
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Effect of Identifying Prosodic Features (PFs) in Improving IELTS Students' Listening Skills

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the impact of prosodic features (PFs) on the listening skills of IELTS test takers has been investigated. In total, 95 male and female students from Kirkuk/Iraq Institute participated in the study. The sample was split evenly across three experimental groups and a control group. The experimental groups were told to identify PFs. The control group was taught listening skills in general without any form of PF from the researcher. Because of the difference in instruction, the experimental groups' mean scores were significantly higher than those of the control group.

KEYWORDS

IELTS, listening, PF, Tone and Annova.

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1. Introduction

The first of the four linguistic abilities is the ability to listen. It is a crucial part of the language learning process and ranks up there with reading, writing, and speaking. The ability to recognize and comprehend what other people are saying is what is meant by "listening" (Idrissova, Smagulova, & Tussupbekova, 2015). Adhikary (2020) wrote that "hearing requires understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, his grammar, and his vocabulary and charting his meaning". Production cannot happen unless we get something to make. It is necessary for developing productive abilities alongside reading. Because listeners take in the information, an auditory signal, and make sense of it using their prior linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge, listening is an active skill rather than a passive one. "Listening is the process of attending to and attempting to obtain the meaning from anything," writes Underwood (1989, p. 1). Listening carefully is an effort to decipher the meaning of a speaker's uttered words. This term additionally lends credence to the idea that "listening to accept" is an active ability in and of itself. In light of this, it should come as no surprise that listening is a crucial skill that is employed frequently in everyday life. We listen when we give our full focus to the speaker and actively seek to understand what is being said. Young children learn this language structure before any other (Krashen, 1985). Students spend a lot of time listening in class because that is how they pick up the majority of their new language skills. As a result, listening is a crucial second skill for language acquisition. It is the bedrock of later linguistic and mental growth and an essential part of the communication process throughout one's entire life. In listening, prosody is important. In this work, we use Fish and Skinder-Meredith's definition (2022) of prosody. They defined prosody as "intonation, stress pattern, loudness variations, pausing, and rhythm". They stated that prosody is often expressed by changing pitch, loudness, and duration. In addition, they claimed that a greater articulatory force can be used to emphasize a word or phrase. So, prosody is taught to the experimental groups in this work to be used in detecting correct answers in the IELTS listening test.

It also analyzes how PFs influence the various sub-scores of the IELTS listening test (The fall-rise tone indicates a qualified agreement; the rise-fall pattern indicates further development, and the fall conveys a sense of finality.)

This study thus seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) To what extent do the two groups of IELTS test takers differ in their average listening scores?
- 2) Which parts of listening (The fall-rise rhythm indicates a partial agreement; the rise indicates that more is to come; the fall conveys a sense of finality; and the rise-fall rhythm indicates either agreement or disagreement.)
- 3) Are PFs very effective in enhancing listening skills in IELTS tests?

To the researcher's knowledge, PFs have also been overlooked in the Iraqi context. As a result, the purpose of this research is to analyze the effect of teaching PFs on students' listening skills.

2. Background of the study

Learners receive feedback on PFs, whether the feedback is positive or negative. This implies that students may see how far they have come in terms of improving their ability to increase the proportion of accurate answers and decrease the proportion of incorrect ones. For example, PFs of language instruction are conceptualizations that incorporate things like the need to express meaning beyond words and their role in discourse (Kuzla, Ernestus, & Mitterer, 2006). The remarks may provide (1) mistake indication, (2) target language form correction, (3) error metalinguistic information, or (4) all of the above. It is more common to see PFs employed in an educational setting than in a natural one.

In this study, 95 advanced English language learners at the college level were split into two groups. The first group was given 100 minutes of education on two prosodic aspects (paratone and prosodic phrasing) in addition to their regularly scheduled listening exercises, whereas the control group was given the same amount of instruction using product-oriented listening approach, which tests word recognition or listening comprehension. The first group of students scored higher than product-oriented students on examinations of general listening comprehension and target prosodic feature understanding after receiving instruction. Arguments are made that adding brief periods of training focusing on prosodic qualities can boost the efficiency of product-oriented EAP listening instruction.

IELTS candidates find the listening section difficult because they hear audio-only once. Rewinding the audio and listening to it again is not available. One of the common difficulties is losing concentration while listening to the audio and looking for an answer to a particular question. This could cause a loss of focus from the audio, costing much more than one mark for that particular question. In this case, Schmidt, Pérez, Cilibrasi, and Tsimpli (2020) explained that the focus on the prosody of the audio helps the test takers understand and remember a large amount of information. Another common problem is predicting the answer without listening to the complete audio and directly marking it as the correct answer. To avoid these two cases, candidates are advised to listen to complete audio with a special focus on the PFs, which may provide more specific information and thus answer the question. Therefore, one of the researchers, Mahmood Ibrahim, explained the use of PFs to the experimental group and conducted mock tests to see how effective the students' awareness of the PFs is in enhancing their IELTS listening skills.

2.1 PFs in Language Learning

Several studies have investigated the function of PF in second language acquisition. "[T]he prosodic feature awareness training significantly improved the students' listening comprehension skills" Yenkimaleki and Heuven (2016). Kang and Johnson (2018) provided convincing evidence that PF can benefit both educators and language learners. They also verified that reformation is the most effective approach. Focused PF, according to Kang and Johnson (2018), has the potential to boost learning in both task success and grammatical acumen. As a result, both students and educators can see how to improve language education.

Derwing, Munro, and Wiebe (1998) indicated that the more the students' prosodic awareness, the more advanced their comprehension skills. According to Gordon, Darcy, and Ewert (2013), prosody education in learning phonological attributes is important. They found out that the speaker's incorrect stress confuses the listeners in terms of the place and order of the words in the listening content. In a study conducted by Field (2005), incorrect stress caused the listeners to construct incorrect meanings and inferences. Hence, this study developed this argument a bit further by arguing that listeners may incorrectly comprehend what they listen to because of the lack of awareness of correct stress.

Since IELTS listening is an essential skill for both teaching and studying a language, PFs have the potential to be an invaluable resource for both. The purpose of this research is to analyze the impact of PFs on students' IELTS listening skills so that educators can make better use of it.

2.2 Listening Aspects and Types of Errors

According to Ibrahim (2021), using a second or third language in listening is an act of bravery. Students of Arabic, Kurdish, and Turkmen are wonderful examples of the participants learning IELTS listening. They found listening to be the most challenging of the four English language abilities tested in the IELTS curriculum. Additionally, the challenges that emerge from an absence of listening experience in PF. There's also the problem of linguistic barriers.

Listening has been found to be one of the most challenging cognitive processes to teach or acquire. So, it is recommended that educators, students, and others put more emphasis on it while creating and implementing curricula. More effective strategies and techniques could be employed in the classroom. Consequently, the focus of this work is on PFs.

IELTS listening tasks encourage students to understand others using their own skills. It can also be utilized as a way to comprehend the speakers and how well candidates can make correct inferences from these speakers. Although PFs are used by English teachers around the world, they are still noticeably absent in the Iraqi context. The most important factors for assessing IELTS academic listening are Tone and Stress (British Council, 2014). In the classroom, information is still exclusively presented on the audio. In the IELTS listening section, students from Iraq often struggle with tone, intonation and stress. These may result from the teacher's own pedagogical practices.

This study, however, examines the effect of PFs on the four listening components of the IELTS exam: the fall-rise tone, rise tone, fall, and Rise – fall tone.

2.3 PFs

The use of English has permeated every aspect of the academic sector. Its prominence in the classroom, particularly in language study and teaching, has grown so enormously that it is impossible for any course to leave it out.

A strong awareness of PFs is essential for enhancing language acquisition and learning. Scientific research has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of PFs in acquiring a second language.

Prosody can simply stand for expressiveness in speech. Its elements are intonation, stress, tone, and rhythm. In discussing language development, vocabulary and grammar seem to be the key stages, but they only make up half the story. "Prosody provides context, gives meaning to words, and keeps listeners engaged. Understanding prosody may seem too big a task for little ones, but it's actually central to their language and social development!" (BabySparks, 2020).

In this case, listening is an important mediation channel supplemented by "thought tools" like outliners, resulting in not only sequential essays but also hypertexts with additional ways to generate and display knowledge.

Several "enabling abilities," as defined by Willis (1981), are crucial to effective listening. One can (1) anticipate the topics that will be discussed, (2) make educated guesses about unfamiliar words or phrases, (3) draw on one's prior knowledge of the topic to gain insight, (4) pick out the most important information and discard the rest, (5) remember the most important information by taking notes, and (6) learn to identify discourse markers such as "well," "oh, the thing is," "now," "finally," and so on. (7) identifying connection words, pronouns, references, etc., as well as coherent devices such as and which, the ability to pick up on subtle nuances in a speaker's intonation, stress usage, etc., that can provide insight into their intended meaning and the social context in which they are speaking; (9) the ability to deduce the speaker's attitude or intentions from their body language.

2.4 Listening Aspects

So far, studies have looked at how various PFs in EFL lead to various mistake patterns. Research by Yenkimaleki and Heuven (2016) reported that PFS improved listening outcomes for pupils.

In addition, society as a whole has become better at spotting PF abuse and fixing it. Evidence for this comes from the research of Khaghaninejad and Maleki (2015), who found that providing ESL students with a foundation in phonetics improved their ability to understand spoken English. This result demonstrates the potential pedagogical value of a focus on the explicit teaching of PFs at the word and sentence levels in the education of prospective interpreters. It also agrees with VY, Lian, and Siriyothin (2020), who stated that teaching English-as-a-foreign-language pupils suprasegmentals explicitly will greatly aid in helping them overcome phonological barriers to listening comprehension.

2.5 This Study

As evidenced by the preceding comments, most studies look into how useful it is to offer PF on listening. So far, there have been no investigations into how PFs affect students' performance in the IELTS listening section. Consequently, the purpose of this study

is to investigate how PFS comments affect students' listening on the IELTS. Furthermore, the impact of PFs on several areas of listening is investigated in this study. These include stress, pitch and intonation.

2.6 Participants and Design of the Study

Ninety-five male students (20 years and up) from Kirkuk Institutes have taken part in this study. They are enrolled in higher education programs throughout the 2018-2022 academic year. This school was chosen for the study because it had enough IELTS classes and computer labs to ensure that the research was duly conducted. All of those places are rather close to where the researcher lives. Students who were taught by the researcher were chosen as a sample for the study. Nonetheless, the sample was split at random into four groups, with three receiving instructions on PF. The control group consists of students who were educated in a non-PF environment.

Ten weeks (four hours per week) of instruction are given to each class using the PF as a guide. The control group was taught the non-listening tasks via computer.

The researcher provided teaching to all students based on the same sections of the Cambridge IELTS (books 7-16) textbook.

This study's design is quasi-experimental since all four groups were given the same baseline assessment before PF was applied (see Table 1) so that the two treatment and two control groups would be comparable. This is necessary in order to achieve the goals of the research. After applying the treatment, the researcher gave all of the groups the identical post-test in order to determine whether or not the PFs had a greater impact on the individuals.

This research has one independent variable—students' mean scores on the PFs—and one dependent variable—their listening. The post-test for the latter comprises sections on the fall–rise tone, which shows limited agreement; rise shows that there is something more to follow; fall gives an impression of finality, and rise–fall shows agreement or disagreement. The mean and standard deviation of the participants' pre-test listening grades are calculated using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the two groups' pre-test results is shown in Table 1.

Group	N	*Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig
Experimental	60	9.75	4.59	.43	.80**
Control	35	9.73	3.28		
Total	95	9.74	3.73		

* Out of 40`

** The results are significant at the $p. \leq .05$ level.

There were no discernible variations in pre-test scores between the two groups (see Table 1).

Students in the experimental groups had their number of PFs comments, number of errors, and mean number of errors in each of the four listening features analyzed (Table 2).

PFs	No	Total Errors	Mean Errors	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
The fall-rise tone shows limited agreement	162	651	11.22	3.23	.25	.80*
rise shows that something more to follow	53	214	3.96	1.09		
fall gives an impression of finality	54	212	3.93	1.18		
Rise – fall shows agreement or disagreement	55	213	3.96	1.04		
Total	54	1290	23.89	2.80		

* The results are significant at the $p. \leq .05$ level.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) table shows the average number of mistakes made in each of the four types of listening.

After implementing the experiment, it appears that there is a difference in the mean error scores of the four listening features. Possible explanation: more sub-listening elements are included in the Stress category than in the other three. Table 3 displays the results of an ANOVA performed to determine the statistical significance of the observed differences. The total number of mistakes made during the experiment suggests that there were substantial differences between the four parts of listening. Based on the results of the experiment, it appears that students received a similar amount of PF comments regarding the faults they made in each of the four areas of listening.

2.7 The Instrument and Materials of the Study

A total of 16 different IELTS Cambridge tasks were selected at random for this investigation (7-16). There were 14 activities covered in the course materials, and they were all taught to the students. They had to take two different tests. In every case, candidates were asked to complete four tasks (sections 1,2,3 and 4). Participants' abilities have been assessed both during and after the experiment. The first activity requires students to answer each section in 7:30 minutes. Students listen to audio and are required to answer questions (see Table 4).

Table 3 Scale for Task 1.

Listening Aspects	Score *
The fall-rise tone shows limited agreement	1-9
rise shows that something more to follow	1-9
fall gives an impression of finality	1-9
Total	1-136/4

* Grades: 1= low; 4= medium; 7 = high

Four IELTS courses served as the course content. There were 30 pupils in every class except in the control group, where there were 35. A total of 14 listening assignments are spread out over the course of 10 weeks. There was a wide variety of subjects covered, and each assignment was accompanied by a set of instructions for some form of academic listening.

2.8 Procedure

Before starting the listening course, the researcher explained the nature of the course and study, showing its aims to all the participants. They were able to pose inquiries regarding the course content and teaching strategies for listening. Students were

assigned to compose a paragraph discussing the IELTS listening task. The instructor discussed the desired features of student listening.

The examiner gave the students PF explanations. Every Friday, participants were instructed to use the "complete a listening test". During the following lecture, the researcher projected the PF drafts, showing the sampling mistakes. Finally, the revised drafts were sent to the students for review.

The teacher in the study's control group used audio-based lessons. However, no PF was detected during the listening of the control group.

3. Results and Findings

To achieve these purposes, the study employed statistical analysis performed in SPSS Application (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The researcher also utilized a one-way analysis of variance, standard deviation, and Scheffe tests to demonstrate potential changes in post-test scores across four categories of listening performance: stress; tone (The fall-rise tone shows limited agreement; rise shows that something more to follow; fall gives an impression of finality and Rise – fall shows agreement or disagreement),

It is clear from Table 5 that the descriptive statistical approach is needed to properly address the first research issue of this study, which is whether or not the existence of PF has an effect on the listening skills of IELTS students.

Table 5. One-way ANOVA on the post-test results

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Experimental	60	22.01	4.20	26.13	.00*
Control	20	15.99	2.10		

* The results are significant at $p. \leq .05$.

As can be seen in the table above, the experimental group performed better on the post-test overall than the control group. The discrepancy may have something to do with the approach taken to instruction. Because of this, we can conclude that the PFS groups' pupils achieved much higher levels of success than the controls.

The second inquiry concerned the specific area of listening (Stress, Tone) that PFS most effectively enhanced.

Descriptive statistics were calculated to help the researcher analyze the impact of PFS on the four aspects of student listening, as shown in the table below.

Table 6. The post-test scores of listening aspects by One-way ANOVA.

Listening Aspects	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
The fall – rise tone	68	17.82	2.95	13.15	.00*
rise tone	18	3.44	1.06		
fall tone	18	2.67	.60		
The fall – rise tone	18	4.39	.89		
Total	108	3.98	1.35		

* The results are significant at $p. \leq .05$ level.

There appears to be a substantial difference between the experimental groups on the four listening items (mean scores in Table 6). As a result, the PFS were useful in enhancing various facets in their own unique ways. In the post-hoc analysis, the differences between means are compared using the Scheffe test (Table 11).

Table 7. The Scheffe Test results for the four aspects.

Writing Aspects	Mean Differences	Std. Error	Sig.
Rising tone	2.3	.307	2.6
Rise-fall tone	2.28(*)	.307	.15
Falling tone	4.62(*)	.307	.00
Fall-rise tone	-2.45	.307	1.00

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

There is a large disparity between rising and falling tones, as shown in the table above. There were also statistically significant variations between the means of rising and falling tone, with the former being much higher. Furthermore, there was a statistically significant difference between the means of falling tone and rising tone, with the former being more highly valued. There was also a statistically significant difference between the means of the two sets of results, with grammar coming out on top. There were also statistically significant variations between the means of the two measures of tone. Even the rising tone and fall rise were drastically different, leaning more toward the former. This suggests that of the four aspects of listening examined, grammatical competence improved the most. Tone, however, had the smallest increase in quality.

4. Discussion

This research confirms PFs' usefulness in preparing students for the IELTS listening exam. In terms of written output, the experimental group participants did better than the control group.

The ANOVA results show that the two groups are considerably different, with the experimental group coming out on top.

PF was used to instruct the experimental group, while PF was used to instruct the control group. Students in the PFs-assisted group had made more gains in their listening than those in the control group. Therefore, PFS appears to improve learning and listening abilities. This lends credence to the findings of Yenkimaleki and Heuven (2016), who found that PF helped students spot errors more frequently.

The results of this study confirm that including PF improves students' listening. Therefore, PF-taught students greatly outperform their non-PF-taught peers. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effect that establishing awareness of prosodic feature training at both the word and the sentence level has on the development of global listening comprehension. The findings of the study indicated that awareness training of PFs would be of significant benefit to trainee interpreters in the development of their ability to develop listening comprehension skills, provided that the trainees had conscious knowledge of stress at both the word and the sentence level. The prosodic feature awareness of stress at both the word and the sentence level was shown to improve the participant's listening comprehension skill in terms of understanding the message by doing a statistical analysis of the data. This viewpoint is reinforced by the findings of Khaghaninejad and Maleki (2015), who argue that the development of listening comprehension skills is the direct result of the explicit teaching of phonetic rules to students learning English as a foreign language. This finding demonstrates that the explicit teaching of prosodic elements at both the word and the sentence level might be of pedagogically significant importance when it comes to the education of aspiring interpreters. It also converges with Xiaoyu's (2009) claim that the explicit teaching of suprasegmentals for English-as-a-foreign-language students would contribute a lot to overcoming phonological obstacles in their listening comprehension. Xiaoyu found that teaching students English as a foreign language suprasegmentals helped them understand English better.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The development of IELTS-relevant listening skills may be greatly aided by participation in the Prosodic Feature explanation. This research demonstrates that PFS has a significant motivating effect on IELTS studies. A word processor that includes PFS may help students with all four components of the IELTS listening exam.

In the IELTS listening curriculum, PFS is highly recommended. Action Pack XI is a PFS application that has been shown to improve writers' abilities. When applied to the study of English, PFS can help students at any level increase their listening skills for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). PFs have potential as an interactive resource for linguistic development.

Concurrently, further studies are needed to improve listening instruction using PFs tools, including supplementary research methodologies and computer programs. Larger samples and alternative PFS strategies are suggested for future studies on English learning for reasons other than IELTS.

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