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Iraqi EFL learners perception of intonation

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Abstract
Intonation is not only considered more significant than grammar but also a crucial element for improving communicative skills. Despite its importance, teaching intonation has been largely overlooked in English language education across various levels in Iraq. Thus, this research aims to identify the problems faced by Iraqi EFL students in mastering intonation systems, including tonality, tonicity, and tones. Specifically, the study investigates students' perceptions of intonation learning strategies and explores how these strategies contribute to their awareness and production of intonation systems.

The research employs and quantitative method. Data were collected through conduction an intonation perception where 40 Iraqi EFL learners from the University of Thi-Qar have been participated in the test. The results of the test indicated a positive impact of English intonation training on undergraduate students' intonation perception scores.

Keywords: Intonation test, EFL perception, intonation systems

Introduction
Literature Review

Halliday (2015) [9] posited that intonation is not merely a matter of good pronunciation, but rather a means of expressing various meanings. Similarly, emphasized the significant communicative role of intonation in speech. Shuying and Quan (2017) [23] confirmed that correct intonation is crucial for effective communication, especially for foreign speakers aiming to be well understood. Yurtbasi (2017) [26] further asserted that when a person's tone contradicts their words, listeners tend to rely more on intonation to understand their true linguistic intentions. Despite its significance, the study of intonation in second-language acquisition has received relatively less attention compared to the production of sound segments (Levis & Wichmann, 2015) [15].

Several studies and researches have demonstrated a strong relationship between intonation production and perception and the successful acquisition of English (Graham & Post, 2018) [14]. Intonation comprehension is essential for effective English language learning, and learners require appropriate instruction models to interpret intonation effectively. Therefore, in-depth training on intonation production, including pitch variation, is crucial for learners to comprehend spoken language.

Intonation is not only more important than grammar, but it is also a decisive factor in achieving better communicative skills, the ultimate goal of second language learning (Halliday, 2015) [9]. Unusual intonation among non-native English speakers may lead to communication problems with native speakers from different regions of the world (Lu, 2002) [16]. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, poor intonation can significantly affect pronunciation (Lyster, 2019) [17]. Teaching intonation presents challenges, with some researchers advocating for limited focus on core intonation items for EFL learners (Taylor, 1993; Hamad & Muhammad, 2018) [24, 10], while others propose introducing intonation training courses with specific language learning strategies (LLS) (Betti & Ulaiwi, 2018) [6].

For Iraqi EFL learners whose native language is Arabic, there are debates about the impact of intonation on successful communication. Some researchers (Al Jubouri, 2013) [37] argue that Iraqi EFL learners struggle with intonation due to their limited understanding of its use and functions. Conversely, studies like those conducted by Al-Jubouri (2013) [37] and Rashid (2019) [21] have examined prosodic features, including intonation, and highlighted the tendency of Arabic speakers to place equal stress on all words in a sentence, regardless of their functional or content-related nature.

Methodology
The research cohort comprised 40 third-year undergraduate students who were enrolled in

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the English Department at Thi-Qar University's Faculty of Education. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, a method that involves the researcher's judgment to carefully select suitable individuals from the population for inclusion in the study. This approach was chosen because the selected students served as the primary source of data. Specific criteria were employed to ensure alignment with the study's objectives, and eligible participants were selected based on qualifications that facilitated the achievement of the research goals (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2009) [8]. The accessible population for the study consisted of 40 individuals, equally divided into experimental and control groups. However, only 17 members of the experimental group met the criteria for data analysis. The sample selection criteria included: 1) all participants being students of English language at the faculty, 2) all participants being third-year students, and 3) all participants having completed two pronunciation courses.

In this phase, the students were instructed to perform three tasks. The first task was to determine the number of Intonation Phrases (IPs) in each sentence. The second task was to discriminate and mark the type of tone (rising, falling, or falling-rising) used in an utterance spoken with eight different intonation patterns. The third task involved underlining the tonic syllable (tonicity) in the utterance pronounced with the various intonation patterns. For this purpose, an audio file from Wells' (2006) [25] course book was used, featuring the utterance "But how do you want to pay for it?" spoken by two native English speakers with eight different intonation patterns.

After data collection, the initial step involved data clearing and screening, including handling missing data and identifying outliers. The dataset was subjected to a normality examination using SPSS 22 (Statistical Package for Social Science). Subsequently, two types of data analyses were performed: descriptive and inferential.

To address the research objective, inferential statistics, specifically the Independent Samples t-test, were employed. This t-test calculates differences between the values of two variables. In this analysis, a significance level of 0.05 was used to compare the mean scores of the variables. The Independent Samples t-test was employed to identify significant differences between the scores of Iraqi EFL learners before and after intonation training.

Results
An independent sample t-test was used to examine the differences between the mean EG, CG scores of the post-test in three tests of intonation perception, namely, EG, and CG's tonality, tonicity, and tone mean scores.

Comparison of pre-and post-Test perception mean scores in Three Tests between EG and CG
The study employed an independent sample t-test to examine the impact of training on Iraqi EFL students' perception of tonality, tonicity, and tone. The results of the independent sample t-test analysis (Table 1) reveal a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the perception test between the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG) for tonality (M=15.58, SD=1.93; M=12.33, SD=4.51; t30=2.21, p=.035) and tonicity (M=17.82, SD=1.63; M=9.93, SD=5.09; t16.53=5.748, p=.000). The mean scores of the EG are significantly higher than those of the CG in these two tests. However, there was no statistically significant difference between the tone test scores of the EG and CG. The results indicate a significant improvement in the intonation perception of Iraqi undergraduate EFL students, particularly in tonality and tonicity, after the intonation training.

Table 1: Comparison of post-test mean scores of intonation EG and CG in perception test

	Groups	Mean	SD	Levene's test		t	DF	p-value	Cohen's d
				F	p-value				
Tonality	EG	15.58	3.82	.11	.743	2.21	30	.035	0.78
	CG	12.33	4.51						
Tonicity	EG	17.82	1.63	15.38	.000	5.75	16.53	.000	2.09
	CG	9.933	5.09						
Tone	EG	12.82	3.74	.01	.939	1.09	30	.283	N/A
	CG	11.33	3.96						

CG: control group, EG: experimental group

The table displays effect size estimates for tonality and tonicity perception, with respective values of d = 0.78 and 2.09. These effect sizes are in close proximity to the threshold of 0.8, as per Cohen's rule of thumb, signifying a substantial difference. The empirical evidence presented in the results indicates noteworthy disparities between the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG) in perception mean scores for tonality and tonicity. Consequently, it can be inferred that the treatment significantly impacted the enhancement of tonality and tonicity perception scores among learners in the EG.

Conclusion
To conclude, the aforementioned findings present compelling evidence that effective English intonation can indeed be effectively taught and is not unduly arduous to acquire. The results of the intra-group comparison reveal a substantial difference in intonation perception among participants in the experimental group, whereas the control group, devoid of any treatment, did not exhibit significant discrepancies in their pre and post-test scores. Intonation training clearly exerted a significant impact on the intonation and perception abilities of the experimental group, both in comparison to the control group and in terms of their advancement across the three assessment points. The overall outcomes unmistakably demonstrate that intonation is not impervious to instruction, as contended by Taylor (1993) [24], nor excessively challenging to impart, as underscored by Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994) [7].

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