



Students' Perceptions of Stress, Intonation, and Rhythm in English Communication

Sifa Askya^{1*}, Aslimah Nur², Cindy Arianti Damanik³, Yani Lubis⁴

¹⁻⁴ Universitas Labuhanbatu, Indonesia

Email: askyasifa@gmail.com^{1*}, aslimahnur026@gmail.com², cindy0304242078@gmail.com³, yanilubis@uinsu.ac.id⁴

*Corresponding Author: askyasifa@gmail.com

Abstract. Suprasegmental elements such as stress, intonation, and rhythm play a fundamental role in spoken English communication, yet they remain consistently underrepresented in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and curriculum design. This conceptual paper synthesizes current empirical research to examine how EFL learners perceive these three prosodic features and to explore the pedagogical implications of such perceptions for pronunciation instruction. Drawing on studies in applied linguistics, second language acquisition (SLA), and pronunciation pedagogy, this paper reveals that learners generally acknowledge the communicative significance of stress and intonation, while rhythm remains the least understood and most pedagogically neglected feature across different proficiency levels. A recurring finding across studies is the persistent gap between learners' theoretical awareness of suprasegmental features and their practical confidence in producing these features during real-time, spontaneous communication. This gap is attributed to limited explicit instruction, the abstract nature of prosodic features, and the influence of learners' native language rhythmic patterns. The paper further identifies that EFL learners tend to view intonation as the most communicatively important but also the most cognitively demanding suprasegmental feature, while stress receives moderate attention and rhythm is frequently misunderstood or overlooked entirely. Based on these findings, the article advocates for explicit, integrated, and communicatively embedded teaching of suprasegmental features in EFL classrooms. Practical instructional strategies—including shadowing, rhythm-tapping, and discourse-level intonation analysis—are discussed as means to bridge the divide between learners' suprasegmental knowledge and their oral performance.

Keywords: Learner Perception; Pronunciation Teaching; Rhythm; Stress; Suprasegmental Features.

1. INTRODUCTION

The ability to speak English well involves much more than just using correct grammar and vocabulary. Elements like stress, intonation, and rhythm—known together as suprasegmental or prosodic features—are crucial for making speech clear and natural. While segmental features focus on producing individual sounds accurately, suprasegmental features operate over syllables, phrases, and whole sentences. These features help express practical meaning, emotions, and the structure of conversation (Brazil, 1994; Saito & Saito, 2017). Despite their significance in communication, these aspects are often neglected in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Research consistently shows that learners who receive direct instruction on suprasegmental features improve their clarity and ease of understanding when speaking (Yenkimaleki & van Heuven, 2023). Nevertheless, many EFL programs still prioritize accuracy in individual sounds over prosody, which can leave students less equipped for natural, spontaneous conversations in real-world contexts (Foote et al., 2022). One effective way to address this issue is to explore learners' own views on suprasegmental features—how

important they believe these features are, how challenging they find them, and how relevant they consider them to everyday communication.

As demonstrated by Derwing and Rossiter (2002), learners' perceptions of their pronunciation needs often differ from what experts prioritize, making research into learner perspectives a valuable foundation for designing curricula. With this in mind, the article aims to review existing studies to understand how EFL students perceive the importance of stress, intonation, and rhythm in English communication, and to identify teaching strategies based on these insights.

The review focuses on the following questions: (1) How do EFL learners view the role of stress in English communication? (2) How do EFL learners view the role of intonation in English communication? (3) How do EFL learners view the role of rhythm in English communication?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Suprasegmental Features in English

Phonological aspects that function at the level of syllables, phrases, and whole utterances, rather than individual sounds, are known as suprasegmental features. Among the three primary suprasegmental elements in English—stress, intonation, and rhythm—stress and intonation are particularly crucial in teaching. Incorrect stress placement in English can significantly hinder a listener's understanding of meaning (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Hahn, 2004). Stress refers to the emphasis placed on a specific syllable or word. Intonation involves changes in pitch throughout an utterance and serves pragmatic and social purposes, such as managing conversational turns, conveying attitudes, and indicating whether a sentence is a question or a statement. English rhythm is typically described as stress-timed, meaning that stressed syllables tend to appear at fairly regular intervals, contributing to the smooth, flowing nature of fluent English speech (Setter & Sebina, 2017).

Research has consistently shown the benefits of teaching suprasegmental features. Saito and Saito (2017) discovered that targeted instruction on suprasegmentals significantly enhanced students' comprehensibility, accuracy in word stress, rhythm, and intonation. Similarly, Yenkimaleki and van Heuven (2023) found that a comprehensive pronunciation program addressing both segmental and suprasegmental aspects was more effective than training focused solely on segments, especially in improving listening comprehension.

Learners' Perceptions of Pronunciation Features

Learner perceptions have long been a central topic in second language acquisition research, encompassing both cognitive and emotional factors such as learners' awareness, attitudes, and confidence. A significant study by Derwing and Rossiter (2002) revealed a clear discrepancy between what ESL learners believed was most important for pronunciation and what expert assessments identified as their most critical communication needs. This finding was further supported by Derwing and Munro (2005), who argued that pronunciation instruction must prioritize intelligibility over accent reduction, with suprasegmental features playing a central role in communicative clarity. While learners often focused on difficulties with individual sounds, experts determined that suprasegmental elements—particularly stress and intonation—had a greater impact on the clarity of their speech. This difference underscores the importance of explicitly teaching learners about suprasegmental features to increase their awareness.

Recent research continues to reinforce this finding. For instance, a survey of adult EFL learners at the B1 proficiency level showed that most participants considered intonation the most crucial feature for communication, yet also the most challenging suprasegmental aspect to control, followed by stress and rhythm (Li, 2023). Similarly, studies on learners' views of pronunciation technology (Aldukhayel et al., 2021) indicated that students were very interested in receiving feedback on suprasegmental features. They also rated tools targeting these features more favorably than those focusing solely on improving accuracy at the level of individual sounds.

Challenges in Suprasegmental Learning

Although the significance of teaching suprasegmental features is increasingly acknowledged, several persistent challenges remain. Firstly, many EFL teachers lack confidence in teaching prosody because their training typically emphasizes segmental phonology (Foote et al., 2022). Field (2005) noted that even small misplacements of lexical stress can cause significant breakdowns in listener comprehension, making it critical—yet difficult—to address in classroom settings. Moreover, suprasegmental aspects—particularly rhythm—are inherently abstract and difficult to isolate for straightforward instruction, as they interact with other language elements like syntax and pragmatics. Additionally, learners whose native language follows a syllable-timed rhythm often transfer these patterns into English, causing interference that is hard to overcome without targeted awareness-raising activities (Setter & Sebina, 2017).

Overall, these challenges highlight a gap not only in learners' understanding and use of suprasegmental features but also in how these features are taught in the classroom. As Levis (2005) argued, the field of pronunciation teaching has undergone a significant paradigm shift toward prioritizing intelligibility and communicative effectiveness, making it essential to align teaching methods with learners' perceptions and real-world needs.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Stress in EFL Learner Perceptions

Research consistently indicates that EFL learners recognize the significance of word stress for being understood, even if they are not yet confident in using it accurately. Hahn (2004) discovered that errors in primary stress can significantly obstruct comprehension, while Derwing and Rossiter (2002) observed that learners frequently notice when communication fails because of stress problems, but they often do not know how to address it. This mix of clear theoretical understanding and lower confidence in applying correct forms suggests that teaching word stress should extend beyond just explaining rules and emphasize continuous, practice-oriented teaching within authentic, meaningful communication settings (Murphy & Baker, 2015).

The Role of Intonation in EFL Learner Perceptions

Among the three suprasegmental features, intonation is often the one that learners most easily identify as a way to express social and emotional meaning. According to Li (2023), B1-level EFL learners consistently associated intonation with expressiveness and interpersonal communication, but they also found it to be the most mentally demanding aspect to handle during spontaneous speech. This is understandable, as intonation requires simultaneous coordination of pitch, speed, and linguistic content, which places a significant cognitive load on learners who are still developing fluency. Overall, these findings indicate that learners would gain more from instruction on intonation at the discourse level, incorporated into communicative activities, rather than from isolated drilling exercises (Yenkimaleki & van Heuven, 2023).

The Role of Rhythm in EFL Learner Perceptions

Rhythm is often the least familiar suprasegmental aspect for EFL learners, primarily because English is a stress-timed language, which contrasts sharply with the syllable-timed rhythm common in many learners' native languages (Setter & Sebina, 2017). Research shows that learners from these backgrounds may find it difficult to understand what "English rhythm" actually means until the concept of stress-timing is clearly explained and experienced through

practical activities. Saito and Saito (2017) recommend teaching rhythm using discovery-based methods—such as tapping out stress patterns on authentic texts or listening to and comparing fluent and non-fluent speech—before moving on to more formal instruction. Once learners grasp the idea, they usually become more open to incorporating rhythm as a key element of fluency.

4. CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper examines how learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) perceive three suprasegmental features—stress, intonation, and rhythm—drawing on various empirical studies from applied linguistics and pronunciation teaching. The research consistently shows that learners generally appreciate the communicative importance of stress and intonation, while rhythm tends to be neglected and poorly understood. For all three features, there is a noticeable gap between learners' conceptual understanding and their confidence in using these features during actual communication.

These findings have clear implications for EFL instruction. Pronunciation lessons should provide explicit, integrated, and communicatively meaningful teaching of suprasegmental features. Practical approaches might include shadowing exercises with authentic speech, rhythm-marking activities using real texts, discourse-level listening analysis, and intonation practice incorporated into role-plays and extended speaking tasks. Such methods can help bridge the divide between learners' knowledge of suprasegmentals and their ability to use them fluently (Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019).

Future research should investigate the relationship between learners' perceptions and their actual suprasegmental production, ideally by combining acoustic analysis tools like PRAAT with assessments from trained listeners. Further comparative studies involving learners from diverse first language backgrounds and proficiency levels would also clarify how linguistic context affects learner perceptions and informs teaching strategies.

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