

***In The Name of God***

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**On the Effect of Awareness Training of Suprasegmental  
features of English on Iranian Advanced EFL Students'  
Pronunciation and Speaking  
Improvement**

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the  
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We hereby certify that this thesis by Yahya Poormohammad entitled **On the Effect of Awareness Training of Suprasegmental features of English on Iranian Advanced EFL Students' Pronunciation and Speaking** is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

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*With Love Dedicated To My Mother*

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## Abstract

It is a commonly accepted claim in pronunciation pedagogy that suprasegmentals play a crucial role in communication. The present study is an attempt to represent the effect of awareness training of suprasegmental features of English on Iranian EFL advanced students' pronunciation and speaking improvement with an emphasis on the move from segmental phonology to suprasegmental and discourse studies in pronunciation which the researcher sees as being fundamental.

After defining theoretical assumptions and reviewing a number of controversies in this regard, the researcher investigates the relationship between teaching suprasegmental features of English and students' overall pronunciation and speaking improvement. In order to facilitate the instruction, four prosodic features were chosen to be worked on. Different tasks are given to students in which the concept of pronunciation is used in communication practice, to give students opportunity to identify meaningful aspect of suprasegmentals, and see how they fit into the overall pattern of speech. This study also underlines awareness-training of prosodic features to adult EFL students.

The experimental group received instruction as for suprasegmentals; that is features which extend over the syllable or segmental elements of speech. Whereas there was no certain treatment in control group. The descriptive statistics indicated that participants in experimental group outperformed the other group. Based upon the results of the study, after 20 sessions of perception-focused instruction, students' production of oral skills seemed to improve.

The findings provide insights into this fact that if pronunciation activities are supplemented by other activities, it will encourage students to make use of this growing awareness. Students can be expected to do well if the pronunciation class is taken out of isolation and become an integral part of oral communication classes.

## Table of Contents

Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgments.....	vi
Abstract.....	vii
List of tables.....	xi
List of graphs.....	xi
<b>I. Chapter One: Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
I.1. Introduction.....	2
I.2. Statement of the problem.....	6
I.3. research questions.....	7
I.4. Null hypotheses.....	7
I.5. Significance of study.....	8
I.6. Definitions of key terms.....	9
I.7. Limitations and delimitations.....	10
<b>II. Chapter Two: Review of Literature .....</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1. Segmental and suprasegmental features.....	12
2.2. Suprasegmentals.....	12
2.3. Why suprasegmentals.....	13
2.4. Ideas shared by most prosodists.....	16
2.5. Prosodic hierarchy.....	17
2.6. Stress.....	17
2.6.1. Factors which make a syllable prominent.....	18
2.6.2. Studies on stress.....	21
2.7. Intonation.....	22
2.7.1. The importance of intonation.....	22
2.7.2. Reasons why intonation is poorly understood.....	23
2.7.3. Approaches to teaching intonation.....	23
2.7.3.1. The being neglect approach.....	23
2.7.3.2. The grammatical approach.....	24
2.7.3.3. The interpersonal approach.....	24
2.7.4. Functions of intonation.....	24
2.7.4.1. The attitudinal function.....	24
2.7.4.2. The grammatical function.....	25
2.7.4.3. The communicative function.....	25
2.7.5. Studies on intonation.....	26
2.8. Voice quality settings.....	27
2.8.1. Advantages of teaching voice quality setting.....	28
2.8.2. A model of voice quality setting in American English.....	28
2.8.3. An example of past work on Voice quality setting.....	30



2.9. Weak forms.....	30
2.9.1. Rational for teaching weak forms.....	32
2.9.2. Communicative practice.....	32
2.10. History and development.....	33
2.11. Past work on suprasegmentals.....	35
2.12. Language awareness.....	38
2.12.1. Background.....	38
2.12.2. Role of teachers in language awareness.....	40
2.12.3. Language awareness and attitudes.....	41
2.13. Teachability of pronunciation.....	42
2.13.1. Explicit teaching.....	42
2.14. The critical period hypothesis.....	43
2.15. Adults' ability to acquire phonology.....	43
2.16. Teaching pronunciation.....	45
2.16.1. Top-down and bottom-up approach.....	45
2.17. Intelligibility.....	46
2.17.1. Native ness principle.....	46
2.17.2. Intelligibility principle.....	46
2.17.3. Suprasegmentals and intelligibility.....	47
2.18. Pronunciation and communicative teaching.....	48
2.18.1. The communicative framework.....	48
2.18.2. The teacher's role.....	49
2.18.3. Communicative courses and suprasesmentals.....	50
2.18.3.1. Self-monitoring.....	50
2.19. Factors influencing pronunciation mastery.....	51
2.19.1. Age.....	51
2.19.2. Type of prior pronunciation instruction.....	51
2.19.3. Apptitude.....	52
2.19.4. Motivation.....	52
2.19.5. Native language.....	52
2.19.6. Psychological and sociological factors.....	52

**III. Chapter Three: Methodology.....53**

3.1. Methodology.....	54
3.1.1. Participants.....	54
3.2. Instrumentations.....	55
3.2.1. Materials.....	55
3.3.2. Instruments.....	56
3.4. Procedure and treatment.....	58
3.4.1. Stress.....	62
3.4.2. Intonation.....	63
3.4.3. Voice quality setting.....	64

3.4.4. Weak forms.....	65
3.5. Design.....	68
<b>IV. Chapter Four: Data analysis and Interpretation.....</b>	<b>69</b>
4.1. Introduction.....	70
4.2. Descriptive statistics.....	70
4.3. Inferential statistics.....	78
4.4. Question one.....	79
4.5. Question two.....	81
<b>V. Chapter Five: Conclusions and pedagogic implications.....</b>	<b>83</b>
4.1. Conclusion .....	84
4.2. Pedagogic implications.....	88
4.3. Suggestions for further study.....	90
References.....	92
Appendices. ....	99

## List of Tables

Table 4.1.....	71
Table 4.2.....	71
Table 4.3.....	75
Table 4.4.....	75
Table 4.5.....	78
Table 4.6.....	79
Table 4.7.....	80
Table 4.8.....	80
Table 4.9.....	81
Table 4.10.....	82

## List of Graphs

Graph 4.1.....	72
Graph 4.2.....	72
Graph 4.3.....	73
Graph 4.4.....	74
Graph 4.5.....	76
Graph 4.6.....	76
Graph 4.7.....	77
Graph 4.8.....	77

# **Chapter One**

## **Introduction**

## Introduction

Phonology is the establishment and description of the distinctive sound units of a language (phonemes) by means of distinctive features. This is actually the segmental aspects of phonology. There are, however, other linguistically important phonological features, which have traditionally been called prosodic or suprasegmental features. They usually refer to units larger than segments, such as the syllable, word or phrase. (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992).

The current emphasis in pronunciation teaching on the broader phonological aspects of suprasegmental features, and their link to meaning on the discourse level, has resulted in renewed interest in the place of pronunciation in communicative language teaching. Gilbert's *Clear Speech* (1984) has become the classic of the top-down approach to pronunciation teaching in which such issues as rhythm, stress patterns, and intonation are addressed before segmental features.

During the past 25 years pronunciation teachers have emphasized suprasegmentals rather than segmentals in promoting intelligibility (Morley, 1991). Recent carefully designed studies have shown some support for the superiority of suprasegmental instruction in EFL/ESL context. (e.g. Derwing & Rossitor, 2003). Also wider availability of software in this regard will encourage work with suprasegmentals. (Hahn, 2004).

Pronunciation teaching is no longer simply regarded in its segmental aspects. Isolated sounds and their function as distinctive features are inescapable phenomenon in language acquisition, but we can no longer be satisfied that the study of segmental features leads to an adequate degree of phonological control in the new language. (Suter, 1976).

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Teaching pronunciation is of paramount importance in foreign language learning. As Morley (1991) demonstrates, it has become increasingly clear in recent years that ignoring students' pronunciation needs is avoiding professional responsibility. In programs for adult ESL learners in particular, it is imperative that students' educational needs, including reasonably intelligible pronunciation, be given with instruction that would give them Communicative Competence.

According to Cele-Muricia, Brington, and Goodwin (1996; cited in Florez, 1998), pronunciation instruction tends to be linked to the instructed method being used. In the grammar-translation method of the past, pronunciation was almost irrelevant and therefore seldom taught. In the audio-lingual method, learners spent hours in the language lab listening to and repeating sounds. With emergence of more holistic, communicative methods and approaches to ESL instruction, pronunciation is addressed within the context of communication.

In recent years, increasing attention has been placed on providing pronunciation instruction that meets the communicative needs of nonnative speakers of English. Empirical research and pronunciation materials writers suggest that teaching suprasegmentals before segmentals to intermediate and advanced nonnative speakers could be more beneficial in a short period of time. (Varonis & Gass, 1982).

Suprasegmental features carry important linguistic information; for example, grammatical prosody (expressed as shifts in syllables) can distinguish whether a word is a noun, verb, or adjective.

Prosodic features also play an important role in expressing emotion. In English, clipped or shortened syllables convey anger, impatience and

irritation; strongly stressed syllables convey anger, vexation, impatience, and disapproval. (Robertson, 1997).

According to Kenworthy (1987), there are two main reasons to focus on prosodic features:

A) Prosody serves communicative functions.

B) Prosody facilitates or constrains other dimensions of communication

Pronunciation can be one of the most difficult parts of language for adult learners to master and one of the least favorite topics for teachers to address in the classroom. Nevertheless, with careful presentation and integration, pronunciation can play an important role in supporting students' overall communicative needs. Saville-Troike (1989) conducted a research in a language laboratory in Korea on 30 young students and adults. The result showed those in both groups who undertook six hours of pronunciation training recorded noticeably higher results than those whose training omitted the pronunciation program. The results supported the view that pronunciation training helps the students in foreign language mastery and it is an effective tool for the teachers. In an elaborate analysis of the role of conscious processes in second language acquisition Radwan (2004) maintains that noticing is the necessary and sufficient requirement for the change of input into intake. Thus, teachers must devote more time and attention to make students aware of English pronunciation. They will learn much better and sooner in this way that if we just expose them to the language. Consciousness-raising can bring about many good results. It helps the students become independent; they will be able to monitor their own pronunciation and correct their own mistakes.

The main principle of language awareness is that most learners learn best while effectively engaged, and when they willingly invest energy and attention in the learning process. (Bolitho, 2003). Hebert (2002; Cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002) strongly believes that in making learners aware of phonological concepts, the learning process becomes more comprehensible and enjoyable. We provide them with a means for decoding and encoding meaning in exchanges as well as with a key to how the culture is articulated through language and to use language. Without this key, it is difficult to understand why and how people convey their intended meanings.

The researcher has chosen four prosodic features namely, stress, intonation, weak forms, and voice quality setting to work on. He believes that these are the most influential features which can have great impact on Iranian EFL students' pronunciation and speaking improvement. It is hoped that the results of the current study would have useful implications in the field of language and learning.

Segmentals are the basic inventory of distinctive sounds and the way that they combine to form a spoken language. In the case of North American English, this inventory is comprised of 40 phonemes (15 vowels and 25 consonant). Pronunciation instruction has often concentrated on the mastery of segmentals through discrimination and production of target sounds via drills consisting of minimal pairs like /bad/ - /bat/. (Florez, 1998).

Suprasegmentals transcend the level of individual sound production. They extend across segmentals and since they provide crucial context and support for segmental production, they are assuming a more prominent place. Stress which is a combination of length, loudness, and pitch applied to syllables in a word is one of the most important features of suprasegmentals. (Florez, 1998).



## Statement of the problem

In spite of the fact that pronunciation is of great importance in order to be a successful learner in mastering English, unfortunately it occupies a subordinate place in our EFL classrooms. Many students do not satisfactorily learn the English pronunciation despite spending so much time on it.

This great failure in pronunciation is because of past traditions of pronunciation teaching in that they have predominantly adopted a phonetic rather than a phonological approach. This has led to an overemphasis on form at the expense of function and there's been too much concentration on the segments. In fact, Pronunciation teaching has not been properly integrated into the wider context of language teaching.

Also most teachers do not follow any particular syllabus in this regard and are neither well informed nor able to fulfill students' needs in solving their pronunciation problems. They make use of traditional methods such as repetition and segmental approach, which do not bear any fruitful results.

The researcher has encountered with lots of students even at advanced levels whose pronunciation leads to an absolute misunderstanding. The following is a shining example.

Special..... may be pronounced ..... Speshi yal

Comfortable ..... may be pronounced ..... come for table

Marriage..... may be pronounced ..... marry age

If teachers get familiar with the importance of suprasegmental features and use them in a motivating way in classrooms by raising students' awareness about the phonological differences of the two languages, in the short course of a time, students will get to the optimal situation of intelligible pronunciation which is the aim of the present study.

### **Research Questions:**

1. Is there any significant difference between teaching suprasegmental features of English and students' overall pronunciation improvement?
2. Is there any significant difference between teaching suprasegmental features of English and student's speaking ability?

### **Null Hypotheses:**

1. There is no relationship between teaching suprasegmental features of English and students' overall pronunciation improvement.
2. There is no relationship between teaching suprasegmental features of English and students' speaking ability.

## **Significance of Study**

Hardly can any scholar be found who does not believe in the great influence of the first language system in the pronunciation of second language learners. So it is important that students be aware of the phonological system for both their native and the target language.

Learning to pronounce language is a very complex task, and the learning process can be facilitated if the learner is aware of exactly what is involved. It is obviously difficult for the learners to do this for themselves. Once learners are aware that English words have stress patterns, that words can be pronounced in slightly different ways, they will know what to pay attention to and can build upon this basic awareness.

Pronunciation is the aspect of language that most adult learners of English need and want to master, yet it is also the aspect most English teachers find themselves least able to teach effectively. The situation is of great concern for it constitutes a challenge to researchers to make available a set of clear principles of teaching pronunciation.

A pronunciation course should focus first and foremost on suprasegmentals as they have the greatest impact on the comprehensibility of learners' English. I suppose that giving priorities to the suprasegmental features of English not only improve learners' comprehensibility as well as oral ability but is also less frustrating for students.

Those who are learning English in a classroom situation, and do not live in the target language community, usually have not a conscious awareness of their wrong pronunciation since they do not communicate with the native speakers of that language to actually see the feedback of

their pronunciation. They are not fully aware of the role of a correct pronunciation in achieving communication.

Pronunciation can be one of the most difficult parts of a language for learners to master and one of the least favorite topics for teachers to address in the classrooms. This study aims to show that pronunciation can turn to be easily learned by students if and only if teachers present it carefully in a motivating and interesting way.

### **Definition of Key Terms:**

- 1- Suprasegmentals (Prosody): “A unit, which extends over more than one sound in an utterance, e.g. stress and intonation and tone”. (Richards, et al, 1992 p.366).
- 2- Voice Quality setting: “The long-term postures of the larynx, pharynx, tongue, velopharyngeal system and lips, as well as long-term laryngeal configurations inflected in the diverse phonation types”. (Esling& Wong, 1983 p.89).
- 3- Consciousness raising: “It involves an attempt to equip the learners with an understanding of specific features to develop declarative rather than procedural knowledge of it”. (Richards& Renadya, 2002 p.168).
- 4- Intelligibility: intelligibility is being understood by a listener at a given time in a given situation. So, it's the same as understandability. (Kenworthy, 1987).