

How to Teach The Suprasegmentals of English To Farsi-speakers Learning English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract:

The major objective of the present writer is to survey some of the problems that Iranian learners of English encounter as to the use of English stress patterns and Intonation. It seems rather obvious that the main source of difficulty in the use of English stress and intonation is the interference coming from the learners' mother tongue, i.e. Persian. The present writer also tries to offer some solutions to the fundamental problems of Iranian learners of English in the area of stress and Intonation.

The choice of topic was based on the fact that, first of all, the teaching of the phonological aspects of English is almost,

totally ignored in Iranian schools. This is especially true about stress and intonation, of which no trace is found in our coursebooks designed for the teaching of English as a foreign language. This naturally leads to erroneous pronunciation on the part of the learners.

In addition, Iranian teachers of English are not all trained teachers. As a matter of fact the majority of them are unfamiliar with matters of pronunciation and are therefore unable to help their pupils to acquire satisfactory pronunciation skills. Moreover, the focus of attention is on reading, vocabulary development and writing, but not on communication. Even if a trained teacher decides to teach proper pronunciation, he will not be able to accomplish much.

The main objective of this paper is to survey the suprasegmentals of both Farsi and English and pinpoint the major problems Iranian learners of English might encounter as to the use of stress and intonation patterns. In addition, the writer attempts to show the importance of stress and intonation, arguing that they make a difference in meaning. Inability to produce the correct stress and intonation will therefore result in poor communication.

The writer comes to the conclusion that most of the difficulties are due to the interference that comes from the

learners' mother tongue. Some come from features that are non-existent in Farsi. Thus, he proposes solutions to such problems on the basis of certain assumptions he makes. In addition he believes that the teacher plays an important role in respect to the teaching of stress and intonation. He also suggests the methodology to deal with the suprasegmentals. He particularly emphasizes that stress and intonation have to be presented systematically as an integrated part of a coursebook.

Based on the discussions of the problems of teaching suprasegmental features of English, the author presents a sample lesson at the end of the paper.

In Greater Detail

In his preliminary survey of the phonological systems of Farsi and English, the writer has come to the following conclusion:

1. Just as the segmental sounds of English make a difference in meaning when one sound substitutes another, so the suprasegmentals change the meaning when one pattern takes the place of another.

Study the following examples:

Ride and **wide** are different in meaning because /r/ is different from /w/. As you can see, the segmental sounds make a difference in meaning.

Conquer / k'änker/ and **concur** /kän'ker/ are different in meaning because the former has the stress on the first syllable, but the latter has it on the second syllable. As you can see, stress makes a difference in meaning.

What did you say with a falling intonation is different from **What did you say** with a rising intonation. The former means "What did you answer to a favor or question that someone asked you?" The latter means, "I did not quite get what you said. Please repeat it to me." As you can see, intonation makes a difference in meaning.

Since stress and intonation make a difference in meaning, the writer concludes, they should be taught carefully.

2. It is impossible to think language minus stress and intonation. On the first day of language instruction, you use word stress and a falling intonation when you point to an object and make a statement such as

This is a pencil.

And when you point to a book and ask

Is this a pencil?

You will be using word stress and a rising intonation.

Thus, you will be involved in teaching the suprasegmentals whether you are aware of the fact or not. The difference is that if you are aware of it, you may be able to help the students with their pronunciation. Otherwise, you will be of no help to them in this respect - let alone the incorrect habits they form because of your ignorance regarding the suprasegmentals.

3. Point 2 above shows that stress and intonation are part and parcel of the language, and they should therefore be part and parcel of any coursebook for the teaching of English as a foreign language. Stress and intonation cannot be taught in isolation. However, They can be presented systematically with special exercises to highlight their pattern/s and then drill them till the students can produce them with facility.

4. It will be useful to contrast the suprasegmentals of English with those of Farsi when and where necessary. Exercises that are based on an understanding of the differences between the two phonological systems might prove more effective. After all, such a contrast gets the learners to

"hear" the difference, which will in turn help them to produce it. Here is an example:

The English words **before**, **because**, **between** and a number of others have the stress on the second syllable whereas their equivalent Farsi words /pí:šaz/, /čónke/, and / b'eine / have the stress on the first syllable. As a result, Iranian Learners of English tend to pronounce the English words /bífor/, bíkaz/, and / bítwin/ respectively. By explaining to the learners why such mistakes are made, the teacher actually helps them hear the correct pronunciation of the English words. Later, he can drill with them and elicit correct responses from them.

It bears mentioning that the teacher should emphasize the English pattern once the students have learned it. As a general rule, teachers must avoid repeating errors. Instead, they must use the correct English pattern to reinforce good language habits.

5. The writer believes that the teachers' familiarity with the phonology of both English and Farsi is of prime importance. Therefore, he proposes that their education should include courses in phonology. As for practising teachers of English, they should receive on-the-job

training in this respect and be made familiar with the phonology of the foreign language they are teaching. In addition the Ministry of Education can provide booklets, with clear explanations and related practice, on the suprasegmentals so that the teachers of English can study them and learn from them to be able to help their pupils.

6. Since the pronunciation of English can be learned in no other way than by listening and imitating correct phonological patterns, the methodology should be the "direct" method—the natural way children learn their mother language. In other words, the students must listen first and then reproduce what they have heard.

In a class situation, the teacher should provide a pattern, repeat it to the students enough times so that they will be able to hear the correct utterance, and then have them repeat it enough times to be able to produce it correctly. Also, he/she should create an environment in which the students get a chance to use what they have learned. He/she could do this through dialogue, role-play, games etc. A useful activity would be to play relevant tapes for them to listen to or imitate. It would also help to record the

students' utterances and let them listen to the recording.

This will help them hear their mistakes and try to correct themselves. When the teacher feels sure the students produce a selected pattern satisfactorily, he may turn to a new point.

7. The sequence of teaching suggested by the writer is to move from intonation to stress and to individual sounds. This is due to the accepted fact that effective communication depends more on the suprasegmentals than on the segmental sounds.

Here is an example:

- : Would you like a cup of tea?

- : No, Thank you.

The teacher first teaches how you offer something to someone and how you decline it. Once this is established and the students can reproduce the rising intonation of the two utterances, the teacher may point out that **would** is stressed, and so is **no**. And he can practice until they reproduce the sentences satisfactorily. Finally, he may point out the pronunciation of **would you** / wudju/ and to that of thank /θank/, drawing their attention to the / d / and

and / θ/ sounds. And he can practice with them till they are able to reproduce the intonation, stress, and individual sounds correctly.

8. To incorporate the suprasegmentals into a coursebook, the writer suggests that the authors should design the lessons in such a way that both the grammatical structures and suprasegmental patterns will move from simpler to more complicated ones. For instance, basic sentence patterns should be taught along with the falling intonation of statements, wh-questions, and imperatives; yes-no questions should be taught along with the rising intonation of yes-no questions; and compound/complex sentences should be taught along with the sustained intonation of such sentences.

They went [↘]home.

What's [↘]this?

Close the [↘]door.

Did they go [↗]home?

They went home, but didn't find anyone there.

Such an arrangement will provide an opportunity to present the suprasegmentals systematically, going from simpler patterns to more sophisticated ones.

9. The following is a short lesson presented as a model.

a) Suppose one of the lessons includes the following dialogue

Albert: Hello, Mary. How are you?

Mary: Fine, thank you. How are you, Albert?

Albert: Not bad, thanks.

Here are suggested steps for the teacher:

- b) He reads the dialogue between three to five times to allow the students to hear the correct stresses and intonations. (If the teacher has a tape with the above dialogue recorded on it, he may as well play the tape three to five times.)
- c) Teacher explains to the students that when you call someone's name in English, you use a

rising intonation. Then he gets the students to repeat after him three to five times.

Hello, [↑]Mary

Hello, Mary

d) Teacher explains that the question **how are you** has a falling intonation and sentence stress falls on **are**.

Then he repeats the question three to five times.

He gets the students to repeat it three to five times.

e) Now he puts the utterances together

 Hello, [↑]Mary. How are you?

And he gets the students to repeat them several times. Also, he asks individual students to say the two utterances to ensure learning.

f) The teacher moves to the response. He explains that "Fine, thank you" has a falling

intonation for "fine" and a rising intonation for "Thank you". Then he repeats the utterance four or five times for the students to listen to.

Fine, Thank you

Fine, Thank you

And he gets the students to repeat the phrase four or five times.

g) the teacher assigns the role of Mary and Albert to two students and gets them to have a short dialogue.

1st student: Hello, Marry.

How are you?

2nd student: Fine, Thank you.

All of the students may be given a chance to make the utterances.

h) Now the teacher goes back to the dialogue and explains the contrast between "you" which

When Albert says, "How are you?", word stress fall on **are**.

How are you?

When Mary says, "How are you?", word stress falls on **you**.

How are you?

The teacher repeats the question several times, and then gets the students to repeat several times.

Then he adds Albert's name, using a rising intonation. He repeats this several times.

How are you, Albert?

Then he gets the students to repeat after him several times.

The teacher checks individual students to be sure they can bring out the contrast.

- i) The teacher gets the students to repeat the last utterance, "Not bad, thanks," which is the same intonation as "Fine, thank you."

- j) Now the teacher reads the dialogue once or twice (or he plays the tape once or twice) while the students listen.
- k) The teacher divides the class into two groups: Mary and Albert. He gets each group to repeat their part. He may do this twice. Then he changes each group's role and he gets them to repeat once or twice.
- l) The teacher gets pairs of students to do the dialogue either by reading it from the written words or orally. He gives all of the students a chance.
- m) The teacher provides handouts with similar dialogues, and he gets pairs of students to read them. He listens carefully and corrects their mistakes.

Here are some suggested dialogues, with the stresses and intonations marked.

John: Good morning, Margaret. How are you?

Margaret: Fine, Thanks. How are you, John?

John: Very well, Thank you.

Teacher: Good afternoon, boys. How are you?

Students: Very well, Thank you.

How are you, sir?

Teacher: I'm fine, Thank you.

Students: Good morning, teacher.

Teacher: Good morning, boys.

How are you?

Students: We're fine, thank you.

How are you, sir?

Teacher: I'm fine, thank you.

m) The teacher asks the students to use the dialogue where and when they get a chance. He himself uses it naturally when he enters the classroom and greets the students the next day and on other following days.

10. Work that waits to be done is as follows:

- a) Preparation of a course of study with particular emphasis on the suprasegmentals for undergraduate students of language teaching.
- b) Drawing up a detailed list of the required stress and intonation patterns that may be incorporated into an appropriate coursebook.
- c) Preparation of lessons on stress and intonation for the use of teachers of English.
- d) Preparation of a booklet that could serve as a guide to teachers interested in helping their students with their pronunciation.

The present writer holds that if coursebooks are designed based on the features suggested in this paper, the Iranian students learning English will learn the English suprasegmental features more effectively and will make fewer mistakes in this difficult area.

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