

Tone as an Interactional Resource in Vocational English Pronunciation Teaching

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Abstract: *In vocational English education, pronunciation instruction has traditionally prioritized segmental accuracy and accent-oriented benchmarks, while prosodic features such as tone have received comparatively limited pedagogical attention. Recent research in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and pragmatic phonology, however, suggests that communicative difficulty in workplace interaction often arises not from grammatical inaccuracy, but from misalignment in discourse-level pragmatic expectations. This paper reconceptualizes tone as a teachable interactional resource in vocational English pronunciation teaching. Drawing on Brazil's discourse intonation framework and recent empirical studies on prosodic-pragmatic instruction, the study examines how tone functions to manage information status, epistemic stance, and interactional roles in task-oriented and institutional discourse. Through expanded qualitative analysis of workplace-relevant examples, the paper demonstrates that distinctions between proclaiming and referring tones function as contextualization cues guiding the construction and revision of common ground. The findings suggest that learners' limited awareness of discourse-level tone functions contributes to pragmatic misalignment in vocational communication, affecting perceptions of authority, politeness, and cooperation. Rather than treating tonal variation as error, the paper argues for an ELF-oriented pedagogical approach that foregrounds prosodic awareness, accommodation, and communicative effectiveness. Pedagogical implications for vocational English pronunciation teaching are discussed.*

Keywords: Tone, Discourse intonation, Pronunciation teaching, Interactional prosody.

1. Introduction

Spoken communicative competence is widely regarded as a core learning outcome in vocational English education, where learners are expected to participate effectively in workplace interaction, institutional communication, and task-oriented collaboration. Despite this emphasis, pronunciation instruction in many vocational and EFL contexts continues to focus primarily on segmental accuracy, word stress, and rhythm, often guided by native-speaker accent models [1][2].

Research in intercultural pragmatics and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has increasingly shown that communicative problems in multilingual professional contexts frequently arise not from grammatical or lexical error, but from mismatches in pragmatic expectations at the discourse level [3][4]. Speakers may produce linguistically accurate utterances while still being perceived as overly authoritative, hesitant, or impolite due to prosodic choices that diverge from interlocutors' expectations.

Prosody, and tone in particular, plays a central role in structuring discourse, managing information flow, and indexing interpersonal stance. In workplace communication, tone contributes to how instructions are interpreted, how authority is enacted, and how cooperation is negotiated. However, tone is often treated in pronunciation pedagogy as intuitive or peripheral, receiving limited systematic attention beyond sentence-level intonation patterns such as statements and questions [5].

Recent empirical studies have begun to demonstrate that explicit instruction in prosodic-pragmatic form–function mappings can enhance learners' communicative performance. For example, Nicora shows that combining prosodic-pragmatic training with meaning-focused tasks significantly improves learners' ability to deploy intonation appropriately in contextualized speech [6]. Similarly, Li et al.

provide evidence that visual feedback tools can support learners' understanding of the pragmatic functions of English intonation [7].

Despite these advances, there remains a gap in research that systematically links discourse-level tone functions, ELF pragmatics, and vocational English pedagogy. This paper addresses this gap by reconceptualizing tone as a teachable interactional resource in vocational pronunciation instruction. Drawing on Brazil's discourse intonation framework and recent work in pragmatic phonology, the study explores how tone contributes to information management, stance-taking, and interactional role negotiation in workplace-relevant discourse.

2. Theoretical and Pedagogical Framework

2.1 Discourse Intonation as an Interactional System

Brazil's discourse intonation theory conceptualizes intonation as a system of interactional choices speakers make in real-time discourse rather than as a set of phonological patterns tied to sentence types [8]. The framework distinguishes three interrelated systems: tonality (the division of speech into intonation phrases), tonicity (the placement of the nuclear accent), and tone (the pitch movement associated with that accent). Among these, tone is most directly linked to discourse meaning, as it reflects how speakers present information relative to assumed common ground.

This functional view aligns well with ELF research, which emphasizes communicative effectiveness, adaptability, and mutual intelligibility over conformity to native-speaker norms. From a pedagogical perspective, discourse intonation offers an analytically transparent and teachable framework for helping vocational learners understand how prosody contributes to meaning in professional interaction.

2.2 Proclaiming and Referring Tones

A central distinction in Brazil's framework is between proclaiming tones (p) and referring tones (r). This distinction is functional rather than purely phonetic, but it is realized through specific pitch movements. Proclaiming tones present information as new or non-shared, while referring tones signal that information is treated as shared, accessible, or inferable within the current discourse context.

Proclaiming tones (p), which include: Fall (p+), Rise–fall (p); Both involve a downward pitch movement and are associated with the introduction of discourse-new content, with the rise–fall functioning as a marked variant often associated with emphasis or speaker commitment. Referring tones (r), which signal that information is treated as shared, inferable, or accessible. These include: Rise (r+), Fall–rise (r). Both involve an upward pitch movement, with the fall–rise typically indicating a more tentative or deferential stance.

While these categories are realized through specific pitch movements, their primary significance lies in their discourse function rather than their phonetic form. In ELF interaction, speakers may approximate or adapt these pitch patterns differently, yet still exploit the underlying pragmatic distinction between new and shared information.

For vocational learners, this distinction provides a functional lens through which tone can be taught not as abstract pitch movement, but as a resource for managing attention, responsibility, and shared understanding in workplace communication.

2.3 Pragmatic Phonology and Interactional Prosody

Recent research in pragmatic phonology and interactional linguistics has demonstrated that prosodic features function as social actions embedded in sequential interaction [9]. Intonation contributes to turn-taking, stance-taking, and the negotiation of epistemic authority—functions that are particularly salient in institutional and professional discourse. These findings support the integration of tone awareness into vocational pronunciation pedagogy.

3. Tone and Information Management in Workplace Discourse

Tone plays a crucial role in managing information flow by indicating how utterances relate to the evolving common ground [10]. This function is particularly important in vocational contexts, where efficient and unambiguous communication is essential.

Consider the following workplace reporting examples:

- (1) // The ~client / requested a `refund. //
 (2) // The `client / requested a ~refund. //

In (1), the referring tone on client treats the referent as already known—such as a case discussed earlier in a meeting—while the proclaiming tone on refund introduces new, focal information. In (2), the tonal pattern is reversed, foregrounding client as discourse-new. Such contrasts

demonstrate how tone guides listeners in integrating information into common ground without altering propositional content, a function highlighted in discourse-based accounts of intonation. For vocational learners, developing awareness of this function can improve clarity and reduce misunderstanding in workplace reporting and briefing tasks.

In instructional discourse, tone also helps manage predictability and cognitive load:

- (3) // First you `log in / then you `select the file / and you `submit the form. //

Here, the referring tone on select the file marks the step as predictable or inferable, thereby reducing informational prominence. Research on procedural talk suggests that such prosodic cues support comprehension and task execution, particularly in training contexts. This use of tone helps manage cognitive load while maintaining procedural coherence. In vocational training contexts, such tonal choices can significantly affect how instructions are processed and followed.

4. Tone, Stance, and Interactional Roles in Vocational Communication

Beyond information structure, tone indexes stance and contributes to the negotiation of interactional roles. In institutional settings, referring tones are frequently used to establish procedural authority rather than uncertainty.

Consider the opening of a training session:

- (4) // r+ Let's begin today's training //
 // r+ We'll focus on safety procedures //
 // r+ Then we'll do a short practice //

The repeated use of referring tones here establishes an interactional frame in which the speaker controls agenda setting and task progression. Such uses align with findings in interactional prosody research showing that rising tones often function as discourse-management devices in institutional talk.

Interactional dominance can also shift dynamically within task negotiation:

- (5) Trainer: // r+ So you report the issue immediately //
 Trainee: // r+ Immediately, yes //
 Trainer: // r+ And copy the supervisor //

Here, both participants use referring tones to assert momentary control over the task sequence, illustrating that dominance is locally negotiated rather than fixed. For vocational learners, recognizing such prosodic cues can enhance participation in collaborative workplace interaction.

5. Pragmatic Misalignment, Requests, and Pedagogical Challenges

In vocational English communication, pragmatic

misalignment often becomes most visible in speech acts that involve power relations, obligation, or interpersonal sensitivity, such as requests, instructions, and problem reporting. While lexical and grammatical forms may appear appropriate, prosodic choices—particularly tone—can significantly affect how utterances are interpreted in terms of authority, politeness, and cooperativeness.

From an ELF perspective, such misalignment should not be interpreted as pragmatic failure, but as a consequence of divergent discourse-level expectations shaped by speakers' linguistic and professional backgrounds. This section provides expanded analysis of how tone contributes to pragmatic misalignment in vocational settings, using workplace-relevant examples that illustrate both the source of misunderstanding and their pedagogical implications.

5.1 Tone and Pragmatic Force in Workplace Requests

Requests are a frequent source of pragmatic tension in professional communication, as they inherently involve issues of obligation and power. Consider the following examples produced in a workplace context:

- (6) // I need` the report by noon. //
 (7) // I need~ the report by noon. //

In (6), the proclaiming (falling) tone presents the request as non-negotiable and treats compliance as expected rather than optional. While such a tone may be appropriate in contexts where institutional authority is clearly established (e.g., supervisor–subordinate relations under time pressure), it can also be interpreted as abrupt or impolite in collaborative settings.

In contrast, (7) employs a referring tone, signaling that the request is grounded in shared situational understanding and remains open to negotiation. The rise functions as a pragmatic softener, aligning with English norms of mitigated requesting in many professional contexts.

For vocational learners, the pragmatic contrast between these two utterances is rarely obvious at the lexical level. Explicit instruction that draws learners' attention to how tone modifies pragmatic force can therefore enhance their ability to adapt requests to different workplace roles and relational dynamics.

5.2 Instruction-Giving and Perceived Authority

Instruction-giving is another communicative activity in which tone plays a critical role. In vocational training environments, learners are often required to both receive and deliver procedural instructions. Consider the following examples:

- (8) // You must` submit the form today. //
 (9) // You must~ submit the form today. //

In (8), the proclaiming tone frames the instruction as categorical and authoritative, emphasizing obligation and urgency. This tone may be appropriate in safety-critical contexts, such as compliance procedures or emergency protocols.

In (9), the referring tone frames the instruction as grounded in shared procedural knowledge, inviting alignment rather than imposing authority. While the modal must still convey obligation, the tone moderates its interpersonal impact.

Such tonal variation contributes to how speakers index institutional roles and enact leadership. For ELF users, however, frequent use of falling tones in instructions may unintentionally project excessive authority, especially in multicultural teams where hierarchical expectations differ.

Pedagogically, vocational pronunciation teaching can benefit from helping learners evaluate when authoritative versus collaborative tonal choices are pragmatically appropriate, rather than treating instruction-giving as a fixed formula.

5.3 Problem Reporting and Epistemic Positioning

Tone also plays a key role in how speakers position themselves epistemically when reporting problems or difficulties in the workplace. Consider the following examples:

- (10) // There's a `problem with the system. //
 (11) // There's a ~problem with the system. //

In (10), the proclaiming tone presents the problem as a new, salient issue requiring immediate attention. The speaker adopts a stance of epistemic authority, positioning themselves as the primary knower of the issue.

In (11), the referring tone frames the problem as potentially shared or inferable, inviting confirmation or joint assessment. This tonal choice can encourage collaborative problem-solving and reduce face-threat, particularly in team-based vocational settings.

Such epistemic positioning is often negotiated dynamically in interaction and is highly sensitive to contextual cues. Learners who lack awareness of these tonal distinctions may unintentionally appear either overly assertive or insufficiently confident, depending on their tonal choices.

From a pedagogical standpoint, problem-reporting tasks provide a valuable context for integrating tone instruction with communicative practice. Role-play activities that contrast proclaiming and referring tones can help learners explore how epistemic stance is constructed prosodically.

5.4 Pedagogical Interpretation of Pragmatic Misalignment

Across the examples discussed above, pragmatic misalignment arises not because learners “choose the wrong tone,” but because they may lack awareness of how tone functions as a discourse-level cue in English. In ELF-oriented pedagogy, such misalignment should be treated as an opportunity for reflection and adaptation rather than as error.

Recent research on ELF-informed assessment supports this perspective, showing that when learners are evaluated on communicative effectiveness and pragmatic appropriateness rather than native-like intonation, they demonstrate greater

flexibility and willingness to adjust their prosodic choices [11].

6. Pedagogical Implications for Vocational English Teaching

Drawing on the analysis, several implications emerge.

First, tone should be integrated into pronunciation curricula as a component of communicative competence rather than treated as an optional feature. Instruction should foreground functional contrasts, such as proclaiming versus referring tones, within workplace-relevant genres.

Second, classroom activities may include contrastive listening tasks, role-plays simulating vocational scenarios, and guided reflection on prosodic choices. Visual feedback tools have been shown to support learners' understanding of intonation form–function mappings.

Third, assessment practices should prioritize communicative effectiveness and interactional appropriateness over native-like intonation patterns, aligning with ELF-informed assessment principles.

7. Conclusion

This paper has reconceptualized tone as a teachable interactional resource in vocational English pronunciation teaching. By integrating Brazil's discourse intonation framework with ELF-oriented pragmatics, the study has shown that tone plays a central role in managing information, negotiating stance, and coordinating interaction in workplace discourse.

Pragmatic misalignment in vocational communication often arises not from grammatical error, but from divergent expectations regarding discourse-level tone functions. Recognizing tone as part of spoken communicative competence allows educators to move beyond form-focused instruction and address the pragmatic realities of global workplace communication.

By adopting an ELF-informed pedagogical perspective, vocational English teaching can better prepare learners for the prosodic demands of real-world interaction, fostering communicative effectiveness in multilingual professional contexts.

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