

A brief comparison of Vietnamese intonation and English intonation and its implications for teaching English intonation to Vietnamese EFL learners

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Abstract. Intonation is important for learners of English because even with satisfactory consonants and vowels, a phrase/sentence with an incorrect intonation contour may change the intended meaning of the whole utterance. This study, basing its observation and formulation on earlier publications, will briefly compare Vietnamese intonation and English intonation as well as highlight some problems Vietnamese speakers are likely to have in learning English intonation due to the differences between these two language intonations, and to offer some implications for teaching English intonation to Vietnamese EFL learners.

1. Introduction

1.1. Justification of the study

Pronunciation is an area of language use where it is particularly difficult to exert conscious control. And yet, it's important. For beginners, or for those who have learnt mainly from written texts, poor pronunciation can be an obstacle to being understood. For more advanced learners, inappropriate intonation may mean that they convey the wrong message when they speak. Even with satisfactory consonants and vowels (phonemes), a phrase/sentence with incorrect melody may change the intended meaning of the whole utterance. On the other hand, Pike (1945) [1] claims that when brief phrases/sentences are

given the proper pitch pattern (prosodic features), large errors in consonants and vowels seem much less important.

This study is an attempt to briefly compare Vietnamese intonation and English intonation as well as highlight some problems Vietnamese speakers are likely to have in learning English intonation due to the differences between these two language intonations, and to offer some implications for teaching English intonation to Vietnamese EFL learners.

1.2. Method of investigation

“The most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner” (Fries 1946: 9) [2]. For a description of both English and Vietnamese phonology, the observation and formulation will be based on earlier publications.

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1.3. Choice of dialects

Of the various dialects of Vietnamese, the references made to Vietnamese pronunciation in this article for the most part describe the Northern dialect. In addition, the examples given are restricted to social dialects on four levels: mature, casual, standard, and good (according to Joos's criteria). Vietnamese is used as the native language and English as the target language.

1.4. Outline of the article

Part I is an introduction to the study, where a justification of the study, method of investigation and choice of dialects are presented.

Part II provides an overview of the tones and intonation of the Vietnamese language. This lays the basis for comparing aspects of Vietnamese intonation with those of English intonation that follow.

In Part III, an overview of the tones and intonation of the English language is presented. In Part IV, some aspects of intonation which are different in English and Vietnamese are addressed, and implications for teaching English intonation to Vietnamese learners are made.

2. The Vietnamese word structure and the Vietnamese tones, intonation

Generally, there are two aspects in Vietnamese that make the language different from English. First, most Vietnamese words are monosyllabic. Second, Vietnamese is a tonal language, that is, words with unrelated meanings may have the same sound combination but differ only in the tone of voice used to produce the sound combination.

2.1. Vietnamese word structure

Vietnamese words are primarily monosyllabic. In the Vietnamese language, the syllable is the minimal meaningful unit that cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts. Each syllable consists of two mandatory components: a tone and a nuclear vowel; in addition, three optional components may be present: an initial consonant, a sound indicating the labialization (rounding of the lips) of the syllable, and a final consonant or semivowel.

In case of the Vietnamese polysyllabic structure, the word is a combination of monosyllabic words. Examples can be observed from Table 1:

Table 1. Examples of Vietnamese polysyllabic structure

Polysyllabic structure	Monosyllabic words	English equivalent
"cửa hàng bách hoá" /kʊə ha:ŋ ba:k hɔə/	"store," "hundred," "goods"	department store
"cuộc nói chuyện" /kʊək nɔɪ tʃjuən/	"session," "talk," "story"	conversation

2.2. Vietnamese tones

Vietnamese is a tonal language in which changes of the pitch level and/or contour signal a change in meaning. The nature of tone in Vietnamese has been a subject of much controversy. Since tone is a constituent pitch which overlies characteristic syllables as a whole, several linguists regard it as a segmental phoneme (Chao 1942, Rygaloff 1973, Cao 2007) [3,4]. However, many linguists pay more attention to its prosodic aspect and consider tone

to be absolutely as essential a part of the word as its consonant and its vowel.

In the instance that follows, the words differ lexically solely in the tone exerted to them, and such words are likely to have unrelated meanings.

"ban" means *committee*

"bàn" means *table* or *discuss*

"bán" means *sell* or *half*

"bản" means *mountainous village*

“bạn” means *friend*

The Northern dialect of Vietnamese has six tones: midlevel, low-falling, high-rising, low-falling-rising, high-rising broken and low-falling broken. Except for the mid-level tone, all the other tones are denoted by diacritics over or under one of the vowels in the syllable in Vietnamese speech. Each tone has its own pitch level. If we draw a short vertical line to present the range of the variation of pitch and divide it into four equal intervals with five points, these five points, counted from the

bottom to the top, represent the five degrees as Chart 1 shows.

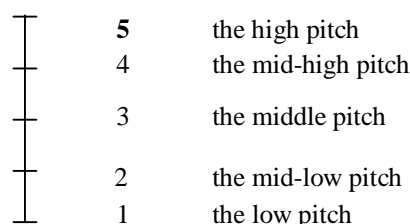


Chart 1. The pitch levels of the Vietnamese tones.

The pitch levels of the six tones can be presented on such a five-degree chart as in Chart 2 below (based on Tíe 1967 and Cù et al 1978) [5,6].

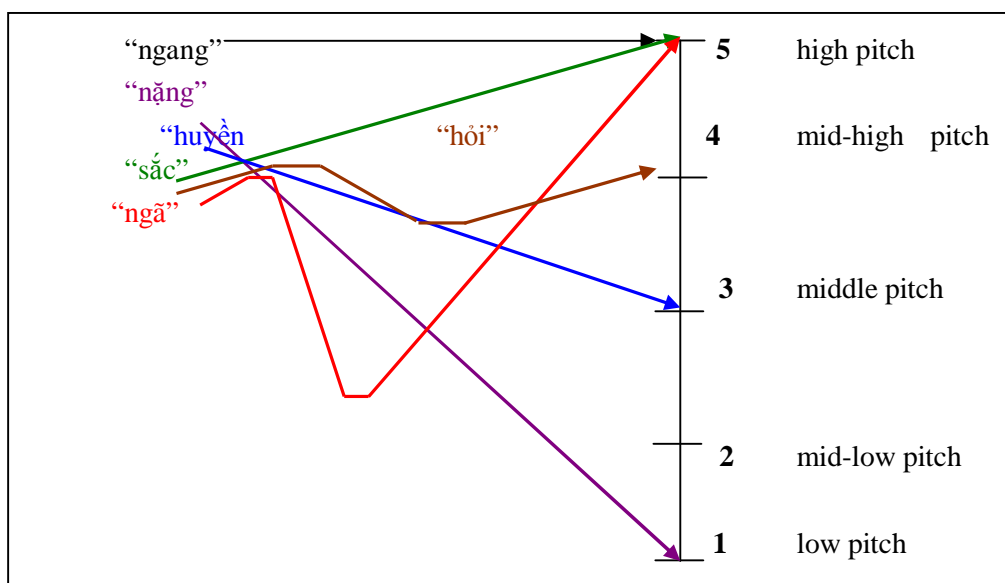


Chart 2. The presentation of pitch levels of the six tones in Vietnamese.

Table 2 below indicates how the various tonal designations are employed in the Northern dialect of Vietnamese, with comparatively parallel descriptions in English intonation.

Table 2. Vietnamese tonal designations and parallel descriptions in English intonation

Tone	Diacritic	English description	Examples
Ngang/Không (midlevel)	(no marking)	high-level tone	“mơ” means <i>dream</i>
Huyền (low-falling)	˘	low-falling tone	“mờ” means <i>vague</i>
Ngã (high-rising broken)	˜	high-abrupt tone	“mỡ” means <i>fat</i>
Hỏi (low-falling-rising)	̉	low-rising tone	“mở” means <i>open</i>
Sắc (high rising)	̉	high-rising tone	“mớ” means <i>bundle</i>
Nặng (low-falling broken)	̣	low-abrupt tone	“mợ” means <i>father’s brother’s wife</i>

2.3. Vietnamese intonation

Vietnamese has not only a “word-pitch system” (tone) but also a “phrase-pitch system” (intonation). In addition to the syllabic pitch (tone), undoubtedly there must be the rises and

falls of pitch which constitute intonation contour in the utterances.

Đỗ (2009) [7] indicates five main components of Vietnamese intonation, as follows:

Table 3. Five main components of Vietnamese intonation

Component	Distinctive features
Pitch / register	high vs. low
Intensity / loudness	strong vs. weak
Duration / Length	long vs. short
Tempo	pause vs. continuous
Contour	level vs. unlevel

Table 4. describes the operation of intonation in Vietnamese reduced sentences

No.	Intonation	Description	Use	Type of sentence
1	short	In this intonation pattern, the duration of the tone is shorter than its inherent duration.	finished, assertive	strongly affirmative
2	long	In this intonation pattern, the duration of the tone is longer than its inherent duration.	with hesitation, delay	
3	high (rising)	In this intonation pattern, the pitch of the tone is one level higher than its inherent pitch.	confirm the truth	
4	very high (high rising)	In this intonation pattern, the pitch of the tone is maximum.	question, surprised, want to know more, challenge	interrogative
5	low (falling)	In this intonation pattern, the pitch of the tone is one level lower than its inherent pitch.	tentatively accept, wait to hear more	affirmative
6	rising - falling	In this intonation pattern, the pitch of the tone rises to the highest level (5), then followed by a fall.	with negativism	sarcasm, negative, command

(adapted from Do, 2009: 194)

Kieu and Grice (...) put it that there is interaction between syllabic tones and intonation. Yet, according to Alan, C. (1986), Vietnamese intonation is used the same way as in other languages. To him, the different tones are somehow "attracted" by the intonation movement. Register tones are levelled, low tones widen their range, high tones are more strongly marked in interrogatives. Yet, intonation contours seem to be a bit more "cautiously used" in Vietnamese than in other languages: In questions,

for example, there is normal declination until the proximity of the sentence final question marker, where the rise begins; the overall register is yet higher than in declaratives.

In terms of the functions of Vietnamese intonation, Đỗ (2009) states, “intonation is one of the conditions for a sentence/utterance to exist and function communicatively.” In communication, the Vietnamese intonation has such functions as grammatical, attitudinal, implicational/logic, pragmatic (see Đỗ 2009).

3. The English word structure and the English intonation

3.1. English word structure

English words can be monosyllabic or polysyllabic, each syllable with a vowel - either a monophthong or a diphthong. Consonants may be found at word-initial position, word-final position, or in both positions. There are consonant clusters in English.

In fact, English has a great variety of polysyllabic structures, ranging from two syllables to eight syllables with the minimum number of one stress pattern to the maximum number of eight patterns. The English polysyllabic structure is simply a close-knit word no matter how many syllables it contains.

3.2. English tones and intonation

Although English employs tonal variations, the English intonation is different from tone as used in Vietnamese. In English, intonation patterns reflect differences in the intention of the utterance, but they do not change the basic meaning of the word or words used.

Examples: How are you today?

 - • • • \

Emphasize time

 \ • • • -

Emphasize concern of health

b. The Rising Tone

In its shortest form, the Rising tone consists of a rise in the voice from a fairly low pitch to a high one. The rise is on the stressed syllable or from the stressed syllable to a following one.

Example: But is it true that they're checking in soon?

 • - • - • • • - • • /

The rising tone conveys an impression that something more is to follow - "an invitation to continue".

3.2.1. English tones

Crystal (1969) and Ladefoged (1982) [9] identify four basic tones. Brazil et al. (1980) and Roach (1983) [14] endorse five tones (fall, rise, rise-fall, fall-rise, and level) whereas Cruttenden (1986) [15] recognizes seven tones (high-fall, low-fall, high-rise, low-rise, fall-rise, rise-fall, and mid-level). From the author's own teaching experience, following are the four basic types of tone in English that can be efficiently taught to non-native speakers of English:

- a. Falling/Fall/Glide-down
- b. Rising/The First Rising Tone/Glide-up
- c. Falling-Rising/Fall-Rise/Dive
- d. Rising - Falling

a. The Falling/Glide-down

In its shortest form, the Falling tone starts fairly high and then falls low. In case there are several syllables, it starts fairly high on the first stressed syllable. The second stressed syllable is a little lower, the third stressed syllable is lower still until the nucleus is reached and the fall takes place on this nuclear syllable which is often referred to as the tonic syllable.

c. The Dive

In its shortest form, the Dive consists of fall followed by a rise which reaches a point a little above the middle of our voice. The Dive may take place on a single syllable or extend over several syllables.

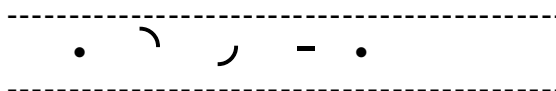
The Dive can be used in statements uttered with hesitation:

Example: They may be home. I'm not sure.



This tone can be used to correct something previously said:

Example: She stayed up last night.

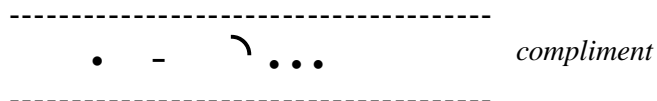
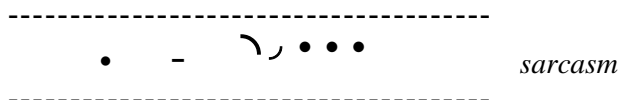


No. Not last night. The night before last



In statements said with sarcasm or irony, the Dive can be observed:

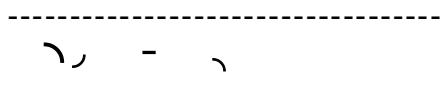
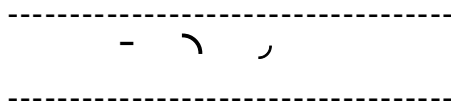
Example: You sing wonderfully.



The Dive is used in initial vocatives:

Example: Sit down, Ann.

Ann, sit down.

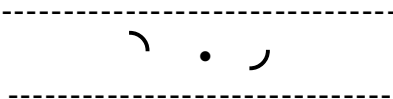


final vocative

initial vocative

In initial adverbials:

E.g. When he comes,...



d. The Rising-Falling Tone

In the Rising - Falling tone, the pitch rises and then falls.

E.g.1. A: You wouldn't do an awful thing like that, would you?

B: ^No.

E.g.2. A: Isn't the view lovely!

^
B: Yes.

The Rising-Falling tone is used to convey rather strong feelings of approval, disapproval or surprise.

In terms of functions of intonation in English, there are four main functions namely attitudinal, grammatical, accentual and discourse.

First, intonation is used to convey our feelings and attitudes as we speak, and this adds special kind of "meaning" to spoken language.

Second, intonation helps to produce the effect of prominence on syllables that need to be perceived as stressed and in particular the placing of tonic stress on a particular syllable marks out the word to which it belongs as the most important in the tone unit.

Third, intonation can help the listener recognize the grammar and syntactic structure of what is being said by using the information contained in the intonation: phrases, clauses, sentences, questions vs. statements, grammatical subordination.

Fourth, intonation can signal to the listener what is to be taken as "new" information and what is already "given", can suggest where the speaker is indicating some sort of contrast or link with material in another tone unit and, in conversation, can convey to the listener what kind of response is expected.

4. Aspects of intonation that are different in English and Vietnamese

In comparing Vietnamese intonation and English intonation, a big difference between the pitch feature of them can be found. Generally, varying the pitch to differentiate the meanings of utterances occurs in every language, but such variations in pitch are not all alike in all human languages. Vietnamese has two kinds of pitch contours: syllabic pitch for individual syllables and intonational pitch for longer utterances or sentences, whereas English only holds the latter feature of pitch. The English intonation patterns over longer stretches of speech have a fundamentally different function from those on individual syllables of Vietnamese speech. In one respect, the intonation contours of both languages are similar in that they do not make any difference in the "dictionary meaning" of an utterance; three basic intonation patterns (falling, rising, rising-falling) of both languages just tell the hearer something concerning the emotional attitude of the speaker or the apparent purpose of making the utterance. However, the English intonation patterns are not completely apparent to the Vietnamese EFL learner. In various situations in real-life communication, information, intentions and feelings expressed by a native English speaker through intonation may not be understood by the Vietnamese EFL learner. Furthermore, the pronunciation aspect in Vietnamese of producing words with different tones may cause the Vietnamese speaker to make unnatural intonation contours when he/she produces English sentences.

In English, the pitch of voice in an assertive statement is usually dropped at the end. In Vietnamese, the meanings of the sentences may completely change if the pitch is dropped.

“Ông ấy đi tu”. (He has become a Buddhist monk.)

Versus

“Ông ấy đi tù”. (He has been sent to prison.)

are completely different. It can be observed that intonation in Vietnamese is strictly restricted by the tones. Learners' attention should be drawn to the fact that the Vietnamese language uses certain grammatical patterns for assertive, negative and interrogative statements.

In English, the intonation may function as the only means of distinguishing various types of sentences; for example, “He is coming.” versus “He is coming?” In Vietnamese, intonation is rarely used as a way to form questions. If an assertive statement ends in a word with *thanh sắc* (the high-rising tone), the voice should be raised at the end of the sentence; for example, “Hôm nay trời nóng lắm.” (It is really hot today.) On the other hand, if a question ends in a word with *thanh huyền* (the low-falling tone), the voice should be lowered at the end of the question; for example, “Hôm nay trời nóng lắm à?” (Is it really hot today?)

However, since the present literature on Vietnamese intonation is quite modest and the framework for describing Vietnamese intonation and that for describing English intonation are incompatible in some respects, not many aspects of intonation can be easily compared in this study.

Implications for teaching English intonation to Vietnamese EFL learners

The pronunciation mistakes made by people learning to speak a foreign language are almost always carry-overs from their native languages. Through a comparison of the intonation of Vietnamese with that of English, an EFL instructor can anticipate potential problems for Vietnamese learners of English while learning this aspect of pronunciation.

Because Vietnamese is a tone language, speakers may tend to be sensitive to changes of

pitch in speech, but they are used to hearing pitch changes over a single syllables, rather than over longer stretches. It may be wise to do some perception practice on intonation patterns extended over a whole clause before encouraging students to produce English intonation in communicative situations.

The EFL teacher is recommended to do the following:

- Learn how to describe pronunciation: The teacher should familiarize him/herself with a system for describing English basic intonation patterns. These are challenging tasks, but they can bring rich dividends. The knowledge will help the teacher to understand more clearly what his/her learners are aiming for in terms of pronunciation, and what their problems are.

- Be aware of the teacher's own pronunciation. The Vietnamese EFL teacher's accent is probably different from the Received Pronunciation or North American English which the learners may regard as 'correct'. Learners can have strong views about some accents being superior to others! Talk to them about different accents, emphasizing that there is more than one acceptable model.

- Direct students' attention to English basic intonation patterns

- Alert students to similarities and differences in intonation between Vietnamese and English

- Teach students to think in terms of the speaker's intention in any given speech situation

- Base the teaching firmly on communicative language teaching practice

- Give feedback and practice using instructional technology. One way of doing so is by letting learners listen to recordings of themselves. This can be a valuable awareness raising strategy; they may well hear features of their intonation that they simply do not have time to notice when actually speaking. As a result, they may be able to work on weak areas consciously.

- Allow for student-centered classrooms and self-paced or self-directed learning

- Create classroom exercises which promote learners' cognitive ability to correct both themselves and their peers

- Employ both perception and production tests

Nearly all of the established EFL textbooks are designed to be used regardless of the native language of the learner. They accomplish this by dealing directly with numerous problem areas with English intonation. Adapting one of these textbooks for Vietnamese students requires going through the lessons and identifying those which deal with problem areas for Vietnamese learners. Once these lessons have been identified, it will probably be beneficial to supplement the material with additional examples, exercises and activities. It will often be helpful to return to specific lessons which the students have studied, but which provide examples and exercises in features which they continue to misuse. It is believed that development of intonation will come more readily from careful, progressive and systematic training, and from practice and language use.

5. Conclusion

This study has compared several intonational features of Vietnamese and those of English, and provided some implications for teaching English intonation to Vietnamese EFL learners. Tones and intonation are important discourse strategies to communicate effectively; simply, it is not what you say, it is how you say it. Therefore, a proficiency in intonation is a requirement for non-native learners of English for a better communicative discourse with native or non-native speakers of English.

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So sánh ngữ điệu tiếng Việt - ngữ điệu tiếng Anh và ý nghĩa của so sánh này đối với việc dạy ngữ điệu tiếng Anh cho người Việt

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Ngữ điệu đóng vai trò quan trọng đối với người học tiếng Anh bởi ngay cả khi phát âm đúng phụ âm và nguyên âm, người ta vẫn không thể chuyển tải được đúng nghĩa của câu nói nếu sử dụng sai ngữ điệu. Nghiên cứu này so sánh ngữ điệu tiếng Việt và ngữ điệu tiếng Anh dựa trên các tài liệu từ các nguồn khác nhau, từ đó đưa ra một số vấn đề người Việt có thể gặp khi học ngữ điệu tiếng Anh do những khác biệt giữa ngữ điệu của hai ngôn ngữ, và đề xuất một số biện pháp dạy ngữ điệu tiếng Anh cho người Việt.