

# BRIDGING THE THEORY-TO-PRACTICE GAP: INCENTIVIZING TEACHERS TO ACCESS RESEARCH VIA SHORT FORM VIDEOS

Marnie Reed, Boston University  
Di Liu, Temple University

The gap between research in second language phonology and pronunciation teaching and learning has long been recognized. Fortunately, the field has never been better positioned to make scholarship accessible. The ubiquitous use of electronic devices as well as the popularity of social media are coming to be recognized for the potential benefits they bring to language teaching. This teaching tip advocates and demonstrates the use of short form videos to incentivize teachers to access research on speaking and listening challenges common to learners from a wide variety of L1 backgrounds. Links are provided to two videos highlighting these topics: a segmental challenge involving a minimal pair contrast with a high functional load; a challenge with suprasegmental phonology whereby the listener fails to grasp the speaker's intent despite being able to understand all the words in an utterance. A sample pre- and post-video viewing survey and action steps are included to address the suprasegmental topic: teaching the pragmatic functions of intonation.

**Cite as:** Reed, M., & Liu, Di. (2023). Bridging the theory-to-practice gap: Incentivizing teachers to access research via short form videos. In R. I. Thomson, T. M. Derwing, J. M. Levis, & K. Hiebert (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 13<sup>th</sup> Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference*, held June 2022 at Brock University, St. Catharines, ON.

## INTRODUCTION

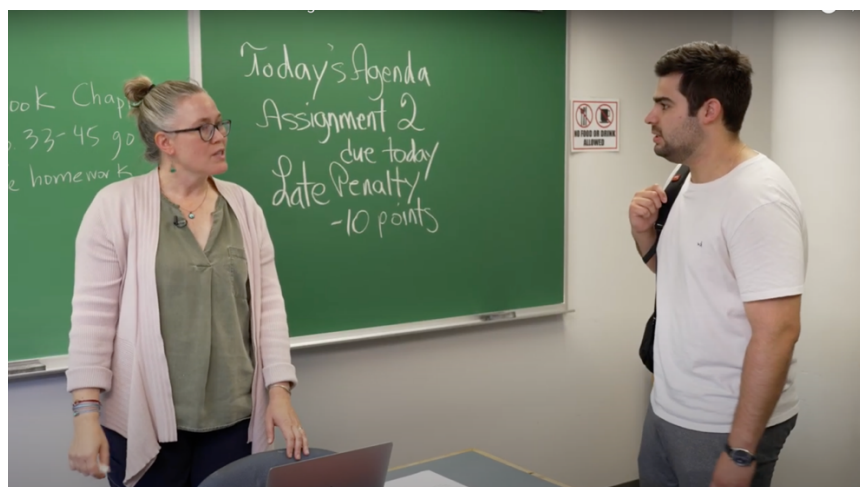
As asserted in the 2021 PSLLT plenary address (Reed, 2022), the gap between theory and practice has been recognized for over half a century (Allen, 1971, Levis, 1999). Various sources for the disconnect between research and classroom practice have been posited. For example, professional development funding for traditional delivery mechanisms like conferences is competitive and limited, making access to these venues out of reach for many. Further, practitioner perceptions that research-oriented journals are conceptual but not practical limit their reach and impact. These constraints and perceptions risk leaving the research untapped. Thus, alternative venues and enticements to access scholarship are needed.

The encouraging news is that the field has never been better poised to bring research to practitioners. Fast development of speech technologies provides teachers increased access to integrated research-informed software and websites (O'Brien et al., 2018). As noted in Reed's 2021 plenary address, a website, [pronunciationforteachers.com](https://pronunciationforteachers.com), co-created by Levis and Sonsaat-Hegelheimer, provides a platform for research, resources, and teaching tips. In addition, the ubiquity of electronic devices (smartphones, laptops, and tablets) and the popularity of social media (Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok) have led to increased attention to the benefits of technology in language teaching (Barrot, 2021). In particular, videos have been used to provide instruction, to facilitate language practice, and to foster online learning communities (Cowie & Sakui, 2021). The accessibility and popularity of short form user videos on social media provides opportunities and inspiration for creating a series of short, YouTube-like videos with embedded links to relevant research.

Inspired by the popularity of TikTok, two short form videos were created to showcase speaking and listening challenges. The first, [\*Individual Sounds Matter\*](#), addresses consonant substitution, a common segmental challenge; the second, [\*Intonation Carries Meaning\*](#), addresses insensitivity to prosodic cues, a common suprasegmental challenge. The segmental error involving minimal pair consonant contrasts with a high functional load is illustrated with the depiction of formal presentations by law school students delivering educational profiles of Supreme Court justices, a common assignment in many Legal English courses. The specific pronunciation issue is the frequent L1 interference problem whereby native speakers of languages such as Spanish pronounce the voiced palatal approximant /j/ as the voiced postalveolar affricate /dʒ/. In this video, the student presenter declares that all but one of the current Justices went to either Harvard or jail (a prison) as opposed to the intended Yale (the university). As the narrator debrief following the video indicates, sometimes segmental errors don't cause communication breakdown, but sometimes they do matter. The link accompanying this video includes this quote: "The most important sounds are the ones that can change the meaning of words" (Carley & Mees, 2021, p.1).

The suprasegmental error involving intonation is captured by depiction of a common classroom exchange. Here, as students file into class, depositing their assignments on the teacher's desk, one seeks a deadline extension, despite the posted late penalty conspicuously displayed on the classroom chalk board. In response to the student's inquiry, "Can I turn in my assignment late?" the teacher responds, "You *can*" – uttered with what Wells (2006) terms the implicational fall-rise pitch contour. Oblivious to the meaning signaled by the marked pitch contour, the grateful student replies with relief, "Thanks!" and takes his seat (see Figure 1). This exchange reveals what Vandergrift and Goh (2012) report regarding suprasegmental phonology: English learners may understand the words but not the message. That is, they may comprehend what was said, but not what was meant by what was said. To do so requires sensitivity to marked pitch contours and knowledge of the meanings they signal: emphasis, contrast or correction, and implications. The link which accompanies this video directs viewers to Wichmann, 2005, p. 229: "Intonation has the power to...undermine the words spoken."

**Figure 1.**  
*Intonation Carries Meaning video scene.*



Research abounds, for example, on cross-linguistic phonotactic cues and sentence parsing, and on connected speech processes and their impact on decoding aural input. Access to this body of research holds the potential to improve classroom instruction and to counter learner failure to segment continuous speech or decode aural input sufficiently well to grasp utterance content.

There is an equally abundant body of research that targets high functional load segments that otherwise risk learners being misunderstood in speech production. Finally, there is a wealth of scholarship on pragmatic and discourse functions of intonation, and much of it is incorporated into pronunciation textbooks, such as those by Gilbert (2012) and Grant (2010). However, the success of even the most research-informed textbooks depends largely on research-informed teachers. In the hands of those who do not avail themselves of the insights available in published works or at professional conferences, textbook exercises may fail to meet their intended purposes, as when lessons on prosody succeed at learner mimicry but without learner buy-in. This phenomenon was asserted theoretically by Gilbert (2014) who claimed that learners might walk out of the classroom not having accepted the system, and it was supported empirically by Reed and Michaud (2015), who report on advanced-level ESL students rejecting adoption of their successfully imitated marked prosody, stating, “If this [intonation] was really important someone would have told us by now” (p. 461).

Noting the popularity and accessibility of short form videos, it is hoped and intended that these attract the attention of English language learners and/or teachers, and entice ELT professionals to access research to expand learner metalinguistic awareness and skill in speech processing and production.

## **VIDEO VIEWING GUIDELINES**

Although these videos are intended to be viewed by language learners, teacher involvement is preferred as it may lead to systematic integration of such videos in learners’ language acquisition process. As Stempleski (2002) pointed out, the teacher plays a crucial role in the use of video in English language teaching because “it is the teacher who selects the video, relates the video to students’ needs, promotes active viewing, and integrates the video with other areas of the language curriculum” (p. 364). The following are suggestions for using short form videos to teach listening, speaking, and pronunciation. It is worth pointing out that we encourage teachers to develop innovative and alternative approaches in the use of these videos. We have selected the *Intonation Carries Meaning* video for illustrative purposes.

### **Pre-Video Viewing**

Prior to playing the [\*Intonation Carries Meaning\*](#) video, conduct a Pre-instruction Survey to establish a diagnostic baseline for learner beliefs and strategies. The survey should be brief, and repeated at post-instruction to assess change at the metalinguistic and metacognitive levels. Clickers, anonymous remote response systems available on cell phone Apps such as *Poll Everywhere* and *Slido*, can be used to capture and display responses. Response types are: Disagree/ Not Sure/ Agree.

- 1) If I can understand all the words in a sentence, I can understand the meaning of the sentence.
- 2) English intonation is merely decorative; it cannot change the meaning of a sentence.

## Post-Video Viewing

Conduct a **Checklist Debrief**:

- 1) Were there any difficult vocabulary words: Yes/No
- 2) Was the conversation successful? Yes/No

## Explication

On a pitch range continuum from a narrow range to a wide range of intonation for unmarked, everyday speech, English is situated at the extreme for wide range of pitch contours. English employs an even greater pitch range beyond its baseline to signal discourse or pragmatic meaning to listeners. In this video, the teacher's words (You *can*) are affirmative, but the message is negative (You shouldn't). This video demonstrates the power of intonation to override or, in the words of Wichmann (2005), "undermine" the spoken words.

## Action Steps

Use three steps to process pragmatic functions of intonation.

1. Detect marked intonation on the basis of pitch change.
2. Locate the word(s) with the marked pitch contour
3. Interpret the marked intonation cue:
  - a. emphasis
  - b. contrast or correction
  - c. implication

Post-instruction student responses to the Survey questions should be negative, with elaboration acknowledging the importance of listening for marked intonation which can signal pragmatic functions, such as emphasis, contrast or correction, and implications.

After playing the video and using it to increase students' metalinguistic awareness of the importance and functions of English intonation, teachers may then provide more examples for practice. Table 1 provides some sample sentences exemplifying the functions of intonation. More examples can be found in the textbooks mentioned above and at [posetest.com](http://posetest.com)

**Table 1**

*Sentences to illustrate the pragmatic functions of English intonation.*

Intonation Functions	Examples
Emphasis	I agree. That <i>is</i> a good idea.
Contrast	Last time we talked about the <i>history</i> of space exploration; Today we will talk about the <i>future</i> of space exploration.
Correction	The room number is 702, not <i>102</i> .
Implication	My boss <i>said</i> she'd fixed the problem (but I don't believe it).

## CONCLUSION

Short form videos have the potential to bridge the theory-to-practice gap by incentivizing teachers to access research and integrate it into their classroom practice by utilizing the available tools. Short form videos can make research accessible; the scenarios make the issues relatable; and the links to research make the teaching doable.

## LINKS TO THE VIDEOS

1. Individual Sounds Matter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7mHkxR77KQ>
2. Intonation Carries Meaning: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zu2qTAwVRVQ>

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Marnie Reed** is Professor of Education and affiliated faculty in the Linguistics Program at Boston University where she teaches courses in linguistics and applied phonology. She is co-editor, with John Levis, of the Wiley *Handbook of English Pronunciation*, co-editor, with Tamara Jones, of *Listening in the Classroom* (TESOL Press), and co-author, with Di Liu and Tamara Jones, of *Phonetics in Language Teaching* (Cambridge University Press). Current research interests include the role of metacognition in cross-linguistic awareness of the pragmatic functions of intonation, to appear in the 2023 Multilingual Matters volume edited by Veronica Sardegna & Anna Jarosz. Dr. Reed has been an invited speaker at venues such as TESOL and the International Conference on Native and Non-native Accents of English.

**Di Liu** is Assistant Professor of Instruction at Temple University. He holds an Ed.D degree in Developmental Studies from Boston University and an MS in Information Science & Technology from Temple University. Dr. Liu is the coordinator of the TESOL MEd. program and the English Language Teaching certificate program. He has an interdisciplinary research agenda addressing the complex and dynamic nature of second language development with advanced technology such as AI and VR. Dr. Liu is a co-author, with Marnie Reed and Tamara Jones, of *Phonetics in Language Teaching* (Cambridge University Press). He has published articles in the *Journal of Second Language Pronunciation* and *Frontiers in Communication*.

## REFERENCES

- Allen, V. (1971). Teaching intonation, from theory to practice. *TESOL Quarterly*, 4, 73 - 81.
- Barrot, J. S. (2021). Social media as a language learning environment: A systematic review of the literature (2008-2019). *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 35(9), 2534-2562.
- Carley, P. & Mees, I.M. (2021). *American English phonetics and pronunciation practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Cowie, N., & Sakui, K. (2021). Teacher and student-created videos in English language teaching. *ELT Journal*, 75(1), 97-102.
- Gilbert, J. (2012). *Clear speech: Pronunciation and listening comprehension in North American English*. (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Gilbert, J. (2014). Intonation is hard to teach. In L. Grant (Ed.), *Pronunciation myths: Applying second language research to classroom teaching* (pp. 107-136). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Grant, L. (2010) *Well said: Pronunciation for clear communication* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Levis, J. (1999). Intonation in theory and practice, revisited. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(1), 37-63.
- O'Brien, M. G., Derwing, T. M., Cucchiarini, C., Hardison, D. M., Mixdorff, H., Thomson, R. I., ... & Levis, G. M. (2018). Directions for the future of technology in pronunciation research and teaching. *Journal of Second Language Pronunciation*, 4(2), 182-207.
- Stempleski, S. (2002). Video in the ELT classroom: The role of the teacher. In J. C. Richards & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice* (pp. 364-366). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Reed, M. (2022). A teacher's view of research: from theory to practice. In J. Levis & A. Guskaroska (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 12<sup>th</sup> Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference*, held June 2021 virtually at Brock University, St. Catharines, ON. <https://doi.org/10.31274/psllt.14394>
- Reed, M., & Michaud, C. (2015). Intonation in research and practice: The importance of metacognition. In M. Reed and J. Levis (Eds.), *The handbook of English pronunciation* (pp. 454-470). Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Vandergrift, L. & Goh, C. (2012). *Teaching and learning second language listening: Metacognition in action*. New York: Routledge.
- Wells, J. (2006). *English Intonation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wichmann, A. (2005). Please—from courtesy to appeal: The role of intonation in the expression of attitudinal meaning. *English Language and Linguistics*, 9(2), 229-253.