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Exploring Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives on techniques of teaching prosodic features of speech

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Although techniques of teaching prosodic features have been well explored, very few studies have given voice to practitioners' perspectives. This data-driven study situated in the Iranian public schools context contributes to filling this gap by theorizing experienced EFL teachers' experience of teaching prosodic features of speech. Teachers' perspectives were explored through qualitative interviews and then analysed in line with the coding schemes of grounded theory. Iterative data collection and analysis revealed eight techniques that lead to effective communication with a focus on prosody in pronunciation teaching.

Keywords: Foreign language teaching; EFL teachers; pronunciation; prosodic features; supra-segmental features; techniques; Iran

Introduction

Previously, prosodic features of speech were ignored in the Iranian national syllabus for public high schools. Recently, however, materials developers have added such features to the syllabus. This top-down change has been imposed on classroom practice without any in-service teacher preparation programme; hence, a great many teachers are unlikely to know how to teach these prosodic features. To provide these teachers with useful techniques for developing EFL learners' phonological competence, the current study aims at uncovering the successful techniques that experienced EFL teachers use for teaching prosodic features. The study uses a grounded theory approach based on collecting and analysing observational and elicitation data. The findings provide assistance to language teachers in this and similar contexts.

Review of the related literature

Teachers can help EFL learners develop their phonological competence in different ways. Firstly, recent technology-based interventions seem to have been effective in raising learners' awareness of prosodic features of speech (Su, Tseng, Jang, & Visceglia, 2018; Sztahó, Kiss, & Vicsi, 2018; Yenkimaleki & Van Heuven, 2019). The impact of computer-assisted prosody training (CAPT) versus instructor-based prosody teaching for improving speaking skills was compared by Yenkimaleki and Van Heuven (2019). Their study showed that CAPT resulted in better performance of learners in developing speaking skills. Sztahó et al. (2018) also found that students using computer-based prosody teaching software were able to produce more acceptable prosody than other students. A prosody model of native English continuous speech as corrective prosodic feedback for non-native learners was presented by Su et al. (2018). The researchers concluded that their model is effective for implementing computer-assisted language

learning (CALL) which helps learners to generate native-like prosody, and at the same time serves as corrective feedback for L2 learners.

A second effective way to raise learners' awareness of the prosodic features of speech is the use of authentic materials such as radio, songs, podcasts, films, TV, and news which help the learners to learn the patterns of the target language's pronunciation features (Namaziandost, Esfahani, & Hashemifarnia, 2018; Sawaengmongkon, 2013; Totoy Sani, 2019). Namaziandost et al. (2018), examining the impact of using authentic videos on prosodic ability, found that participants learning supra-segmental features via authentic videos outperform those who learn them without the use of authentic materials. In other words, teaching via authentic videos had a significant effect on improving learners' prosodic ability. Additionally, teaching supra-segmental features of English through films can develop the listening achievement of learners (Sawaengmongkon, 2013). Totoy Sani (2019) also concluded that *TED Talks* videos are innovative tools which facilitate the teaching of supra-segmental features of pronunciation. He also suggested that language teachers need to include authentic materials to improve the teaching process, increase student's phonological awareness and reach intelligible pronunciation.

Teachers can also develop learners' phonological awareness and prosodic features through auditory feedback (Rosse, 1999; Wulandari, Laila, & Prasetyarini, 2008) which leads to improvement in students' phonological ability, especially in pronouncing word-stress (Wulandari et al., 2008). It is considered a method for developing more native-like speech for advanced adult ESL learners. Furthermore, in using this technique, language learners attempt to repeat immediately after the speaker whatever the speaker says (Rosse, 1999). Therefore, learners can be led to more native-like phrasal and sentence rhythm and are forced to focus on intonation contours, stress and rhythm (Rosse, 1999).

In addition to providing auditory feedback, teachers can make effective use of visual prosody training (Levis & Pickering, 2004; Wulandari et al., 2008). Levis and Pickering (2004) suggest, intonation, which is one of the supra-segmental features of speech, can be addressed through the use of speech visualization technology which helps language teachers show how intonation and tonal patterns function in discourse. Likewise, Wulandari et al. (2008), in studying the use of audio visual aids in improving students' knowledge of supra-segmental features, found that audio visual aids play a positive role in pronouncing the correct word-stress and by watching videos the students could monitor the speakers' expressions, listen to native speaker's voices, and read the subtitles.

A further way to develop learners' phonological competence is the use of phonemic transcription, based on the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which is used to teach intonation, accent, stress, and articulation (Snow, 2001) in using this technique for special education.

The above review shows that multiple techniques are already used to raise learners' phonological competence. However, they rarely reflect experienced teachers' perspectives. Rather than being driven from teaching practice, they are imposed on classroom practice. Although language education is no longer dependent on mother disciplines such as linguistics and psychology, many educators still follow the applied science model of teacher education (Day, 1993). Therefore, following a transmission model of teacher education, they impose theories on classroom practice. However, successful practice can also shed light on suitable approaches. The current study, therefore, theorizes teachers' experience in this area.

Methodology
This study collected and analysed interview data using a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) approach to inductively discover techniques of teaching prosodic features of speech from teachers' own perspective. These findings were triangulated against field notes made during the observation of classroom practice.

Sampling procedure and participants
Target participants were English teachers with at least ten years of teaching experience in the Iranian public school system. That teaching experience is assumed to give the participants an insight into the way they use techniques to teach prosodic features of speech. Those who were willing to share their perspectives on teaching the prosodic features of speech were selected through purposive sampling. An initial round of data collection was used to extract categories indicative of teaching techniques. Concepts related to the emerging categories were theoretically sampled and the iterative process of data collection and analysis continued until the emerging categories reached a point of theoretical saturation. In total, 12 participants were interviewed and their classes were observed. They all taught 16-18-year old male and female students at an intermediate or upper intermediate level. The demographic information of participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants

Teacher Participant Codes	Age	Gender	English Language Level	Teaching Experience
T.P.1	38	Female	M.A. in English Language and Literature	11
T.P.2	37	Female	M.A. in TEFL	13
T.P.3	31	Female	B.A. in TEFL	10
T.P.4	44	Male	M.A. in English Language Translation	24
T.P.5	33	Female	B.A. in TEFL	10
T.P.6	35	Female	M.A. in TEFL	12
T.P.7	30	Female	M.A. in TEFL	11
T.P.8	29	Female	Ph.D. Candidate in TEFL	10
T.P.9	31	Male	M.A. Student of TEFL	12
T.P.10	32	Female	Ph.D. in TEFL	10
T.P.11	41	Male	B.A. in English Language and Literature	19
T.P.12	42	Male	B.A. in English Language and Literature	22

Note: TEFL = Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Data collection

The primary instrument employed in this study was semi-structured interviews consisting mostly of open-ended questions to allow for a discussion with the interviewees rather than a question and answer format. Two rounds of interviews were conducted to ensure all aspects of the topic were covered and to allow verification of points emerging from the first round of interviews. The interviews were used to elicit participants' experiences of techniques of teaching prosodic features of speech. Participants were interviewed individually in Persian, their native language. Interviews were translated into English by the researcher and the accuracy of those translations was verified by a linguist. The secondary source of data was observation of classroom practice and collection of field notes. The observation data was used to validate the interview data. All data was collected at the participants' workplaces in Winter 2018. The total data set consisted of 24 interviews and 12 class observations.

Data analysis

The data, from the interviews and observations of participants' classes, were analysed in line with the coding scheme in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which is a three-step process. Firstly, the transcribed interview data were analysed sentence by sentence to build concepts and categories and to ensure that those emerging concepts and categories are descriptive of the participants' perspectives. Secondly, axial coding was used to improve the breadth and depth of concepts by answering what, when, how, and why questions and answering them through theoretical sampling of concepts related to the emerging concepts and categories. Attention was also paid to the grouping of codes or concepts to form categories and to how the categories develop and grouped to form patterns. Finally, selective coding was used to develop the core category which is an abstraction and description of all codes and categories, and pulls them together into a unified whole.

Methodological limitations

It is common for studies like this to collect data through focus groups but that was not possible due to practical constraints. In consequence, this study might have missed other convincing perspectives that teachers might have revealed had they been interacting with each other rather than only with the researcher. A further potential limitation on the methods employed in this study relates to the limited sample size which might have constrained the range of concepts and techniques which emerged.

Results

Participants' perspectives on techniques they use to teach prosodic features of speech

This section describes from participants' own perspectives the techniques they use to teach features of prosodic speech. The techniques fall into 8 categories: using authentic input, audio feedback, visual symbols, technology, phonemic transcription, grammar, drama voice techniques, and minimal pairs. The frequency of use of techniques, as reported by the participants, is presented in Table 2. The techniques are discussed in detail in the remainder of this section.

Table 2. Frequency of usage of techniques

Techniques	Frequency*
Authentic input	11
Audio feedback	10
Visual symbols	10
Technology	9
Phonemic transcription	7
Grammar	6
Drama voice techniques	6
Minimal pairs	5

* Number of participants who claimed to use each technique.

Using authentic input

Authenticity refers to the degree of similarity between language used inside and outside the classroom. Language teaching materials are contrived since they have been developed for pedagogical purposes and thus do not necessarily reflect the way language is used outside the classroom. To overcome this gap, participants exposed their students to samples of real language use such as newspaper and magazine extracts, and radio and TV programmes.

The participants used interesting news stories as authentic input but rather than having students listen for meaning, they were encouraged to listen to the intonation patterns. One of the participants explained:

> Having presented a news story to my students [downloaded from PRESS TV], I asked them to listen to it carefully in order to recognize its intonation and tone. Then, the students realized that typically, a phrase that is 'news' - that is, information that the hearer is not expected to know - has both a falling intonation and a falling tone. Therefore, they came to an understanding that the pattern presented in news contrasts with information that the hearer and speaker already shared, which has a rising or fall-rising tone. (T.P.7)

The participants also mentioned keynote speeches for teaching the concept of pause, as another supra-segmental feature of speech. These keynote speeches include lectures given by students and academics in class or at a conference, reports given by business people at meetings, texts read aloud by teachers or broadcasters to their pupils or their audience. One of the participants explained how he raises learners' awareness of pause as a prosodic feature:

> Once I used a speech delivered by Hillary Clinton on a National Run for Office Day in the USA. In this video, Clinton presented a prepared speech. In other words, she tended to put speech unit boundaries, often marked with a pause, at clause boundaries. So, I asked the students to watch the video, transcribe it, and mark the speech units with //. [explained by the teacher in interviews and presented to the researcher during the observation of the classroom.] Thus, having watched that video, the students analysed the clauses in which pause was used and they concluded that pause is used between two clauses linked by *and* or *but*, before and after an adverbial clause [i.e. a clause that gives more information about how, where, when, why, etc.], after a clause which is the subject of a sentence, and before and after a non-defining relative clause [i.e. a clause that gives more information about a noun or noun phrase before it.] (T.P.2)

Using audio feedback

Audio feedback is commonly used in language teaching for listening to recordings of native speaker discourse and for allowing students to replay their own output. As a technique of teaching supra-segmental features of speech, it can be applied in different ways. As one of the participants mentioned:

> I always ask learners to record their own voices. Then, I want them to listen to their own voice to notice whether it seems different from what they expect or not. Sometimes I encourage them to record a conversation with a partner and listen to the intonations they used and check whether it sounds natural or not. (T.P.7)

Audio feedback also allows students to focus on a range of supra-segmental features when listening to themselves reading a passage. A participant referred to this point as follows:

> I usually ask language learners to record their own voices reading written passages aloud and ask me for feedback. Therefore, the stress patterns of words, intonation patterns of sentences, pause, pitch, and rhythm are all going to be considered and corrected. Actually, by applying this technique, the learners will become more aware of the right and appropriate use of supra-segmental features of speech. (T.P.5)

Using visual symbols

Visual symbols are used to emphasize and represent particular prosodic features of speech in a word or a sentence. They can be used for teaching stress patterns of words, intonation patterns of sentences, tone and pitch. Participants pointed out that visual reinforcement can be used by EFL teachers in different ways. As one of them commented:

> I teach the intonation patterns of different accents of English language with the help of visual symbols. [interviewee showed Figure 1] As you see the sentence ”are you hungry?” has a rising intonation pattern in American accent, however, in British and Australian accent, it is considered to be falling. I show the intonation patterns via visual signs [i.e. rising (↖) or falling (↙).]” [These signs were utilized by the teacher while teaching intonation patterns during observation of the classroom practice.] (T.P.10)

Figure 1. A graphic of visual symbols used for teaching intonation

Visual symbols are also used to teach the stress patterns of words. Following this strategy, one of the participants said:

> I use visual symbols to make word stress visible. It would be possible via writing the stressed syllable in bold letters or words. Look at the stress patterns of the following words: *before* and *when*. They show that *before* has two syllables and the second syllable is stressed. And *when* has one syllable and its stress pattern is as shown. Furthermore, I use dots to show stressed syllables. That is, I used larger dots to show the stressed syllable. For example, *catwalk* is patterned in this way: • • [Teacher's explanations during class observation.] (T.P.12)

Using technology

Participants believed that teaching prosodic features of speech can be enhanced if teachers use technological aids such as talking dictionaries, and pedagogical websites. One of the participants explained how and why she uses talking dictionaries as follows:

> I often use *TahlilGaran Dictionary* which helps learners master supra-segmental features of speech. It provides lots of phonologically useful information including phonetic transcription, audio-taped pronunciation differentiating American and British pronunciation (both the phonetics and the audios), American and British accents, and stress patterns. Most importantly, it shows the number of vowels and syllables of a word via a visual pattern [See Figure 2]. (T.P.8)
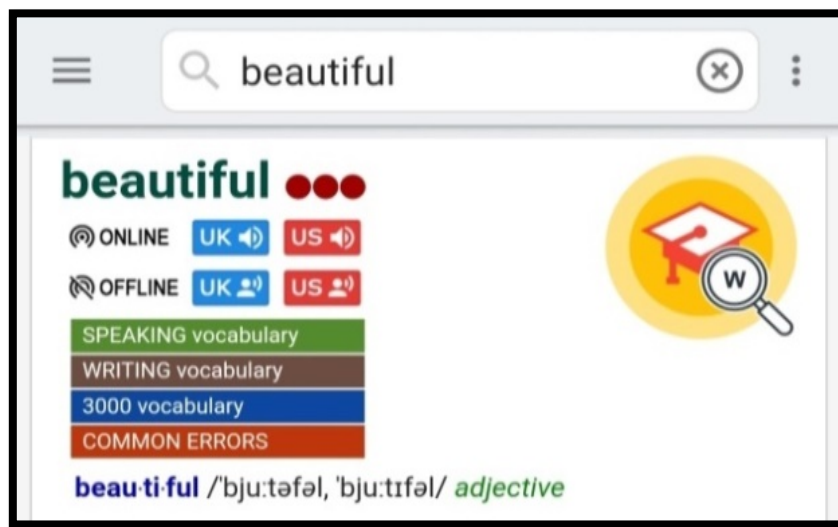

Figure 2. Extract from TahlilGaran Dictionary

Another innovative tool used by the participants was a list of different websites which help language teachers access numerous sources of instructional videos, exercises, and worksheets to teach prosodic features of speech. For instance, as one of the participants suggested:

> I use *Busy Teacher Website* for teaching prosodic features of speech. It provides the users with IPA flashcards through which the students can learn and review the International Phonetic Alphabet. Also, there are three sample words for each sound/symbol; therefore, pronunciation can be practiced in context. Additionally, this website makes the language teachers have access to different activities and songs for teaching and practising phonetics. [see Figure 3]
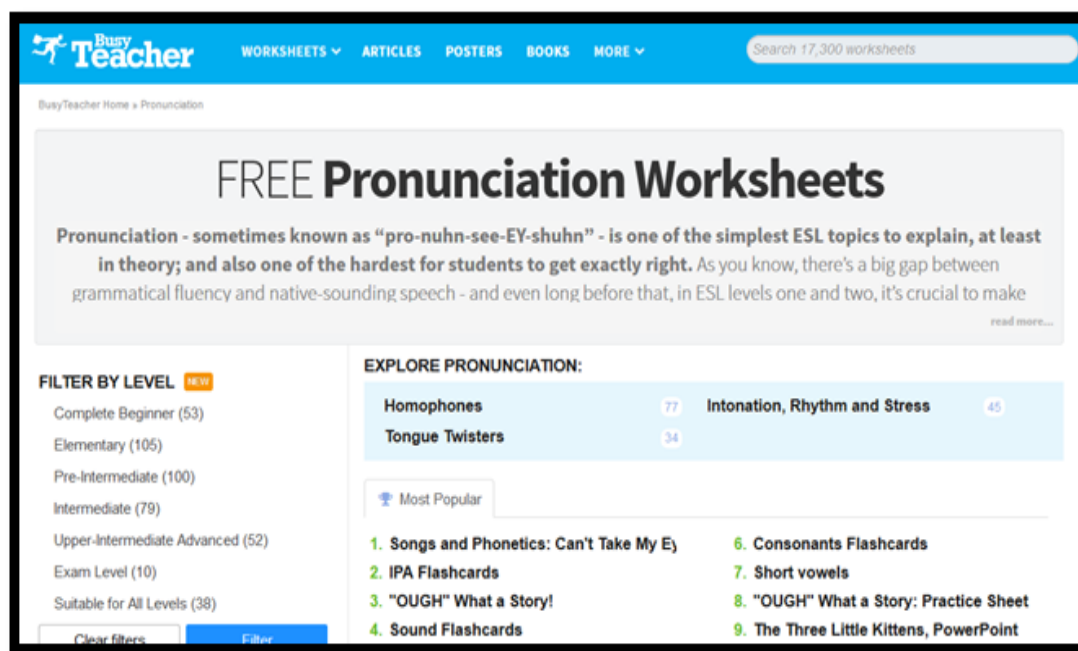
Figure 3. The *Busy Teacher* website

Using phonemic transcription
Phonemic transcription also known as broad transcription, involves representing speech using a unique symbol for each phoneme of the language. Such transcriptions do not represent actual sounds, but abstract mental constructs. They are considered to be the categories of sound that speakers understand to be the sounds of their language. Dictionaries which provide phonemic transcription can greatly improve learners' phonemic awareness and knowledge of supra-segmental features. Participants believed that teaching learners how to read phonemic transcriptions greatly improves their phonological awareness. Stress shift and vowel shift can also be taught through phonemic transcription. One of the participants exemplified this point as follows:

> I teach vowel shift and stress shift via phonemic transcription. I make the following examples. Having a look at the phonemic transcriptions of a given word, students notice how vowel and stress shifts can change the pronunciation, meaning, and even the part of speech of a word. For instance, I tell the students that in the examples *rid* /rid/ and *read* /riːd/, a vowel shift occurs. And, based on the phonemic transcriptions of the word *record*, the students realize that the noun form of this word is different from its verb form due to both a vowel shift as well as a stress shift e.g. *record* [noun] /ˈrekɔːd/, *record* [verb] /rɪˈkɔːd/ - stress shift. (T.P.8) [The use of this technique was stated by the teacher during the interview and then some extra explanations were added during classroom observation.]

Using grammar
Six of the participants of the present study preferred to teach some aspects of supra-segmental features of speech (e.g. intonation) along with grammar. Participant T.P.9 offered an example of highlighting intonation with the help of grammar (see Table 3).

Table 3. Teaching intonation via grammar

Sentence Type	Example	Intonation Pattern
WH questions	Where do you live?	Falling
Yes-No questions	Are you a teacher?	Rising
Question tags: Chat	It shouldn't look like that, should it?	Falling
Question tags: Check	It shouldn't look like that, should it?	Rising
Statements	I am a student.	Falling
Lists	You need flour, milk, and butter.	Rising, rising, and falling

Using drama voice techniques

Drama voice techniques prompt students to dramatize a conversation and produce oral utterances in the form of a dialogue or a role-play. Since expression is very important in drama, various aspects of supra-segmental features of speech are strengthened. Using this technique, one of the participants acknowledged:

> I use this technique to teach pitch, volume and different tones of English language in my class. To do this, I choose a drama or a conversation and I have the students role-play using different styles (e.g. high or low pitch). Then, we discuss the role-plays in groups and the students find out the ways that range, pitch, and pronunciation affect the meaning they convey and their performance. Therefore, the audience can hear and understand the speaker. The speaker will be able to convey his/her meaning, as well. (T.P.10)

Another participant suggested the use of drama voice techniques in teaching supra-segmental features via poetry in the classroom:

> One means in which drama voice technique can enter pronunciation classroom is for teachers to employ poetry. For instance, I provide my students with various English poems. Then, we discuss the variety of tones and intonation patterns of lines and stanzas in order to understand the relationship between supra-segmental features and the meaning they convey in different conditions. (T.P.4)

Using minimal pairs

Minimal pairs and minimal sets are words that have different meanings but their pronunciation differs only in one phoneme. For instance, *pin* and *bin* are minimal pairs in English. Participants made effective use of minimal pairs to teach prosodic features of speech (e.g. number of syllables and stress patterns). Concerning this technique, one of the participants claimed:

> I teach pronunciation of the word *air* using the words *chair* and *hair*. While using the above examples, I tell the students to pay attention to the number of vowels in these words and recognize the number of syllables based on the number of vowels. For example, *air* has one vowel, so it is a one-syllable word. In this way, the students realize that by adding a consonant to the previous word, they will have a new word with the same syllable structure. So, the words *hair* and *chair* will have one-syllable structures, as well. (T.P.5)

Another participant suggested teaching the stress patterns of different words using minimal pairs:

> For instance, I present some words (e.g. *alive* and *arrive*) to students and I explain that these minimal pairs have two vowels and two syllables. Then, I ask the students to recognize stress patterns of the two words. Therefore, they will figure out that there is a relationship between the vowels and patterns of stress in English words. Finally, I ask them to make some other examples and create new words with the same stress pattern. In this strategy, they will become familiar with the concept of vowels, stress and stress pattern based on the similarities of the words. (T.P.7)

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the teacher participants in the context under review favour techniques for teaching prosodic features of speech which are consistent with findings from other research and have developed some techniques which are less well researched elsewhere.

The previous studies have indicated that using authentic videos and films has a significant impact on developing the prosodic ability of language learners (Namaziandost et al., 2018; Sawaengmongkon, 2013), and that using audio files also enhances the listening experience (Cakir, 2012; Elder, Golombek, & Aufderhaar, 2004). The current study suggests that additional inputs such as news, lectures, animations, and podcasts are also useful authentic materials which help expose learners to native and native-like prosodic features. The participants in this study believe such exposure will enable learners to learn and imitate the language patterns they contain.

The audio feedback techniques reported by participants in the current study are in line with the tracking technique (Rosse, 1999) because they use authentic materials to provide input and as an opportunity for learners to repeat and practice. This technique allows the teaching of several supra-segmental features (e.g. sentence rhythm) and promotes a focus on intonation contours and stress.

Participants also report using visual prosody training which is known to teach how intonation and tonal patterns function in discourse (Levis & Pickering, 2004). In contrast, while other studies focused on the use of audio visual aids for teaching word-stress (Wulandari et al., 2008), the participants in this study emphasized the role of visual symbols (e.g. falling and rising signs, and boldness) in representing specific prosodic features in a word or a sentence.

Similarly there is a contrast between earlier studies and this one in the use of computer-based prosody teaching. Elsewhere, the focus was on computers to produce better prosody (Sztahó et al., 2018) or to provide corrective prosody feedback (Su et al., 2018). However, in the current study, the participants focused on the use of computers to provide practical tools (e.g. dictionaries) and information (e.g. informative websites). Such provisions will familiarize learners with a variety of supra-segmental features.

As with other studies (see, for example, Snow, 2001), the participants in the current study recognized that phonemic transcription can be used to teach various features such as intonation, accent, stress, and articulation. However, they added features such as number of syllables, stress patterns, vowel shifts, stress shifts, the concept of primary stress, secondary stress, intervening syllables, unreduced syllables and unstressed syllables.

Minimal pairs have been considered beneficial in teaching segmental features of speech including sounds (Hamzah & Bawodood, 2019) including specific consonants of the target language that are absent in the learners' mother tongue (Altamimi, 2015). However, the current findings revealed a more extensive use of minimal pairs for teaching

supra-segmental features such as the number of vowels, syllables and stress patterns of words.

Uniquely, two of the teaching techniques revealed in the current study (i.e. using grammar and drama voice techniques) as useful techniques for teaching features of prosodic speech have not been documented elsewhere in the literature.

Conclusions, implications and suggestions for further research

This research has looked at the techniques used by experienced teachers for teaching prosodic features of English in Iranian EFL settings. The goal has not been to measure quantitatively the effectiveness of those techniques, which may be an impossible task given the variables involved, but to tap the wealth of knowledge of experienced teachers. By analysing the techniques reported by those teachers and by triangulating those reports against observations of their teaching practice, the current study has identified eight preferred techniques. The purpose is not to claim that these are the only successful techniques or that these techniques must be used. It is rather to show readers a range of techniques that have been found useful in one specific context. It is for readers to decide for themselves whether their teaching context is sufficiently similar for the research here to be relevant and whether the described teaching techniques fit comfortably with their own personal teaching styles.

It is clear that more research is needed in this area. For example, although this research has focused on EFL, it would be interesting to look at similarities and differences in techniques used to teach other languages. It would also be of great value to consider techniques for teaching supra-segmental features of speech in special education and among foreign language learners who suffer from hearing problems or communication disabilities.

Finally, it is important that the techniques recorded in this research, along with others which might be discovered in later research, be incorporated into the mainstream teacher education curriculum so that future novice teachers do not have to discover useful teaching techniques through trial and error (which is never to the advantage of their students), or through the good graces of their seniors within the profession (who may not always have the time or patience for such unpaid tutoring).

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