

Training Effects on the Perception of Final Melodic Contours in L2 French Questions

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Abstract

The perception and production of several prosodic phenomena (stress, intonation, and rhythm) often pose a challenge for adult learners of a second language (Mennen, 2015; Jongman & Tremblay, 2020). Research has shown that while explicit instruction improves oral fluency and native-like rhythm in Anglophone L2 French learners (Drouillet et al., 2024), implicit approaches, such as the Verbo-Tonal Method, enhance prosodic mastery in reading and spontaneous speech (Alazard et al., 2010; Alazard, 2013; Saito & Plonsky, 2019). To our knowledge, no prior studies, however, have compared explicit (otherwise known as Form-Based, FB) versus implicit (Meaning-Based, MB) instruction effects on the perception of difficult prosodic patterns in ecologically valid classroom settings. This study addresses two questions: (1) To what extent are beginner Anglophone learners sensitive to the prosodic cues distinguishing *yes/no* and *wh*-questions in French, and how does this sensitivity change with training? (2) Which type of training, Form-Based or Meaning-Based, yields greater improvements in the perception of final melodic contours in L2 French questions?

Thirteen English-speaking undergraduates enrolled in beginner L2 French courses in the U.S. (ages 18–21; $M = 19.9$ y/o; 8 women, 5 men; A1–A2 CEFR proficiency after one semester ~ 45 –50 hours) participated in our study. Participants were randomly assigned to FB ($n = 7$) or MB ($n = 6$) conditions, completing 7.5 hours of standard curriculum instruction over two weeks.

In FB classes, the instructor provided explicit metalinguistic corrections, prompted self-correction, reformulated learner output, and used paralinguistic cues (gestures, exaggerated intonation). MB classes emphasized recasts, clarification requests, and implicit noticing of prosodic forms through communicative tasks. To assess participants' sensitivity to intonation, 20 questions (10 *yes/no* and 10 *wh*-) were recorded, each produced in three manipulated versions using PRAAT: canonical, non-native 1, and non-native 2. For *yes/no* questions, the final f_0 contour on the last syllable was modified to create (1) a native-like late rise (L)H* H% (6–8 ST), (2) an over-amplified rise (L)H*HH% (+2–4 ST, total 8–12 ST), and (3) a falling contour L* L%. The same three manipulations were applied to open *wh*- questions: (1) a native-like fall L* L%, (2) a rise H% (+6–8 ST), and (3) an over-amplified rise HH% (+2–4 ST).

Results show that question type significantly influenced performance: *wh*-questions consistently proved more challenging than *yes/no* questions. MB training produced slightly stronger gains for interrogative intonation recognition, particularly for distinguishing canonical falls from exaggerated rises in *wh*-questions. Error patterns revealed persistent L1 influence, with learners favoring exaggerated rises (HH%), which aligns with previous studies on L2 learner preferences (Santiago et al., 2014).

Our results suggest that ecologically valid classroom prosody training supports more consistent perceptual patterns for L2 French interrogatives, with Meaning-Based instruction showing modest advantages over Form-Based approaches for melodic contour recognition. These findings highlight the feasibility and value of early prosodic instruction within standard beginner curricula, addressing a critical gap in L2 acquisition.