail to use tone groups to divide the

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stream of speech into meaningful chunks and it is resulted on intelligibility. And the nuclear/contrastive stress but not tone – one almost unique characteristic of English is the way in which it varies the most prominent stress in a tone group to create meaning. So learners often fail to pick up the significance of the tonic stress” (p. 193).

These facts make learning intonation vital and topical. Besides errors, a number of questions concerning L2 acquisition of intonation arise. For instance, it is still an open question about the possibility of acquiring native-like intonation for adult learners. The reason for this is that our mother tongue is linked with our identity (Wrembel, 2007) and adaptation of our normal pitch range to a foreign standard can jeopardize our language ego and self-confidence. In spite of this, researchers mention the fact that if factors such as age, motivation and self-esteem are analyzed, only one of them is studied (Gut, 2007). Moreover, learning L2 prosody may be a stress-inducing experience. A number of studies have established the extent to which pronunciation and accent are sensitive to (basically unconscious) emotional and affective factors (Acton, 2001).

Nevertheless, there is still not enough successful practice in using sociolinguistic knowledge in teaching L2 pronunciation. It is indicated by many Russian methodologists illustrating the problems in L2 attainment in general (see, for example, Fedorova, 2012). These problems are usually the following: a lack of experience in socio-cultural imagination (the existence of “my” culture, “foreign” culture, stereotypes towards a different culture); a lack of awareness in social use of language in various communication situations; teaching country study instead of providing socio-cultural knowledge; socio-ethnographic vacuum – in the artificial environment of the classroom learners are without emotions, age, gender, real needs and social relations.

Under current educational conditions where the Russian educational system, nevertheless, considers general intellectual and cultural development of students to be one of the crucial purposes of modern education (Mikhaleva & Régnier, 2014), a new approach is extremely necessary and advisable. It is believed that controlling sociolinguistic factors in a conscious manner can create favorable socio- and psychological conditions conducive to the acquisition of the second language intonation.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

*The Purpose of Research:* the purpose of this research is to identify the efficiency of teaching foreign intonation taking into account sociolinguistic factors in the learning process to Linguistics majors.

*Objectives of the research:* a) to investigate successful strategies for teaching English intonation to adult learners; b) to analyze how a sociolinguistics-based model of teaching English intonation with the focus on conscious control of using it can change students’ attitudes and enhance their performance in the production of English intonation in communicative tasks.

*Hypothesis:* taking into consideration such sociolinguistic factors as age, motivation, self-control in the learning process will facilitate adult learners’ skills in acquiring English intonation.

The present contribution seeks to find possible ways for adequate methodological approaches for teaching prosody to adult foreign language learners. The need for analyzing has arisen from the fact that traditional approaches are not fully adequate. A new way to teach L2 prosody is based on the recognition that only in conscious manner learners will be able to achieve better results. The present paper intends to overview the experience of teachers in teaching L2 intonation to demonstrate the importance of taking into account the sociolinguistic factors in teaching. Moreover, it aims to show that the success in foreign intonation may be accomplished by appealing to learners’ haptic system.

*The sample and content:* The research was developed during the academic year of 2013-2014. The sample group involved 94 students from the Faculty of Humanities within the NSTU. All the students were divided into two groups: experimental (50 students) and control (44 students). We dealt with the students who were taking a Bachelor’s course, majoring in Linguistics.

*Methods of Research Used:* a systematic observation during the classes of practical phonetics; questionnaires, tests, methods of mathematical statistics.

As the basis of our research we took a metacompetence-oriented model of phonological acquisition developed by Wrembel (2007) for verifying it through teaching. We have managed to integrate this model in the teaching-learning process and modify it. Our teaching model includes 15 lessons and some tests. The classes were held once a week

and the overall number of academic hours per group was 30. Data were collected by pre and a post testing, questionnaires as well as oral and written activities. We worked with different intonation models including the intonation of enumeration, intonation of conditional sentences, exclamations and others provided us with opportunities to practice all possible typical scales in English.

## 2.2. Traditional models of teaching intonation

Throughout the XX century one approach changes another (Elovskaya, 2004) in teaching L2 pronunciation demonstrating gradual awareness in what is required in achieving proper pronunciation in a most successful way. Table 1 illustrates this.

Table 1. The results of changing attitudes towards teaching pronunciation throughout the XX century.

| 1950s   | from 1960-70s up to 1990s  | 1990s and till the present days |
|---|--|---------------------------------|
| The opinion about the innateness of phonetic knowledge and universals in expressing emotions in languages | the communicative approach – its main concern: the mechanism of language use in achieving the goals of communication | the socio-cultural approach     |

According to the Russian tradition in teaching L2 phonetics there exist some certain difficulties and failures in teaching pronunciation. Most of them are connected with the lack of teachers' competence to use socio-cultural approach to teaching.

## 2.3. A sociolinguistic-based teaching model of intonation

A model for experimental study was designed based on the assumption that taking into account and controlling sociolinguistic factors consciously can contribute to the improvement in acquiring English intonation. Sociolinguistic variables include such things as age, gender, identity, belonging to a definite social group. Most of the limited studies of L2 production of intonation are restricted to the enumeration of errors made by learners. Taking into consideration of the sociolinguistic variables are only at the beginning both in the Russian and western pedagogical traditions. As the present paper aims to investigate the acquisition of foreign intonation by adult learners, let us look at the age as one of the sociolinguistic factors in teaching English prosody.

### 2.3.1. Age and L2 prosody attainment

In spite of the widespread consensus about difficulties for adult learners to acquire English intonation, the general tendency is that the acquisition of English intonation is not impossible even for late learners (Stapp, 1999; Gut 2007; Young-Scholten, 2013). Although some of researchers admit that teenagers and adult learners exhibit problems (Hirschfeld & Trouvain, 2007; Wrembel, 2007, Herschensohn, 2007). In Table 2 we show different opinions about the age of learning.

Table 2. Opposite approaches towards the age of beginning in acquiring English intonation.

| Age influences perceptual abilities  | Age does not influence perceptual abilities   |
|--|---|
| 1. Those who begin to study at a later age have more difficulties in perceiving English sounds and intonation. The exposure to L2 input by at least puberty is essential for successful acquisition of phonology (Herschensohn, 2007).                                       | 1. Both younger and older learners follow predictable paths during the acquisition of L2. Studies on learners acquiring the phonology of L2 have shown that mostly the same internal mechanisms operate across the lifespan (Gut 2007; Young-Scholten, 2013). |
| 2. Human infants are extraordinarily sensitive to language sounds very early in life. This capability gradually declines even in childhood, and by adolescence most individuals experience difficulty discriminating unfamiliar phonemes in foreign languages (Stapp, 1999). | 2. There is no clear-cut link between the age and prosody acquisition but neurologic, socio-psychological and cognitive factors make a contribution to earlier success (Stapp, 1999).   |
| 3. The reason for success of young learners in acquisition of English pronunciation and failure of adult learners is hidden in mechanisms of   | 3. If the problem with the adult acquisition of L2 phonology has to do with the brain specialization that happens at about 6 months of age and  |

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|---|--|
| <p>language acquisition. It is considered that young learners have the access to universal processes but adult learners have their phonological system already established and it is limited to selected processes (Wrembel, 2007).</p> | <p>that our brain stops perceiving phonemes, then knowledge of the mechanism of pronunciation should help. Only in this way learners can be able to perceive L2 phonemes and intonation (Gregory, 2005).</p> |
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There is also a socio-psychological approach to explaining why adults have barriers to acquire English pronunciation. The matter is that the formal system of language is embedded in its social context. Pronunciation, more than other aspects of English language, is influenced by personal factors, especially in second language acquisition, especially in prosody. Young learners to a large extent are influenced by a foreign language and culture because they don't have stereotypes linked with their identity whereas adults instinctively resist socialization. Besides, children do not have stereotypes about learning languages, they do not simply know that this process is rather complicated and that is a reason for their learning a language in an easier way.

### 2.3.2. Identity, language ego, empathy or self-esteem

As it is indicated in (Wrembel, 2007), the above factors can influence pronunciation performance to a considerable extent. Acquiring intonation can be very stressful experience. The level of anxiety is likely to grow as a learner's effort and diligence does not always lead to immediate improvement and success; that is why considering these factors can be purposeful. Raising awareness will create favourable socio- and psychological conditions necessary for L2 intonation acquisition.

### 2.3.3. Description of the sociolinguistic-based teaching model

Based on the described processes in acquisition of L2 pronunciation the present model assumes that a lot of factors should be taken into account when teaching English pronunciation to adult learners. The following principles were included in the process of experimental teaching: cognitive, behavioral and emotional. The cognitive principle involves explanations of language aptitude. Behavioural principle includes observations of gestures, words of people from different nationalities. Emotional principle aims at learning stereotypes of people from different nationalities as well as perception of the world from another person's point of view.

Conscious teaching and learning focus on discussions about the role of English intonation in speech. Learners should produce pragmatic meanings at the discourse level in which very similar utterances might change their pragmatic orientation due to specific prosodic realization. This will provide stimulation for their further work.

The next thing is the need to prepare articulatory apparatus for the following work where learners are expected to change their native articulatory base and adhere it to the necessary English one. In order to prepare speech apparatus for the forthcoming efforts it is necessary to use relaxation techniques, breathing exercises, and exercises enabling students to "rule their faces", i.e. to control their lips, tongue and muscles. As the educational practice shows, usually without relaxation exercises it is practically worthless to continue any work connected with pronunciation.

It is extremely important to increase the level of confidence and self-esteem. It is achieved through a conscious attempt of adapting a long-term articulatory posture specific for a particular language – the pitch level, the tongue and lip positions, the pitch range and the degree of muscular activity. We tried to teach students to distinguish between specific features of their own language and those of the targeted one in a conscious manner. Contrastive exercises were included comparing specific issues in both languages. Some techniques aiming at conscious imitation of model intonation patterns were used: mouthing – miming the dialogue without words; mirroring – repeating simultaneously with the speaker, imitating gestures and facial expressions; tracing – repeating simultaneously with the speaker without mirroring the speaker's gestures; echoing – repeating after the speaker.

The next thing is that auditory apparatus should be prepared for the forthcoming practice. It is needed to discover the essential nature of prosody. It can be made possible by means of humming the tune without words, acting out tales. The auditory practice is preferable to start with the introduction of boundaries of thought groups. In this respect, as Gilbert (2008) illustrates, simple math problems appeared to be very fruitful. In speech only pitch levels and pauses serve to indicate the thought group clear. For instance, accurately placed pauses and drops in pitch help a listener to distinguish between  $2 + (3 \times 4)$  and  $(2 + 3) \times 4$ . Practising such numbers and equations, therefore, helps

students to hear, produce, and recognize the importance of these markers.

A more complicated task for advanced students can be recording a conversation from a real life with the following transcription of it. The aim is to recognize whether changing intonation emphasis and phrasing could have improved communication.

A very nice tool for developing awareness of English prosody is including kinesthetic involvement (Wrembel, 2007; Gilbert, 2008), that is involvement of the whole body movements to practice the main tones and stress patterns. A very good practice is raising hands corresponding to word stress patterns or even the task to present the whole sentence with a body: standing on the toes depicts the highest pitch level, knees bend – mid-pitch, squatting – general pitch of unstressed vowels, kneeling – falling pitch.

Based on the experiments of other researchers (Acton, 2002; Wrembel, 2007; Gilbert, 2008) we included the classroom practice with rhythm accompanied by some physical gestures, such as tapping the desk or moving a foot. This physical movement is far more effective than merely taking mental notice. We combined the use of this kinesthetic practice of stress with a variety of physical markers for the stressed syllable (e.g., hand raising, head raising, eyebrow raising – which is difficult but amusing – or rising from the chair). This can be a welcome change when class energy is getting low.

A range of exercises aiming at raising awareness of controlling sociolinguistic factors in a conscious manner were included in teaching phonological acquisition. Among such tasks there were analytical, analogical, transformational and creative exercises.

Analytical exercises were chosen where students were offered to differentiate polite or impolite persons in a dialogue depending on their intonation or to find out which reply belongs to a child. Students need to use intonation interactively and not simply mimic melodic patterns. Therefore, an essential part of teaching the communicative value of intonation is to use exercises in which the listener's answers depend on noticing the speaker's choice of focus word. Such tasks provide students with the opportunity to receive immediate, practical feedback.

Exercises for analogy are another choice where learners enumerate all offensive details in behavior of a stranger. Transformational exercises are those where learners change the dialogues of young people into the dialogues with the same content but belonging to elderly people. And, finally, creative exercises where learners describe something from the point of view of different people depending on their social status.

The main idea of these tasks and exercises is to make learners aware of the melody of the target language by appealing to their senses, relaxing them and making their egos more permeable. These techniques tend to integrate cognitive, emotional and psychological perspectives into the learning process. Emotions are considered to improve memory and performance. Students are able to experiment with sounds and intonation. Pronunciation work should be simultaneously non-threatening and expressive. Pronunciation teaching from different modalities (auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and tactile) is clearly advantageous.

In effort to make students aware of English intonation and make them realize it, it is essential to introduce notation of pitch and stress patterns. Students get to know about the British School of intonation analysis. Nuclear tones which are usually associated with the distinct pitch movements are studied. The British School proposes other elements of intonation phrases apart from the nucleus. The whole intonation phrase can be depicted in an interlinear transcription. Each syllable in an utterance is represented as a dot and a dash. A dot indicates an unstressed syllable and a dash – a stressed one. The two horizontal lines symbolize the upper and lower range of a speaker's voice. The position of the dot between the two lines indicates the pitch height of each syllable. Usually the last content word in an utterance has a falling or rising pitch which is indicated with a downward or upward curve.

Usually practicing the contour analysis takes a lot of time but finally realized by students becomes an interesting and practical task for analyzing English intonation. Students are eager to depict intonation between two lines because it is really very helpful in acquiring English prosody.

### **3. Discussion of Results**

The present paper does not pretend to depicting all the problems in L2 acquisition of phonology but illustrates what appeared to be successful in real practice of teaching English intonation to adult learners, which was verified in a the real educational practice of teaching university students using observations and enquiry as well as different

tests. The author does not illustrate all aspects in this field but it is only an attempt to use sociolinguistic factors in the teaching process to achieve better results in teaching/learning English phonology.

A series of tests applied before and after the experiment were introduced which allowed registering the students' achievements. The percentage of fulfilled tasks in the tests is presented in Table 3. The tasks in the tests included depicting intonation on the paper in various situations based on video and audio materials, recognizing the meaning of phrases depending on intonation, illustrating modal-pragmatic meaning of intonation depending of melodic contour.

Table 3. Results obtained by the students in the tests applied.

| Sample Groups      | Stages of Experiment            |                                |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
|                    | Tests before the experiment (%) | Tests after the experiment (%) |
| Control Group      | 56%                             | 62%                            |
| Experimental Group | 61%                             | 75%                            |

The results obtained by the students of the experimental group show the advantage in using English intonation in comparison with the control group. This fact illustrates the efficiency of means used during the experiment, including learning activities and creating a favourable psychological atmosphere. In Table 3 we can see that the students from the experimental group were better after the experimental learning compared with their results before the experiment. After experimental learning, their scores were increased from 61% to 75%, that speaks for a higher gain in using intonation in the experimental group by 14%. The results of the experiment have confirmed our hypothesis and the efficiency of the approach chosen. We attribute these changes in the students of the experiment group to the employment of the sociolinguistic-based model of teaching English intonation. Appealing to the students' haptic system, including kinesthetic involvement, creating motivation (relaxing them, explaining the importance of intonation, taking into account their identity, language ego and self-esteem), proved to be efficient in acquiring a foreign language intonation. We noticed the correlation between using the sociolinguistic approach and the students' better performance.

#### 4. Conclusion

Considering the process of phonological acquisition depending on age and other socio-linguistic factors, the general conclusion can be made that for adult learners the process of acquisition of L2 intonation is not restricted at all. Moreover, judging by various investigations of time successful for phonology acquisition it is clear that adults can succeed in foreign intonation easily. It is going without saying that neurological, cognitive and psychological factors influence the process of acquisition depending on age but, on the whole, there is no tough connection between age and success in acquiring a foreign language intonation.

The main idea in the process of teaching/learning is taking into account such factors as age, motivation and self-esteem. The organized teaching of L2 prosody should concentrate on building awareness of how pronunciation is acquired, on breaking stereotypes about different nations and on creating a friendly atmosphere where students can feel relaxed and free in expressing their emotions.

Acting in such a way students become aware of foreign language sounds and intonation, their auditory and speech apparatus are prepared for further efforts and students can control intonation because they get used to listening to a great amount of audio materials and they get used to depicting intonation contours on the paper, consciously realizing what is going on. We found out the correlation between controlling sociolinguistic factors and efficiency in acquiring English intonation as well as the correlation between appealing to all senses and easily understanding of intonation.

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