

Complexity of Interrogative Intonation in Sudanese Undergraduates' Verbal Production

عقدة التنغيم الاستفهامي في الانتاج اللفظي لدى الطلاب الجامعيين السودانيين

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ABSTRACT:

This work exclusively aims to explore the erroneous interrogative intonation produced by university students. The observed weakness in undergraduates' verbal production; especially in intonation mastery was the major motive behind conducting the current study. This paper adopted the descriptive analytic method. Fifty students were randomly selected from Sudan University of Science and Technology and Al-Neelain University to represent the study sample. In the conduct of analysis, a diagnostic test was utilized to collect the data regarding the production of such intonation. The obtained findings of the statistical analysis rejected the alternative hypothesis in favour of the null hypothesis. Based on the present work outputs, it is suggested that intonation respecting declarative and tag questions should be considered more broadly in further studies.

Keywords: interrogative intonation, complexity, verbal production

المستخلص :

يهدف هذا العمل بشكل حصري الى استكشاف التنغيم الاستفهامي الخاطيء المنتج من قبل الطلاب الجامعيين. الضعف الملحوظ في اداء الطلاب الجامعيين اللفظي، وخاصة في اتقان التنغيم كان الدافع الاساسي وراء اجراء هذه الدراسة. اعتمدت هذه الورقة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي. خمسون طالبا تم اختيارهم بشكل عشوائي من جامعة السودان للعلوم والتكنولوجيا بالإضافة الي جامعة النيلين لتمثيل عينة الدراسة. لاجراء التحليل، تم استخدام اختبار تشخيصي لجمع البيانات المتعلقة بانتاج مثل هذا التنغيم وقد رفضت نتائج التحليل فرضية البحث لصالح الفرضية الصفرية. استنادا لمخرجات هذه الدراسة يقترح تناول التنغيم المتعلق بالاسئلة التصريحية والمزيلة بصورة اوسع في الدراسات المستقبلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التنغيم الاستفهامي ، تعقيد ، الطلاب الجامعيين الناطقين بغير الانجليزية ، الانتاج اللفظي

INTRODUCTION

English language acquisition is not an easy task for non-natives unless there is a close contact with the target language environment; especially English can basically be thought of as highly- complicated systems for first language speakers to express their thoughts, intents and attitudes and to extract meaning from the utterance made by other people. Thus, linguistics is the science that arose to study the nature and properties of these systems and its various branches focus on different aspects of the communication process (Alkhuli, 1983, 43).

In point of fact, even with a perfect accent, second language learners are often faced with more common obstacles to language

acquisition (Laurideson, 2018). Therefore, conveying intended meaning and producing intelligible pronunciation by these learners is a problematic for a number of reasons. *Based on the basic assumption of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, learners of any language tend to transfer the structure of their native language into that of the target language while coming across such differences* (Hayati, 1998). Speech clarity requires mastering specific features which are called supra-segmental features in phonology, whose function is to allow speakers to convey their real intents besides enabling the listeners to perceive the discourse in an appropriate way.



Of course, intonation is a main part of these features since it can convey linguistic and pragmatic meaning (Wennerstrom, 1994). As intonation is an effective mechanism to clarify the intended meaning (e.g., surprise, reservation, questioning and etc...) in spoken contexts, learners should be aware of its composition and functions which usually stand as a difficulty for non-natives to master. To understand the nature of English intonation a light should be shed on some relevant concepts.

In any utterance in English three distinct meaningful choices are made which can be, and usually are, subsumed under the heading of "intonation". These are: first, the distribution into tone groups; second, the placing of the tonic syllable ... third, the choice of primary and secondary tone and I suppose to call these three systems "tonality", "tonicity" and "tone" (Halliday, 1967, p.18).

Having recognized the compositional elements of intonation, we now proceed to look at the linguistic functions that intonation can fulfill. One of these functions is the grammatical role. The listener is better able to recognize the grammatical and syntactic structure of what is being said by using the information contained in the intonation (Roach, 1996). Moreover, the most obvious role of intonation is to express our attitudes and emotions- to show shock or surprise, pleasure or anger, interest or boredom, seriousness or sarcasm, and many others; we do all this by tone. Intonation also serves social function as it signals information about the sociolinguistic characteristics of the speaker such as his sex, class, professional status' (Crystal, 2008). Above all, the act of speaking in a broader way, we can see that intonation can signal to the listener what is to be taken as a new information and what is already given, can suggest when the speaker is indicating some sort of contrast or link with material in another tone-

unit in conversation, and it can convey to listener what kind of response is expected. Such functions are examples of intonation's discourse function." (Roach, 2009, p.146)

The motive behind conducting this research was as a result of the researcher's concern for weak performance of Sudanese undergraduates in producing proper intonation when communicating.

Due to the complicated nature of intonation above reviewed, non-speakers of English produce serious production errors affecting their fluency. These difficulties gave rise to a number of researches to be conducted in this area. One of the local level studies conducted by (Ahmed, A. (2015) was on the impact of intonation on EFL learners' listening and speaking skills. This study tested (92) 3rd. year students majoring in English at Sudan University of Science and Technology to investigate the degree of students' knowledge ability of toning questions and their knowledge in this area was quite good before they were taught intonation but their ability became much better after they were taught intonation. Moreover, a Palestinian study conducted by (Khader & Magdad, 2015), 68 students studying phonetics and phonology course at Islamic University of Gaza were subjected to a diagnostic test to investigate the difficulties encountered by EFL junior learners in learning intonation in written and spoken contexts. The findings of that study confirmed that the sample encountered various difficulties while learning intonation in both contexts. Additionally, in an error analysis study conducted by (Eghlidi, M. 2007) on Iranian undergraduate EFL Students the obtained findings showed that the subjects erred in using rise-fall pattern in the sentences containing two clauses more than other patterns while, they did not err when applying rise intonation.

The relevant prior studies on intonation has left room for further research since, nearly all of the research has focused on studying intonational production errors in a broad way while the current study followed a narrow track by addressing only the production of interrogative intonation which is important for allowing speakers to gather information and clear up confusion as well as engage in interesting conversations with others. Accordingly, the current research project specifically sought to answer the question: To what extent do EFL undergraduates fail to determine the correct intonation patterns to be used for conveying certain intent in terms of the following?

- 1- WH-word questions (WHQ)?
- 2- Yes/No question (YNQ)?
- 3- Question tag seeking information (QTSI)?
- 4- Question tag confirming information (QTCI)?
- 5- Declarative question (DQ)?
- 6- Repeated question (RQ)?

METHODOLOGY

Participants and measurements

The main aim of this particular work is to provide an overview of the interrogative intonation production intricacy for EFL undergraduate-students. In order to do this case study design is used to look for the answer if EFL undergraduates fail to determine the correct interrogative intonation patterns to be used for conveying certain intent in terms of various types of questions. The methodology developed for this study is both

descriptive and analytic in nature Fifty (50) 3rd. year students majoring in English were randomly selected from Sudan University of Science and Technology besides Al-Neelain University to represent the study sample. As for the measurement utilized for collecting data, the participants were subjected to a diagnostic oral test consisted of (6) various types of questions with a guide written instruction attached to each. Then the students' voices were recorded and the collected data were categorized through using an acoustic programme called PRAAT. Then the quantitative approach is used to analyze the numerical collected data using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) programme.

2.2 Reliability and Validity of the Research measurements

The diagnostic production test was dispersed to a panel of experts to check its validation and review its content to see if it did actually measure what was supposed to be measured or not. Accordingly some modifications and eliminations were done thoroughly as suggested by the panel members. As for the reliability Half Split Coefficient Method was used. The diagnostic reliability was piloted and the table below shows that the significance values are all smaller than 0.05 so the correlation coefficient of all the fields were significant at $\alpha = 0.05$ and it is also seen that the general reliability for all items equals 0.854 for (DPT). This result obviously indicates that the test is reliable.

Table 1: Split-Half Coefficient method

Diagnostic production Test		
Items	Person-correlation	P-Value
1	0.765	0.000
2	0.877	0.000
3	0.545	0.000
4	0.866	0.000

5	0.744	0.000
6	0.644	0.000
Mean	0.854	0.000

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before presenting and discussing the statistical results of the data collected, it should be noted that, each test item of the six has been illustrated with a PRAAT picture for the purpose of offering a model answer for the tone used in the target item. Then, the

responses gathered were tabulated and subjected to frequency counts and percentage after being matched to the PRRAT model.

Figure 1: Model answer of (WHQ): Why are you complaining?

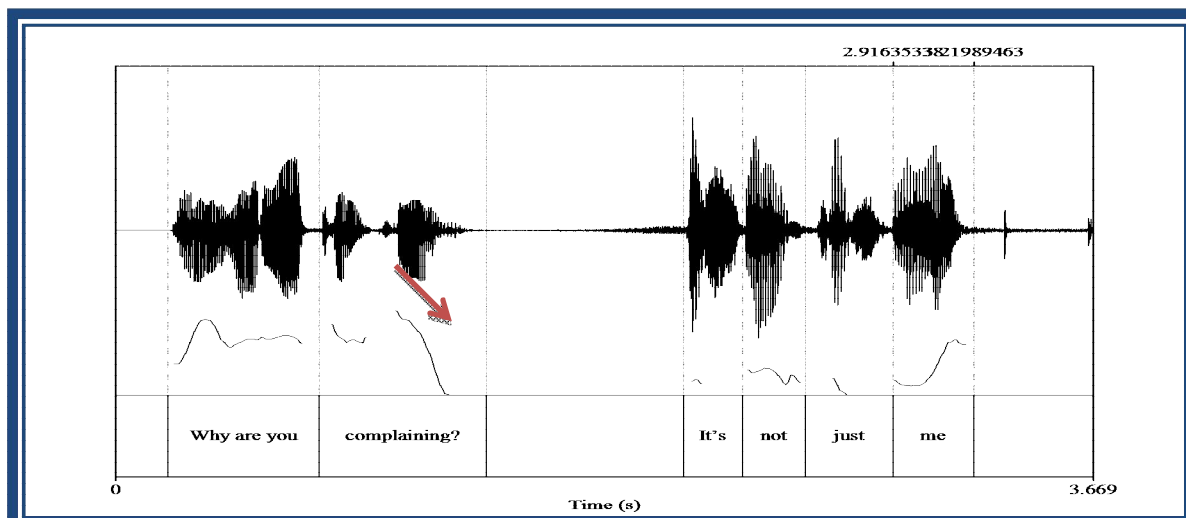


Table 1: Results of item one:(WHQ)

Type of Utterance	Correct		Incorrect		Total	
	frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	F	%
WHQ	26	52%	24	48%	50	100

Test item (1):The figure above displaying the model tone for the Wh question:"Why are you complaining?" and based on that,the participants' responses were matched to,on purpose of collecting numerical data. The obtained results coming up from the statistical

analysis show that, the percentage of correct responses is (52%) which is simply indicates the familiarity of the participants with producing such interrogative intonation.

Figure 2:Model answer of (YNQ): Are you ready?

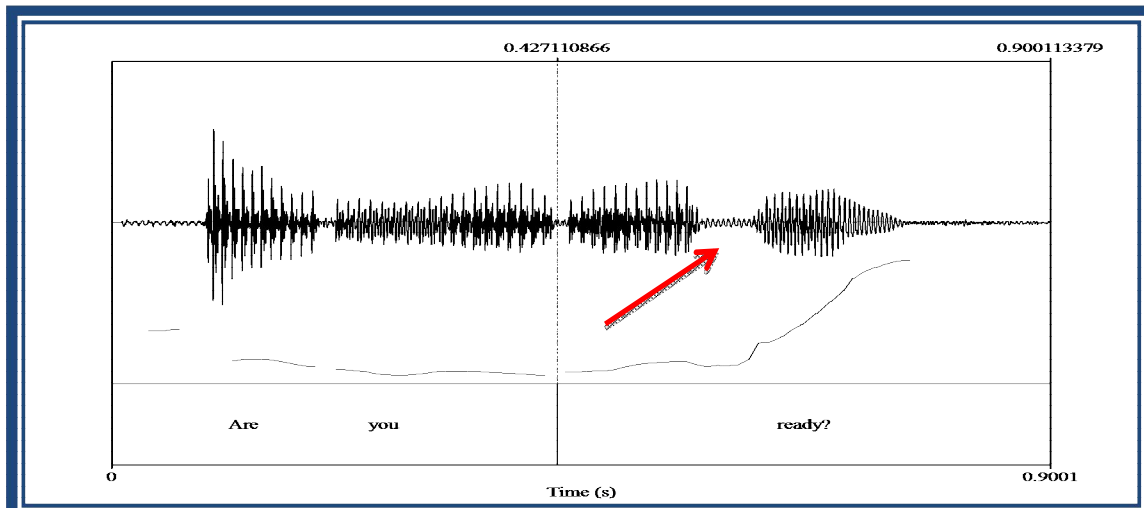


Table 2: Results of item two: (YNQ)

Type of Utterance	Correct		Incorrect		Total	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	F	%
YNQ	26	52%	24	48%	50	100

Test item (2): "Are you ready?" As shown in above PRRAT figure the default tone used in producing such interrogative constructions expecting an answer of "yes" or "no" is usually rising tone. Thus, the above figured tone was used as a model answer to which participants' responses were matched. The statistics attached display that; the final result obtained from testing the target item was in

favor of the correct responses by (52%) versus (48%) for incorrect responses. It is worth mentioning that, the slight variance between the correct and incorrect responses so far confirms that there is still a problem facing students in producing the default tone fitting such speech forms.

Figure 3: Model answer of (QTSI): You like it, do you?

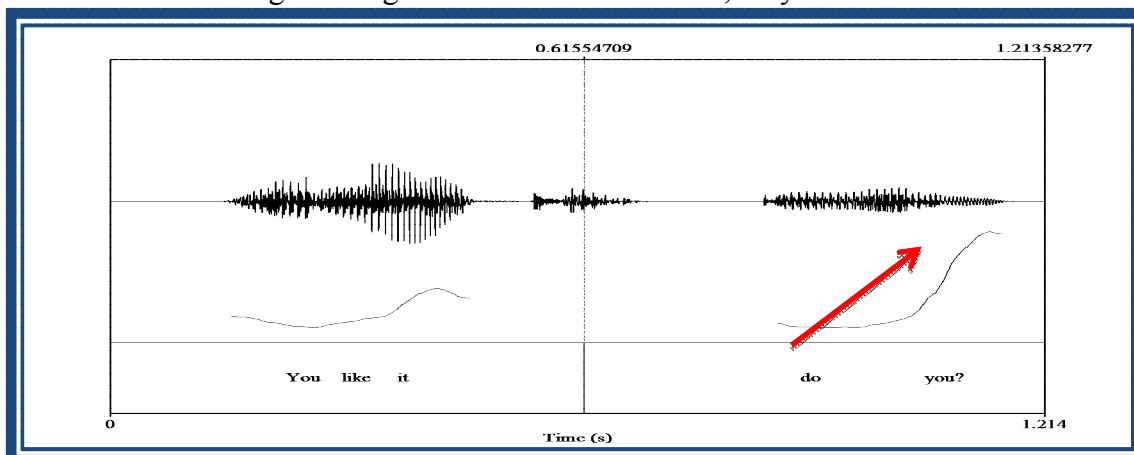


Table 3: Results of item three:(QTSI):

Type of Utterance	Correct		Incorrect		Total	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	F	%
QTSI	26	52%	24	48%	50	100

Test item (3): "You like it, do you?" In the diagnostic production test, the respondents were guided to utter this question in a way of confirming information in order to be tested if they could properly use the rise tone with such questions or not. The above PRAAT figure (3) illustrates the model tone accompanying tag questions seeking information and according to the statistical analysis above shown, the obtained results indicate that, there is also a slight variance between the correct and incorrect responses as it was in item (2), where twenty six respondents (52%) out of fifty uttered tag question confirming information in a proper

tone (rise tone) while the rest (48%) failed. Due to the fact that, tag questions are considered as short yes no questions tagged onto the end of a statement, the students spontaneously utter them in rise tone as they used to do with yes no questions and this actually results in producing errors especially when asking tag questions confirming information. Eventually, based on the percentage of incorrect responses which was (48%), the researcher considers this result is worrying as it indicates that, there is a degree of difficulty facing EFL students in producing the proper tone suiting such type of question.

Figure 4: Model answer of (QTCI): It's snowing, isn't it?

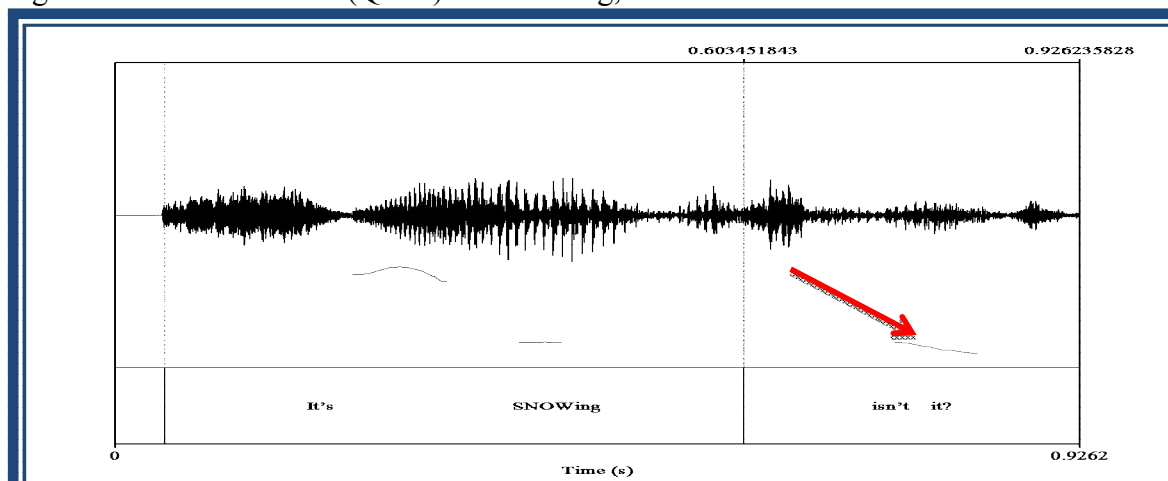


Table 4: Results of item four:(QTCI)

Type of Utterance	Correct		Incorrect		Total	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	F	%
QTCI	<u>15</u>	<u>30%</u>	35	70%	50	100

Test item (4): "It's snowing, isn't it?" As observed in the above PRRAT figure numbered(4), the default tone used for expressing such type of tag questions is a fall intonation. The researcher guided the participants to read aloud the above item in a way of asking for a certain piece of information in order to identify whether their responses were correct or not. Then based on Figure 5: Model answer of (DQ): He took his passport?

the model answer shown in that figure the participants' responses were matched and the statistical results were as follows: in the light of the frequency and percentage shown in table (4), the overall obtained result affirms that, out of the fifty participants subjected to the diagnostic production test, only fifteen of them (30%) correctly produced the falling intonation while the others (70%) erred.

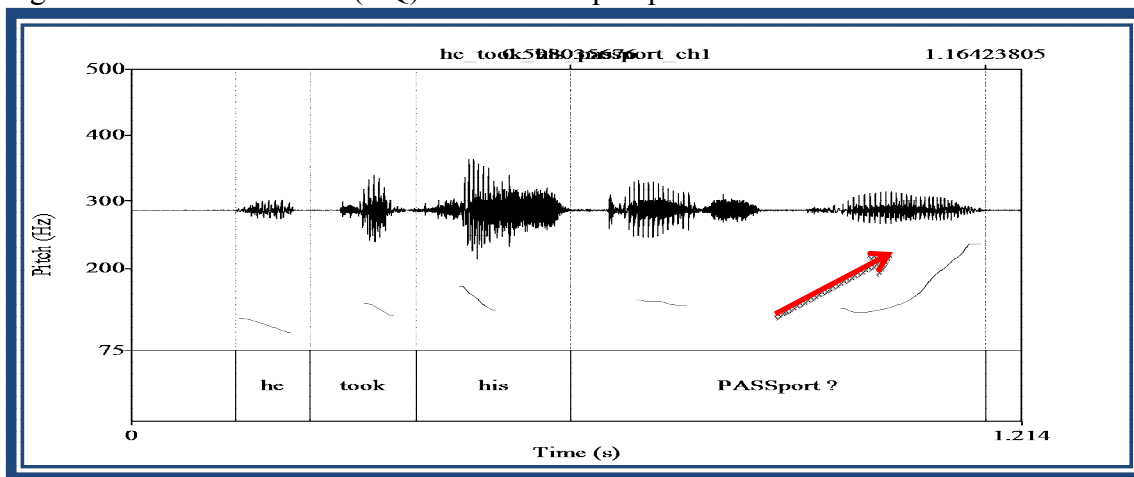


Table 5: Results of item four:(DQ):

Type of Utterance	Correct		Incorrect		Total	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	F	%
DQ	<u>5</u>	<u>10%</u>	45	90%	50	100

Test item (5): "He took his passport?" This item is called declarative question, which is grammatically like statements and they can be identified only by its intonation, or by the pragmatics of the situation where is used. This type of interrogations is usually uttered with a rising tone like that used with yes-no questions as seen in the above figure. When matched up the collected data with the model

answer, the statistics show that, the vast majority of subjects by (90%) erred to utter (DQ) appropriately while only five (10%) of them did. With reference to the gathered recorded data it was observed that most of those who erred, they used the falling tone instead of the rise one for this question as if it were a complete definite sentence.

Figure 6: Model answer of (RQ): A: He took a Tonga? B: He took a what?

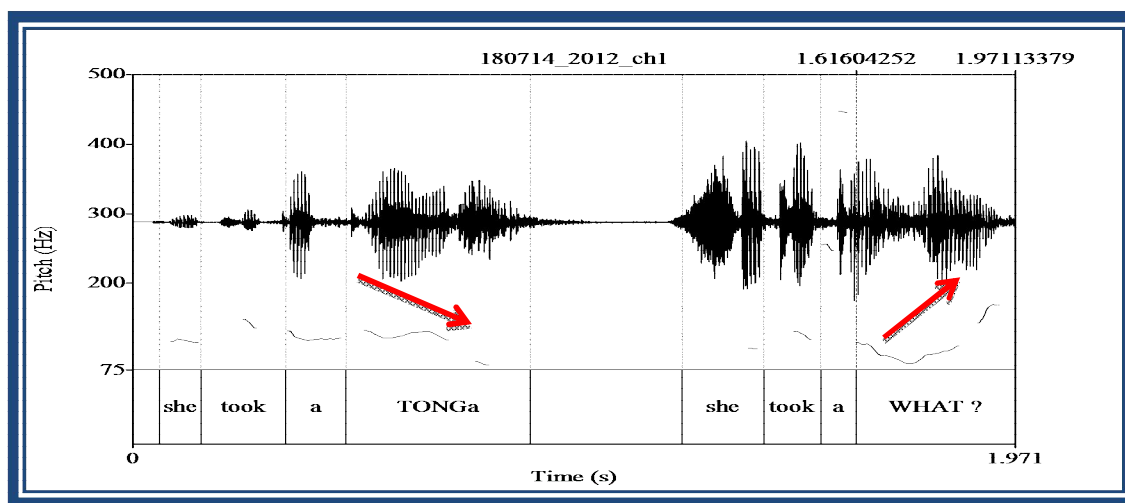


Table 6: Results of item four: (RQ):

Type of Utterance	Correct		Incorrect		Total	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	F	%
RQ	36	72%	14	28%	50	100

Test item (6): "A: She took a Tonga. B: She took a what?" The item (B) is a please-repeat question which involves the focused element into the question word (what); the expected tone goes with such questions is always rising. In the simplest form of this kind of questions there is no fronting of the (WH) word and if so, it still bears the prominence and has a rising tone (Well, J. C. (2006). The above PRAAT figure clearly

shows the model contour of this interrogative tone. From the above table (6), it can be said that, the higher percentage of responses seems to be in favour of the target tone as thirty six of the participants (72%) were able to utter the target item successfully, while only fourteen of them (28%) could not. In general, the obtained result has tended to contradict the hypothesis of the study.

CONCLUSIONS

The statistical results of the current work indicate that, despite the lower percentage obtained, the Sudanese undergraduates whom tested didn't find it difficult to produce the interrogative intonation of wh, yes/no and tag seeking information where the percentage of each item of the three above mentioned was 52% for each. As for repeated question, the good-performing of this item showed the participants' mastery of intonation that should be used with such interrogative forms type. In contrast, question tag confirming information and declarative question represented a problematic for the participants to produce the proper accompanying intonation of each, where the results obtained were by 15% and 5% respectively. Accordingly, the overall findings support the null hypothesis in favour of the alternative hypothesis that states interrogative intonation represents a verbal intricacy for EFL undergraduates to convey the exact linguistic intent behind the questions asked.

Drawing on the findings relevant to the tag question confirming information, the most likely reason for signaling faulty interrogative intonation refers to the fact that, students might generalize rising intonation to all types of tag questions and that due to their unawareness of the different types of interrogative tones. As for declarative question the linguistic reason leads to the students' incompetence in producing the model intonation accompanying such questions is mainly the lack of familiarity with them because the stereotype of questions formed in their minds is that typical questions in which the verb precedes the subject. Since this finding is a modest contribution of this study on intonation literature, the current work suggests that, further studies in the area should shed greater light on this type of interrogative

intonation as well as other types not addressed in this study.

In light of the current study outputs, the researcher recommends the following:

1- Intensive and continuous oral and listening assessments should be activated throughout English teaching process because that will help learners get many benefits in mastering intonation; especially interrogative one.

2- Since there is lacking contact with natives, creating language learning environment is a necessity and this should be done through presenting audio and visual materials in conjunction with English classes to enable the learners be aware of the intonation type used in interrogation.

3- Frequent self-practice of the second language by listening intensively to various authentic materials together with regular communicating with others help EFL students get used to the natives' accent and that contributes to making them master the target language.

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