

ESL Yemeni Learners' Perceptions and Perspectives on the Importance of Learning Stress and Intonation as Supra-Segmental Features of Speech and Sound Attributes to the Process of Comprehension: A Survey Study

Ahmed M. S. Alduais (Corresponding author)

Independent researcher, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

E-mail: ibnalduais@yahoo.com

Tel: 966-551-367-208

Rafiq Al-Shamiry

Dept. of English Language, Faculty of Arts

The University of IBB, IBB, Yemen

E-mail: rafiqshamiry@gmail.com

Received: May 3, 2013 Accepted: June 7, 2013 Published: July 8, 2013

doi:10.5296/ire.v1i1.3630

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/ire.v1i1.3630>

Abstract

Purposes: To obtain Yemeni learners' of English language perceptions and perspectives on the importance of teaching/ learning stress and intonation as supra-segmental features of speech and sound-attributes to the process of comprehension and to identify the reasons of neglecting/ avoiding the use of stress and intonation when attempting to communicate in English. **Methods:** The participants of this survey-study are 140 students who were enrolled in the University of IBB, Yemen as bachelor level students, in the departments of English, faculties of Arts and Education (first year: 10 Arts, 10 Education, Second year: 20 Arts, 20 Education, third year: 20 Arts, 20 Education, and fourth year: 20 Arts, 20 Education). In all levels, there was a balanced number of gender. A researcher-made questionnaire consisting of

23 items was given to the 140 participants to achieve the above objectives of the study. **Results:** Descriptive statistics (frequency and percentages) of the 17th version of SPSS was used to analyse the collected data. The statistical results indicated the following: 1) more than 50% of the participating students have negative attitudes towards the use of super-segmental features, 2) less than 50% have incompetent level and/or limited knowledge of the functions of suprasegmental features of speech, 3) the application of these features is limited to the classroom activities, 4) the reasons behind neglecting such features by order are: educational system, students, teachers and social situation, 5) social and personal reasons are the most discouraging factors for not applying such features of speech, and 6) frequent evaluation, labs, teachers and classmates, and society members are the proposed encouraging factors by order. **Conclusions:** Accentual function is not the only function of stress and intonation that relate them phonologically to the learned/acquired language. Instead, this phonological relationship is extended to semantic, morphological and syntactic functions. Because of this, it is concluded that most of the participating students are incompetent, *uninterested*, yet not encouraged to use such supra-segmental features of speech. Learning environment that would support the proper learning and use of these features must be considered by policy-makers and required by English language teachers.

Keywords: Learners of English as a second language (ESL learners), Stress and intonation, Supra-segmental features of speech, In-service teachers

1. Introduction

It is not easy for a learner to learn another language, especially when it is not cognate to his/her native language. Naturally, learning a language, for example, English requires the learning of four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Each of these skills has its own features which greatly influence the improvement of a learner in a particular skill. Moreover, each skill has its linguistic importance in effecting the learning of the language. Strictly speaking, learning only some features of a skill and leaving others means incomplete learning of this skill as in the case of learning writing, and imperfect understanding as in the case of learning speaking skill. Yet learning any skill requires two sides of studying: one is theoretical, and the other is practical. That is actually to say, to study something, to practice it, and to apply it, then, it is to be considered as perfectly learning of the language.

Reasons for learning a language do positively and negatively interfere with the process of learning the language. For instance, learning English language for business purpose, a learner is required only to utter some sentences which make him/her able to communicate with others, in the outside world. In such a case a learner is not expected to be a proficient speaker or a skilful writer; though being so is a plus. Unlike this is in the case of learning English language for academic purposes where in both reading and writing skills would be more required. In spite of this, most of the students of English Department, at IBB University, faculties of both Arts and Education are learning English for other purposes rather than academic ones. They are studying each skill separately and yet each feature of each skill isolately.

In learning the speaking skill, for example, the students unwisely think that speaking more

effectively and developing such a skill is not necessarily required for any job or process of life. Consequently, this does not only lead to hurdling the process of improving speaking skill but also to the process of understanding this skill perfectly and the other skills completely.

To put it simply, English stress and intonation which are two main features of speaking skill have to be studied, practiced, and applied by the students when they attempt to communicate in English. Moreover, and with reference to the reasons of learning, it is unwisely thought and wrongly mistaken that speaking effectively and being a proficient speaker which requires practicing and applying the main features of speech is not as important as writing academically and being a skilful writer which also requires practicing the writing skill and applying its main features. Additionally, these two important features of speech are not used/ applied by the students of English though, are considered as the main features of speaking skill that lead to a fuller understanding of the other skills of the language.

In effect, and in addition to what has been mentioned above, Kelley's(2000:3) consideration of stress and intonation as “supra-segmental features of speech”, and also Jones’ (1972:146) view of them as “sound attributes” to the process of comprehension; all have greatly motivated the researchers to choose this topic and search in this area.

Thus, it is hopefully aimed by this study to identify and discuss the importance of these features of speech and to investigate the reasons of neglecting them by the students, and finally to suggest some solutions that may help the students of English and probably all other Yemeni learners to overcome this problem/ difficulty.

In basic, it is observed that Yemeni learners of English encounter many difficulties when they attempt to communicate in English and most of these difficulties lead to communication breakdown. Among these difficulties is the one in English stress and intonation. This is due to the fact that their mother tongue Arabic— and English are not cognate languages. Yet, such linguistic difficulties can be overcome by frequent practice and hard efforts, a thing which is rarely done by some students. Therefore, it is worth searching this area in detail, in order to help the Yemeni learners overcome this problem. As a result of neglecting/avoiding to practice the two main features of the speaking skill, the students’ abilities to speak effectively, to communicate successfully and to perfectly understand other skills of the language are all badly affected. So, it is hopefully aimed that the results of this study will positively affect both the students and their teachers to change their negative attitudes as well as to draw their attentions to the importance of these two important linguistic features.

The scope of this study focuses on the students of English at the university level, specifically at IBB University, English Department, Faculties of Arts and Education. This means, other learners of English, such as those of schools and institutes are not included in this study. Conversely, the chosen students from both faculties some have become teachers and they are now teaching English, are specifically questioned. However, their answers are analytically presented and critically discussed. What is more important is that the researchers are not going to present stress and intonation as linguistic elements and parts of phonetics and phonology, for example, what do they mean, or what their components are— rather they are actually presented and evaluated from functional/communicative aspect.

The speaking skill is very much neglected and little care is taken to improving it. James (ibid: 7) defines this skill importantly by saying “speaking organizes thoughts in their logical sequence, this helps in the continuous flow of the ideas and the mind becomes quick in selecting words”. Furthermore, this skill is not seriously taught at schools and universities. To put it differently, students are taught this skill theoretically rather than practically which greatly affects the improvement of the speaking skill and the other skills as well. Derol (1996) in Al-Badani (2005:5) observes:

...students learning a foreign language need practical language, such as speaking and experiencing culture before they need theoretical language such as, reading and writing.

Consequently, students’ skill of speaking is not improved as well as the other skills. That is to say, they cannot speak/communicate successfully because they study this skill theoretically. Needless to say, any skill acquires both studying and practicing at the same time. Al-Baadani (ibid:15) states:

...most students of English may be able to perform good results in their mid-term and final-term tests, but they often react incompetently when required to use their linguistic knowledge in real communication.

This means the students cannot use this skill successfully because they are not in the habit of practicing this skill, namely its features. Underwood (1989:9) stresses on the need of learning the features of spoken English and he also mentions the effects of neglecting them. So, it can be observed that the students are not competent in spoken English because of many and various factors that hurdle the improvement of this skill and also the other skills. Thus, it is arguably questioned whether the students are not aware enough of the importance of improving this skill, or are there some other reasons?

To return to speaking skill and its features, this skill has many features but two of them, namely stress and intonation are more importantly considered as the main features of this skill. They can positively or negatively affect the perfect learning of speaking skill in particular and the perfect understanding of the language in general. However, these two features are intensely concerned by Kelly (2000:3) as “supra-segmental features of speech”, and by Jones (1972:146) as “sound attributes” to the process of comprehension. To illustrate this point it is suggested that these two features must be discussed briefly from the point of view of their functions and also importance.

To begin with defining stress and intonation, Jones (1972:245) defines stress as:

...the degree of force with which a sound or a syllable is uttered, it is essentially a subjective action. A strong force of utterance means energetic action of all the articulating organs, and it is usually accompanied by a gesture with the hand or head or other parts of the body; it involves a strong ‘push’ from the chest wall and consequently strong force of exhalation; this

generally gives the objective impression of loudness. Weak force of utterance involves weak action of the chest wall resulting in weak force of exhalation, and giving the objective acoustic impression of softness.

On the other hand, intonation is also defined by Jones (ibid: 275) as “the variation which takes place in the pitch of the voice in caused speech” (ibid: 275). Though two different features, they are practically and functionally interconnected. Kelly (ibid: 71) indicates that “the use of stress in speech helps as both deliver and understand meaning in language utterances if it is closely linked with intonation”.

Furthermore, stress and intonation are importantly considered as the main features of spoken English as well as the other skills. That is actually to say what Kelly (ibid: 73) mentions about them “speakers make certain assumptions with regard to what is old and new information, and express these by means of stress (and intonation) patterns”. He (ibid: 73) also notably adds:

...our spoken language is not tied to sentences. When conversing, we often use incomplete sentences, phrases which would be considered ungrammatical if written down, interrupt each other, backtrack and so on. However, a study of stress within complete sentences provides a ‘user-friendly’ way of drawing attention to the main aspects of how we use stress in speech..

Moreover, Kelley (2000:84) goes on to summarise precisely the functions of these features and he stresses on the importance of learning and practicing them along with spoken sentences rather than written ones. So, he (ibid: 84) clearly maintains:

Sentence stress is an integral feature language which provides listener with vital clues as to the salient points of the speaker's message. Other features are the grammar of the utterance, the lexical content, the particular phonemes which mark up the utterance, and the intonation contour used to deliver the message.

Similar to this is intonation which has also very important functions. Kelley (ibid: 87-105) explains in detail and with giving clear illustrations how studying intonation only theoretically can badly affect the improvement rather than improving it as it is in the case of studying it theoretically and practically. Additionally, Roach (2000:183) explains more expressively the functions of stress and he starts this by raising a very meaningful and useful question, so that he requests learners to imagine:

What would be lost if we were to speak without intonation: you should try to imagine speech in which every syllable was said on the same level pitch, with no pauses, and no changes in speech or loudness. This is a sort of speech that would be

produced by ‘mechanical speech’ device that made sentences by putting together recordings of isolated words.

In spite of this, it is still argued whether these features are of enough importance to be taught practically or not. Needless to say, features such as stress and intonation are worthy important and functional to be practiced and taught practically. This in in agreement with what Kelly (ibid: 86) states

In dealing with intonation in the language classroom, we need to examine the nature of these conscious processes, bring them to the surface and show how we believe they work. To be of use to students, work on intonation in the classroom needs to focus on practice rather than theory.

He (ibid: 106) also adds that “working on intonation can, and should be, built into lessons from beginner level to advanced level”. Similarly, Roach (2000:180) stresses on the importance of teaching students theoretically and practically. That is to say, a student has to be competent and at the same time has the ability to perform it.

On the basis of the above mentioned literature, one could assume that speaking without applying and practicing the main features of this skill is quite likely as writing without applying the features and rules of writing. To put it simply, one can imagine what it would be like if we were to write without using punctuation marks. Similar to this is also spoken English if it is done without stress and intonation. Thus, it can be confirmed that those who are practicing what they have studied theoretically seem probably more competent and reliable than those who only study theoretically. In brief, the current study aimed at answering the following questions from the students’ perspective(s):

- 1) Are the Yemeni learners of English incompetent in English stress and intonation because they are not aware of their importance and functions?
- 2) Are they incompetent in English stress and intonation because these features are chiefly neglected at schools as well as at departments of English?
- 3) How often do they try to apply them, when they attempt to communicate in English?
- 4) Who is the first responsible for the students are not being able to communicate successfully?
- 5) What are the various factors that may discourage the students to use/practice stress and intonation?
- 6) What are the various factors that can encourage students to use stress and intonation when they attempt to communicate in English?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The population of this study are Yemeni students who were enrolled in the English Language Departments, Faculties of Arts and Education, the University of IBB, IBB, Yemen. In this specialization, students either get a Bachelor degree of Arts in English Studies (4 years, 8 academic terms) or Bachelor degree of Education in English Language (4 academic years, 8 terms).

The researchers followed random sampling method where in 140 students, both females and males from the two faculties and all levels participated in this study. Tables (1 and 2) show the distribution and characteristics of the subjects of this study.

Table 1. Distribution of the subjects

Faculty of Arts: English Dept.			Faculty of Education: English Dept.		
Level	Number	Gender	Level	Number	Gender
1	10	F & M	1	10	F & M
2	20	F & M	2	20	F & M
3	20	F & M	3	20	F & M
4	20	F & M	4	20	F & M
Sub-total	70		Total	70	
Total		140			

Table 2. Characteristics of subjects

Age range	20-26
Mother tongue language	Arabic Language
Dialect	Yemeni Arabic Language
Ethnicity	Islam
Other languages	English (ESL and EFL use)
Gender	Female and male (single and married)
Nationality	Yemenis (a few number of non-Yemeni Arabs)
Specific characteristic	Be enrolled in any English Language Dept, in the University of IBB

The setting of the study was the University of IBB, IBB city, Yemen. The study was conducted between the period of early January 2007 and late May 2007. The Department of English Language & Literature, Faculty of Arts, is located in the main campus of the University of IBB, IBB city. On the other hand, the Department of English, Faculty of Education is located in Alnaderah district.

The results of this study are and were prepared to be generalized for those who did not participate and for other departments in other governorates in Yemen as well. In other words, the included number of the subjects (140) would really, yet methodologically serve to claim that such reached situation might be generalizable to other universities in Yemen.

2.2 Measures

A researcher-made questionnaire that includes 23 items was used as a measuring tool in this paper. Furthermore, the 23 items are divided into 6 clusters where in a certain number of items seeks and/or answers one of the raised questions in this study regarding the ESL learners' perspectives and perceptions about the importance of stress and intonation as supra-segmental features of speech and sound-attributes to the process of comprehension. The following table (3) displays the distribution of the items of the tool into six clusters.

Table 3: Division of the questionnaire items into six clusters

Theme	Items
1. Negative attitudes and poor knowledge	1-5
2. Competence and awareness	6-10
3. Applying the supra-segmental features of speech	11-12
4. Responsible person/ factor for the problem	13-16
5. Discouraging factors	17-19
6. Proposed encouraging factors	20-23

Both validity and reliability of the used measurement tool were taken into consideration by the researchers.

To start with the validity of the tool, only two types of the construct validity were achieved, namely, face and content validities. Though both types are methodologically and statistically considered the weakest types of construct validity, but using them can minimize the risk of using an invalid tool. The face validity was primarily achieved by handing the questionnaire to a university teacher of English to judge and decide subjectively the purpose and the suitable use of the tool. The university teacher from the University of IBB stated that this tool is a suitable tool that would assess and obtain certain learners' perspectives and perceptions about pronunciation of English language with more focus on stress and and intonation. By this means, it was decided that such face validity for the tool is good.

As for the content validity, it was achieved through dividing the items of the questionnaire to answer the questions of the study. Using this criterion, it has been easy to decide on any unrelated item of the investigated topic of the research (this division can be seen in table (3) above). Having done this, then the content validity of the tool was decided as very good since no item in the tool was identified as unrelated to the objectives of the paper.

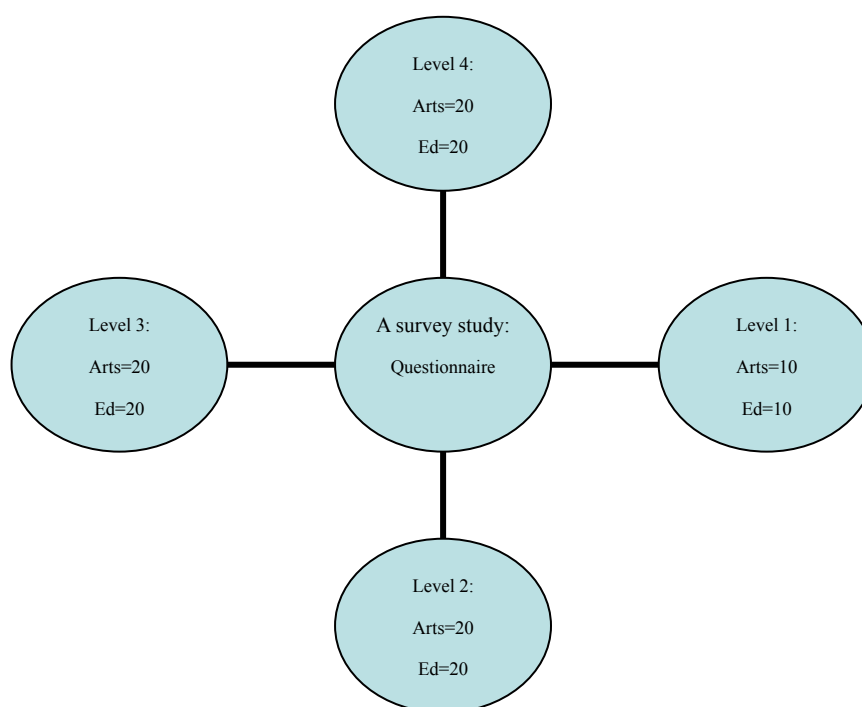
To move to reliability, again only one type of reliability was achieved in this paper, namely the inter-rater reliability. The responses provided by the respondents were rated twice by one

of the researchers to ensure the reliability of the collected data. The results of the double rating indicated a 100% accuracy of the collected and calculated ratings.

2.3 Design

A survey study approach was followed in this study wherein balanced distribution representing all targeted population was highly considered. Chart (1) displays the design of the study (the figure can be read either clockwise or anti-clockwise).

Chart 1: Study design



2.4 Procedure

Data-collection: the data of this study was collected using a researcher-made questionnaire.

Authenticity: a consent form was included within the questionnaire stating the high authenticity of the collected data and using it only for research purposes. The participants were given the opportunity not to participate in the research unless they were willing to do so.

Questionnaire distribution: the questionnaire was distributed to the students of the Faculty of Arts by the principal researcher. For the students of the Faculty of Education, it was distributed by a demonstrator from the same department.

Time and environment: the students were requested to take the questionnaire with them home and return them by the end of the week in order to avoid obtaining misleading data by the rush of time. The estimated time for filling each questionnaire is about 10-15 minutes.

Process performance: a student reads each item and chooses any of the scales (totally agree,

totally disagree, partially agree, and partially disagree), except for the items 9 and 10, there are five scales (always, often, sometimes, rarely, and never). In the first part, the student provides data regarding level (1-4) and type of faculty (Arts or Education).

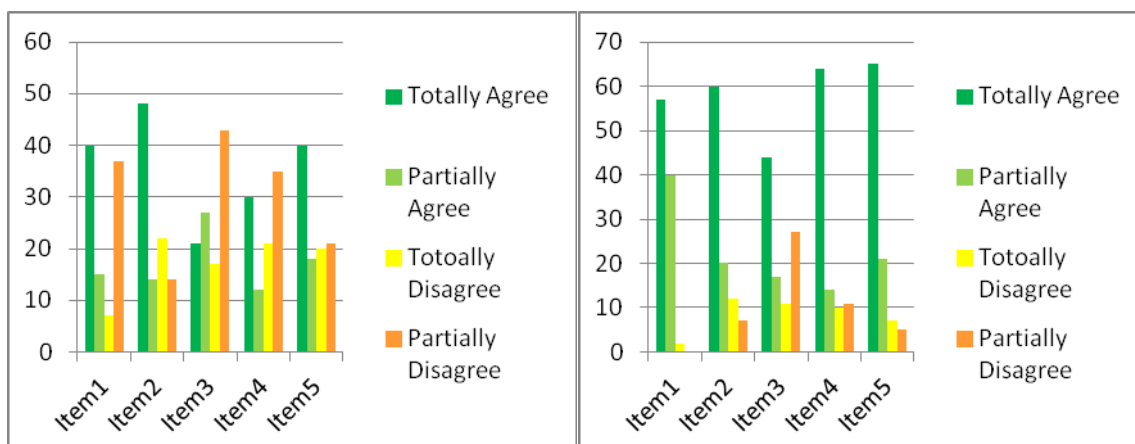
Scoring: the value of each answer is scored and counted simply in terms of frequency and percentage according to the format of stating each item (either negation or affirmation).

Preliminary analysis steps: the results are counted statistically in terms of percentages in most of the items and in terms of frequency as in items 9 and 10.

3. Results

It has been mentioned in the introduction that the current study attempts obtaining the students' perspectives and perception regarding the importance of stress and intonation as supra-segmental features of speech and sound-attributes to the process of comprehension. Six questions were raised and to remind ourselves of such questions; they are:

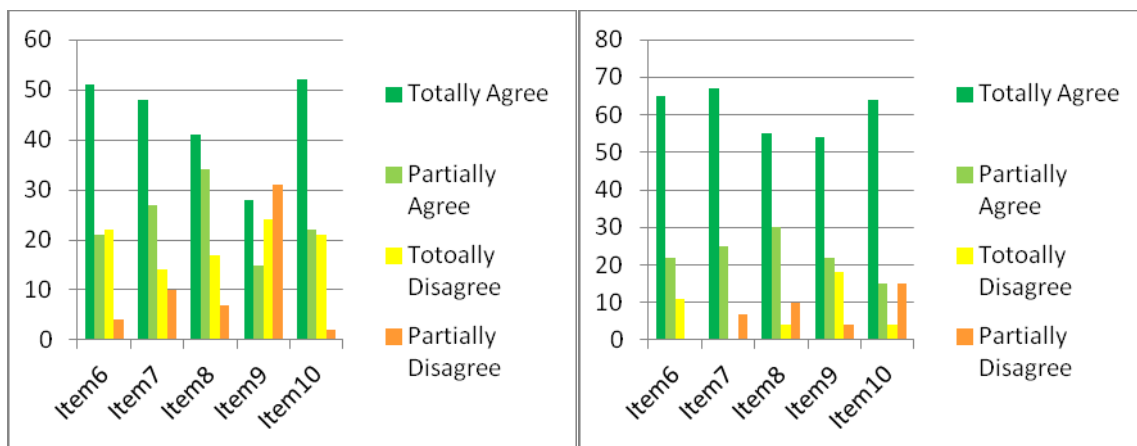
- 1) Are the Yemeni learners of English incompetent in English stress and intonation because they are not aware of their importance and functions?
- 2) Are they incompetent in English stress and intonation because these features are chiefly neglected at schools as well as at departments of English?
- 3) How often do they try to apply them, when they attempt to communicate in English?
- 4) Who is the first responsible for the students are not being able to communicate successfully?
- 5) What are the various factors that may discourage the students to use/practice stress and intonation?
- 6) What are the various factors that can encourage students to use stress and intonation when they attempt to communicate in English?



Figures 1 and 2. Students' attitudes and knowledge of supra-segmental features of speech

On the basis of this, the presented Figures (1-12) [the figure to the left represents the answers of the students of the Faculty of Education and the figure to the right represents the answers of the students of the Faculty of Arts], below show the analysis of the collected data as an attempt to answer statistically and interpretatively the above raised questions. The researchers made use of the 17th version of the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), mainly descriptive statistics (frequency and percentages) to present the results of the study.

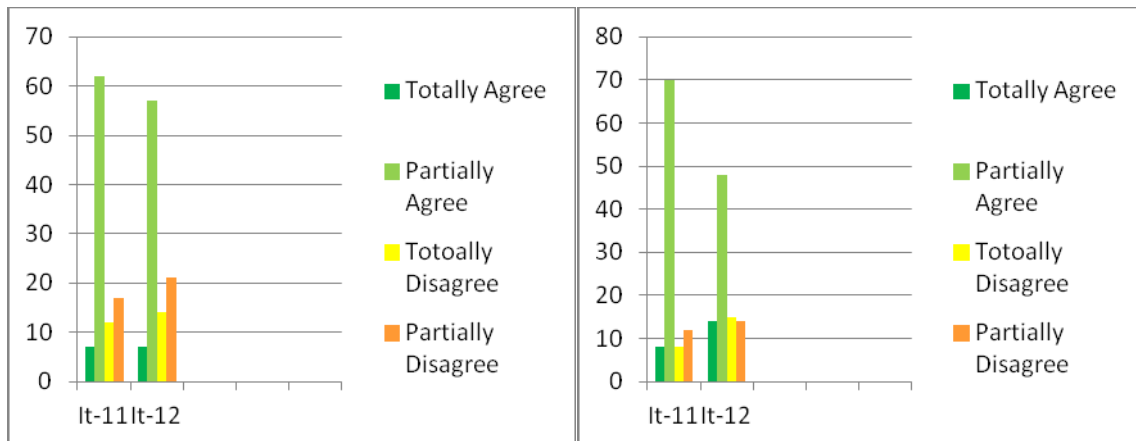
These five questions in Figures 1 and 2 were mainly asked to demonstrate the students' negative attitudes and very poor knowledge about the importance of practicing/using stress and intonation when they attempt to communicate in English. Yet, to infer the fact that such important linguistic features as English stress and intonation are clearly neglected at Yemeni schools and at the departments of English as well, namely at the University of IBB. However, statistics which are shown above in (Table 4) illustrates clearly how students' attitudes towards improving their speaking skill are not positive. That is to say, there are only about less than 50 percent of the students who agreed totally to the mentioned ideas in the questions (look at the table), more than 50 percent, on the other hand whom amongst either partially agreed or partially/totally disagreed to the mentioned ideas which proves the idea that the main features of speaking skill are chiefly neglected at schools as well as at the English departments. Thus, in contrast between the two faculties, it appears obviously that the students of the Faculty of Arts, as the statistics shows, are more aware of the importance of improving their speaking skill and studying the skills as interconnected ones than the students of Faculty of Education.



Figures 3 and 4. Students' competence and awareness of the functions of stress and intonation

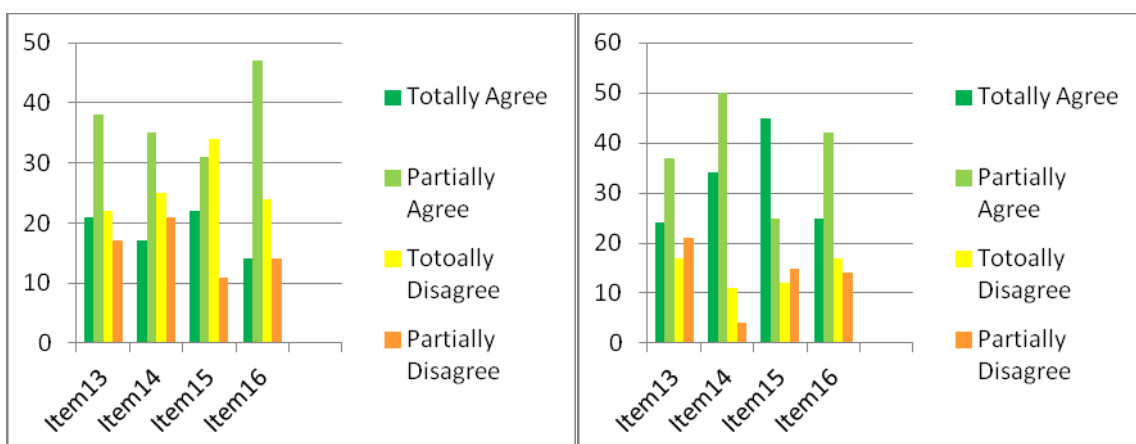
The above questions in Figures 3 and 4 were asked to evaluate the students' competence and awareness of the functions and importance of applying English stress and intonation which are assessed as supra-segmental features of speech and sound attributes to the process of comprehension. As illustrated in the figures, more than half of the students have proved their competence and understanding of the various and important functions of applying the main feature of speaking skill. On the other hand, less than half of the students are either not sure

of their responses or as statistically illustrated do not know at all the right answer. This means that a large number of the students are not aware of the functions of applying English stress and intonation. Once again, when comparing between the two faculties, it seems clearly that the students in the Faculty of Arts are more aware of the main functions of applying English stress and intonation.



Figures 5 and 6. Time spent for practicing and applying the supra-segmental features of speech

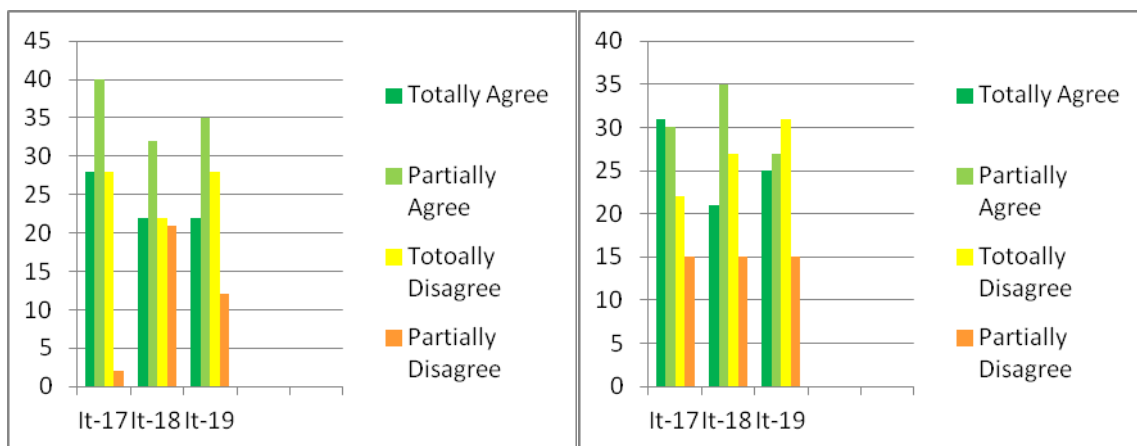
Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate clearly the amount of time during which the students of both the faculties try to apply the main features of speaking skill when they attempt to communicate in English inside and outside the classroom. However, as it is statistically shown the students attempt to apply English stress and intonation when they are inside the classroom more than when they are outside the classroom. Consequently, this reflects that the students are applying these features inside the classroom as a duty, mainly at the classes of spoken English and not at all in the other classes.



Figures 7 and 8. Responsible factors for the students' incompetency in stress and intonation

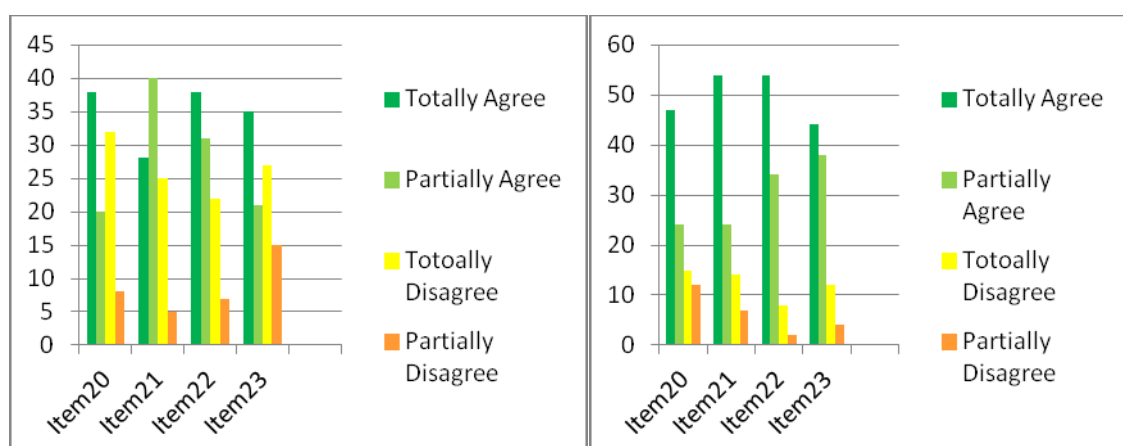
Figures 7 and 8 contain a number of the questions and their answers which are importantly considered by the researchers. To put it simply, the students' incompetence in English stress

and intonation affects negatively the processes of communicating successfully and using the language productively. However, it seems difficult to determine the first responsible for this problem, a thing which by the drawn information of these questions the researchers are trying to do. Hence, the results report statistically that the first responsible for the students are not being able to communicate successfully and produce practically what they have received theoretically is the educational system. After that they say—the students themselves are the second responsible and the third one is the teachers may be not highly qualified. The final responsible factor—they report is the social situation.



Figures 9 and 10. Discouraging factors for not using and practicing stress and intonation

Figures 9 and 10 show the results of a number of the questions which are asked to draw two kinds of information. One is to identify analytically and critically the most negative discouraging factor to the students to apply/use stress and intonation when they attempt to communicate in English. Yet, another one is to list in sequence the factors that discourage the students to apply these features according to the statistics. Thus, the results report that (the difficulties of these features) is the number one discouraging factor. Social and personal reasons, they maintain the same as the number two discouraging factors.



Figures 11 and 12. Proposed encouraging factors for using and practicing stress and intonation

Figures 11 and 12 contain a number of the questions which are carefully made in order to verify the fact that the frequent evaluation for stress and intonation can greatly encourage and positively affect the students to use/apply stress and intonation. However, the results in Figures 11 and 12 declare such a factor as the number one encouraging factor from among the other factors. Hence, other factors are too important but less effective than the number one factor. That is to say, English laboratories in the university, they consider the second and then teachers and classmates. Friends and other society members they mention as the last one.

4. Discussion

With reference to the above presented statistical results and their interpretation, one's comes to the point that the basic causes for the raised problem can be traced to six reasons: the chiefly neglect of practicing these factors at schools as well as at the English departments, unawareness of the functions and importance of these features, focusing to a great extent on the theoretical side of study and neglecting/avoiding the practical side, irresponsibility, presence of some discouraging factors, and absence of some encouraging factors.

To start with the first cause of the students' incompetence in using English stress and intonation when they speak in English in particular and when they study the other skills of English in general, it appears that there are only less than half of the students who agreed totally to the ideas, asked about neglecting the main features of speaking skill. For instance, the results of the statistics show analytically the following points:

- 1) Over 50 percent of the students agreed totally that a specialist learner of English must improve his/her speaking skill;
- 2) Over 50 percent agreed also totally that most of the students did not listen to the tapes, given with English courses in both preparatory and secondary schools levels;
- 3) Fewer than 50 percent agreed totally that is necessary for a learner to peak as fluent as a native speaker;
- 4) About 50 percent agreed totally to the importance of understanding all the skills perfectly;
- 5) Again over 50 percent agreed totally to the importance of the practicing the main features of speaking skill;
- 6) Fewer than 70 percent of the involved students agreed totally to the fact that speaking skill can make a teacher more successful on his/her professional life.

Thus, this proves that one of the basic causes of the students' incompetence can be traced to the event of the neglect of practicing stress and intonation at schools and at the departments of English as well.

To make it clear, according to the results one can hardly find over 60 percent of the students who have totally agreed to each of the above mentioned points. That is to say, there are about half of the whole involved respondents who responded negatively, because such features are not taught at schools.

Therefore, such contradictory responses, suggest to a great extent that most of the students are not highly competent in English stress and intonation and also in all other practical skills, because these features are chiefly neglected at schools and at the departments of English. For that matter, on his book (2000:11) maintains the idea that how a competent learner in “grammar” and “lexis” can be simply “frustrated” when he/she discovers that he cannot use what he/she has formed the rules practically. Moreover, Gimson (1980:321) indicates practically to show that how “valueless” it would be when a student has only theoretical information and linguistic items on his/her mind but unfortunately he/she cannot use them communicatively or “transmit” them in efficiently articulated speech”.

The next reason that can be traced for the students’ incompetence is the unawareness of the main functions of the main features of speaking skill. The following example illustrates clearly this statement. According to the results of the questionnaire only about half of the respondents who agreed totally that they are aware of the main functions of the main features of speaking skill but likely not able to communicate successfully. On the other hand, there are over 45 percent of the same respondents who negatively responded. Put it simply, among those over 45 percent from are not sure about their answers which analytically prove that they might be aware of the functions of these factors but s/he may certainly forget because they are not using/ applying them when they communicate in English. Yet, others totally/partially disagreed; a thing which indicates to a great extent that they are not aware of the main functions of the mentioned factors.

Moreover, since nearly most of the students think that each skill is certainly separate from the other one, it can be proved again that students are not aware enough of the functions of stress and intonation which through them and some other practical linguistic elements—all the skills of English language are being interconnected.

Again the highest percentage of the students who stated clearly that practicing and applying these two features practically is more important than studying them theoretically are less than 55 percent. This naturally indicates that they declared their attitudes rather than the information they acquired/learnt. Hence, it proves also that most of the students are not keenly competent in the communicative skills namely when using stress and intonation because it is proved here that they are not principally aware of the functions of these features.

Nevertheless, it becomes an evidence for that idea that is a large number of the students who are not aware of the functions of practicing English stress and intonation. In effect, it can be stated that there are accentual, attitudinal, morphological, syntactical, and also semantic functions for stress and intonation that are not known to most of the students. That is to say, if the students are really trying to apply what they have studied theoretically, they would have remembered well the functions of stress and intonation and responded positively.

Another reason for the students’ incompetence in English stress and intonation in particular, and in using the language practically in general is neglecting the process of practicing the main features of speaking skill. For instance, the results of the questionnaire reported clearly that about 60-65 percent of the respondents who are trying often to apply these features when they attempt to communicate in English. Yet, the results state also that they are trying to

apply these features inside the classroom more than outside the classroom. Thus, it indicates that the over majority of the students are not always trying to apply these features,

However, it can be traced that the students study stress and intonation theoretically rather than practically; a thing which negatively affects the process of communicating successfully. To make it clear, the researchers arose carefully the question that how often the students try to apply the main features when they communicate in English. Paying attention to the word “try”, which indicates indirectly applying these features but only trying—there were only about quarter of the students who are always trying to apply these features. Needless to say, if the question was to be asked directly, the results were going to be worse than these reported here. That is to say, it is often claimed that such features are very difficult to use but when the solutions are offered to the students to practice and apply what they have already studied theoretically, unfortunately it is found that they are not paying attention to such a process.

Kelly (2000:84) insists on the importance of involving the students in as many activities as a teacher could do in order to be able to use practically-“productively” what they have already received. Similarly, on his research (2006:16), Al Ba'adani reports that the students do not usually prefer to use English language as a means of communication. Hence, it is not only because these features are not cognate to their native tongue so that they cannot communicate successfully but also and more importantly for not practicing these features.

One more reason of the students' incompetence is neglecting/avoiding using/applying stress and intonation by most of the students during the period of study at the university. Put it another way, it is observed that most of the students who graduated from secondary schools and have joined the departments of English are mispronouncing nearly all the words they had learnt at the school. Above all, it is claimed by most of the students that only a small number of the teachers who are really good speakers; a thing which they have discovered after they have become students of English. That is to say, when they were still pupils, they had not yet known more about the English language, so are not able to determine whether their teachers are pronouncing correctly or not.

Once again, some other students think that social situation and the difficulty of communicating to other people as most of them including those of the English departments may be willing to communicate in English but not willing to apply the main features of speaking skill.

Furthermore, some other students say that the students are the first responsible for not being able to communicate successfully and mispronouncing words in English. Thus, what they have said is to some extent correct but only in the case of not being able to communicate successfully. That is to say, pupils in the secondary schools are not responsible for mispronouncing the words as they are in that age/time only receive information without even knowing that it is correct or not.

Yet, another party of the students say that educational system is the number one responsible for most of the students and teachers mispronounce most the English words and more importantly cannot communicate successfully.

Therefore, the entire above mentioned reasons are all responsible for the mentioned problem but who/which is the first responsible is ensured statically here. The results declare that the first responsible is the educational system. The second responsible is mentioned as the students themselves and the third responsible is the teachers.

Thus among all the respondents there are only about quarter of them who agreed totally that one person/factor can be the only responsible. That is to say, other respondents whether partially agreed or disagreed are in the opinion that a educational system along with the other factors are responsible for the students are not being able to communicate successfully and mispronounce most of the English words they had learnt at the school.

All in all, the observed problem that most of the students of English in particular and gradutors of secondary schools in general mispronounce most of the English words they have learnt at the schools is analytically proved through the responses of the respondents. Yet, the ambiguity of determining the number one responsible is determined through the results of the statistics. Hence, it can be concluded that not only the educational system is the responsible for this problem but also all the above mentioned points with taking into consideration that one factor/person is more responsible than another.

An additional cause for the students' incompetence is some personal, social, and linguistic factors. Such various factors are intensely considered as discouraging factors that as proved by the statistics result in affecting negatively the students' abilities to improve their speaking skill and the other skills as well.

For instance, the results of the questionnaire report that the number one discouraging factor of using/applying English stress and intonation and not being able to benefit from their linguistic values is the linguistic one, namely the high difficulties of English stress and intonation. This indicates that most of the students are not really highly motivated by the current going on educational system, instead they are de-motivated.

Accordingly, all the factors should be taken into consideration but some of them are more considerable than others. This means, since most of the students insist on the high difficulties of stress and intonation as the most effective discouraging factor, so there must be an insist on the students to practice these two features as much as they can in order to overcome these difficulties.

On his book (2000:106-7) Kelly argues against the claim that stress and intonation are neither teachable nor learnable, yet he proves it practically. Nevertheless, on his research (2006:15) Al-Ba'adani reports that the students' poor knowledge of the communicative needs of speaking effectively such as stress and intonation is one of the most discouraging factors to the students to communicate in English. However, the later point is not agreeable with the point that has been resulted here and proved analytically. That is to say, it is proved here that the problem is not realizing the functions of these features or the communicative needs but more considerably and effectively is not practicing/applying these features which result to their failure to communicate successfully and use the language productively.

The final cause for the students' incompetence in the productive skills, mainly English stress

and intonation is the absence of some of the encouraging factors that may encourage them to practice/ apply stress and intonation when they attempt to communicate English. To illustrate this point, the results of the questionnaire maintain the absence of these factors and at the meantime declare the factor that can be the most prominent and encouraging one form amongst the other factors.

Indeed, the students who wanted to say that only a particular factor can certainly solve the problem and encourage the students to practice the main features of the speaking skill consider the frequent evaluation. Moreover, the students who want to say that a particular factor principally and also the other factors chose again the frequent evaluation.

Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of the students insist on the idea that the frequent evaluation for those who try to communicate as successfully as they can by practicing and applying as many practical linguistic items as they could. In spite of this, other factors such as English laboratories in the university, classmates and teachers, and friends can also help encouraging the students and teachers but less effectively than does the frequent evaluation.

To all intents and purposes, these six reasons have made negative effects on the students' competence in using the language productively. To put it simply, most of the students can hardly communicate successfully in English. In fact, the effects of the above six mentioned reasons have gradually resulted to that most of the students usually fail to communicate successfully, speak effectively, and use the language skilfully because they study nearly all the things theoretically rather than practically.

One of the biggest effects of sticking on the theoretical side and not insisting on the students to be able and to practice producing what they have studied receptively is that a learner is about to forget nearly most of the things he/she has received. For instance, the results prove that about half of the students did not remember the functions of the main features of speaking skill, because they are not practicing/applying them. One may wish to argue that it is not necessary to apply these features, unless a student is going to communicate with native speakers. For that matter, it has been discussed briefly that accentual function of stress and intonation which most of the students think unwisely as the only one and needed only when speaking to native speakers is to a great extent not right. Put it another way, stress and intonation do have other functions which through all the skills of English are interconnected. Such functions, however, if being benefited from them, a student can be more productive and competent at the same time. Thus, it is shown clearly that most of the students are not keenly competent in the productive skills as they are in the receptive ones. It reflects that either they have negative attitudes towards these features or these features are really very difficult to the extent that one cannot practice them.

Indeed, the results proved that some of the students have really negative attitudes; some think materialistically that such a thing is not required in any job, and some others are those who study wisely. That is to say, most of the teachers are concentrating on grammar and memorising words in the schools, too are most of the students in the English departments. In his book (2000) Kelly maintains that most of the teachers and learners of English find applying stress and intonation difficult, not because they are difficult because the teachers

and the learners are concentrating on grammar and vocabulary and neglect/avoid to practice/apply them more than to study them theoretically.

The effects of not using/practicing the main features of speaking skill are not only felt at the level of hindering the process of the speaking skill but also at the socio-educational level. For instance, the results proved that about half of the respondents are unaware neither of the importance of improving the speaking skill nor of the functions of the main features of speaking skill. Above all, students who have become teachers from both the faculties are not highly qualified, mainly in the productive skills. As a result, most of the students graduated from the secondary schools mispronouncing most of the words they had learnt in the secondary schools.

As a final area at which the effects of most of the students are not being able to use the language productively, mainly when they attempt to apply the main features of the speaking skill is the government. To illustrate this point, the results of the questionnaire declare that about half of the respondents are not keenly competent in the productive skills. Put another way, they are not trying to apply what they have studied, a thing which indicates that they cannot communicate successfully. Consequently, the government sends those who are working in the embassies and ministries abroad in order to improve their communicating skills. This of course means that they are paying high expenses in order to qualify such employees. Certainly, the reason is that most of the students in the English departments are concentrating on the theoretical side which makes them unable to communicate successfully. Moreover, it has also to be mentioned that when any visitor/comer from the outside world wants to evaluate the education development level in Yemen, specifically in the subject of English, if the result is good, logically, he/she will thank the government for their noticeable efforts. On the other hand if the result is negative, again, the government will be the number one claimed side. Thus, good results of education in general will naturally reflect a good government and teachers as well. Yet, passive information and mechanical minds will reflect nothing but negative side for both the government and the teachers.

In conclusion, the students of English have to put into their consideration that improving a language means only that a learner of that particular language is able to produce practically what he/she receives theoretically. Conversely, professors of English in IBB University have also to make sure whether they are giving their learners the opportunity to practice the language and use it productively, or not.

5. Conclusion

This survey-study aimed at collecting the perspectives and perceptions of the Yemeni learners of English language as a second language towards the use and application of stress and intonation as supra-segmental features of speech and sound-attributes to the process of comprehension, in the University of IBB, Yemen. A researcher-made questionnaire consisting of 23 items was distributed to 140 participating students from the Departments of English Language in both Faculties-Education and Arts, in the University of IBB, Yemen. It has been shown clearly and precisely that English stress and intonation are the main features of speaking skill, yet accentual function is not their only function. Put it another way, the

English stress and intonation which relate phonologically to speaking skill, are related also morphologically, syntactically, and semantically to the skills of English language in some particular linguistic functions. On account of this, this study revealed that a quite number of the students of English are not keenly competent in the productive skills, mainly when they attempt to apply the main features of speaking skill for many reasons. Therefore, each of these reasons has been discussed analytically and critically according to the statistical results. Thus it has been proved that they are incompetent for the following reasons: 1) the chiefly neglect of English stress and intonation at the schools as well as and more importantly at the departments of English, 2) the unawareness of the functions of applying these features and their interconnection with the other skills of the English language, 3) concentrating on the theoretical side and neglecting the practical one, 4) irresponsibility, 5) some discouraging factors such as the high difficulties of these features and the educational system, and 6) finally some encouraging factors such as frequent evaluation and unavailability of English laboratories in the departments of English at IBB university.

Acknowledgement

Many thanks are due to all the students who actively and willingly participated in this study. Great thanks are also due to Mr. Mohammed Alkhoulaidy, the demonstrator at the Department of English, Faculty of Education, IBB University, for his help in distributing the questionnaire for the participating students from his department.

References

Al-Baadani, M. (2006). Using English as a Means of Communication of Everyday Verbal Communication among the Yemeni Students of English, at the Faculty of Arts, IBB University: Problems and some Suggestions. IBB: Unpublished BA term-paper submitted to the Department of English Lang. and Liter., Faculty of Arts, The University of IBB, Yemen.

Alduais, A. M. (2007). Assessing the Importance of Stress and Intonation as Supra-segmental Features of Speech and Sound-attributes to the Process of Comprehension. IBB: Unpublished term-paper submitted to the Department of Eng. Lang. and Lit., Faculty of Arts, The University of IBB, The Republic of Yemen.

Gerald, A. (1980). *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English*. London: Edward Arnold.

James, B. (1980). *Improve your English*. New Delhi: Good Will Publishing House.

Jones, D. (1993). *An Outlines of English Phonetics*. New Delhi: Kalyani Publishers .

Kelly, G. (2000). *How to Teach Pronunciation*. Longman: Longman Press.

Roach, P. (2000). *English Phonetics and Phonology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thompson, L. (1981). *Inonation Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Underwood, M. (1989). *Teaching Listening*. London and New York: Longman Press.

Appendix

Students' Questionnaire

Dear students,

This questionnaire is about assessing the importance of stress and intonation as supra-segmental features of speech and sound-attributes to the process of comprehension. Please fill it carefully and then return it to the one who has given it to you.

We would like to assure you that all the information provided will be used only for research purposes.

Thanking you,

Please tick the following boxes for your level and faculty.

Level: First year Second year Third year Fourth year

Faculty: Arts Education

Please tick the box before the item that best applies to you. Only one choice is required at a time.

1. A learner of English must improve his/her speaking skill, to what extent do you agree?

Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree

2. Writing speaking, reading and listening are interconnected with each other, to what extent do you agree?

Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree

3. Most of the students didn't listen to the cassettes of preparatory and secondary school, to what extent do you agree?

Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree

4. It is not necessary to speak as fluent as a native speaker, to what extent do you agree?

Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree

5. To speak successfully one has to apply the main features of speaking skill, to what extent do you agree?

Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree

6. Stress and intonation are the main features of speaking skill, to what extent do you agree?

Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree

7. Accentual function is the only function of stress and intonation, to what extent do you agree?

Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree

8. Practicing stress and intonation is more important than studying them theoretically, to what extent do you agree?

Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree

9. How often do you try to apply stress and intonation when you speak English in the class?
Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never
10. How often do you try to apply stress and intonation when you communicate in English outside the class?
Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never
11. It is argued that it is not necessary for a student of English to understand all the skill of English perfectly, to what extent do you agree?
Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree
12. It is argued that it is not necessary for a student of English to practice stress and intonation, to what extent do you agree?
Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree
13. Teachers are responsible for the students who cannot communicate successfully, to what extent do you agree?
Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree
14. Students are responsible for not being able to communicate successfully, to what extent do you agree?
Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree
15. Educational system is responsible for the students who cannot communicate successfully, to what extent do you agree?
Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree
16. Social situation is responsible for the students who cannot communicate successfully, to what extent do you agree?
Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree
17. High difficulties of stress and intonation discourage you to use them, to what extent do you agree?
Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree
18. Some social factors, discourage you to use stress and intonation, to what extent do you agree?
Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree
19. Some personal reasons, discourage you to use stress and intonation, to what extent do you agree?
Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree
20. English laboratories in the university can encourage you to practice stress and intonation, to what extent do you agree?
Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree
21. Teachers and classmates can encourage you to practice stress and intonation, to what extent do you agree?
Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree

22. Frequent evaluation can encourage you to practice stress and intonation, to what extent do you agree?

Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree

23. Friends and society can encourage you to practice stress and intonation, to what extent do you agree?

Totally agree Totally disagree Partially agree Partially disagree

Researchers

Ahmed M. S. Alduais

Dr. Rafiq Alshamiry

Copyright Disclaimer

Copyright reserved by the author(s).

This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).