

The backyard of EFL teaching: issues behind L1 prosodic interference in Russian English

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Modern EFL teaching in Russia pays much attention to variations in the cultural schemata represented by students' L1 and the target language, as well as behavioral patterns of their speakers. However, teaching practitioners scarcely address certain issues of Russian L1 prosodic interference that cause attitudinal confusion on the part of native English speakers. The study explores the wrong pragmatic effects created in English due to the transfer of Russian intonation contours and the reasons behind the failure of Russian EFL teachers to address the issue. Specifically, it investigates English speakers' negative perceptions of Russian L1 intonation and examines Russian teachers' practices and beliefs with regard to the place of intonation in a language classroom. The paper draws on findings from recent studies on effects of Russian L1 prosodic features in English and the results obtained from a survey conducted by the author among 29 Russian EFL teachers. The paper argues that whereas L1 intonation interference seriously affects learners' cultural image, its role in EFL teaching is significantly undervalued as compared to that of grammar and vocabulary. It concludes by suggesting practical ways to facilitate intonation teaching in a Russian EFL classroom.

Keywords: prosodic interference, L1 interference, intonation, pragmatics, Russian English

Introduction

Due to certain prosodic features, which are normally ignored in the process of English language teaching in Russia, it is not infrequent that learners, though demonstrating a high level proficiency in grammatical and lexical accuracy of the target language (English), still fail to produce the desired pragmatic effect on the listeners. Various researchers have addressed this issue (Crosby, 2013; Jenkins, 2007; Pavlenko, 2007; Perve-sentseva, 2013; Proshina, 2010; Vishnevskaya, 2013), beginning with Leed (1965) who conducted a most comprehensive study of Russian intonation in English. Literature review and the author's own teaching practice have helped single out the most common prosodic interference features which are demonstrated by even proficient English speakers of Russian background.

Contributing to attitudinal confusion on the part of native English speakers, these features are not generally addressed in the teaching process in educational institutions unless these specialize in translation studies and prepare professional interpreters and translators. The issue in question is connected with suprasegmental features of Russian English, specifically intonation contours, which seem to be absolutely similar in form in Russian and English, but differ in their distribution. And this is where L1 interference most readily comes into play: the functional discrepancy between the application of such contours in the two languages produces an undesirable pragmatic effect on the listeners and contributes to the negative image of Russian EFL learners in the eyes of the English-speaking community.

Russian L1 prosodic interference

Intonation as the critical element revealing attitudinal states

Intonation, as a suprasegmental feature of pronunciation, reveals itself through 'the meaningful use that

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speakers make of changes in their voice pitch' (Thornbury, 2011, p. 110). It is one of the most influential non-verbal aspects of language that, as Kelly (2011) wisely observes, 'we are very sensitive to, but mostly at an unconscious level' (p. 86).

Being a prosodic feature of language, intonation does more than simply help to determine the meaning: it gives clues about the speaker's communicative intention (Solomennik & Cherentsova, 2013) and his attitude to what he is saying (Mitrofanova, 2012; Thornbury, 2011). Crystal (2012) illustrates the attitudinal function of intonation, which he calls 'emotional', by a line from an old song which says 'it ain't what you say, it's the way you say it.' (p. 249). About 50 years ago Leed (1965) even went as far as to claim that 'misunderstandings due to intonational differences ... may color one's attitude towards an entire nation or culture' (p. 62).

In light of the aforesaid, it seems logical that in case of L1 interference wrong application of intonation contours largely causes a misunderstanding of attitude or intent behind the utterance rather than of content (Mentcher, in Crosby, 2013).

The role of intonation in interactive communication, therefore, cannot be underestimated: although it is non-verbal, it often determines the total impact of the utterance. This may explain why English speakers make a good deal of allowance for imperfect articulation of individual sounds, but are 'less able to make the same allowance for mistakenly used intonation' (Vishnevskaya, 2012, p.226); the view supported by a wide range of studies (Kang, in Kremenchugsky, 2013; Pervesentseva, 2013; Thornbury, 2013; etc).

Transfer of L1 intonation contours

Research suggests that behind the negative attitude expressed by English speakers with regard to Russian intonation patterns lie peculiarities of prosodic features of the Russian language which are likely to be interpreted by English speakers not as linguistic differences but 'as directly revealing personality traits or at least emotional or attitudinal states' (Hughes, 2008, p. 38). This phenomenon is stipulated by the fact that the same intonation contours in different speech communities may 'differ in prototypical meanings assigned to intonation contours' (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 52). Thus, while being correct in their form, they serve different communicative purposes and may be wrongly applied in the situation (Ladd, 1996; Vishnevskaya, 2012). This means that mainly prosodic interference is caused by the difference not in form, but in the intonation function.

Moving on to the question of the types of prosodic features of Russian English, the article further presents an overview of certain intonation contours that following the same pattern in the two languages differ in meanings assigned and lead to the wrong pragmatic ef-

fect created by Russian EFL learners due to the transfer of their L1 intonation contour to the target language. Specific features of Russian intonation which play the major role in the issue of L1 interference will be highlighted subsequently with regard to, first, rising intonation contours, then level intonation contours, and falling ones.

Rising intonation contours

I. General questions

How does L1 interference show in rising intonation contours? Basically, there are two main incorrect applications of the rising tone by Russian EFL learners. First, for the purpose of marking logical stress Russian EFL learners often use a sharp rise in the middle of a general question mirroring the corresponding L1 intonation contour. Compare the intonation patterns of the 2 utterances (an asterisk (*) in the examples below indicates accented words):

*English: Is this */your pen?* (Visson, 2005)

*Russian: Rech idet o *serje/znoj summe?* (Solomennik & Cherentsova, 2013)

This is not to say that English does not have logical stress. Rather, the English low-rising nuclear tone on the stressed word is gradual and not so sharp and abrupt as in Russian where it is much more marked (Aizlewood, 2013; Leed, 1965; Mitrofanova, 2012; Monk & Burak, 2001; Vishnevskaya, 2012). Research shows that such usage of the rising tone by Russians is perceived by native speakers of English as expressing disbelief, doubt, annoyance (Leed, 1965; Visson, 2005).

II. Special and alternative questions

Secondly, Russian speakers of English tend to pronounce special and alternative questions with a rising intonation (Monk & Burak, 2001; Proshina, 2010):

*Special question: Why did you */say that?*

*Alternative question: Do you want */coffee or */tea?*

Interestingly, it should be noted that this intonation pattern of special and alternative questions does not follow the basic Russian intonation model typical for this type of sentences. In the intonation paradigm of Russian presented by Solomennik and Cherentsova (2013, p.12), the corresponding types of questions end with a falling intonation:

*Special questions: Kto *govori\`t? Gde vy *rodili`s?*

*Alternative questions: Vy predpochitajete *gosti/nicu ili chastnuju *kvarti\`ru?*

Undoubtedly, the reasons behind the application of the rising intonation pattern by Russian EFL learners in special and alternative questions are worth further investigation.

At the same time, it should be noted that while the typical Russian intonation used in English general and special questions is rated by native English speakers as sounding more arrogant, angry, and critical, no corresponding biases for Russian speakers' ratings of Eng-

lish accented speak was found. (Holden & Hogan, as cited in Philippot, Feldman & Coats, 1999, p.198).

Level intonation contours

In case of transfer of Russian L1 level intonation contours, communication problems arise when the final pitch level is identical to the one in primary stress.

Whereas in Russian this intonation contour is frequent in semi-official announcements, lecture style, and conversational Russian, Leed (1965) points out that a final level pitch in English carries with it strong implication expressing complete lack of interest combined with annoyance and warns that the English speaker 'must not attach the same emotional connotation to this contour as he does in his own language' (p.70). E.g.: **I don't care.**

Falling intonation contours

I. Declarative sentences

Turning to the attitudinal confusion caused by the impact of application of Russian falling intonation contours, here the contrast in meaning between the two languages lies in the fact that the normal declarative sentence intonation in Russian is the intonation contour with a sharp fall on the stressed syllable and the low pitch on primary stress (Leed, 1965; Solomennik & Cherentsova, 2013):

Russian: Pojezd sledujet do konechnoj stancii (Solomennik & Cherentsova, 2013, p. 12).

Here, due to L1 interference, Russian speakers tend to apply the contour of the Russian low falling tone which is less gradual and less final than the corresponding English low falling nuclear tone (Vishnevskaya, 2012). This is similar to a much sharper rise used by Russian students on the stressed word in the middle of a general question than would be appropriate for English.

Such contours used for colorless statements in Russian sound striking to the English ear as being emotionally coloured and considered to be anything but neutral, most often even sounding annoyed. A most comprehensive comparison of falling tones combined with different pitches on primary stress is laid out in Leed's study (1965). Cf.:

English (tired, probably disgusted): I want to go home (p. 64)

II. General questions

Apart from incorrect application of falling tones in declarative sentences, Russian learners frequently apply falling tones to general questions, impoliteness of which fact is emphasized by a few practitioners as well (Monk & Burak, 2001; Shoebottom (n.d.)): Did you tell her?

Effects of Russian L1 interference in intonation

As has been mentioned above, intonation features are unconscious, hard to detect, and not 'as accessible

to direct cognitive intervention as the pronunciation of individual sounds or the manipulation of grammatical constructions or the learning of new vocabulary' (Underhill, 2005, p. 194).

Operating at the subconscious level, meanings of intonation patterns are felt intuitively by native speakers, but are completely ignored in the process of English language acquisition by native speakers of Russian who are not usually taught non-verbal aspects of language explicitly in an English classroom and, *ipso facto*, do not possess the knowledge of such. Indeed, in spite of the evident importance of intonation in communication, in Russia (as well as in many other non-English speaking countries) 'L2 learners, perennially concerned about pronunciation of vowels and consonants, are rarely aware of suprasegmental differences' (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 67).

At the same time, researchers have long pointed out inappropriateness of transferring Russian intonation to English utterances. According to many researchers (Holden & Hogan in Philippot, Feldman & Coats, 1999; Leed, 1965; Monk & Burak, 2001; Visson, 2005; etc.), Russian L1 prosodic interference produces a serious negative effect on the way Russian EFL learners are perceived by native speakers of English. For instance, back in 1965, Leed described 'Americans referring to "his typical bureaucratic tone of voice" with reference to Russian speakers who have no intention of conveying such an impression' (p. 64).

Since then little has changed. Indeed, most recent studies (Crosby, 2013; Jenkins, 2007; Pavlenko, 2007; Pervesentseva, 2013; Proshina, 2010; Vishnevskaya, 2012; etc.) have brought to life numerous examples of a rather negative attitude to Russian accents on the part of native speakers of English. A study by Jenkins (2007) revealed that English with Russian intonation was described 'in unremittingly negative terms' (p.178), including such descriptions as 'harsh', 'strong', 'strange', 'heavy', 'sharp', and 'aggressive'. Pervesentseva (2013) adds to the list such descriptions as 'unfriendly', 'rude' or 'threatening'.

Interestingly, Crosby (2013) observes that 'English speakers react negatively to Russian accents more often than Russian speakers react negatively to English accents' (p. 24).

Intonation in an EFL class in Russia: a case study

Methods

The methodological base of the research consists of a quantitative analysis of the results of an online survey on teacher beliefs which was conducted among 29 English language teachers in one of Russia's leading universities – the National Research University Higher

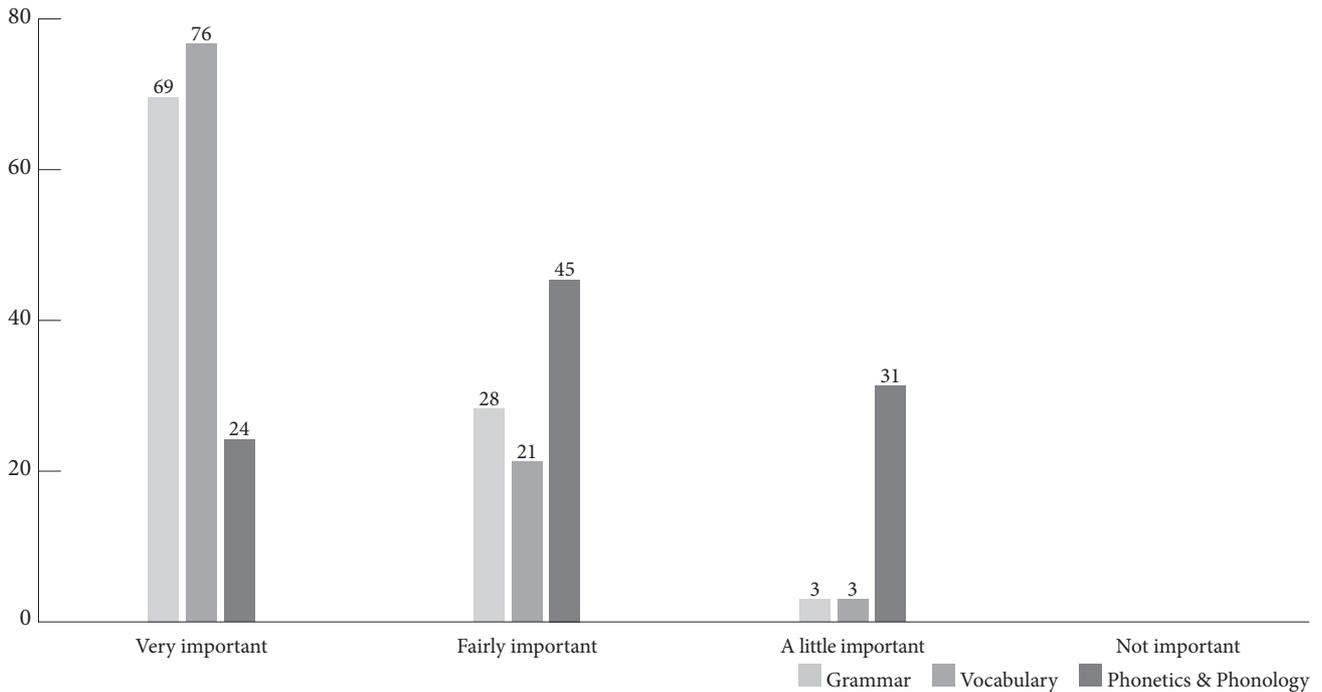


Figure 1. The place of intonation in EFL teaching.

School of Economics. The survey included questions asking the participants whose native language is Russian to rate a particular aspect of English teaching

(e.g. How important for language teaching is each of the following: grammar, vocabulary, phonetics and phonology?), provide specific data related to their everyday teaching practice (e.g. In your teaching practice, how much possibility do you have to practice intonation contours?), assess the importance of certain language features for successful mastery of language (e.g. What is your point of view on importance of the following for the mastery of language: correct articulation of individual sounds, sentence stress, intonation contours, rhythm, aspects of connected speech?), etc.

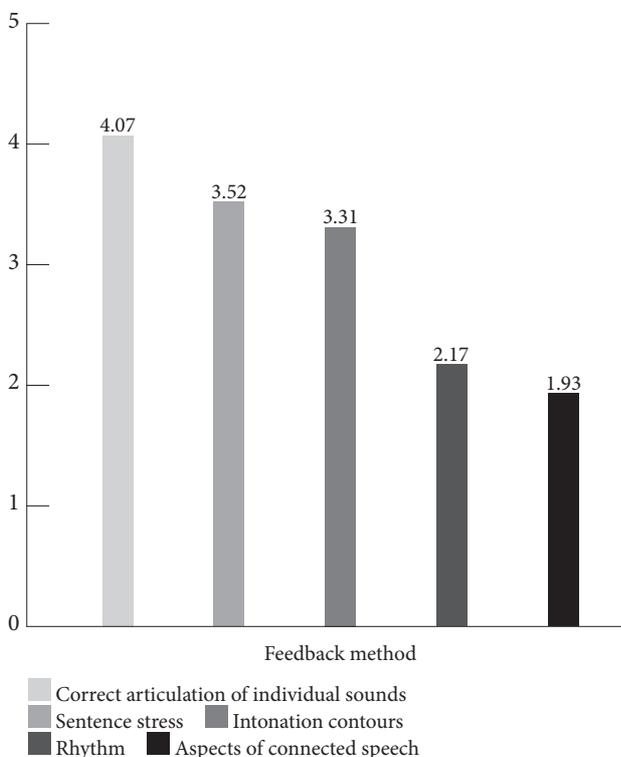


Figure 2. Relative importance of specific phonetic and phonological features for learning.

The results of the online questionnaire analysis were supplemented by the qualitative analysis of case study interviews conducted with a number of participants in order to clarify their answers or, where the comments generated questions beyond the questionnaire framework, to get a deeper understanding of their views on intonation in the system of language teaching. Thus, for instance, the interviewees were asked to explain their choice when prioritizing language features taught, or to clarify how and why, from their point of view, lack of accuracy in certain language forms can contribute to the negative perception of Russian EFL learners on the part of native speakers of English.

Results

The study revealed that only 24% out of the 29 interviewees believed intonation to be really important for mastery of language (Fig. 1). About 31% considered it to be only a little important; top priority in

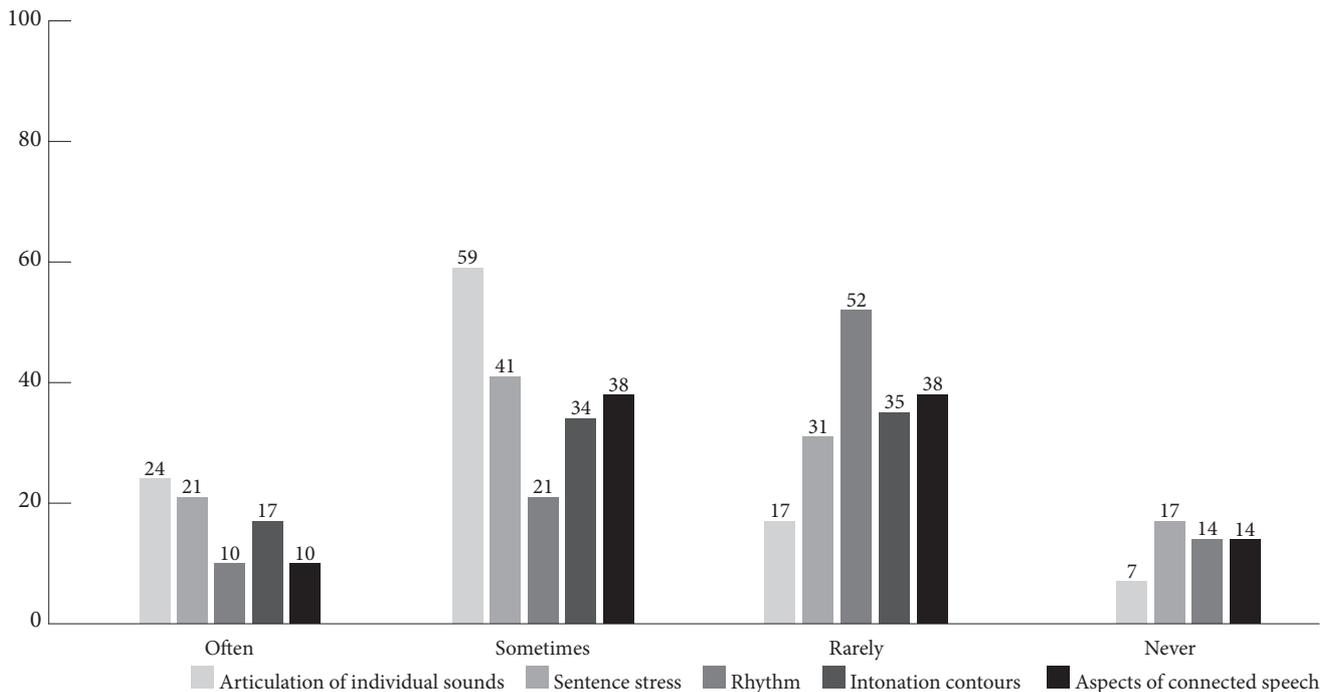


Figure 3. The amount of practice given to specific phonetic and phonological features.

teaching being given to vocabulary (76%) and grammar (68%).

Furthermore, when asked to rate (according to a 5-point scale) the importance of particular aspects of pronunciation for language learning, intonation again was not among the top popular answers (Fig. 2): the respondents gave top priority to correct articulation of individual sounds (the highest mean score of 4.07) and sentence stress (the mean score of 3.52), whereas the importance of intonation contours for the mastery of language was assigned the middle position having the mean score of 3.31; only rhythm and aspects of connected speech receiving lower scores of 2.17 and 1.93, respectively.

More detailed analysis shows that theoretical evaluations of the importance of the phonological aspects described are higher than the actual amount of practice allocated to teaching these in real life (Fig. 3).

Figure 3 shows that whereas theoretical significance of intonation for teaching was rated at about 66%, in practice only 15 teachers (about 52%) admitted dealing with intonation patterns in class; among them only 5 teachers (17% of the respondents) actually dealing with intonation on a regular basis ('often'), and 10 teachers (34%) practicing it only 'sometimes'. These numbers stand in sharp contrast with the amount of attention regularly given to the practice of individual sounds, as was acknowledged by 83% of the respondents.

The fact that priority is given to the articulation of individual sounds, however, does not comply with the

view that native speakers of English have of foreign accents. Thornbury (2013), for instance, states that native speakers 'frequently identify the non-native-like use of stress, rhythm, and intonation as being a greater bar to intelligibility, and a stronger marker of accent, than the way individual vowel and consonant sounds are pronounced' (p. 37). Likewise, Kang (2010) points out the significance of suprasegmental features for the listener's perception of an accent (Kang, in Kremenchugsky, 2013).

Among the reasons for insufficient attention given to intonation teaching in class, many respondents mentioned the limited time allocated to English classes in a school curriculum; the fact acknowledged by 10% of the teachers interviewed. Besides, certain classes, e.g. classes which focus entirely on writing skills, simply exclude almost any possibility of providing students with sufficient, or even minimal, practice of intonation contours (as acknowledged by 7% of the respondents).

It should be noted that quite a few interviewees (59%) admitted that L1 intonation is the most frequent factor which reveals itself in Russian English (Fig. 4). Russian L1 intonation was observed in the target language even more often than wrong pronunciation of individual sounds (reported by 45% of the respondents) or transfer of L1 grammar structures and vocabulary (52% and 38% of the respondents, respectively).

In terms of the wrong pragmatic effect produced by L1 phonological features (Fig. 5), 34% of the respondents are aware of the negative role Russian L1 prosodic

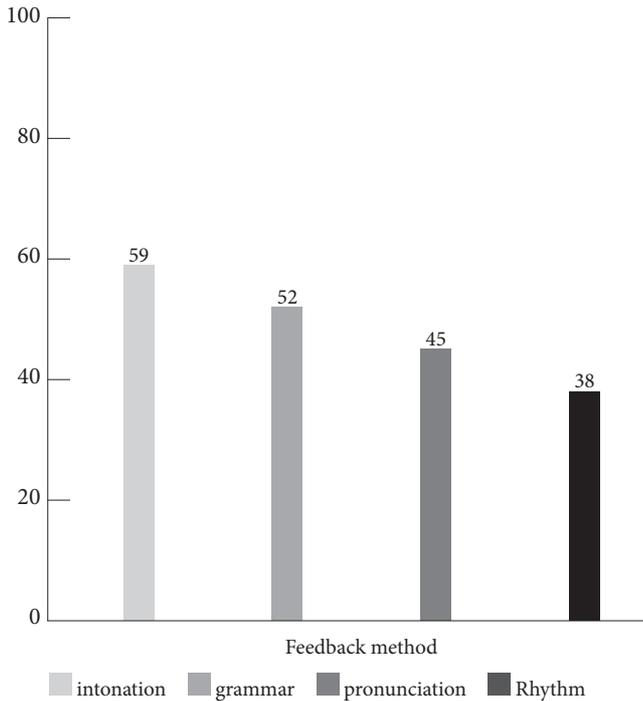


Figure 4. Features of L1 interference revealed in Russian English.

interference may ‘often’ play in communication with native English speakers; 34% considering it to be the issue only ‘sometimes’; 21% and 11% considering it likely to happen ‘rarely’ or ‘never’, respectively.

Among those who acknowledged the wrong effect produced by Russian L1 intonation in English, 4 par-

ticipants (approx. 13% of the total number of the respondents) admitted that Russian L1 intonation was pointed out to them as an interfering feature during communication with native speakers. Two respondents mentioned being familiar with recent research on the matter, while the others found it difficult to provide any valid explanation for the view held and seemed to base their answer entirely on intuition.

Discussion

In terms of students’ exposure to intonation patterns in an EFL class, data analysis results go in line with other studies (Crosby, 2013; Pavlenko, 2007; Vishnevskaya, 2012) which have revealed that teachers of English mainly focus on studying grammar and vocabulary whereas prosodic features of the language do not receive proper attention. And even in those classes where pronunciation is explicitly taught, there is more focus on segmentals and little focus on intonation. On the other hand, the survey results look more optimistic than those obtained in the study by Pervesentseva (2013) where the author states that often ‘intonation seems to be the last aspect that is taught to students if ever at all’ (p.152): on the whole, 52% of the respondents deal with intonation in class at least ‘sometimes’. However, this relatively high number may be explained by the institutional affiliation of the respondents who come from a prestigious university based in Moscow, have more exposure to communication with native speakers than many of their colleagues around the

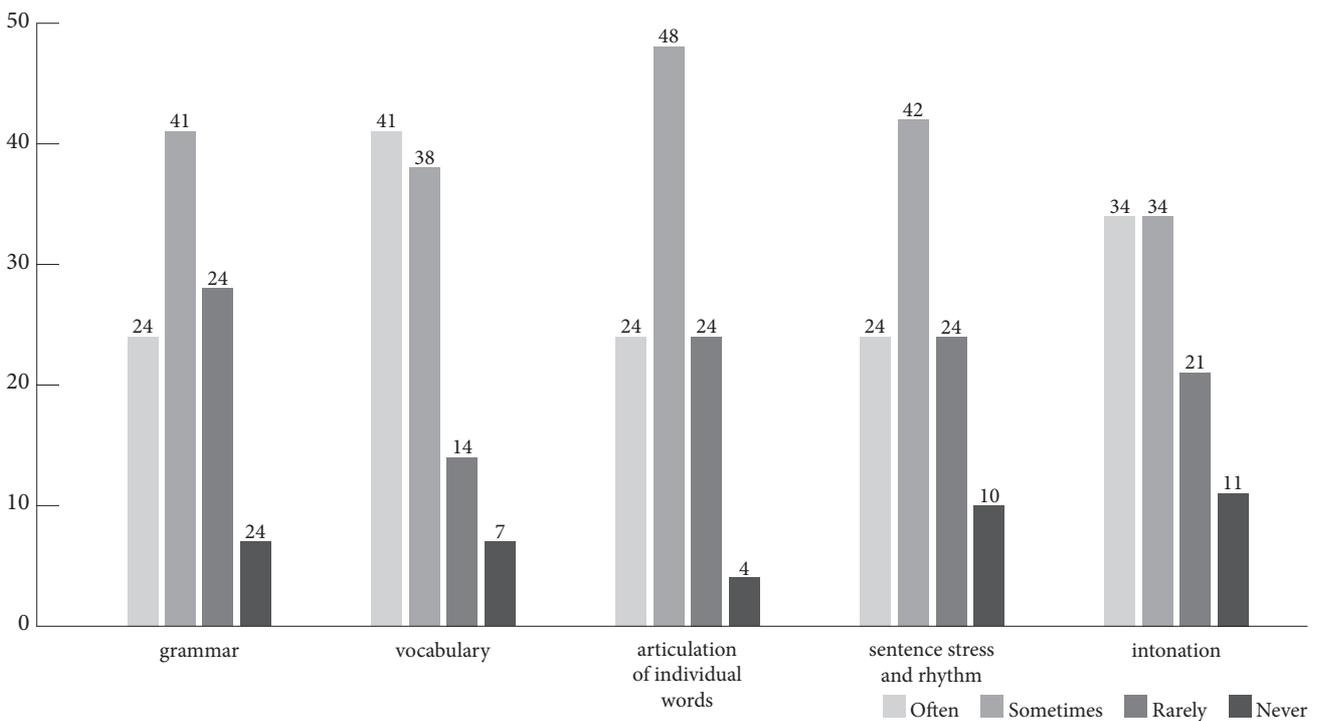


Figure 5. Perceptions by Russian teachers of the wrong pragmatic effect created by lack of accuracy in.

country, and thus are more familiar with the problem of prosodic interference. As for Russian EFL learners, they are, as a rule, totally unaware of the issues connected with the wrong usage of intonation contours. Moreover, examples of Russian L1 prosodic interference are often combined with a high level proficiency in grammatical and lexical accuracy of the target language, discrepancy between which in this case sounds particularly inappropriate.

One may wonder how it can happen that even proficient English speakers of Russian background fail to notice weaknesses in the effect their intonation produces. First, this may be explained by the illusive nature of intonation, whose effect is mainly perceived at an unconscious level and due to which intonation is 'not always easy to shift to the conscious mind for research or teaching purposes' (Mitrofanova, 2012, p. 282). Therefore, intonation mistakes persist until the very advanced levels of proficiency in English, with L1 intonation often becoming 'fossilized'. Vishnevskaya (2012), for instance, notes that suprasegmental characteristics of Russian English are 'more pronounced at later stages of language learning and are more difficult to overcome' (p. 233).

The most important reason for the neglect of prosody in an English classroom is, perhaps, the fact that in Russia non-native English teachers are prevalent, which, in its turn, is explained by a number of social and economic causes. The ultimate effect is that learners may unintentionally come across as rude, but teachers are not able to correct them, simply because they are unable to recognize non-target intonation and notice the wrong intonation contours themselves.

Admittedly, apart from cases when non-native teachers simply underestimate the significance of intonation patterns, the failure to address intonation teaching, where its importance is more or less realized, is also explained by institutional constraints mentioned above such as lack of time allocated by the institution for English classes and focus on certain skills, e.g. writing, which deprives the teacher of the opportunity to deal with intonation in greater depth if at all.

Nevertheless, Russian EFL learners, as well as their non-native speaking teachers, have to realize how heavily native-speaker perceptions are influenced by intonation alone and how serious consequences may be due to the misunderstanding caused by non-target-like intonation. Thus, according to Crosby (2013), at least one other common language background has been preferred in employment situations over Russian speakers of English. Much earlier, this fact was observed by Honey (1989) who emphasized a significant role played by accents in forming the often crucial first impressions at job interviews (Honey, in Vishnevskaya, 2012, p. 235).

Another drawback leading to poor intonation teaching may be a method used. Thus, Mitrofanova's

study (2012) suggests 'the usefulness of the top-down functional approach to developing English extended pitch sequences' (p. 290) rather than the generally used bottom-up approach.

Whatever the constraints to pronunciation teaching may be, caution should be made in an English classroom to make students avoid at least the most confusing Russian intonation patterns in English described above. Focusing on specific examples of Russian L1 prosodic interference may be more practical and realistic than exposing students to the whole variety of intonation contours available in English. In other words, English teachers should strive to reduce L1 prosodic interference that produces a negative pragmatic effect, whereas examples of interference that do not lead to misunderstanding of attitude or intent behind the utterance can, probably, be tolerated.

Conclusion

One can easily see the importance of intonation in the creation of the 'right' attitude, which fact emphasizes the need to show learners how the choices they make with regard to intonation serve to determine the meaning of utterances. One cannot but agree with Harmer (2008) who points out that difficulty in acquiring intonation tunes 'does not mean that we should abandon intonation teaching altogether' (p. 250).

Obviously, intonation needs to be a feature of classroom language analysis and practice, especially now that technology provides new ways of teaching suprasegmental characteristics of speech. Noteworthy in this respect is speech visualization technology, among examples of which one can name, for instance, the *Say It: Pronunciation from Oxford application or CAN-8 VirtualLab*, an innovative network-based software, both of which allow learners to compare their pronunciation and intonation with that of a native speaker through visualization of soundwave patterns on a computer screen.

Identified problems must not be neglected in English language teaching as their covert effect is more serious and far-reaching than it may seem at first sight, affecting even learners' employment opportunities. This means that English classrooms in Russian educational institutions should raise learners' awareness of identified linguistic problems concerned with pragmatics and thus facilitate cross-cultural communication between Russian and English speakers.

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