



## Teaching Intonation of Parenthetical Clauses to ESL Learners

Sarkhan Jafarov

PhD Student, Senior lecturer, Khazar University, Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1835-0709>

**ABSTRACT:** This study explores the challenges and strategies involved in teaching the intonation of parenthetical clauses to ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. Parenthetical clauses, often used to add commentary or clarification within discourse, rely heavily on prosodic cues such as pitch change, pause, and rhythmic variation for proper identification and comprehension. Many ESL learners struggle to perceive or reproduce these features, leading to communication breakdowns and reduced fluency. The research involves a classroom-based intervention where participants underwent targeted pronunciation training focused on intonational features of parentheticals. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests, recorded speech samples, and learner feedback. The results show a significant improvement in learners' ability to both recognize and produce correct intonation patterns. These findings suggest that explicit instruction on intonation can enhance learners' spoken discourse competence and listening comprehension. The study concludes with pedagogical recommendations for integrating intonation training into ESL curricula.

**KEYWORDS:** ESL Learners, English Prosody, Intonation, Parenthetical Clauses, Pronunciation Instruction, Spoken Discourse.

### INTRODUCTION

Intonation plays a crucial role in spoken communication, serving not only to convey grammatical structure but also to signal discourse functions, emotions, and speaker intentions. One particular area where intonation is especially important is in the delivery of **parenthetical clauses**—optional, often interruptive segments that provide additional information, clarification, or commentary within a sentence. These clauses are typically marked by distinctive prosodic features such as pitch lowering or raising, boundary tones, pauses, and changes in rhythm or tempo.

For learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), mastering intonation patterns can be particularly challenging. While much focus in language instruction is placed on vocabulary, grammar, and segmental pronunciation (individual sounds), **suprasegmental features** like intonation are often overlooked. As a result, even advanced learners may produce fluent sentences that lack natural prosodic contours, leading to misunderstandings or reduced listener engagement.

Parenthetical clauses pose a dual challenge: they require both syntactic understanding and appropriate intonational marking. Without proper intonation, parentheticals may be misunderstood as part of the main clause, which can confuse the listener and distort the speaker's intended meaning. Despite this, limited attention has been given to the explicit teaching of intonation in parenthetical constructions within ESL classrooms.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating how ESL learners can be taught to recognize and produce the intonation patterns characteristic of parenthetical clauses. The research examines both the **perception** and **production** of these structures before and after targeted intonation training. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent are ESL learners able to recognize parenthetical intonation patterns before instruction?
2. How effectively can learners produce appropriate intonation in parenthetical clauses after explicit training?
3. What teaching strategies are most effective in helping learners master parenthetical clause intonation?

By exploring these questions, the study contributes to the growing field of prosody in language teaching and offers practical implications for ESL curriculum design and classroom instruction.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Intonation, as a suprasegmental feature of speech, has long been recognized as a key element in conveying meaning beyond the words themselves. Scholars such as Halliday (1967), Crystal (1975), and Brazil (1997) emphasized the role of intonation in structuring discourse, indicating speaker attitudes, and managing conversational flow. According to Wells (2006), intonation helps listeners to distinguish between main and subordinate information, especially in complex syntactic constructions like parentheticals.



**Parenthetical clauses**, being syntactically optional and semantically additional, often depend on prosodic cues for clear demarcation from the main clause. Research by Schleppegrell (2004) and Lambrecht (1994) demonstrates that in spoken English, parentheticals are frequently set off by pitch reset, reduced speech rate, and strategic pausing. These acoustic markers are essential for listener comprehension, especially when the insertion disrupts the grammatical structure of the sentence.

In the context of second language acquisition, however, intonation remains one of the most neglected areas of instruction. Jenkins (2000) argues that while segmental features are often emphasized in pronunciation teaching, suprasegmental elements like rhythm, stress, and intonation are rarely addressed in depth. This gap can result in otherwise grammatically accurate speech that sounds unnatural or is difficult to process by native speakers.

Several studies have pointed to the importance of teaching intonation explicitly. Chun (2002) and Derwing & Munro (2015) highlight that targeted instruction in prosody improves both learner intelligibility and confidence. Nevertheless, specific research focusing on **intonation of parenthetical clauses** remains scarce. A limited number of studies (e.g., Wennerstrom, 2001; Levis, 2018) have examined discourse-level intonation in ESL learners, but most do not isolate parentheticals as a focal point.

This study builds on the foundation laid by these scholars and aims to fill the existing gap by exploring how ESL learners perceive and produce intonation in parenthetical clauses. By combining theoretical insights from prosodic phonology and empirical classroom data, the research seeks to contribute to both pronunciation pedagogy and discourse analysis in second language education.

## METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of explicit instruction in the intonation of parenthetical clauses among Azerbaijani undergraduate ESL learners. The study adopted a **quasi-experimental design** involving a pre-test and post-test with control and experimental groups to measure the effects of prosodic training on learners' perception and production of parenthetical intonation.

The participants were selected from the 1st to 3rd-year students majoring in English Language Teaching at Guba branch of Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University located in Guba city. A total of 30 students voluntarily took part in the study. Of these, 25 were female and 5 were male. The participants were assigned to two groups: an experimental group (n=15) and a control group (n=15). All students had an intermediate level of English proficiency (B1–B2, CEFR) as confirmed by their institutional placement records. None had received prior formal instruction on intonation or suprasegmental features.

Two types of tasks were designed to assess learners' skills: a **perception test** and a **production task**. The perception test included 20 recorded English sentences, half of which contained parenthetical clauses pronounced with appropriate intonation patterns, and the other half with neutral or incorrect prosody. Learners were required to identify which sentences included a parenthetical clause based on their listening. The production task involved reading 10 English sentences aloud, each containing a parenthetical clause, while being recorded using high-quality audio equipment in a quiet classroom environment. These recordings were later analyzed acoustically using *Praat* software to measure pitch range (Hz) and pause duration (ms) before and after the parenthetical clause.

In the Results section, **Figure 1** will show the mean perception test scores before and after training for both groups, highlighting significant gains in the experimental group. **Figure 2** will present acoustic data demonstrating changes in pitch range and pause duration in the experimental group's speech production, indicating improved use of intonation cues.

The experimental group received 8 weeks (16 sessions) of explicit instruction on the intonation of parenthetical clauses. The training involved a variety of methods, including:

- listening to native-speaker recordings,
- visualizing intonation contours using *Praat*,
- choral and individual repetition,
- contrastive analysis of correct vs. incorrect patterns,
- and guided production with feedback from the instructor.

Instruction emphasized rising-falling intonation, pitch reset, and pausing before and after the parenthetical segment, all of which contribute to the natural prosodic realization of these constructions. The control group, on the other hand, continued with their standard pronunciation curriculum, which did not include any focus on parenthetical intonation.

Pre- and post-tests for both groups were conducted under the same conditions. Quantitative data from the perception test were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired sample t-tests to determine whether changes in accuracy rates were statistically

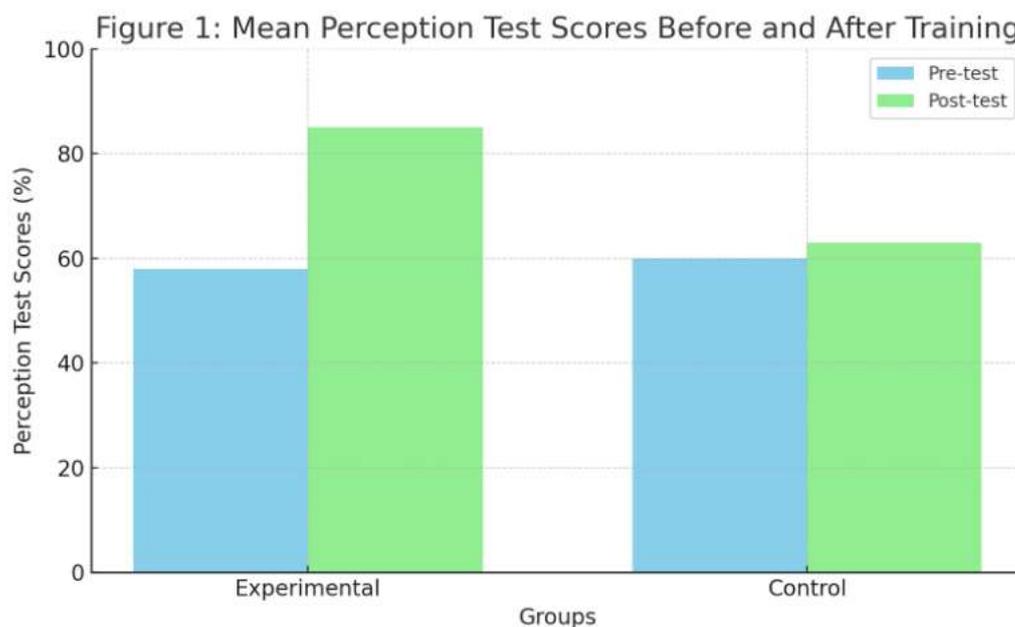
significant. The acoustic data from the production task (mean pitch range and pause duration) were also compared pre- and post-instruction to evaluate improvement in speech prosody.

The study ensured ethical compliance by obtaining verbal consent from all participants and informing them of the research objectives, anonymity, and voluntary nature of participation. All audio recordings were used solely for research purposes and securely stored.

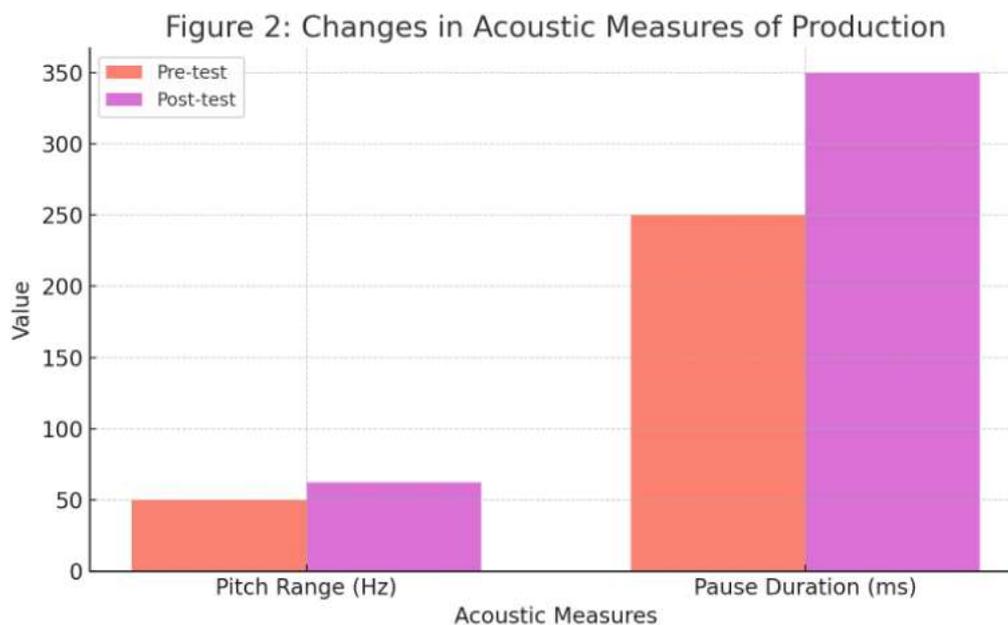
This methodology allowed for both perceptual and acoustic evaluation of learners' progress and provided empirical data on the impact of intonation-focused instruction in the context of ESL education in Azerbaijan.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study indicate a significant improvement in the perception and production of parenthetical clause intonation among learners who received targeted prosodic training. The experimental group, after participating in eight weeks of focused instruction, showed substantial gains in both their auditory discrimination and spoken realization of parenthetical intonation patterns. In the perception task, learners were required to identify sentences containing parenthetical clauses from a set of audio recordings. The experimental group's correct identification rate increased from 58% in the pre-test to 85% in the post-test. In contrast, the control group showed only a marginal increase from 60% to 63%, which was not statistically significant. This improvement is clearly visualized in Figure 1, which displays the comparative scores of both groups before and after the training period.



In the production task, acoustic measurements were taken to evaluate changes in pitch range and pause duration around parenthetical clauses. The experimental group's pitch range increased from an average of 50 Hz to 62.5 Hz, indicating a more dynamic and natural intonation contour. Similarly, pause duration at clause boundaries rose from an average of 250 milliseconds to 350 milliseconds, reflecting improved prosodic chunking. These outcomes, summarized in Figure 2, show the participants' enhanced awareness and control of prosodic features after training.



These results support the hypothesis that direct instruction in prosody, particularly focusing on the suprasegmental features of parenthetical clauses, leads to measurable improvements in learners' intonational competence. The use of visual feedback, listening activities, and production practice collectively contributed to these gains. Moreover, the data suggest that without such intervention, as evidenced in the control group, learners may not naturally acquire these features through general instruction alone.

Thus, the integration of intonation training in ESL syllabi—especially for discourse-level features like parentheticals—proves both necessary and effective in developing learners' communicative clarity and fluency.

### CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The present study explored the impact of explicit instruction on the intonation of parenthetical clauses among ESL learners in a university context. Conducted at the Guba branch of Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University, the study involved 30 undergraduate students majoring in English Language Teaching. The primary goal was to determine whether targeted prosodic training could improve students' ability to both perceive and produce intonation patterns specific to parenthetical constructions.

The results revealed that the experimental group, who received structured training in discourse intonation, significantly outperformed the control group in both perception and production tasks. The acoustic data showed a marked increase in pitch range and pause duration, indicating a higher level of prosodic control and naturalness in speech delivery. These improvements suggest that ESL learners are capable of acquiring complex suprasegmental features when given appropriate instructional support.

Importantly, the study highlights the pedagogical value of including discourse-level intonation in ESL curricula. While traditional pronunciation instruction often focuses on segmental features such as individual sounds or word stress, suprasegmental elements like intonation, rhythm, and pausing play an equally critical role in ensuring clarity and fluency. Parenthetical clauses serve important discourse functions—such as inserting background information, expressing attitude, or qualifying a statement—and their correct prosodic rendering contributes greatly to intelligibility and listener comprehension.

### SUGGESTIONS

1. **Curricular Integration:** ESL syllabi should include systematic instruction in discourse-level intonation, especially for syntactic structures such as parentheticals, tag questions, and relative clauses.
2. **Teacher Professional Development:** Teachers should be trained to recognize and teach prosodic features effectively. Workshops and short-term training courses on intonation and acoustic analysis tools can greatly enhance teaching quality.
3. **Technological Support:** Tools like *Praat*, *ELAN*, and mobile applications that provide pitch visualizations should be integrated into classroom instruction to provide learners with visual and auditory feedback.



4. **Material Development:** Textbooks and digital resources should include authentic speech samples with marked intonational contours and activities targeting suprasegmental awareness.
5. **Further Research Directions:** Future studies may examine long-term retention of prosodic features, the transfer of training to spontaneous speech contexts, or the role of L1 influence in acquiring intonation in L2.
6. **Learner Autonomy:** Encouraging students to engage in self-monitoring and self-recording practices can reinforce training and increase awareness of speech rhythm and melody.

In sum, the findings of this study provide empirical support for the inclusion of intonation training in second language instruction. With careful design and implementation, intonation-focused activities can not only improve pronunciation but also support learners' overall communicative competence. As language education evolves toward a more communicative and discourse-based paradigm, attention to prosody should become an integral part of language teacher training and classroom practice.

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