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TEACHING ENGLISH INTONATION: CHALLENGES AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

This study explores how first-year Ukrainian university students approach English intonation, what they find difficult, what they understand, and which types of classroom practice seem most helpful. The research was conducted as part of an introductory phonetics course and used a mixed-method questionnaire completed by 42 students of English Philology and Translation. While most participants recognise that intonation plays a key role in communication, helping to show emotion, signal meaning, and shape spoken interaction, they often struggle to use it naturally. The responses point to a strong preference for interactive practice: listening and repeating after native speakers, rehearsing short dialogues, and getting immediate feedback from the teacher. Several students also mentioned recording themselves, tracking pitch with arrows, or using apps to visualise intonation. These responses suggest that learners benefit from a mix of listening, imitation, visual support, and self-monitoring. Despite having a theoretical understanding of intonation categories, many still find it difficult to apply this knowledge in real time. Students describe problems with pitch

direction, sentence stress, rhythm, and pausing. Their unedited comments show how first-language influence, limited exposure to natural English speech, and the pressure to monitor pronunciation while speaking can all make intonation feel awkward or artificial. Rather than repeating patterns mechanically, learners appear to need space for trial, repetition, and reflection. These findings are consistent with earlier research on intonation learning and suggest that what helps most is regular, low-pressure practice tied to real communication rather than isolated drills. For EFL contexts where natural input is limited, these learner reflections offer useful insights into how intonation instruction can be made more effective.

Keywords: *English intonation, learner reflections, phonetics instruction, pronunciation teaching, questionnaire-based study.*

INTRODUCTION

English intonation is a central component of spoken communication, functioning at the level of sentence and discourse to signal meaning, speaker attitude, and communicative intent. It helps distinguish between statements and questions, highlight new or contrastive information, and structure larger stretches of speech through grouping and prominence. For learners of English as a foreign language, intonation often presents considerable difficulty, as it operates across multiple prosodic dimensions (pitch movement, stress placement, rhythm, and pausing) and requires fluent integration with lexical and grammatical choices in real-time speech. These demands make it a less accessible area of pronunciation than individual sounds or word stress, particularly in educational contexts with limited exposure to authentic spoken input.

In Ukrainian universities, English intonation is typically introduced as part of a first-year phonetics course. Students are expected to become familiar with basic intonation patterns such as rising, falling, and fall-rise patterns, and to apply them in speech production tasks. However, despite the presence of intonation in the curriculum, many learners continue to report uncertainty when using it in spontaneous interaction. The gap between theoretical awareness and actual performance has been widely noted by instructors and reflects a broader issue in pronunciation teaching: the difficulty of moving from controlled practice to fluent, communicative use. This problem is further complicated by the influence of the learners' first language, which often shapes intonation habits and may hinder the internalisation of target-language patterns.

The aim. This study investigates how first-year students majoring in English Philology and Translation perceive their own use of English intonation and evaluate the learning activities that support its development. The aim is to identify specific challenges students report when trying to apply intonation in spoken English, and to determine which forms of classroom practice they find most effective. By focusing on learner reflections collected through a structured questionnaire, the study provides insight into how intonation is learned, processed, and applied by students in a university phonetics course. The findings contribute to the ongoing discussion on pronunciation instruction by foregrounding the learner's perspective and highlighting areas where more targeted support may be needed.

Literature overview. The teaching of English intonation has long posed challenges in foreign language education. Although its communicative significance is widely acknowledged, its systematic instruction remains limited in many programmes. It has been argued that suprasegmental features such as intonation are often underrepresented in curricula due to their abstract nature and resistance to rule-based explanation (Levis, 2005). In many university settings, instruction focuses predominantly on segmental aspects of pronunciation, leaving prosody to be treated later or less thoroughly.

Intonation plays a critical role in managing discourse and expressing pragmatic meaning. D. M. Chun (2002) emphasises its function in structuring information and conveying the speaker's attitude. A. Wennerstrom (2001) also highlights how intonation contributes to discourse coherence and listener comprehension. It has been demonstrated that learners with otherwise advanced linguistic skills may still sound unnatural if their intonational patterns diverge from English norms (Pickering, 2004). In particular, L. Pickering's research shows that difficulties with turn-taking, emphasis, and boundary marking are frequently linked to insufficient control over prosodic forms.

The influence of the first language (L1) on the acquisition of English intonation has been widely documented. I. Mennen (2007) shows that learners tend to transfer L1 pitch range, timing, and boundary tones into English, resulting in patterns that may be intelligible but pragmatically inappropriate. J. Jenkins (2000) contends that such transfer may not always lead to miscommunication but can significantly affect perceptions of fluency and naturalness. It has also been noted that this transfer is particularly persistent in contexts with limited access to native-speaker models, such as Ukrainian classrooms (Mennen, 2007; Jenkins, 2000).

The impact of intonation on listener comprehension has been supported by empirical studies. L. Hahn (2004) found that misplaced stress and prosodic cues can slow down listener processing and reduce understanding, even when individual words are pronounced correctly. This finding was corroborated in later studies, where prosodic features were shown to influence both comprehensibility and perceived fluency more than segmental errors (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Munro & Derwing, 1999).

Comprehensive pedagogical frameworks have been developed to address this issue. M. Celce-Murcia, D. M. Brinton, and J. M. Goodwin (2010) propose an approach that includes guided listening, contextualized speech production, and communicative feedback. Recent research has further emphasized the importance of teacher metalinguistic awareness in intonation instruction. D. Liu et al. (2024) demonstrated that ESL teachers' explicit metalanguage use serves as evidence of their metalinguistic knowledge of the English intonation system, suggesting that teacher preparation and awareness directly influence instructional effectiveness. The importance of explicit pronunciation instruction and learner awareness has also been underscored (Couper, 2006). It has been argued that prosody should be taught not as a final refinement but as an integral part of communicative competence from the early stages. Pronunciation needs to lose its isolated character and be treated as part of communication and discourse (Setter & Jenkins, 2005).

Ukrainian scholarship contributes to this discussion through the work of N. Mospan (2022), who investigated the use of video-based instruction to develop students' command of emotional intonation. Her study involved receptive, imitative, and expressive phases and demonstrated measurable improvement in learners' ability to recognize and reproduce expressive prosodic patterns. The approach proved effective in environments with limited naturalistic exposure, supporting the case for multimodal teaching strategies (Mospan, 2022).

Additional research has explored how intonation influences teacher assessment. T. Isaacs and P. Trofimovich (2012) found that raters frequently base evaluations of oral proficiency on prosodic fluency and naturalness rather than solely on grammatical accuracy. Similar findings were reported by O. Kang (2010), who observed that variation in pitch and rhythm strongly correlates with higher fluency ratings in standardized speaking tests.

The integration of pronunciation instruction into broader communicative goals has also been emphasized. M. C. Pennington and J. C. Richards (1986) argue for a shift away from isolated drills toward discourse-oriented practice. It has been shown that frequent, low-stakes engagement with natural speech patterns supports the automatization of prosodic control (Trofimovich & Baker, 2006).

Taken together, these studies illustrate the need for an instructional model that balances theoretical explanation with authentic, contextualized practice. While much of the literature focuses on teaching strategies and perception, relatively few studies have addressed how learners themselves perceive their progress or evaluate the effectiveness of classroom activities. The present study aims to address this gap by analysing learner reflections, offering insight into how intonation is internalized and used by first-year philology students in a Ukrainian EFL context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out among 42 first-year students studying English Philology or Translation at Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University. All of them were native speakers of Ukrainian, aged 17–18, with an estimated intermediate level of English proficiency.

To collect the data, a questionnaire was developed and distributed during a regular phonetics class. It included a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions and was titled *Your Experience with English Intonation (for Students of English Phonetics)*. The first part focused on how confident students feel when applying intonation, and how helpful they find the intonation component of the course. The second part asked about effective forms of practice and gave students space to reflect on what difficulties they experience and what kinds of classroom tasks are most useful.

In the first question, students were asked: *How confident do you feel about your use and understanding of English intonation patterns (e.g., rising, falling, fall-rise) in real speech?* They could choose from five answers: *Very confident*, *Confident*, *Somewhat confident*, *Not confident*, or *I don't know what they are*.

The second question addressed their perception of the course material: *How helpful do you find the intonation section of your English Phonetics course?* The options ranged from *Very helpful – it makes things clear* to *Not helpful – I don't understand it well*, with an additional option: *I don't remember studying intonation*.

The third question asked: *Which form of practicing intonation works best for you?* Students could select one or more of the following: *Listening and repeating after native speakers*, *Recording and analyzing their speech*, *practicing dialogues with peers*, *using visual aids like intonation arrows*, *Classroom drills with the teacher*, or specify another method.

The fourth item asked them to rate the importance of intonation in spoken English: *In your opinion, how important is correct intonation for effective spoken English?* The answer choices ranged from *very important* to *I am not sure*.

The last two questions were open-ended. The fifth asked: *What challenges do you face when trying to apply correct intonation in your speaking?* and the sixth: *What kind of tasks or activities in your phonetics course help (or would help) you improve your intonation most?*

The questionnaire starts with self-assessment and course feedback, then moves to personal experience and learning strategies. Most students were able to describe their difficulties with reference to pitch, stress, or rhythm, suggesting that they were drawing on knowledge gained during their phonetics training. The responses to Question 5 were analysed qualitatively and grouped into recurring categories, which are presented in the next section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While the questionnaire covered a range of specific issues, it seems reasonable to begin with a more general one: how students themselves assess the role of intonation in spoken English. This was not the first question on the form, but it helps set the stage. Before turning to how confident learners feel or what methods they prefer, it's useful to understand whether they see intonation as something that matters.

Figure 1 shows that most students rated intonation as either "important" or "very important" for successful communication. This is notable. It suggests that learners do not treat intonation as a technical detail to be memorized, but rather as something tied to being clear, expressive, and understood. For many, its value seems to go beyond the classroom.

This kind of awareness may reflect the influence of early instruction. During the first semester, students were introduced to basic intonation patterns and practiced using them. Although the questionnaire didn't ask where their ideas came from, classroom exposure likely played a role.

Findings in previous studies support what students here seem to understand intuitively. L. Hahn (2004) showed that misplaced sentence stress can make listening harder. In other work, T. Derwing and M. Munro (2005) noted that intonation often matters more than accurate sound production when it comes to intelligibility. Listener judgments, as T. Isaacs and P. Trofimovich (2012) also observed, are shaped by rhythm, pitch, and pausing, sometimes more than grammar.

The students' preference for immediate feedback and interactive practice aligns with research on corrective feedback in suprasegmental instruction. W. Zhang, H. Chang, and Y. Liao (2021) found that recasts and clarification requests significantly enhanced English intonation development,

supporting the current findings that learners benefit from real-time correction and guided practice rather than isolated pattern repetition.

The belief that intonation contributes to communication gives useful context for the results that follow. If learners already link it to clarity and fluency, their reflections on classroom tasks and personal difficulties gain further significance.

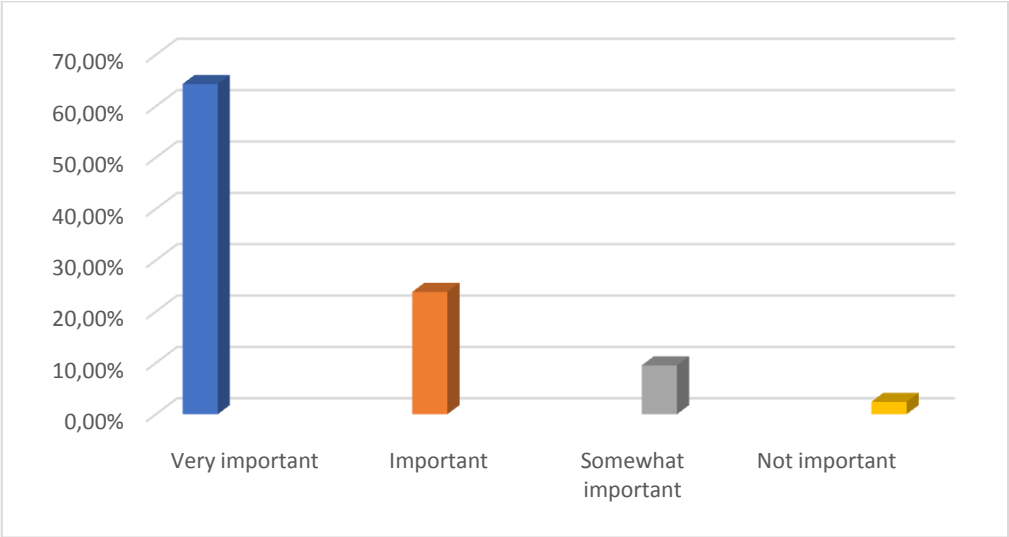

Figure 1. **Student Opinions on the Role of Intonation in Effective Communication**
Developed by authors

Student Self-Assessment of Intonation Confidence and Training. The next step in the analysis turns to how students assess their own ability to use English intonation. Although this was the first question in the survey, it follows naturally after the previous discussion. If learners believe intonation matters, it is useful to ask how confident they feel using it themselves.

Figure 2 shows a fairly even distribution, with most students choosing either *Somewhat confident* or Confident. This suggests that learners are aware of the patterns and their function, but are not yet fully at ease applying them in real speech. Only a few described themselves as "Very confident," which is in line with findings by J. Levis (2005) and D. M. Chun (2002), who noted that suprasegmentals take longer to acquire than segmentals, even when taught explicitly.

Some responses indicated low confidence or even uncertainty about what intonation patterns are. While this was a minority, it still points to a potential gap between instruction and real-time use. Previous studies, including those by J. Jenkins (2000) and L. Hahn (2004), have observed similar disconnects, especially when learners receive limited feedback or have few opportunities to test prosodic features in authentic settings.

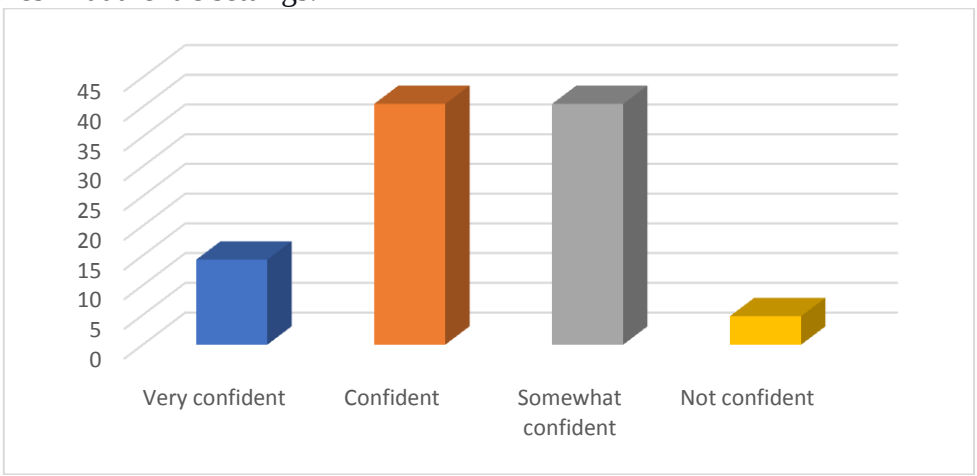

Figure 2. **Student Self-Reported Confidence in Using and Understanding English Intonation Patterns**
Developed by authors

Figure 3 shifts the focus to how useful students found the intonation component of their phonetics course. Here, almost half said it was *very helpful – it makes things clear*, and another large group selected *helpful, but I still need practice.* Together, these responses suggest that the course provided a good foundation, though not always enough for fluent use. D. M. Chun (2002) has argued that even when instruction is strong, real development depends on how often learners actually use intonation in context.

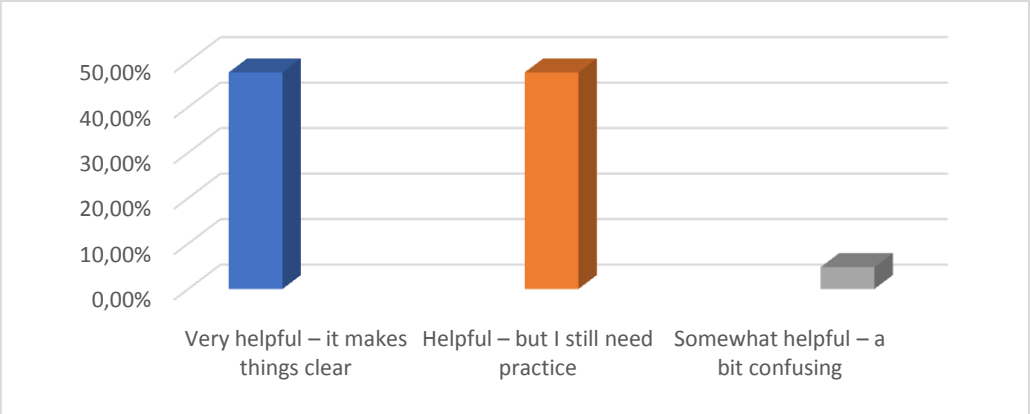

Figure 3. **Student Feedback on the Usefulness of Intonation Training in English Phonetics**
Developed by authors

A smaller group rated the course as only *somewhat helpful* or said they did not remember the intonation part at all. It is hard to know whether this reflects inattentiveness, weak retention, or differences in how students engage with prosodic material. Research by G. Couper (2006) and N. Mospan (2022) suggests that training is most effective when students combine listening, imitation, and reflection, not just passive exposure.

Altogether, the results from both figures point to a shared trend: students value the instruction they have received, but their confidence remains limited. To close the gap between knowledge and use, intonation needs to be revisited often and in different formats. Practice tasks that allow for experimentation, feedback, and low-stakes rehearsal may help students carry this skill into real communication.

Preferred Practice Activities: Learner Preferences and Reflections. This part of the results addresses the kinds of practice students found most effective for improving their intonation. Figure 4 summarises responses to a multiple-choice item, while Table 1 includes open-ended answers. Though these two questions were placed separately in the questionnaire, many students repeated or expanded on the same preferences.

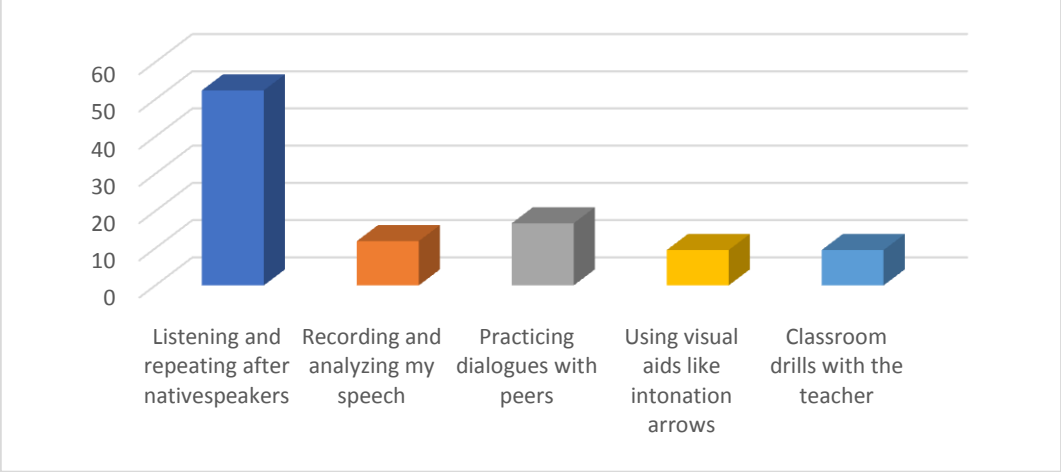

Figure 4. **Preferred Forms of Practising Intonation among Students**
Developed by authors

Listening and repeating after native speakers emerged as the most frequently chosen method. Students also reported practising dialogues with peers, participating in teacher-led drills, and recording their own speech. Visual aids like arrows to indicate pitch were mentioned as well. These responses reflect well-established classroom techniques. As noted by M. Celce-Murcia, D. M. Brinton, and J. M. Goodwin (2010), combining listening, imitation, and guided production remains central in teaching suprasegmentals. A similar conclusion was reached by N. Mospan (2022), who found that students trained with video materials improved both recognition and production of emotional intonation.

Table 1

Student Perceptions of the Most Helpful Intonation-Focused Tasks in Phonetics Classes

Category	Frequency	Example Student Responses
dialogue practice / intonation	24	*dialogue repetition mostly, possibly repetition to songs; Dialogues, and very clever and understandable teacher*
repetition after native speakers / teacher	19	*The most helpful for me is listening and repeating after a speaker.; Repeating after the teacher*
peer/classroom practice	15	*Practicing in group; practicing dialogues with peers*
recording and listening to own voice	13	*To repeat after native speakers, record and analyze my speech; Recording dialogues, and practice in the class*
listening to native speakers	13	*Listening to native speakers and practicing with intonation drills or recordings helps me; Listening and repeating after native speakers and teacher*
transcription	5	*Practicing of writing transcriptions of dialogues and recording them; Listening, transcribing and record (!) dialogues*
shadowing	5	*Perhaps most of all, it is shadowing and reading and intonation of dialogues.; Shadowing*
visual aids / markers	3	*Writing dialogues on the board, intonating them with arrows and then discussing it with a teacher; Practicing sentences with visual markers*
apps / tech support	1	*It would help even more to get feedback from the teacher or use apps that show pitch and stress*

Developed by authors

The written comments add more detail. Many students singled out dialogue repetition, linking it to tasks done in class. One wrote, *Dialogue repetition mostly, possibly repetition to songs.* Another mentioned, *Very clever and understandable teacher.* These responses are quoted directly and have not been corrected. Though informal in tone, they suggest that learners appreciate exercises that feel natural and communicative.

Another frequent theme was repetition after the teacher or a native speaker. Several responses described it as the most helpful approach. As one student put it: *The most helpful for me is listening and repeating after a speaker.* D. M. Chun (2002) has argued that such repetition, especially when done with clear and meaningful input, can support more natural use of prosodic features.

Some students mentioned recording their voice and listening back. One wrote: *To repeat after native speakers, record and analyze my speech.* Others brought up transcription, visual tracking using arrows, or mobile apps for pitch contour analysis. Although these were mentioned less often, they point to a growing interest in using tools to support feedback and self-monitoring.

The students' growing interest in technological tools for self-monitoring aligns with recent research on immersive learning environments. A. Akkarapon, Muthmainnah, and A. Al Yakin (2025) examined EFL students' perceptions and experiences with AI-driven metaverse environments for

developing communication skills, finding positive attitudes toward technology-enhanced interactive practice opportunities that provide immediate feedback and visualization capabilities

Taken together, the responses suggest that no single method dominates. Students seem to benefit from combining listening, speaking, feedback, and some degree of self-reflection. Where tasks allow for clear models, personal control, and repetition without pressure, learners appear more confident and engaged.

Learners' Reported Challenges in Applying English Intonation. To explore the challenges learners face in applying English intonation, students were asked the open-ended question: *What challenges do you face when trying to apply correct intonation in your speaking?* Their responses (quoted without correction) point to a range of issues: difficulties with pitch movement, uncertainty about where to place stress, hesitation over how to pause naturally, and broader concerns about rhythm or expressiveness. Notably, many of the comments demonstrate a conscious awareness of specific phonetic features, indicating that students are drawing on terminology and skills developed during their phonetics training. These patterns are summarized in the table below.

Table 2

Learners' Reported Challenges in Applying English Intonation

Challenge	Description	Student Comment(s)
1. Conscious effort and automatization	Applying intonation is not yet automatic; students report hesitation or distraction while speaking.	*Sometimes l start thinking too much about it and make wrong pronunciation.* *It takes time to use it unconsciously.*
2. Choosing the appropriate intonation pattern	Learners are unsure when to use rising/falling intonation, which leads to flat or cautious speech.	*Sometimes my speech sounds flat because I'm not sure how to show emotions or emphasis like native speakers do.*
3. Stress placement and emphasis	Uncertainty about which words to stress affects both prosody and meaning.	*I don't always hear when and where I should use primary or secondary stress, fall, rise.* *It's hard to figure out which word should be stressed.*
4. Listening awareness and self-monitoring	Difficulty monitoring one's own intonation during speech due to lack of feedback.	*You don't know if you have the right intonation because it is difficult to hear and analyse it at once when you speak.*
5. Pronunciation-related difficulties	Problems with individual sounds and pitch control, especially in complex word clusters.	Controlling each type of intonation in a sentence (rise-fall).
6. First language influence	Use of Ukrainian intonation patterns interferes with English pronunciation.	*I used Ukrainian intonation instead.* *Ukrainian manner of intonation.*
7. Limited access to feedback	Lack of native-speaker models or correction hampers self-monitoring and improvement.	*To monitor intonation without native speakers or teacher.*
8. Tempo and naturalness	Increased speech speed disrupts pitch, pausing, and stress control.	*Sometimes it's difficult to use pauses and intonation when speaking fast.* *While talking, concentrate on the full stops.*

Developed by authors

Taken together, these responses provide a detailed picture of the many interrelated factors that influence intonation use in spoken English. While some difficulties, such as L1 interference or stress placement, are well known in phonetics research, others, like overthinking during speech or a lack of feedback from fluent models, point to classroom-specific or learner-specific issues.

Previous studies have reported similar trends. For instance, J. M. Levis (2005) and A. Wennerstrom (2001) describe widespread learner difficulty in both perceiving and producing natural intonation contours. L. Pickering (2004) has shown that learners often struggle with the discourse functions of intonation, such as signalling turn-taking or emotional stance. The influence of the first language is also well-documented (Mennen, 2007), supporting what Ukrainian students in this study describe as "negative transfer."

What stands out in the current data is how many students explicitly describe the process as cognitively demanding. Unlike in broader studies, these responses come from phonetics students who are trained to notice patterns, yet even they struggle to move from awareness to fluent, intuitive use. This suggests that targeted support, more modelling, and low-pressure repetition may be especially useful for bridging that gap. In addition, the mention of local models with incorrect intonation reflects a need to reinforce standard input through reliable materials or recordings.

These findings confirm established patterns while also drawing attention to specific challenges observed in an EFL university context. These results are consistent with what earlier studies have shown, but they also highlight challenges specific to the EFL classroom. Rather than focusing only on explanation or repetition, instruction might work better when it gives learners chances to hear, test, and apply intonation in varied situations.

CONCLUSIONS

The results suggest that first-year students often find English intonation difficult to grasp, despite recognising its importance. While learners generally recognise its importance for communication and report a range of effective classroom practices, they also express uncertainty in applying intonation spontaneously. This tension between awareness and automatization suggests that even informed learners benefit from more sustained and contextualised exposure. Responses across the questionnaire indicate that students prefer interactive and multimodal approaches, including imitation, repetition, recording, and guided feedback. The data also reveal that learners value tasks that connect intonation with real speech acts, rather than treating it as a mechanical skill divorced from meaning.

At the same time, several obstacles persist. Many students cited their difficulty in choosing appropriate pitch patterns, monitoring their own speech, or overcoming the influence of their first language.

At the same time, students mentioned several difficulties: choosing the right intonation, keeping track of their speech while talking, and avoiding transfer from their first language. These responses point to a need for more flexible classroom approaches, ones that give space for repeated use without too much pressure. Several students also referred to arrows, recordings, and mobile apps as part of their practice. While these tools were mentioned less often than traditional activities, they seem to offer a helpful supplement, especially for those who want to check their pitch or track changes visually. Some learners appear to rely on such aids to make sense of what they hear or produce. Instead of repeating isolated patterns, these students may benefit more from tasks that let them experiment, listen back, and gradually adjust their speech based on what feels right or sounds natural.

By foregrounding learner perspectives, this study highlights the importance of treating intonation not just as a set of patterns to be taught, but as a communicative resource to be experienced, tested, and refined through use.

Limitations. The study was limited to a single course and institution, with a relatively small sample size of first-year students.

Future research. A follow-up study could revisit the same students in their third year to track whether and how their use of intonation becomes more natural and confident over time.

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НАВЧАННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ ІНТОНАЦІЇ: ВИКЛИКИ ТА ДІЄВІ МЕТОДИ

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У статті розглядається, як українські студенти першого курсу університету засвоюють англійську інтонацію, з якими труднощами стикаються, що саме їм вдається зрозуміти та які форми аудиторної практики вважають найбільш ефективними. Дослідження було проведено в межах вступного курсу з фонетики та базувалося на анкетуванні змішаного типу. В опитуванні взяли участь 42 студенти спеціальностей «Англійська філологія» та «Переклад». Хоча більшість учасників усвідомлюють важливість інтонації для комунікації – як засобу вираження емоцій, передачі значення й організації мовлення – вони часто мають труднощі з її природним вживанням. У відповідях простежується виразна перевага інтерактивних методів: слухання та повторення за носіями мови, відпрацювання діалогів у парах або групах, а також отримання миттєвого зворотного зв'язку від викладача. Декілька студентів згадали також про використання запису власного мовлення, графічне позначення мелодики стрілками та застосунки для візуалізації інтонації. Такі відповіді свідчать про те, що найефективнішою є комбінація слухання, імітації, візуальної підтримки та самоконтролю. Попри наявність теоретичних знань про інтонаційні категорії, багатьом студентам складно застосовувати їх у реальному мовленні. Вони зазначають труднощі з напрямком тону, наголосом у реченні, ритмом і паузами. Їхні не редаговані відповіді демонструють, як на інтонаційне оформлення впливають рідна мова, обмежений контакт із природним англійським мовленням та необхідність постійного контролю за вимовою. Замість механічного повторення

студентам потрібен простір для експериментування, багаторазового повторення та осмислення. Результати узгоджуються з попередніми дослідженнями у сфері вивчення інтонації й свідчать, що найбільш дієвими є регулярні, неформальні практики, пов'язані зі змістовною комунікацією, а не ізольовані вправи. У контексті навчання англійської як іноземної мови за умов обмеженого природного мовного середовища рефлексії самих студентів відкривають нові орієнтири для удосконалення викладання інтонації.

Ключові слова: *англійська інтонація, анкетне дослідження, навчання вимови, рефлексії студентів, фонетична підготовка.*