Improving HUMG students' speaking skills through the English prosodic features

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ABSTRACT

The study is concerned with the role of the English prosodic features in improving HUMG students' speaking skills. These features including the linguistics functions such as stress, rhythm and intonation appear when the sounds are glued together in connected speech, which is necessary to build larger units of speech. It is very important for students to learn the prosodic features as the basic for intelligibility than the individual phonetic segments. They are known as the supra-segmental features concerning the stress, tone, and duration in the syllable or word for a continuous speech sequence. With the English prosodic features, the researcher hopes that HUMG students can be more active and readier to speak, to share their thoughts. It also formed the students' autonomy when learning English then they feel encouraged to speak because of their readability and preparation. The study aims to help HUMG students solve the intelligibility problem in English as a foreign language then the students can communicate with others in English more naturally and confidently.

Keywords: prosodic features; speaking skills; stress; rhythm; intonation.

1. Introduction

In Hanoi University of Mining and Geology (HUMG), English is taught as the foreign language, and it is a compulsory subject through educational institutions such as secondary schools, high schools and universities. There are four language skills taught to students: speaking, listening, writing and reading. As an English lecturer, the researcher was faced by two choices in teaching English for archiving good marks in written test or for training the students to speak English as a means of communication well. The process of teaching and learning English in classroom today is just to do the written test then many students got difficulty in speaking English. Therefore, in order to help students express their opinions and thoughts more easily, it is necessary for English teachers to spend more time studying how to improve students' speaking skills and how to encourage them to talk by themselves. For this purpose, the prosodic features are recommended to help answer these questions, with the hope to bring more happiness and momentum to HUMG students then they can be more energetic when expressing their ideas in English.

Speaking is the key of communication so in teaching speaking, teachers/ lecturers should be able to guide students into learning situation or context in order to enable them to master these factors. If the students are familiar with the situation of speaking, they can express their opinions and ideas freely and without anxiety or hesitation, on the other hand, they will fail to achieve a successful communication. When the speaking topics are suitable for them, they can build larger units of speech or connected speech, and they can focus on various aspects of prosody. Students can recognize when they should pause, where to put a main stress and linking into a sentence, or when to change the intonation in a connected speech, which means students are speaking fluently. This demonstrates that when students are active and ready to share their thoughts, they can speak English easily. Brown (1994: 256) says that there are some factors causing speaking difficult for the students, they are: clustering, redundancy, reduced form, performance variables, colloquial language, rate of delivery, stress, rhythm, intonation and interaction. The prosodic features are necessary to help students' mastery of learning speaking.

After categorizing and explaining these features (which were introduced in the pronunciation part) to students, they can practice some simple sentences which are easy to talk. When they understand these concepts, it is time for them to go further to the larger units of speech. It can be from a small talk or a short introduction to more complicated things such as a group discussion, their viewpoints around a specific phenomenon or matter. The lecturer can encourage them to produce more connected speech with a perfect use of the prosodic features by inviting them to join in some interactive activities which help develop oral communication skills.

2. Literature review

2.1. From English sounds to connected speech

Students first learn *the sounds* to pronounce a word, they are the vowel and consonant sounds. There are three aspects (Yule, 2010): voiced or unvoiced, place of articulation, and manner of articulation, which help speakers correct their pronunciation mistakes. Some of these factors intervene on the ending sounds of a word such as –*s* and –*ed*. The followings are a brief summary of English pronunciation:

	Bilabial		Labiodental		Dental		Alveolar		Palatal		Velar		Glottal	
	−V	+V	−V	+V	−V	+V	−V	+V	−V	+V	−V	+V	−V	+V
Stops	p	b					t	d			k	g		
Fricatives			f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	ʒ			h	
Affricates									tʃ	ʤ				
Nasals		m						n				ŋ		
Liquids								l r						
Glides		w								j				

Figure 1. *Consonant sounds (Yule, 2010)*

	Front	Front	Central	Back
High	i			u
		ɪ		ʊ
Mid		e	ə	o
		ɛ	ʌ	ɔ
Low			æ	
			a	ɑ

Figure 2. *Vowel sounds (Ladefoged, 2006; Yule, 2010)*

When students govern these rules, they can pronounce every English word quite well. They will know how to recognize the stressed syllables and the unstressed syllables then the word is pronounced correctly with a good tone. The problem here is about the larger units than a word such as a phrase, a sentence, or long opinions. Students got difficulty in expressing their thought in English, even when they know the word stress and the individual sounds very well. Because they are not ready to talk, for a longer talk, an organization of ideas is necessary, when students know what they are going to say, they will be more active in speaking. A longer talk refers to *connected speech* which is the continuous sequence of sounds forming utterances or conversations in spoken English. This will naturally create the prosodic features including stress, rhythm and intonation.

They may need to know some more rules of saying a bunch of words in order to have a successful communication. The sentence stress and intonation are important to express speakers' intentions, and sometimes they are difficult to guess, which leads the learners' speaking anxiety. The rhythm is based on the contrast of strong and weak syllables in regular intervals, with the strong ones falling within content words.

2.2. The prosodic features and its affection to the pronunciation of larger units

2.2.1. Stress

There is difficult to determine which syllable or syllables in an English word, phrase or sentence must be stressed, but every time you learn a word you must be sure how it is stress (O'Connor, 1967). It is about the degree of emphasis given a sound or syllable in speech. In the group *I could hardly believe my eyes* not all the words are stressed, it depends on the situation and normally *I, could* and *my* are unstreesed. It is necessary to know where to use the unstressed vowel, often it is the schwa sound which accounts for about 30% when we speak English. English is a stressed-timed language, therefore, *one, two, three, four,* and *one and two and three and four*, and *one and a two and a three and a four,* they all take exactly the same amount of time (duration) to say. Because of this feature, it is called "the stress-timed rhythm" of English.

2.2.2. Rhythm

Rhythm is how the stressed and unstressed syllables are organized in a connected speech. It is the pattern of sounds, which is marked by the stress, timing and syllables. Some syllables are stressed more than the others, and some of them are pronounced longer than the others. Native speakers will get difficult to understand what non-native speakers says if there is no rhythm in non-native speakers' speech. For the groups **When** *are you* **going** *to the* **party***?* and **Last** *month Fiona* **got** *a* **job** *in New***york,** we have the content words (bolded) which are stressed (louder and longer) than the functions words. As we know English is a stress-timed language, therefore to keep the rhythm, the unstressed syllables will be spoken faster. During this process, if we change the pitch of each sound, this will lead to the next concept called "Intonation".

2.2.3. Intonation

Listening to an English conversation sometimes looks like listening to a song. That is true because of the tune shapes of the English voice. We are talking about tune (melody) or tone which is a specific pitch (expressing moods). Tone is like the single sound or note in a song but tune is the progression of notes. *"When the voice goes up and down and the different notes of the voice combine to make tunes"* (O'Connor, 1967:108), we can say a word group with different attitudes, this means we are using tones or tunes in our speaking. The words do not change their meaning but the tune/ tone we use adds something to the words – it is the speakers' feelings at that time. This way of using tunes is called "Intonation". Intonation is the pattern of pitch changes that occurs in speaking. Intonation serves to convey different messages in communication, this makes English different from other tonal languages. The combination between intonation and stress creates a melody to a connected speech, which in turn with rhythm will produce a perfect "song" in your speaking.

In prosodic features affecting to the meaning of modality, we have four basic intonations: the glide-down, the glide-up, the dive, and the take-off. Each of them affects to the change of the underlying information or the message. Then, we use intonation to help get our message across.

2.3. The importance of the prosodic features in improving students' speaking skills

Language starts with the ear (O'Connor, 1967:1). When a baby starts to talk, he does it by hearing the sounds his mother makes and imitating them. This is the gift of imitation which gives the gift of speech. After this process, the ability to imitate perfectly becomes less, and adults have more difficulty in mastering the pronunciation of foreign languages. When we have a fairly large number of sound units which we put together in many different combinations to form words, phrases or sentences, most of English learners got difficulty in speaking, sharing their thoughts rather than reading or uttering words separately.

This is because many non-native speakers do not say what they are really thinking about, they just try to combine words together separately. Therefore, to the soul of their speaking, it is the best way to learn how English sounds are used, and the rule of delivering longer talks (connected speech). The tools to achieve that goal are the prosodic features. It helps learners control their ideas to make real conversations.

We have different ways to apply the prosodic features in producing connected speech. They can read a text after someone, speak about their favorite topics or discuss the matters that they are concerned as long as they actually know what they are going to say. Then with the knowledge from these features, they can make perfect talks.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Eighteen HUMG students in one class were chosen randomly after two modules of English subject. The participants are non-native speakers. They were mostly the first-year students with an age range from 18-19. They are from different majors including information technology, business administration, oil and gas processing fields and chemical engineering. They participated in all sessions of training.

3.2. Procedure

The participants were given three activities. Before that they had to do a pre-test (oral speaking) in order to compare with the results after finishing the activities. They had to do the post-test in two cycles. Cycle 1 was about their individual work, and Cycle 2 was still about their individual work and an extra effort to work in groups. Cycle 2 was to assure the stability of the experimental group. The introduction to the prosodic features was carried from the beginning of the first lesson (the alphabet, vowel and consonant sounds…) then studied further in the pronunciation part of the next lessons. This process lasted about three months before the post test.

The oral test they had to record was to make a small talk to introduce themselves, to talk about their hobbies, family, and so on in around one minute and thirty seconds. Their results were marked depending on the five criteria of speaking, and how good the performances were. After that, they went to cycle 1 of evaluation, they were given time (around one minutes and thirty seconds) to discuss a topic which they had learned in class before, they must submit their records after preparation. In cycle 2, they were asked to create a conversation in a group of four or five members. This time they needed to share their thoughts, responses and attitude to a specific topic. All of their recordings were scored by five specific criteria of speaking including: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension.

3.3. Data analyzing technique

After collecting the data, the lecturer classified the data into two groups as follow:

3.3.1. Analyzing quantitative data

The classroom action research would be successful if there was an enhancement of students' speaking skills. We could recognize that when the students could do the test, felt easy and enjoyed learning in the classroom. After the data were collected, the lecturer calculated the mean of pre-test and the post-test by using descriptive statistics then analyzed the scores from those tests. The lecturer used it to answer whether there was difference between students speaking skill before and after the action.

The mean of the pre-test and post-test can be calculated with the formulas as follows:

$$\overline{X} = \frac{\sum X}{N}$$

Where: $\overline{X}$ = means of pre-test scores
$\overline{Y}$ = means of post-test scores
N = the number of sample

$$\overline{Y} = \frac{\sum Y}{N}$$

(Puspita, 2007: 69)

3.3.2. Analyzing qualitative data

The lecturer used Interactive Model of Data Analysis as propounded by Matthew, B. Mile and A. Huberman (1994). This model includes four different interconnected processes including data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. First, the data collected in the pre test were noted. Second, the data collected in the post test were noted. Next, the means of each process were calculated according to the formulas above. Then, the tables and charts were established to show the differences between two processes. Finally, there were discussions on the results and achievements.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1. The reasons of students' problems in speaking English

There are some reasons affecting to students' autonomy when they learn English. First, they are lazy to talk, most of students feel isolated in class because of their speaking competence. Second, students are spending more time doing writing tasks, therefore they are shy and not ready to talk. Third, some students have low interest in English especially speaking English. It is not by their ability of expressing their ideas but it is by how they feel to speak English, by the other words, they are not accustomed to speaking English. Consequently, their speaking is not fluent.

4.2. The improvement of students' autonomy

When eighteen HUMG students were given time for preparation, they were readier to share. When they recorded their speaking, it was less stressful for them to do that, they felt free to talk (the researcher has all of their recordings). This also formed the students' autonomy when learning English, a clue for this is their scores in the final exam and they were happy and active to do the recording tasks. They were ready to do more tests that the researcher provided, and during the lessons they were ready to share and answer any researcher's questions. Students' autonomy could help them improve not only speaking skills but also all of their English skills.

4.3. The improvement of students' speaking skills

From the tests, it was concluded that the prosodic features improve students' speaking skills. They feel encouraged to speak because of their readability and preparation. There were some indicators that demonstrated an

improvement in their speaking skills. They were pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. A scale of 0 to 5 for each indicator and the total numeric score for all indicators is out of 25. The students' speaking scores improve from pre-test to cycle 1 then to cycle 2 as shown in the following table:
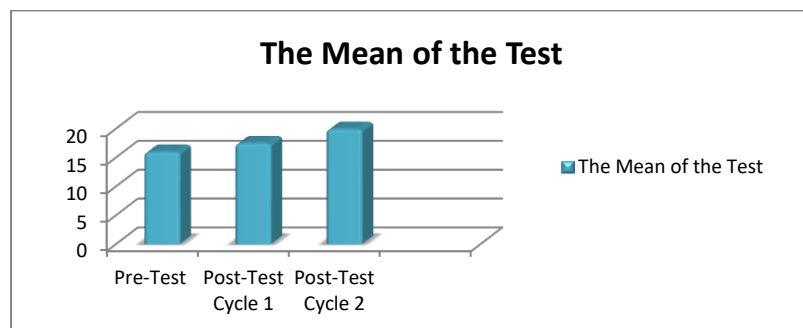

Figure 3. The mean scores of the test.

Table 1. The mean scores of the test.

Test	Mean Score
Pre-test	15.94
Post-test cycle 1	17.44
Post-test cycle 2	19.89

The increase of students' mean score from 15.94 in the pre-test to 17.44 in the post-test cycle 1 then to 19.89 in the post-test cycle 2 showed that there was an improvement of students' speaking result before and after the application of the prosodic features.

5. Conclusion

After the lecturer did this research by using the prosodic features, HUMG students can be more active and readier to speak, to share their thoughts. The reticent students are also encouraged to talk because they have met their interesting topics, their curiosity was woken then they were more confident to express their ideas. After all, their autonomy in learning has been cultivated, and they had chance to get more experience from their speaking, even their mistakes and defense. By observation during classes, the researcher could realize that the other skills were also developed such as: self-awareness and teamwork skills.

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TÓM TẮT

Nâng cao khả năng nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên trường Đại học Mỏ - Địa chất thông qua các đặc tính ngôn điệu

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Nghiên cứu đề cập đến vai trò của các đặc tính ngôn điệu, trong việc nâng cao khả năng thực hành nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên trường Đại học Mỏ - Địa chất. Các đặc tinh ngôn điệu như trọng âm, nhịp điệu và ngữ điệu xuất hiện khi các âm gắn kết với nhau trong qua trình nói, việc này là hết sức cần thiết đối với người học để tạo ra được các đoạn nói dài và lâu hơn. Khi sinh viên nắm được các đặc tính ngôn điệu này làm nền tảng, các em sẽ thấy hứng thú và dễ hiểu hơn so với việc phân tích các phần tử âm chi tiết. Các đặc tính trên được biết đến là tính siêu phân đoạn, liên quan đến các vấn đề như trọng âm, tông giọng, cao độ, và trường độ của âm tiết và từ trong câu nói. Tác giả hi vọng việc áp dụng các đặc tính ngôn điệu trên có thể giúp cho sinh viên trường Đại học Mỏ - Địa chất tích cực và sẵn sàng hơn khi nói và chia sẻ ý kiến bằng tiếng Anh. Qua đó tính tự giác học tập của sinh viên cũng được bồi dưỡng và hình thành, và khi các em có sự sẵn sàng và chủ động học tập, các em sẽ cảm thấy hào hứng chia sẻ ý kiến của mình. Nghiên cứu này hướng tới việc giúp sinh viên trường Đại học Mỏ - Địa chất giải quyết vấn đề về sự dễ hiểu khi học ngoại ngữ, từ đó các em có thể giao tiếp được bằng tiếng Anh một cách trôi chảy và tự tin hơn.

Từ khóa: tính ngôn điệu; kỹ năng nói; trọng âm; nhịp điệu; ngữ điệu