Question Intonation Patterns in A Real-life Conversation And in Textbook Dialogs

Linh Thuy Huynh

Introduction

This paper provides a comparison of question intonation patterns in authentic conversations and those taught in textbook dialogs. The analysis shows that intonation patterns can be influenced by the action that the question is performing and what context it occurs in rather than by its syntactic structure alone. The findings can assist teachers in providing students with more functional information about English questions.

The paper aims to answer two main questions:

1. How is intonation used in various kinds of questions in real-life conversation?

2. What are the differences between intonation of questions used in real-life and those taught by dialogs in textbooks?

To answer the above questions, I recorded natural conversations among three participants, a woman and her two nephews in Honolulu, Hawaii in 2011. Their conversations took place during homework time in the dining room and kitchen. The participants are American-Vietnamese; the woman came to the US as an adult and speaks English as a second language while the two boys were born in the US and speak English as native speakers.

I found four types of questions that the participants often used during their conversation: *Wh*-questions, *Yes/No* questions, Statement as questions and Open/Closed-choice alternative questions (*Or*-questions). For example:

(1) *Wh*-question: What's the hair length behind of my hair?

(2) *Yes/No* question: Can I make up a nick name?

(3) Statement as question: Blick?

(4) Open/Close-choice alternative: Is that a spelling or what?

The analysis of each question is based on the whole sequence that is the context of the question. After identifying the questions in the data, I used Praat (Boersma & Weenink, 2012), a software for phonetic analysis, to trace the intonation contours of those questions. The questions' intonation patterns are described below.

Wh-Questions

Most *Wh*-questions have the same intonation of rising in the prominent syllable and falling in the final syllable of the utterance (Excerpts 1, 2 and Figures 1, 2).
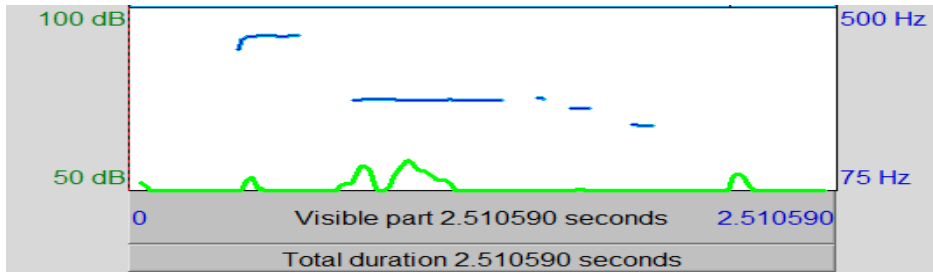
Excerpt 1. Falling *Wh*-Question 1
```
30  R: =what's the hair's length >behind of< my hair.
31     (.)
32  C: [huh?]
33  W: [hair]'s length. that's yours just like. five inches.
```

Figure 1. =<u>what</u>'s the hair's <u>length</u> >behind of< my <u>hair</u>.

Excerpt 2. Falling *Wh*-Question 2
```
42   C: what do you mean [a nick name.
43   W:              [yah? you can make it up?
44      (0.7)
```


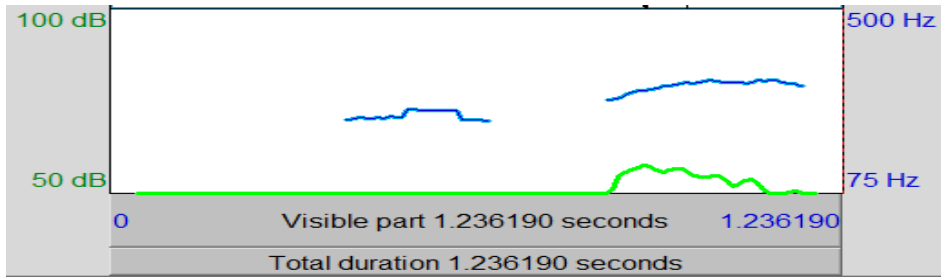*Figure 2. what do you mean [a nick name.*

However, I also found *Wh*-questions with rising final intonation. These tend to communicate the speakers' attitude or emotion. For example, in Excerpt 3, when R asks '[↑>what are you< <u>doing</u> that FOR::?,' with a high, prolong and rising pitch at the of the question (Figure 3), he was also conveying an angry and accusing attitude toward his brother.

Excerpt 3. Rising *Wh*-Question 1
```
11   R:   [↑>what are you< doing that FOR::? and you played outside:
12        and you told >mommy that< you finished.
13        ((stare at W and speak with angry voice))
14        (3.0)
```
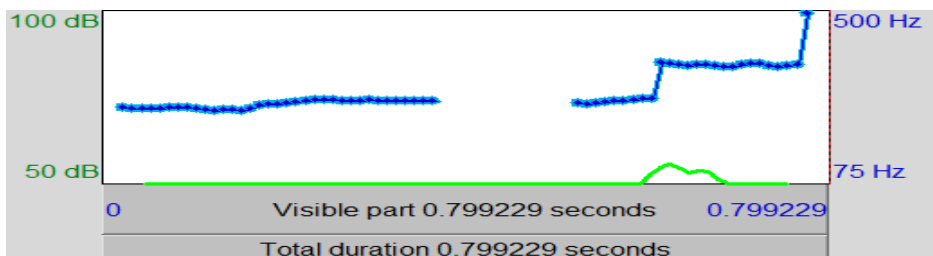

Figure 3. ↑>what are you< <u>doing</u> that FOR::?

In another example, the rising intonation of the *Wh*-question (Figure 4) is a greeting formula that the speaker is recreating to see

how the new nickname they found (Raiden) might work (Excerpt 4, line 92).

Excerpt 4. Rising *Wh*-Question 2

```
67     (1.0)
68  C: okay. let's me [see
69  R:               [I have NO nick name.=
70  W: =>ya [can< CALL you
71  C:      [in:: work sheet:=
72  R: =Blick?=
73  C: =>is it< the one?=
74  W: =∘uhm huh∘ (1.7) Rai
75     (0.2)
76  R: what's the Rai.
77     (0.5)
78  W: no >wa-wait< ↑↓Raiden ↑↓Raiden=
79  R: =what's the word.
80     (.)
81  W: Raiden.=
82  R: =>how ya spell< ↑↓Raiden.
83     (0.2)
84  W: R A I D E N=
85  R: =R what?=
86  W: =A I [d e n
87  R:      [A I what?=
88  W: =D E N
89     (0.7)
90  R: d e n
91     (1.5)
92  W: w(hs)hat's up? Raiden?
93     (1.0)
94  R: so is it? R A I?
95     (0.3)
96  W: ↓yeah r a i
97     (1.8)
98  R: and: okay I'm done
99     (1.3)
```
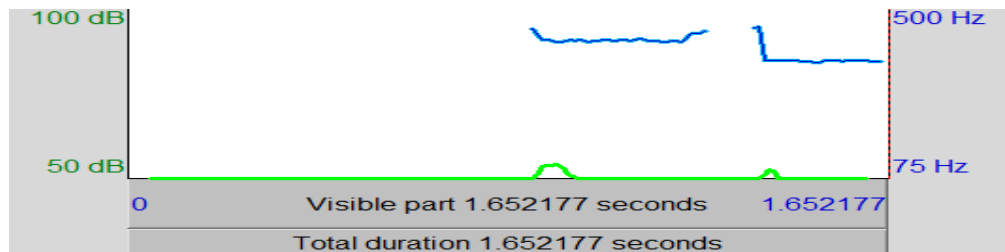

Figure 4. "w(hs)hat's up? Raiden?"

Interestingly, in the real-life conversation I recorded, people sometimes ask a short *wh*-question such as "what i- ↑which one.=" (Excerpt 5, lines 8) or only one

word "=when." (Excerpt 6, line 132) with falling pitch at the end (Figures 5 & 6).

Huynh, L. T. (2012). Question intonation patterns in a real-life conversation and in textbook dialogs. *Hawaii Pacific University TESOL Working Paper Series 10,* 83-92.
Website: http://www.hpu.edu

Excerpt 5. short *Wh*-Question 1
1 C: <u>let</u>'s me see. five <u>sentences</u>. w w <u>5</u> e: what? >is it.<
2   (0.7)
3 W: <u>where</u>? ↑y ↓y >°let's me° see<.
4   ((W opens his book, turns the pages to find his homework))
5   (4.0)
6 W: <u>five</u> c.
7   (5.0)
8 C: what i- ↑<u>which</u> one.=
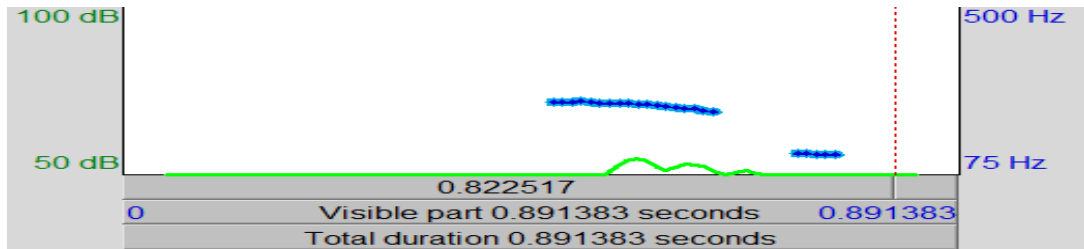9 W: =five <u>C</u>

Figure 5. what i- ↑<u>which</u> one.=

Excerpt 6. short *Wh*-Question 2
126 C: where <u>is</u> the <u>spelling</u> test. uh.=
127 W: =the <u>writing</u> y test?
128   (.)
129 C: ↓yeah
130   (0.7)
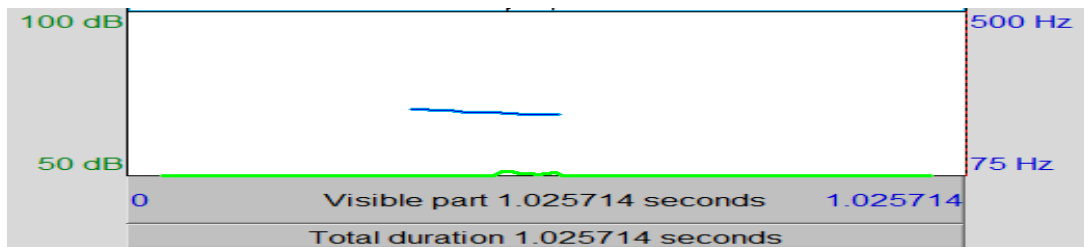131 W: she <u>never</u> bring <u>this</u> one yet.=
132 C: =when.

Figure 6. =when.

Or Questions

In the data I collected, two alternative questions have falling intonation at the end (Excerpt 7). The questions at line 12 'c? or e:' and line 24 'is <u>that</u> a <u>spelling</u>? or, what.' have rising pitch for the first choice 'c?', 'spel<u>li</u>ng?' and then falling pitch for the last choice 'e:.', 'what' (Figures 7 and 8).

Excerpt 7. *Or* Question 1
```
8    C: what i- ↑which one.=
9    W: =five C
10     ((W shows C his homework))
11       (0.2)
12   C: c? or e:. [↑what ↑↓LETTER.
13   W:            [c c c: c:: [c c °c::° ↑↓c C are ALL there.]
```
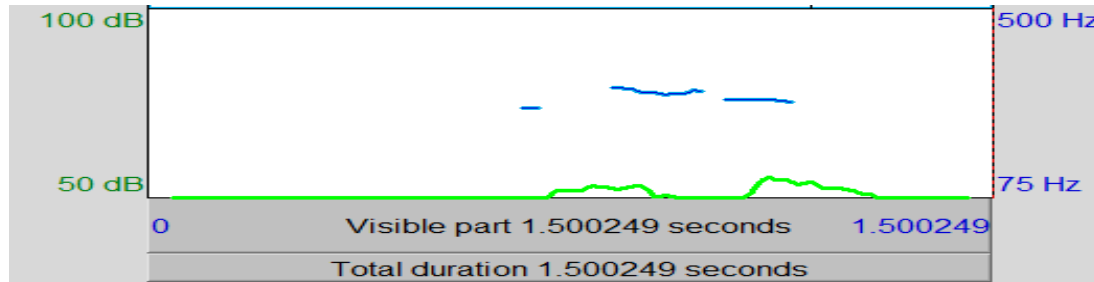

Figure 7. c? or e:.

Excerpt 8. *Or* Question 2
```
24   C: is that a spelling? or, what.
25      (.)
26   R: my-my note. >supposed all about me<=
27   C: =oka[y. Wilson.
```
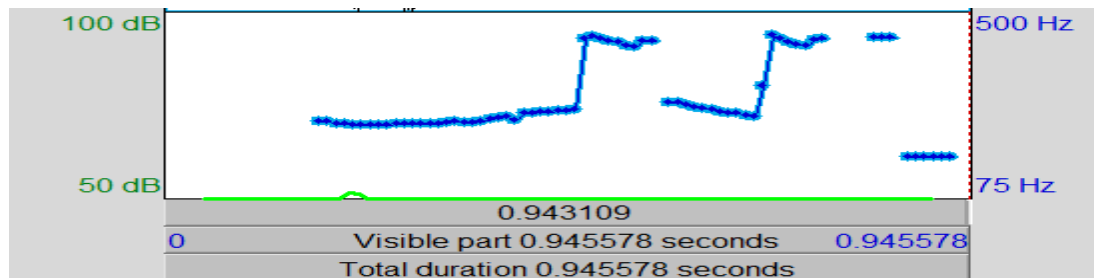

Figure 8. is that a spelling? or, what.

Yes/ No **Questions**

Yes/ no questions frequently take a falling and then rising intonation pattern. However, in the real-life conversation I collected, *yes/ no* questions are sometimes produced with the falling pitch at the end of the question. The questions in lines 1 (Excerpt 9), 23 (Excerpt 10), and 42 (Excerpt 11) all have falling pitch contour at the end (Figures 9-12). Perhaps the speaker uses the falling intonation in these *yes/ no* questions because he/ she already knows the answer and wants to check with the recipient. For example, in the question 'do ya. have any home↑work today.' and '>do ya< have to sign on that.' speaker C already knows that everyday her nephew has homework and needs an adult's signature on the paper, so her question is to confirm the information.

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Excerpt 9. *Yes/ No* Question 1
```
1    C: >do ya.< have any home↑work today.
2       ((stand behind W and ask))
3       (1.0)
4    W: huh?
```
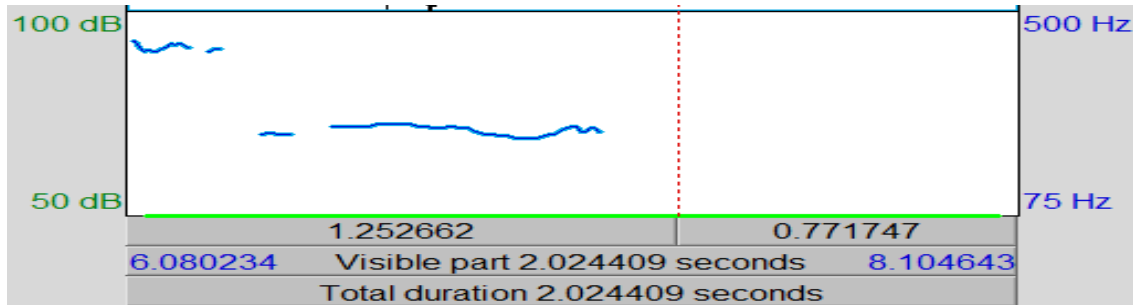

Figure 9. >do ya.< have any home↑work today.

Excerpt 10. *Yes/ No* Question 2
```
18   C: =ok? bring the-the homework and do it.
19      ((R shakes his heads and keep doing his homework)
20      (0.5)
21   W: I study a >couple [of these< more.]
22   R:              [don't tell it. more::hs]
23   C: >do ya< have to sign on that.
24   W: ↑↓yeah
25      (3.0)
```
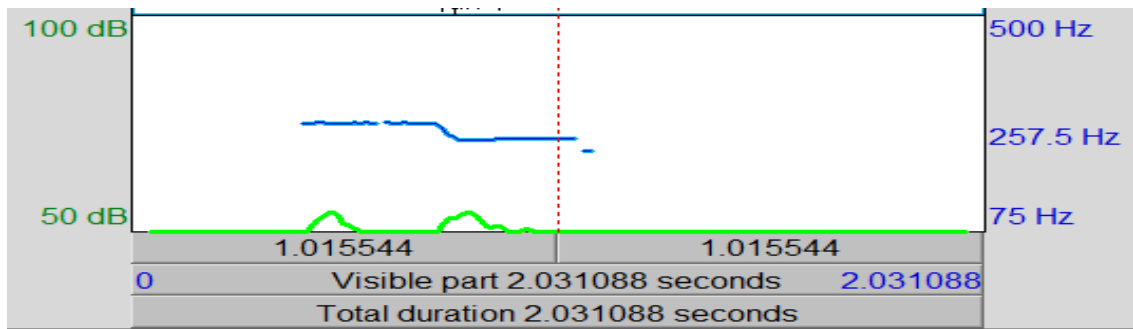

Figure 10. >do ya< have to sign on that.

Excerpt 11. *Yes/ No* Question 3
```
40   R:              [can I? make up. a NICK name?
41   (1.0)
42   C: what do you mean [a nick name.
43   W:              [yah? you can make it up?
44   (0.7)
```
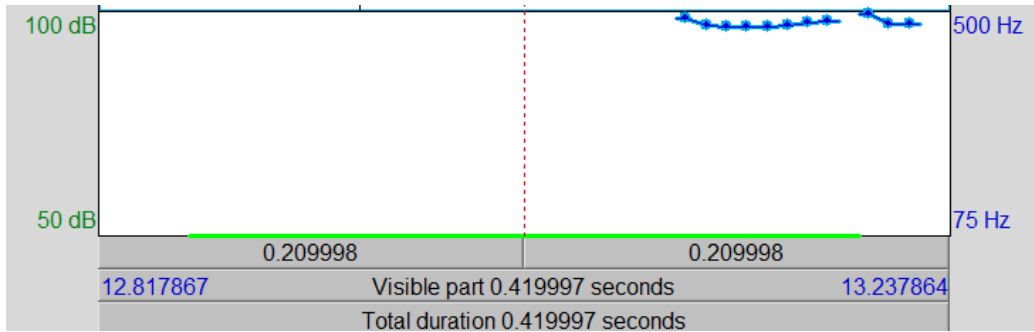
Figure 11. what do you <u>mean</u> [a <u>nick</u> name.

Statement As Questions

Some statements are produced as questions with rising intonation at the end of the sentence. In this kind of question, the intonation plays an important role to help the listener distinguish the difference between a statement and a question. In my data, the utterances in lines 64, 72, 127 (Excerpt 12) all have the rising intonation at the end of the sentence (Figures 13-15).

Excerpt 12. Statement as questions 1
```
64  C: what is today. the twenty?
65     (.)
66  W: ↑yeah
67     (1.0)
```
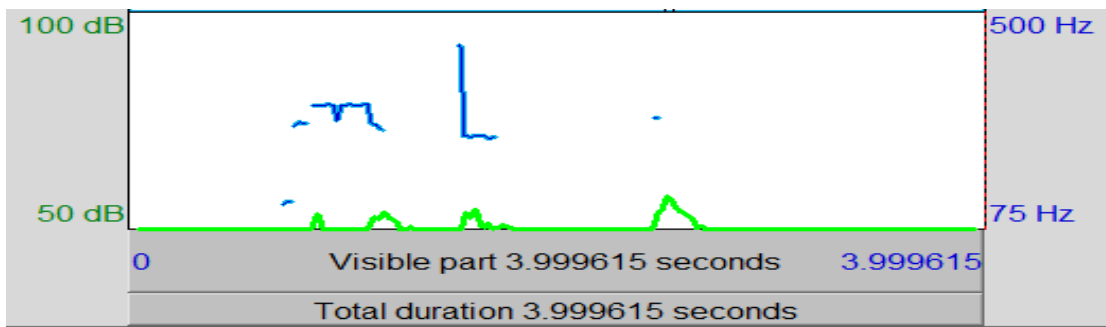

Figure 13. what is <u>to</u>day. the twen<u>ty</u>?

Excerpt 13. Statement as questions 2
```
69  R:              [I have NO nick name.=
70  W: =>ya [can< CALL you
71  C:      [in:: work sheet:=
72  R: =Blick?=
73  C: =>is it< the one?=
74  W: =∘uhm huh∘ (1.7) Rai
75     (0.2)
```
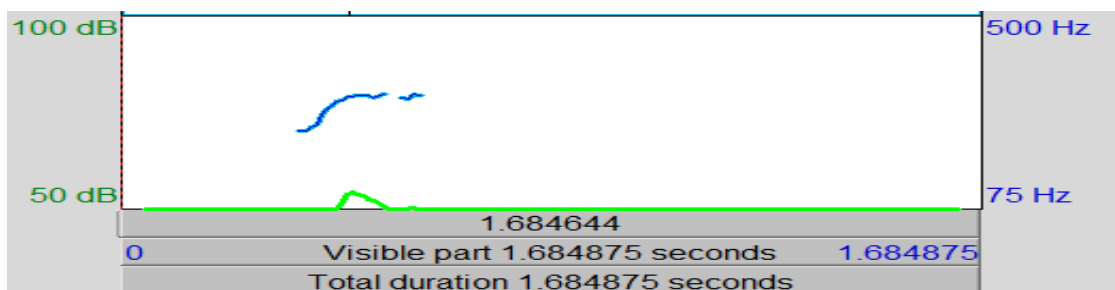
Figure 14. `=Blick?=`

Excerpt 14. Statement as questions 3
```
126 C: where is the spelling test. uh.=
127 W: =the writing y test?
128    (.)
129 C: ↓yeah
130    (0.7)
131 W: she never bring this one yet.=
132 C: =when.
133    (0.8)
134 W: about this week some may- some from this week
135    (0.7)
136 C: when >are you gonna< have this test again.
137    (0.8)
138 W: this: Friday?
```
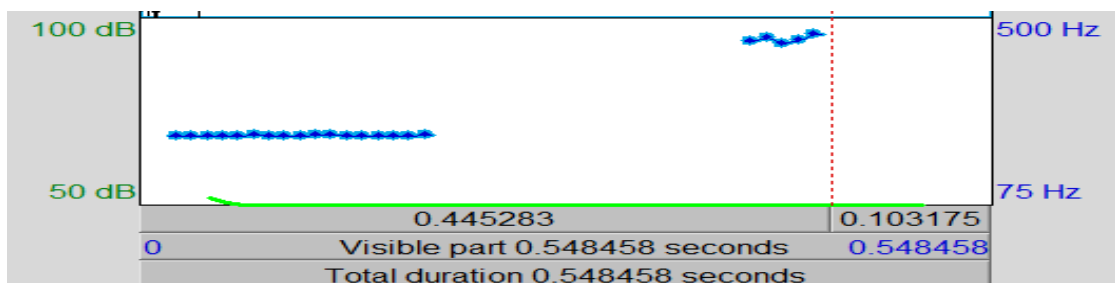

Figure 15. =the <u>writing</u> y test?

I now turn to the intonation patterns for questions introduced in language textbooks. I examine an English textbook in Vietnam, *Tieng Anh 9 [English 9]* (2010) adopted by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, *Connect 4* (2004) published by Cambridge University Express and *New Interchange 3* (2004) published by Cambridge University Press. There are different types of questions as well as the question intonation patterns that are taught in these textbooks. It is taught that *wh*-question and *or* question have the low pitch on the final word. The questions are asked with rising-falling intonation. In contrast, *yes/no* question and statement as question are produced with high pitch placed on the last syllable, and the questions are produced with falling-rising intonation.

*Wh-*questions:

~~What are you going to do?~~
Tieng Anh 9 (2010, p. 52)

~~How many friends?~~
Connect 4 (2004, p. 42)

~~How does it feel to be 21?~~
New Interchange (2004, p. 2)

Or questions:

~~Would you like to have the party here, or somewhere else?~~
Connect 4 (2004, p. 42)

Yes/No questions:

~~Can you turn on the volume, Thuy?~~
Tieng Anh 9 (2010, p. 52)

~~Can I invite some other friends from school to the party, too?~~
Connect 4 (2004, p. 42)

~~Don't you think you've accomplished quite a bit in the last few years?~~
New Interchange (2004, p. 2)

Statement as questions:

~~Everyone?~~
Connect 4 (2004, p. 42)

Table 1
Question Intonation Patterns in An Authentic Conversation And Textbook

	Authentic conversation	Textbook
*Wh-*question intonation patterns	Rising-falling Falling-rising	Rising-Falling
Or questions intonation patterns	Rising-Falling	Rising-Falling
Yes/ No questions intonation patterns	Falling-Rising Terminal falling pitch	Falling-Rising
Statement as questions intonation patterns	Terminal rising pitch	Terminal rising pitch

Table 1 summarizes the similarities and differences in question intonation patterns between the recorded authentic conversation and those taught in textbook dialogs. As the table shows, while the authentic conversation includes all of the intonation patterns presented in the textbook, there are two intonation patterns that are present in the

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recorded conversation but are not taught in the textbook. *Wh*-questions in the real-life conversation may have a falling-rising contour in addition to the rising-falling contour presented in the textbook. Also, *Yes/No*-questions in the real-life conversation may have a terminal falling pitch contour, a pattern not presented in the textbook either.

Teaching implications

This preliminary analysis shows that there are differences between the question intonation patterns in authentic conversation and textbook materials. Mainly, what I have found is that in a real-life conversation, the intonation pattern can be influenced by what *actions* the question is performing, or what context it occurs in.

The results of this analysis show that textbook dialogs may not prepare students sufficiently for the wide range of intonational patterns that questions may take in English. Gilmore (2011) stated that students exposed to authentic input developed higher communicative competence compared to those exposed to only textbook materials (p. 23). Consequently, in teaching classroom language, teachers should not only use textbook materials but also provide authentic conversations such as transcripts, audio samples, or video clips to students. It is hope that with more authentic materials, teachers can more effectively help improve students' ability in language acquisition and communicative competence.

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