

UTILISING PROSODY IN OVERCOMING INTERACTION CHALLENGES AMONG SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

¹Julia Madzalan, ¹Muhammad Syakir Sulaiman
²Nazirah Hamdan (PhD)
³Siti Fatimah Madzalan

¹Faculty of Education,
Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS), Selangor, Malaysia.
²UiTM Kampus Kota Samarahan 2, Sarawak
³Innovative International College, Petaling Jaya

julia@kuis.edu.my

Abstract

English plays an important role in communication as well as education field either in oral or written manner. In Malaysia, English is deemed even more necessary considering its characteristics as a developing nation. Since the aim of English education is not only to develop knowledge of grammar and written skills but also to teach oral English skills (Paakki, 2013), there is a pressing need in investigating the issue of interaction challenges among second language learners of English (ESL). The aim of this study is to discover the role of prosody utilisation in overcoming interaction challenges among ESL students as learners of second language. In this study, a set of questionnaire is distributed to 52 respondents to gather information in relation to prosody utilisation during communication. Most of the respondents agreed that prosody knowledge assists them in interacting better in English and thus ensuring effective communication in classroom interaction.

Keywords: prosody, interaction challenges, second language learners

1.0 INTRODUCTION

English language is widely used in Malaysia and it plays a major role as the language of international communication. It is expected that with the trend of globalisation, this country will experience a more rapid growth and thus requires an increasing demand for expertise in various fields. As a result of this situation, Malaysian students should be well-equipped with solid education foundation and in training to remain competitive; including the ability to communicate well in English. According to Khairi Izwan & Nurul Lina (2010), graduates who have better command of English will most likely to possess greater chances and opportunities to be hired by multinational companies after they have completed their studies. It is very essential for Malaysian students who are the second language users to acquire communicative effectiveness in English so that they can use the language efficiently in academic as well as professional setting.

As mentioned by Dato' Seri Mohamed Khalid Nordin in The National Graduate Employability Blueprint (2012), "Prospective employers complain of fresh graduates lacking the prerequisite attributes; more than 50% of fresh graduates are deemed to be unsatisfactory in English communication skills, and yet, many of these young, inexperienced job-seekers expect unrealistically high starting salaries". Having poor command in English, the candidates

have already fallen into second-class candidates' category, even though they obtained good academic grades.

Communicating effectively means that the speaker uses verbal speech or other methods of relaying information that get a point across, or in other words, be understood by the listener. One of the many problems faced by speakers is when the message sent is not comprehended as expected. As mentioned by Lumsden & Lumsden (2003), sending a message only means it was transmitted; it ensures nothing about what happens after that. This means that the speaker has already performed his or her role in conveying the message to the interlocutor; nonetheless, this does not mean that the listener understands the message as being perceived, understood and sent by the speaker.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The lack of a good command of English is one of the major factors that prevent students from getting employment in the job sector (Gopala, Roszainora, Nor Zaitolakma, Nazrul Nadziruddin, Azyanee, Thenmolli & Haslina, 2014). In the study conducted, Gopala et. al. (2014) mentioned that there are still signs that students are reluctant to use English language to communicate with each other despite language educators' efforts in applying the language in the classroom. English mastery is an essential element as revealed in The National Graduate Employability Blueprint (2012). This is important because English is the international language for communication which is needed in order for students to succeed in the working world.

In a study conducted, Gilbert (2008) stated that language students claimed that "native speakers talk too fast". This means that they could not 'follow' the flow of speech as produced by the speaker as they are struggling to understand the message conveyed by the speaker and keeping up with the on-going interaction. The listeners are facing difficult time in the process of decoding the intended message as well as trying to understand the purpose of the conversation. As a result, this leads to reluctance of second language users of English to utilise the language as medium of interaction in everyday life.

Malaysia is a growing country which needs manpower who are experts in their respective fields as well as having the ability to converse fluently in English. In the 2015 MUET report published by Malaysia Examination Council (MPM), the results for listening and speaking test shown a declining trend. Starting from March examination session, followed by July session and finally November session, most of the candidates scored the lower bands in the MUET examination. This shows that the language competency of students in Malaysia is becoming an alarming matter (<http://portal.mpm.edu.my>, 2016).

In studies conducted, it was found that Malaysian learners were unable to speak well in English (Lim, 1994). In these studies, it was proven that the respondents prefer to use other language skills such as writing and reading in comparison to listening and speaking. Studies conducted by researchers such as Lawtie (2004) and Gilbert (2008), to name a few, have found the crucial point on the needs to introduce the knowledge of prosody to language users in order to assist face-to-face spoken interaction.

According to Seppanen, Vayrynen & Toivanen (2003), prosody is a variation which exists when speaking. The variation is utilised easily by speakers of all languages in the world. Generally, it can be assumed that all languages in the world have their own prosody properties which are unique and identifiable to the native language users. For these properties to be well-accepted by the native users, they should be utilised and accepted by a community of people and the same understanding should occur to the language users. A study by Teilanyo (2010) found that prosody features, which are paralinguistic elements, are used in order to aid communication. In this study, the prosody properties involved are the pitch, stress and pause pattern during communication.

As Gilbert (2008) found that students who are taught about English prosody patterns often report improved understanding of speech on TV, in movies, and in face-to-face conversation. Therefore, this study intends to investigate the issue of interaction challenges among second language learners of English (ESL). The aim of this study is to discover the role of prosody utilisation in overcoming interaction challenges among ESL students as learners of second language.

3.0 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Regardless of the realisation that English is a necessity in the working world, undergraduates are still reluctant at using it during daily interaction. This may be caused by several factors that affect the students' ability to converse well in the language which influenced the students' tendency to converse in English whether inside or outside of the classroom. According to study conducted by Wendy (2012), some of the factors that hampered students from using English for communication purposes are respondents were hesitated to speak English because they were worried about making grammatical mistakes, difficulty in speaking fluently due to unfamiliarity with certain English vocabulary, unable to fully understand their teachers and lecturers as the teachers and lecturers spoke too fast which in the end caused them to misunderstood their teachers and lecturers' intended meaning and instructions.

Most English learners who suffer from inadequate training in listening comprehension complain that "native speakers talk too fast" (Gilbert, 2008). They are unable to decode the speech as sent by the speakers within the stipulated time. Hence, they refuse to use the language altogether. In Malaysia, students generally spend six years in primary school, five years in secondary school and another four years in tertiary level of education. Within fifteen years of studying, the level of English is still at either average or low level. This is proven by the performance of students in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET).

In 2012 only 27, 378 students or 36.22% were awarded Band 3 and above in MUET examination in November 2012 (Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia, 2013). The status of 63.78% students was not stated in the report. In the same session in 2015 MUET Examination, the statistic shown that the result continues to decline in November examination session in which majority of the candidates or a total of 70.32% scored bands one and two for listening test and a total of 74.97% of the candidates mainly scored bands three and four in speaking test (Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia, 2013).

In reference to the statistics reported in the MUET results, it shows that students in Malaysia are still lacking the necessary skills to be considered proficient users of English language. If this condition persists, the number of unemployed graduates will likely increase and this alarming issue should be restrained for the sake of Malaysia's future.

Having considered the factors mentioned thus far, this study is conducted with the intention of identifying the role of prosody which serves as the 'road signs' in assisting to overcome interaction challenges among ESL learners in Malaysia.

4.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research intends to discover the role of prosody utilisation in overcoming interaction challenges among ESL students. Hence the questions that the study attempts to answer are as follows:

1. What are the spoken interaction challenges faced by ESL learners?

2. What is the role of prosody in overcoming spoken interaction challenges faced by ESL learners?
3. What is the perception of ESL learners regarding prosody utilisation in overcoming spoken interaction challenges?

5.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researchers adopted a quantitative design by distributing a set of questionnaire to 52 respondents to gather information in relation to prosody utilisation during communication. The respondents in this study are undergraduates currently studying bachelor's degree level in a private higher learning institutions in Selangor, Malaysia. The data obtained were analysed using SPSS version 23 and analysed descriptively to answer the research questions.

5.1 Research Sample Selection

The respondents of this study are 52 students studying bachelor's degree level in higher learning institutions in Selangor, Malaysia. There were 10 male and 42 female students and all respondents are in Semester 6. They were in the age range of 19 to 25 years old. All of them passed Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination and the grade for their English subject during SPM examination ranges from A to B-. The significance of choosing these respondents was because they were mainly involved in the process of communicating as well as listening and speaking in English. Hence they would be suitable respondents to study the utilisation of prosody during communicating in formal situations.

5.2 Research Limitation

The study involved 52 bachelor's degree level students who are using English as second language and currently studying in private higher learning institutions in Selangor, Malaysia. They came from various backgrounds – from foundation studies to diploma and Malaysian Higher Certificate of Education (STPM). Hence their language mastery varies depending on the number of years of exposure gained to English communication. The study is conducted while disregarding the respondents' academic background and the selection as study respondents was conducted only due to the administrative factor as they registered to study linguistic content subjects in their academic landscape.

5.3 Data collection procedure

The data collection in this study was conducted via questionnaire distribution. The entire process of data collection takes three weeks to complete. All data collected were then converted to Ms Excel form which was later on transferred to SPPSS for analysis process. The questionnaire utilised in this study is adapted from Al-Qahtani (2019) and Al Hosni (2014) with 5-point Likert Scales of Very Weak, Weak, Average, Strong and Very Strong for Section A, and Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree and Strongly Agree for Section B and C respectively.

6.0 STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study provides an overview to discover the role of prosody utilisation in overcoming interaction challenges among ESL students as learners of English as second language. The

findings showed that most of the respondents agreed that prosody knowledge assists them in interacting better. Apart from that, the respondents also agreed that the educators should utilise the prosody knowledge to optimum level in ensuring effective communication in classroom interaction.

6.1 Respondents' Demographic Data

The respondents' demographic data is represented in Table 1 and Table 2 as below. Table 1 discusses on the frequency and percentage of respondents according to age, while Table 2 presents frequency and percentage of respondents according to gender.

Table 6.1: Frequency and Percentage of Respondents according to Age

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
19-21 years	49	94.2	94.2
22-24 years	2	3.8	98.1
above 25 years	1	1.9	100.0
Total	52	100.0	

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of respondents according to age. Only one respondent was of the age above 25 years, which equals to 1.9% of the total respondents. There were two respondents of the age between 22 to 24 years old. The rest of the respondents, which was a number of 49 respondents which made up to 94.2%, were of the age of between 19 to 21 years old. This shown that most of the respondents in this study were students who had left the secondary school years in not more than four years.

Table 6.2: Frequency and Percentage of Respondents according to Gender

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	10	19.2	19.2
Female	42	80.8	100.0
Total	52	100.0	

Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage of respondents according to gender. There were ten male respondents, which equals to 19.2% of the total respondents. The rest 42 respondents were female; which made up to 80.8%. This shown that the percentage of female respondents was more dominant in becoming the respondents in this study.

6.2 Section A: Spoken Interaction Challenges faced by ESL Learners

The challenges faced by ESL learners in term of spoken interaction is presented in Table 3. The discussion of this table is as follows.

Table 6.3: Spoken Interaction Challenges

Item	Frequency and Percentage (N=52)					Mean	SD	INT
	5	4	3	2	1			
1 I have limited vocabularies in English.	10 (19.2%)	42 (80.8%)	-	-	-	3.192	0.397	MH
2 I do not know when to take turn during communicating.	40 (76.9%)	12 (23.1%)	-	-	-	3.759	0.425	MH

3	I have limited grammatical English knowledge.	11 (21.2%)	40 (76.9%)	1 (1.9%)	-	-	3.192	0.444	MH
4	I feel shy and anxious when speaking in English.	27 (51.9%)	15 (28.8%)	10 (19.2%)	-	-	3.327	0.785	MH
5	I am not confident of my pronunciation.	27 (51.9%)	18 (34.6%)	7 (13.5%)	-	-	3.385	0.718	MH
6	I do not feel confident during speaking in English.	25 (48.1%)	21 (40.4%)	6 (11.5%)	-	-	3.365	0.686	MH
Overall mean of Spoken Interaction Challenges							3.365	0.528	MH

Based on Table 3 above, the mean score for the respondents' spoken interaction challenges are basically between the value of 3.192 and 3.759. There are six items which scored moderate high level. The item that scored the highest mean value is item 2 "I do not know when to take turn during communicating" with the mean score of 3.759 which is at moderate high level. For this item, as many as 40 respondents (76.9%) denoted 'very weak' with the statement and a number of 12 respondents (23.1%) denoted 'weak' when reflecting their spoken ability based on the statement.

The item which scored the lowest mean value are item 1 "I have limited vocabularies in English" and item 3 "I have limited grammatical English knowledge" with the mean score of 3.192 which is at moderate high level.

As a conclusion, it can be said that the spoken interaction challenges faced by the respondents is at a moderate high level with the overall mean score 3.365 (SD=0.528). Conclusively, it was found that lack of linguistic skills is found to be the main spoken interaction challenge for respondents in this study as they indicated that they do not know when to take turn during communicating. The finding of this study was proven by looking at the item which scored the highest value which is "I do not know when to take turn during communicating" with the mean score of 3.759 (40 respondents).

6.3 Section B: Prosody Role in Overcoming Spoken Interaction Challenges

The role of prosody in overcoming spoken interaction challenges as faced by ESL learners is presented in Table 4. The discussion of this table is as follows.

Table 6. 4: Prosody Role in Overcoming Spoken Interaction Challenges

Item	Frequency and Percentage (N=52)					Mean	SD	INT	
	SD	D	N	A	SA				
1	Prosody helps me to be proficient in English communication.	-	-	-	10 (19.2%)	42 (80.8%)	3.810	0.398	MH
2	Prosody helps me to put sentences in manageable chunks.	-	-	-	34 (65.4%)	18 (34.6%)	3.346	0.480	MH
3	Prosody assists me to sound like a native speaker of English.	4 (7.7%)	46 (88.5%)	2 (3.8%)	-	-	2.981	0.241	ML

4	Prosody provides a clue to infer speaker's meaning.	1 (1.9%)	49 (94.2%)	2 (3.8%)	-	-	3.039	0.341	MH
5	Prosody helps me to overcome confusion in sentences.	-	-	-	8 (15.4%)	44 (78.8%)	3.846	0.364	MH
Overall mean of Prosody Role in Overcoming Spoken Interaction Challenges							3.404	0.365	MH

Based on Table 4 above, the mean score for the role of prosody in overcoming spoken interaction challenges as faced by ESL learners are basically between the value of 2.981 and 3.846. There are four items which scored moderate high level. The item that scored the highest mean value is item 5 “Prosody helps me to overcome confusion in sentences” with the mean score of 3.846 which is at moderate high level. For this item, as many as 44 respondents (78.8%) denoted ‘strongly agree’ with the statement and a number of 8 respondents (15.4%) denoted ‘agree’ when reflecting the role of prosody in overcoming spoken interaction challenges as faced by ESL learners.

The item which scored the lowest mean value is item 3 “Prosody assists me to sound like a native speaker of English” with the mean score of 2.981 which was at moderate low level.

As a conclusion, it can be said that the role of prosody in overcoming spoken interaction challenges as faced by ESL learners is at a moderate high level with the overall mean score 3.404 (SD=0.365). Conclusively, it was found that prosody plays a major role in assisting to solve syntax ambiguity in overcoming spoken interaction challenge for respondents in this study as they indicated that they can overcome confusion during communicating by utilising prosody. The finding of this study was proven by looking at the item which scored the highest value which is “Prosody helps me to overcome confusion in sentences” with the mean score of 3.846 (44 respondents).

6.4 Section C: ESL Learners' Perception on Prosody Utilisation

The perception of ESL learners towards the utilisation of prosody in overcoming spoken interaction challenges is presented in Table 5. The discussion of this table is as follows.

Table 6.5: ESL Learners' Perception on Prosody Utilisation

Item	Frequency and Percentage (N=52)					Mean	SD	INT
	SD	D	N	A	SA			
1 Prosody utilisation by ESL educators assists language proficiency.	-	-	-	37 (71.2%)	15 (28.8%)	3.289	0.457	MH
2 The most facilitative prosodic feature is pitch feature.	-	-	3 (5.8%)	34 (65.4%)	15 (28.8%)	3.231	0.546	MH
3 The most facilitative prosodic feature is stress feature.	-	-	7 (13.5%)	31 (59.6%)	14 (26.9%)	3.135	0.627	MH

4	The most facilitative prosodic feature is pause feature.	-	-	3 (5.8%)	46 (88.5%)	3 (5.8%)	3.115	0.323	MH
5	Prosody serves as an important clue in avoiding syntax ambiguity.	-	-	39 (75.0%)	13 (25.0%)		3.325	0.437	MH
Overall mean of Prosody Role in Overcoming Spoken Interaction Challenges							3.219	0.478	MH

Based on Table 5 above, the mean score for the ESL learners' perception on prosody utilisation are basically between the value of 3.115 and 3.325. All five items scored at moderate high level. The item that scored the highest mean value is item 5 "Prosody serves as an important clue in avoiding syntax ambiguity" with the mean score of 3.325 which is at moderate high level. For this item, as many as 39 respondents (75%) denoted 'agree' with the statement and a number of 13 respondents (25%) denoted 'strongly agree' when reflecting on their perception regarding prosody utilisation.

The item which scored the lowest mean value is item 4 "The most facilitative prosodic feature is pause feature" with the mean score of 3.115 which was at moderate high level.

As a conclusion, it can be said that the ESL learners' perception on prosody utilisation is basically at a moderate high level with the overall mean score 3.219 (SD=0.478). Conclusively, it was found that ESL learners have positive opinion regarding the utilisation of prosody in overcoming spoken interaction challenge. The finding of this study was proven by looking at the item which scored the highest value which is "Prosody serves as an important clue in avoiding syntax ambiguity" with the mean score of 3.325 (52 respondents).

7.0 CONCLUSION

This study is conducted in order to identify the role of prosody utilisation in overcoming interaction challenges among ESL students as learners of second language. As mentioned by Cole, Mo, & Baek (2010), prosody plays an important function in speech communication. This study assists in understanding the spoken interaction challenges faced by ESL learners in higher learning institutions in Malaysia.

In this study, the respondents showed an insightful result on the spoken interaction challenges faced during communicating in English. Lack of linguistic skills become the major barrier in hindering the ESL learners in communicating in English, followed by affective issues such as shyness and anxiety. This support the findings as found by Al-Qahtani (2019) and Al Hosni (2014) in which the respondents' biggest hindrance during communicating in English is found to be linguistics skills such as turn-taking and picking up questioning-and-answering signals when communicating. This is followed by the hindrance in emotional aspect and is found to be in line with study by Krashen (1970) through the affective filter hypothesis which stated that emotion plays a major role in determining one's success in learning a language.

Respondents in this study reported that prosody is facilitative in overcoming spoken interaction challenges in ways that the features assists in solving syntax ambiguity. The cases of ambiguous sentences can be avoided by using the clues provided by prosody. Respondents also reported that prosody utilisation allows language proficiency. The clues provided by prosody allow the ESL learners to suggest importance of utterance to the brain Gilbert (2008). This assist the respondents to parse sentences into meaningful and manageable chunks to ease understanding and consecutively assists interaction process in English.

A listener must be attentive to phonetic variations in order to reconstruct the prosody context and to understand the meaning of an utterance as intended by the speaker. Through the analysis of the results obtained in this study, it is revealed that prosody, namely the pitch pattern, assisted the listening process and enables the conveyed message to reach the listener as intended. As proposed by Teilanyo (2010), prosody, namely the pitch pattern helps in suggesting importance of utterance to the brain. In this study, it was found that pitch pattern becomes useful when it assisted the respondents to comprehend interaction conducted in English. In conclusion, it is found that utilisation of pitch pattern assists communication process and it is best done by maximising the use of pitch in order to convey the intended message to the audience.

8.0 REFERENCES

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