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“The acquisition of second language intonation patterns: a discourse approach”

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Traditionally intonation has been a neglected element in the study of language acquisition. This is mainly due to the fact that on many occasions intonation has not even been considered a proper linguistic component. Besides, it is probably one of the most obscure aspects of language and the way in which children acquire it cannot be easily explained. In this context, it is not surprising that second language acquisition research has ignored intonation for decades. Nonetheless, experience with second language learners has shown that intonation is an essential element for communication. It is more than often that misunderstandings and disruptions in conversation are produced by the selection of a wrong intonation pattern by the speaker. Consequently, it seems that the study of the acquisition of intonation is worthwhile. Therefore, the main aim of this paper will be the analysis of the processes that take place in the learning of English intonation patterns by Spanish speakers.

The study in which it is based was carried out by means of an experiment in which a group of Spanish students of English participated. The students were divided into two groups depending on whether they had some theoretical knowledge of the intonation system of English or no knowledge of it at all. Both groups were asked to perform some oral tasks that were recorded. These tasks were designed from the point of view of a discourse approach to intonation, which purports that intonation is intimately connected to discursive factors. The recordings were transcribed and analysed in order to decide whether the previous knowledge of intonation aspects as well as discursive factors are relevant for the production of the correct intonation contours. The presentation of the conclusions of this study constitutes the body of this paper.