

Difficulties Encountered by English as a Second Language Learners in Using Stress and Intonation: A study based on Higher National Diploma in English (HNDE) students of Advanced Technological Institute (ATI), Trincomalee, Sri Lanka

Dr. Niruba Sarath Jayasundara¹ and Abdul Halik Abdul Farook²

¹Department of Languages and Communication Studies, Faculty of Communication and Business Studies,
Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University of Sri Lanka
Trincomalee, 31100, Sri Lanka

²English Language Unit, T/Mu/Al Hilal Central College,
Trincomalee, 31100, Sri Lanka

Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the difficulties encountered by the Higher National Diploma English students of Advanced Technological Institute, Trincomalee in using stress and intonation and to identify the errors in speaking and loud reading. The use of stress and intonation is very important in oral communication. Encountering difficulties in the use of stress and intonation has been a problem for Higher National Diploma students. As a result, this study was carried out. In this study, 25 Higher National Diploma students from the first-year and second-year of Advanced Technological Institute were randomly selected as the sample for investigation. This study was descriptive research and quantitative method was used to collect data. The research instruments used in this study were oral pronunciation test and audiotape recording. The oral pronunciation test was used to collect the data regarding the difficulties the students encounter in using stress and intonation. It consisted of 5 sets of words and 10 sentences with regard to stress and intonation, and audiotape recording was used to record the performance of the students. Later, their pronunciation errors were noted. According to the finding and results of the oral pronunciation test, 62% of the participants encountered difficulties in using word stress whereas 64% of the participants encountered difficulties in using sentence stress. Further, 68% of the participants encountered difficulties in using intonation. These difficulties and problems causes due to adult age, insufficient phonetic knowledge and lack of pronunciation practice. This problem can be overcome and the ability in using stress and intonation can be improved in their speaking and loud reading when pronunciation is introduced as separate component like grammar, writing etc in school English as a Second Language curriculum. Through implementing it at schools, natural pronunciation can be given before adulthood.

Key words - English as a Second Language, Advanced Technological Institute, Stress, Intonation

1. Introduction

The English Language seems a significant language since it has been a global language, is widely learned and spoken around the world. Significant stage is given for English Language in each country and it is the language of administration, law, business, education etc. in most of the countries. However, in countries where English is spoken as either a second language (L2) or a foreign language (FL), Most of the learners find difficulties in oral

communication. With regard to oral communication, speaking and pronunciation are major challenges for both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners around the world. Although they speak English to a certain extent, they encounter a number of difficulties in pronunciation. Pronunciation plays a vital role in oral communication. Ismail & Ilmudeen (2011) point out in their research study that pronunciation is an important role in the field of speaking. Everybody likes to speak English like a native speaker. Despite, English pronunciation is always a great challenge for them. In Sri Lanka, pronunciation problems and difficulties has been one of the significant problems among the ESL learners. A large number of ESL learners encounter difficulties in pronunciation. Despite, both the learners and teachers do not care about pronunciation errors in their loud reading and speaking because even the ESL teachers make pronunciation errors when they speak and read louder. Although pronunciation errors are major problems in oral communication, due to unawareness of the phonetic rules, they do not consider it as a problem. In particular, using suprasegmentals in oral communication is a great challenge and problem for most of the second or foreign language learners. Despite it, the ESL learners and teachers do not provide prominence to pronunciation and they do not consider pronunciation errors as a problem in oral communication. But, producing correct pronunciation is significant in speaking and loud reading, in particular, stress and intonation. In this sense, Ruzkina et al (2016) state that proper pronunciation; stress and intonation directly affect the appropriate communication in conversation. Several state and non-state educational institutions in Sri Lanka offer English as either a main or optional subject in their education curriculum. Likewise, Advanced Technological Institute (ATI), also recognized as Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education (SLIATE), established under the Ministry of Higher Education in 1995 offer Higher National Diploma (HND) programmes in various fields of study. There are 12 ATIs and 7 ATI sections in Sri Lanka. ATI, Trincomalee is one of the ATIs in Sri Lanka, established in 1995. It offers HND programmes in four disciplines, namely: English, Accountancy, Information Technology, and Tourism and Hospitality Management. In this sense, Higher National Diploma in English (HNDE) students of Advanced Technological Institute (ATI), Trincomalee were observed to find a number of difficulties and challenges in the use of stress and intonation in their speaking and loud reading. This is one of the problems identified among the HNDE students of Trincomalee ATI. As a result, this study was carried out to investigate the difficulties faced by HNDE students of Trincomalee ATI since difficulties and problems were observed in the use of stress and intonation among most of the students.

1.1 Research Questions

1. Why do HNDE students encounter difficulties and problems in using stress and intonation in their speaking and loud reading?
2. Do the HNDE students make errors in using word and sentence stress in their speaking and loud reading?
3. Do the HNDE students make errors in using word and sentence stress in their speaking and loud reading?

1.2 Problems Statement

The use of both stress and intonation is a significant part of oral communication. To produce correct pronunciation and build clear oral communication, pronunciation is important, particularly, stress and intonation. However, ESL learners in Sri Lanka encounter a number of difficulties in pronunciation. Several research studies had been carried out investigating the pronunciation problems of ESL learners in Sri Lanka. Similarly, HNDE students of Trincomalee ATI were observed that they face difficulties and problems in using stress and intonation in their speaking and loud reading. Although they learn English professionally, they find difficulties in speaking English with the correct pronunciation.

1.3 Objectives of the Research

1. To investigate the difficulties faced by HNDE students in using stress and intonation

2. To identify the errors made by HNDE students in using stress and intonation in their speaking and loud reading
3. To recommend remedies to overcome the difficulties in using stress and intonation and to improve the ability in the use of stress and intonation in speaking and loud reading

1.4 Limitations of the Research

English pronunciation is a vast area of study. When research studies are carried out about pronunciation and pronunciation problems, all the components of pronunciation (segmental features and suprasegmental features) cannot be considered for investigation. Therefore, in this current study, stress and intonation in suprasegmentals were limited for investigation. There are over 150 HNDE students from 1st year and 2nd year studying at Trincomalee ATI. Since collecting data among 150 students is difficult task, 25 HNDE students were randomly selected and the participants were limited with 25 HNDE students from 1st year and 2nd year.

1.5 Significance of the Research

This study was conducted to investigate the problems encountered by HNDE students of Trincomalee ATI in using stress and intonation in their loud reading and speaking, and suggest some suitable remedies and recommendations to overcome the problems. In this sense, this study will be significant for ESL learners in higher educational context in Sri Lanka. And also, this study and its recommendations are useful for ESL teachers in Sri Lanka to implement necessary techniques to overcome the problems faced by the learners in using suprasegmentals (stress and intonation) and to improve their pronunciation skills. Moreover, this study is significant for ESL curriculum designers to give prominence for pronunciation skill.

2. Literature Review

Several previous studies related to the current study had been carried out locally and internationally since pronunciation has been a long problem among ESL/EFL learners around the world. In this sense, in the review of previous studies with regard to pronunciation, Chouchane (2016) claims that many learners tend to achieve a native-like pronunciation while speaking. However, it is not an easy task for Arab learners since they encounter several pronunciation difficulties. When ESL/EFL learners start learning English after their puberty (after the age of 13), acquiring natural pronunciation seems to be a great challenge for them, particularly, grasping suprasegmentals. Parab (2015) points out that the students who start to learn English after their school years are most likely to encounter serious difficulties in acquiring intelligible pronunciation. Similarly, Lado (1957) states that an adult speaker of a language cannot easily pronounce language sounds of another language even though he/her has no speech impediment. As they pointed out above, using stress and intonation has been a huge challenge for adult learners. Therefore, since HNDE students of Trincomalee ATI are adult learners, it was observed that they encounter a number of difficulties in using stress and intonation. However, pronunciation takes an important part in oral communication and to convey clear ideas and meaning to the hearer. Similarly, Garrigues (1999) says in his study that the foundation of effective spoken communication is on good pronunciation. It is known as a fundamental skill in which students have to grasp because it can affect the accuracy and comprehension of the hearers. Both stress and intonation are significant part of oral communication in all languages. Some previous research studies are reviewed related to the difficulties faced by ESL/EFL learners in the use of stress and intonation.

2.1 Stress

Both word stress and intonation are significant part in pronunciation. Due to insufficient rule of prosodic features in English, the use of word and sentence stress in loud reading and speaking seems a prominent problem, in which HNDE students were observed to find difficulties and problems. In this sense, Pakhshan & Himdad (2018) describe

that stress is usually defined as ‘the relative emphasis that may be given to certain syllables in a word, or to certain words in a phrase or sentence’. They further explain that stressed syllables are louder than non-stressed syllables in English. According to the above statement, the pitch helps the speaker to convey meaningful ideas to the hearer. Further, Areen & Jamal (2014) say that the content words are usually stressed, due to their importance in communication, grammatical words tend to be unstressed. However, ESL/EFL learners find difficulties in using appropriate stress (word and sentence stress) in their loud reading and speaking since they do not have proper knowledge of about stress rule in pronunciation. In a relevant study, Yangklang (2013) states that a major reason for finding difficulties with pronunciation by EFL learners is due to the lack of stress knowledge of a second/foreign language which is being learnt. Similarly, it was observed among the HNDE students that they stressed all the words in the sentence with the same pitch. As a result, they mispronounced the sentences. A similar study was carried out investigating stress, In this study, Bourjan (2003) states that Thai students had problems with stress placement in their pronunciation of major categories of words in English. He further points out that a similar problem was also observed in the pronunciation of the first-year students of Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University. Most of the students were not aware of how to pronounce stress and intonation in words and sentences correctly”. Zhang & Yin (2009) suggest that the use of stress and intonation can improve learners’ communication ability directly. Therefore, learning stress and intonation pronunciation is significant for English oral communication. Teaching the rule of stress is very important in ESL/EFL classes; therefore, learners can grasp stress and produce natural pronunciation in oral communication.

2.2 Intonation

Another important difficulty observed in the current study was intonation, which was highly challengeable for HNDE students of Trincomalee ATI. This seems to be a problem for not only ESL learners in Sri Lanka but also for ESL/EFL learners in other countries where English is learned as either second or foreign language. Several studies have been previously carried out investigating the problems and difficulties encountered by the learners in using intonation in speaking and loud reading. In a previous study, Yangklang (2013) says that if a speaker speaks English with flat intonation, this may sound boring and uninteresting. Using the wrong intonation can give offense. Therefore, it is essential to practice intonation. In order to convey meaningful utterances to the hearer, producing correct intonation is very important. Clennell (1997) explains that intonation consists of five major levels; Rise, Fall, Rise-Fall, Fall-Rise, and level (neutral). Therefore, the pitch of the voice should rise and fall according to the situation. But the learners pronounce the sentences with the same pitch of voice for all the sentences. Similarly, Yangklang (2013) further says that the falling and rising of tones can be sudden or gradual. It is common knowledge that speakers use the voice pitch to convey various messages. However, in classroom teaching, it was observed that using intonation is very challenging for most of the students due to various factors. Even in a prepared speech, students were unable to use intonation appropriately.

3. Research Methodology

This study was carried out to investigate the difficulties encountered by HNDE students of Trincomalee ATI in using stress and intonation in their speaking and loud reading. This study was a descriptive research and quantitative research method was used to collect the primary data. Over 150 students study HNDE at Trincomalee ATI. They are first-year and second-year students. To carry out this research and investigate, out of over 150 students, 25 HNDE students from the first year and second year were randomly selected as the sample for collecting data. The research instruments were an oral pronunciation test which was used to find out the errors made in using stress and intonation, and an audiotape recording that was used to record the performance of the students. Later, their pronunciation errors were noted. The oral pronunciation test was designed based on the problems of this study, which consisted of 5 sets of words and 10 sentences. The participants were instructed to read aloud the words and sentences. Later, their pronunciation errors made in their loud reading were noted down. After collecting data, their errors in stress and intonation were statistically analyzed to find out the answers to the questions of this study.

4. Results and Findings

The oral pronunciation test was designed based on the problems of this study. The test consisted of 5 sets of words that were set related to word stress and 10 sentences which were set related to sentence stress and intonation. According to the findings of the oral pronunciation test with regard to word stress, the results show that 10 of the participants which were 40% incorrectly pronounced all the 20 words. They equally stressed all the syllables in each word, whereas 7 of the participants which were 28% correctly pronounced all the 20 words. They stressed the syllables correctly according to syllable stress rule in suprasegmentals. 5 of the participants which were 20% incorrectly pronounced between 1 – 10 words and 3 of the participants which were 12% incorrectly pronounced between 11 – 20 words. The following graph (Fig 1) shows the results of the pronunciation test based on word stress.

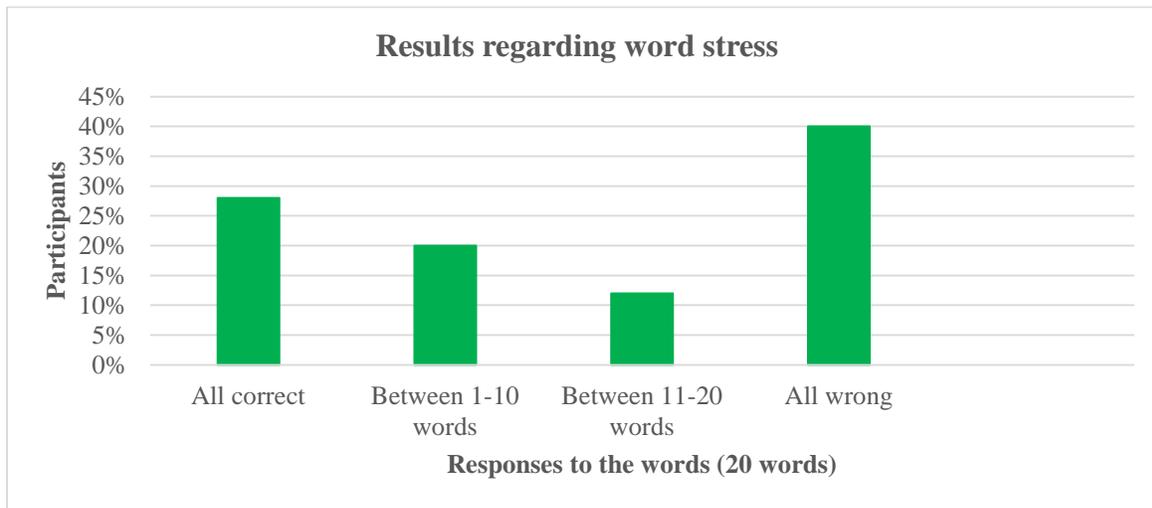


Fig 1 Results regarding word stress

Further, according to the findings of the test with regard to sentence stress, the results show that 16 of the participants which were 64% incorrectly pronounced all four sentences. They equally stressed all the words in the sentences. Both content and functional words were stressed with the same pitch. On the other hand, 9 of the participants which were 36% correctly pronounced all four sentences given in the test. They stressed all the content words and unstressed all the functional words in the sentences. Similarly, as far as intonation is concerned, according to the findings of the test, the results show that 17 of the participants which were 68% incorrectly pronounced all six sentences given in the test. They were not aware of the rule of intonation. As a result, they pronounced all the sentences with the same pitch and tone. On the other hand, 8 of the participants which were 32% correctly pronounced all the sentences given. They were aware of the rule of intonation and correctly pronounced the sentences according to the rule of intonation. The following graph (Fig 2) shows the results of sentence stress and intonation.

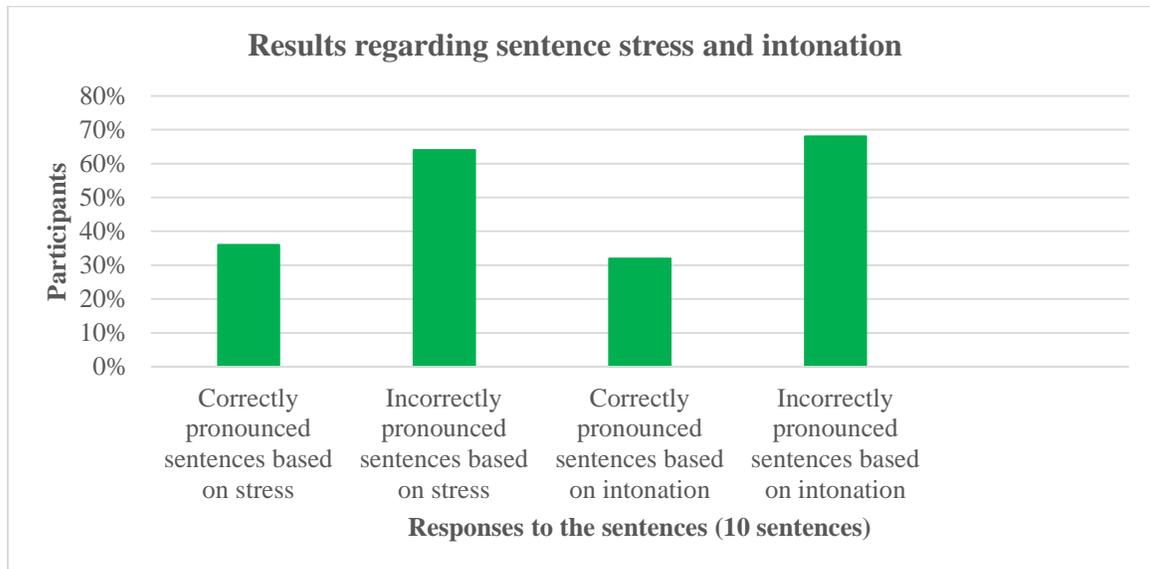


Fig 2 Results regarding sentence stress and intonation

5. Conclusion

This study was carried out to investigate the difficulties encountered by HNDE students of Trincomalee ATI in using stress and intonation. In this research, 25 HNDE students from the first year and second year of Trincomalee ATI were randomly selected for collecting data. Therefore, according to the findings and results of data analysis of oral pronunciation test, the use of stress and intonation is a great challenge for almost all the HNDE students. They encountered a number of difficulties in using both word and sentence stress and intonation. As far as the word stress is concerned, 62% of the participants faced difficulties in pronouncing the words with the correct stress. They stressed all the syllables in the words which led to mispronunciation. As far as sentence stress is concerned, on the other hand, 64% of the participants faced difficulties incorrectly using stress and unstressed patterns in the sentences. All the content and functional words were equally stressed. Similarly, as far as intonation is concerned, 68% of the participants encountered difficulties and challenges in using the pitch correctly. They pronounced all the words, phrases, and sentences with rising patterns. They were unable to fall the pitch according to the situation.

These difficulties and challenges caused due to insufficient knowledge of the rule of suprasegmentals and lack of practice. Previously the students did not learn about the phonetic rules and practice speaking. According to the ESL context in Sri Lanka, very little focus has been given to speaking and pronunciation in ESL classes. In a formal education context at schools, ESL teachers do not allocate time and periods to teach pronunciation and practice pronunciation rules. According to the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), Lenneberg (1967) claims that a child should acquire language and natural pronunciation before puberty (before the age of 13). Therefore, a child can grasp a language and pronunciation naturally. However, In Sri Lanka, most of the students start to learn English after the age of 18. As a result, the learners are unable to grasp natural pronunciation and they encounter difficulties in pronunciation. This problem can be overcome and improved when pronunciation is considered as a separate component of English like reading, writing, grammar, etc. in the school ESL curriculum. The ESL curriculum designers should implement it in the curriculum and through implementing pronunciation as a separate component, the phonetic rule can be taught, more listening practices and pronunciation games can be applied in the classroom, number listening practices can be given and learners' pronunciation errors can be corrected like correcting grammatical errors.

6. References

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First author I completed Doctor of Linguistics at Annamalai University, India, Master of Arts in Linguistics at Annamalai University, India and Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics at University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. I worked as a Lecturer (probationary) at Trincomalee Campus of Eastern University of Sri Lanka. I worked as Senior Lecturer, grade 2 and currently I work as a Senior Lecturer, grade 1 at Trincomalee Campus of Eastern University. I have published several research papers in both local and international journals. I have presented several research papers in conferences and symposiums. I was a Gold medalist for Master’s in Linguistics at Annamalai University, India (2006). I won Endowment Award for best performance in Linguistics at Annamalai University, India (2005, 2006) and I won Prize for high performance on special degree examination in Linguistics.

Second author I completed MA in Linguistics with research component at the University of Kelaniya in 2020, BA in English at Pathumthani University, Thailand in 2020, Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) at Alagappa University in 2017 and HND in English at SLIATE in 2016. I worked as English Instructor at NAITA for 3 years. Currently I work as an ESL teacher at public school in Sri Lanka and I have been as Visiting Lecturer at International European Campus. I have published two research articles in international journals. I completed BA in English degree programme with second class (upper division) and HND in English with merit pass.