

NNS' Comprehension of Intonational Meaning with Hours of English TV/Movies Watched

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Abstract

English language learners have ready access to TV and movies in English, and the effects of extensive listening have been studied to evaluate the gain of a variety of language skills. Although benefits relating to pronunciation skills (such as improved listening or increased fluency) have been examined, research has still been limited as to the improvement in learner comprehension of intonational meaning. Furthermore, whether learners focus more on linguistic or paralinguistic features of speech in order to make conclusions about intonational meaning has not been fully elaborated. To contribute more to our understanding of learner comprehension of intonational meaning, listening tests and background questionnaires were administered to 17 high/intermediate students enrolled in Listening and Speaking courses in an Intensive English Program. Follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with 4 of these participants. Findings indicate that although the majority of the participants watch TV/movies in English on a weekly basis, there is no statistically significant correlation between the amount of hours of TV/movies watched and higher test scores of comprehension of intonational meaning. Results further illustrate that learners focus more on paralinguistic features of speech, rather than linguistic features. The implications for explicit teaching of intonational meaning are discussed.

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Background

Emanating from extensive reading, extensive listening (EL) is the focus on meaning rather than form when students are exposed to a large quantity of input in the target language (Reinders & Cho, 2010). When learners are exposed to listening texts, they can hone their listening processes, recognize linguistic and lexical features, and acquire more cultural knowledge about the target language (Siegel, 2011). Television and movies are now some of the most accessible forms of input to practice EL and they are a resource that English language learners will not ignore (Sherman, 2003). Although there are a range of skills gained from watching TV and movies in English, the benefits this input has on a learner's comprehension of intonational meaning is understated in the literature. Being that intonation contributes to the pragmatics of communication, and the use of intonation conveys speaker feelings about what is being said (Bolinger, 1989), it is worthwhile to examine the effects of watching TV/movies in English on learners' perception of intonational meaning.

Ladd (1996) defines intonation as "the use of *suprasegmental* phonetic features to convey "postlexical" or *sentence-level* pragmatic meanings in a *linguistically structured* way" (p. 6). Intonation and "paralinguistic" features of speech are closely linked (Ladd, 1996). Paralinguistic features are those in which "continuously variable physical parameters (e.g. tempo and loudness) directly signal continuously variable states of the speaker (e.g. degree of involvement or arousal)" (p. 8). Paralinguistic messages are mostly related to aspects of interpersonal interaction, including characteristics such as aggression, appeasement, solidarity,

condescension, or they are otherwise used to convey messages about a speaker's emotional state such as fear, surprise, anger, joy, or boredom (Ladd, 1996).

Paralinguistic features of speech have been discussed in the literature for over half a century and continue to be discussed in L2 pronunciation teaching. They can be found embedded in other terms such as "speaker's attitude" (Pike, 1945) or "affective meaning" (Levis, 1999). Pike (1945) was the first who began discussing paralinguistic features of intonational meaning: "an INTONATION MEANING modifies the lexical meaning of a sentence by adding to it the SPEAKER'S ATTITUDE toward the contents of that sentence" (p. 21-22).

Modern pronunciation textbooks materials have overemphasized Pike's concept of affective meaning, associating different pitches with feelings or attributes of the person's mood, while discouraging the focus on communication (Levis, 1999). This approach can be a problem because "an intonation that sounds "bored" in one sentence, for instance, may sound "level-headed" in another, "angry" in another, and "interested" in yet another" (Levis, 1999, p. 56). According to Levis (1999), it is unreasonable for NSs of English to assume that NNSs share their perception of intonational meaning; he adds that "students do not have native speakers' intuitions about meaning, usually do not have ready access to the cultural norms that allow a native-speaking teacher to make these judgments, and have little possibility of generalizing such appeals to affective meaning" (p. 50).

Although there is a large body of research connecting classroom technology to different skills, research is limited in evaluating how watching TV/movies in English might benefit the perception of intonational meaning. The aim of this study was to isolate the variable of watching TV/movies in English in order to see if it had an effect on higher scores of perception.

Furthermore, it attempted to look at what features of conversation (linguistic or paralinguistic) are attended to more when making decisions about intonational meaning.

Research Questions

1. Are students in a study abroad context watching TV/movies in English on their own time, and if so, how many hours per week?
2. Does the quantity of hours of TV/movies watched outside of class affect scores on a listening test measuring comprehension of intonational meaning?
3. Do NNSs listen to more linguistic (phonological) or vocal paralinguistic features when making a decision about intonational meaning?

Methods

The participants for this study were recruited from the Program in Intensive English (PIE). There were 12 males, 4 females, and one participant who did not state gender. Of the participants, 13 (75.5%) were native speakers of Arabic, 3 (17.6%) were native speakers of Chinese, and 1 (5.9%) was a native speaker of Korean. The 17 participants were enrolled in Level 4 and 5 Listening and Speaking classes at this IEP (3 from Level 4 and 14 from Level 5).

The present study made use of a mixed-methods design in an attempt to answer the research questions. An *ex post facto* design was used to investigate, through a background questionnaire and a listening test, if the quantity of hours of TV/movies watched in English had an effect on scores on a listening test. The listening test (modeled after Cohen, 2010) included 8 speech acts and 8 yes/no questions in which the intonational meaning affected the overall pragmatics of the utterance. All of the items came from TV series, movies, talk shows, or YouTube videos. By using sound only in this study, the variable of non-verbal information would be removed so the participants had to rely on sound to make a conclusion about the intonational meaning, and the participants would do as Sherman (2003) mentioned and focus

more on listening. The participants were instructed to choose one of three answers for each question in order to respond to a question about intonational meaning: a) likely, b) unlikely, and c) I don't know. In all cases of a, b, or c, a rationale was required.

Follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with four consenting students (two from Level 4 and two from Level 5) on the premises of the IEP. Some of the items on the listening test which warranted further explanation from the student were replayed in a stimulated recall procedure.

Results

Responding to the first research question about whether or not students at the PIE watch TV/movies outside of class, only 1 reported *not* watching any TV/movies per week. Fifty percent of the participants reported watching at least 4+ hours per week.

For the second research question, a Spearman Correlation test revealed no statistically significant correlation between the amounts of hours of TV/movies watched in English and the listening test scores. The value of $r_{\text{observed}} (-.06)$ did not exceed $r_{\text{critical}} (\pm.51)$ so the null hypothesis could not be rejected. In other words, there was no correlation between higher scores of perception of intonational meaning and higher amounts of TV/movies watched in English.

In response to the third research question, after coding for linguistic and paralinguistic features mentioned in the rationale portion of the listening test, frequency counts revealed that although students *did* make mention of linguistics features (28 times for speech acts and 28 times for yes/no questions), paralinguistic features were mentioned almost double the amount (57 times for speech acts and 50 times for yes/no questions).

Interview data, among other observations, offered more insight into the written rationales on the listening test, as illustrated in some of the following explanations:

- *When a speaker had “no strong tone in his voice” it meant that it wasn’t “angry” and it was very “peaceful”*
- *People who are surprised, they always show “strong mood, strong emotion [...] or strong response”*
- *When a speaker wasn’t happy, it was because the voice “was not straight, not go up or down”; it was “not sad” but just “straight”*
- *A speaker can seem “shy” from the way he says something*
- *“Sorry too loud” didn’t come from his heart*

Relevance to the PIE and Second Language Learning

The results of this study have indicated that for these participants, there was no relationship between input from watching TV/movies in English and test scores of intonation meaning. Although this sample was quite limited, the results can guide future research and teaching at PIE as they suggest that the perception of intonational meaning might not be able to be acquired simply through EL. It seems that language classrooms should have explicit instruction of intonational meaning and the different pragmatics that can be conveyed through different intonational patterns.

The rationale component of the listening test illustrated that these PIE students paid attention to paralinguistic features almost two times more than linguistic features. However, they did hear and make note of linguistic features despite the fact that they might not have had the “correct” language to talk about them. Teachers should encourage the ability of learners to perceive, or hear, linguistic features of conversation.

Interview data offered more insight into how these participants interpreted paralinguistic features and related them to linguistic features such as “strong” or “peaceful” tones. Levis (1999) notes a few implications which can be relevant to teaching Listening and Speaking at the PIE: teachers should teach intonation first at the general level, and then provide different, more

specific contexts in which intonation changes specific meaning. Furthermore, because second language learners may not have NS intuitions about intonational meaning, a variety of communicative situations should be presented to learners to expose them as much as possible to the diverse, communicative functions of intonation.

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