

**TASK-BASED INSTRUCTION FOR THE  
TEACHING OF DISCOURSE FUNCTION  
TO CHINESE STUDENTS IN ENGLISH  
AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS,  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH**



**GU MIN**

UMS

PERPUSTAKAAN  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND  
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH  
2007**

**A STUDY ON TASK-BASED INSTRUCTION FOR  
THE TEACHING OF DISCOURSE FUNCTION  
TO CHINESE STUDENTS IN ENGLISH  
AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS,  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH**

**GU MIN**

 PERPUSTAKAAN  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH  
**THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT FOR  
THE DEGREE OF  
M. ED. (TESL)**

**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND  
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH  
2007**

## UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

## BORANG PENGESAHAN TESIS

JUDUL : \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

IJAZAH : \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

SAYA : \_\_\_\_\_ SESI PENGAJIAN : \_\_\_\_\_  
(HURUF BESAR)

Mengaku membenarkan tesis \*(LPSM/Sarjana/Doktor Falsafah) ini disimpan di Perpustakaan Universiti Malaysia Sabah dengan syarat-syarat kegunaan seperti berikut:-

1. Tesis adalah hak milik Universiti Malaysia Sabah.
2. Perpustakaan Universiti Malaysia Sabah dibenarkan membuat salinan untuk tujuan pengajian sahaja.
3. Perpustakaan dibenarkan membuat salinan tesis ini sebagai bahan pertukaran antara institusi pengajian tinggi.
4. Sila tandakan (/)

☐

SULIT

(Mengandungi maklumat yang berdarjah keselamatan atau kepentingan Malaysia seperti yang termaktub di AKTA RAHSIA RASMI 1972)

☐

TERHAD

(Mengandungi maklumat TERHAD yang telah ditentukan oleh organisasi/badan di mana penyelidikan dijalankan)

☐

TIDAK TERHAD

Disahkan oleh:

\_\_\_\_\_  
(TANDATANGAN PENULIS)\_\_\_\_\_  
(TANDATANGAN PUSTAKAWAN)

Alamat Tetap: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

TARIKH: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(NAMA PENYELIA)

TARIKH: \_\_\_\_\_

## Catatan:

\*Potong yang tidak berkenaan.

\*Jika tesis ini SULIT dan TERHAD, sila lampirkan surat daripada pihak berkuasa/organisasi berkenaan dengan menyatakan sekali sebab dan tempoh tesis ini perlu dikelaskan sebagai SULIT dan TERHAD.

\*Tesis dimaksudkan sebagai tesis bagi Ijazah Doktor Falsafah dan Sarjana Secara Penyelidikan atau disertai bagi pengajian secara kerja kursus dan Laporan Projek Sarjana Muda (LPSM).

## **DECLARATION**

The materials in this dissertation are original expect for quotations, experts, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged.

Gu Min

Ps 04-006(K)-024(A)

29 NOVEMER 2006



**UMS**  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

## **ABSTRAK**

### ***ON TASK-BASED INSTRUCTION FOR THE TEACHING OF DISCOURSE FUNCTION TO CHINESE STUDENTS IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS, UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH***

Kajian ini telah menyelidik keberkesanan panduan asas tugas dalam pengajaran berdasarkan fungsi perbincangan. Tujuan kajian ialah untuk mengenal pasti keberkesanan penggunaan panduan asas tugas sebagai strategi untuk memperbaiki tahap pembelajaran intonasi di dalam English sebagai bahasa asing. Memandangkan pengajaran dan pembelajaran intonasi melibatkan sub aspek yang luas, penyelidik telah mengurangkan perbincangan berkenaan kunci pengajaran intonasi kepada skop yang lebih kecil. Ujian pre test dan post test telah dilakukan terhadap 46 orang pelajar China yang sedang mengikuti program IELP. Seramai 23 orang pelajar telah diuji dengan menggunakan kaedah tradisional sebagai kesesuaian kepada pelajar yang telah menerima ujian pre test dan post test iaitu instrumen utama kajian melalui pengumpulan data secara efisien.

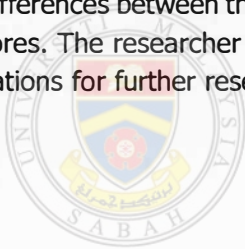


UMS  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

## **ABSTRACT**

### ***ON TASK-BASED INSTRUCTION FOR THE TEACHING OF DISCOURSE FUNCTION TO CHINESE STUDENTS IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS, UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH***

This study investigated the efficacy of the Task-based instruction for teaching of discourse function. It aims to find out the practicality of using the task-based instruction as strategy to improve intonation learning in the English as a foreign language classroom. As intonation teaching encompasses a wide array of sub aspects, the researcher has limited the scope of discourse function of intonation. 46 Chinese students undergoing IELP participating the study, and a pre test and post test, factorial design was employed. 23 learners made up the control group to receive the traditional method as opposed to 23 learners who receive the task-based instruction to teach discourse function. The pre test and post test being the main instrument of research to collect data on the efficacy of instructional strategy was further supported by a preliminary questionnaire during five classes. The results indicated statistically significant differences between the Control and Experimental groups on the variables of post test scores. The researcher discusses the pedagogical implications and suggests recommendations for further research.



UMS  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would have to thank my supervisor, Dr. Hamzah Md. Omar for his advice, comments and guidelines, which I would not have been able to do without. I also would like to thank Miss Siti Zuraini Yassin for her help during this research. Not forgetting also to all lectures who have provided the academic support during the semesters of studies. Lastly, to my parents for their never ending support and understanding. To my friend Maine who without her, this endeavor would have been most arduous. To my course mates, thank you for your help and friendship.



UMS  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

## LIST OF TABLES

- 4.1.1 Language Class Enrolment
- 4.1.2 Previous Pronunciation learning
- 4.1.3 Teaching Method
- 4.1.4 Understanding of 'Correct Intonation'
- 4.1.5 Understanding of 'Attention Focusing'
- 4.1.6 Understanding of 'Stress Placement'
- 4.1.7 Understanding of 'English Tones'
- 4.2.1 Pre-test and post-test scores of Part 1 for the Experimental group
- 4.2.2 Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) of Pre Test and Post Test for Experimental Group
- 4.2.3 Pre-test and post-test scores of Part 1 for the Control group
- 4.2.4 Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) of Pre Test and Post Test for Control Group
- 4.2.5 Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) of Part 1 Post Test for Experimental Group and Control Group
- 4.2.6 Independent Sample T – Test for Difference in Part 1 Post Test Scores Between Experimental Group and Control Group
- 4.2.7 Pre-test and post-test scores of Part 2 for the Experimental group
- 4.2.8 Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) of Pre Test and Post Test for Experimental Group

- 4.2.9 Pre-test and post-test scores of Part 2 for the Control group
- 4.2.10 Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) of Pre Test and Post Test for  
Control Group
- 4.2.11 Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) of Part 2 Post Test for  
Experimental Group and Control Group
- 4.2.12 Independent Sample T – Test for Difference in Part 2 Post  
Test Scores Between Experimental Group and Control Group
- 4.2.13 Pre-test and post-test scores of Part 3 for the Experimental group
- 4.2.14 Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) of Pre Test and Post Test for  
Experimental Group
- 4.2.15 Pre-test and post-test scores of Part 3 for the Control group
- 4.2.16 Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) of Pre Test and Post Test for  
Control Group
- 4.2.17 Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) of Part 3 Post Test for  
Experimental Group and Control Group
- 4.2.18 Independent Sample T – Test for Difference in Part 3 Post Test  
Scores Between Experimental Group and Control Group

## LIST OF CHARTS

- 1.3 Conceptual framework
- 2.3 The theoretical framework
- 3.1 Research design
- 3.3 The experimental design
- 3.4 Tests and Variable



UMS  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

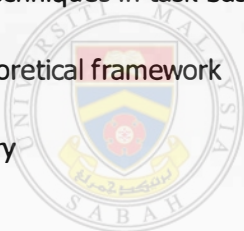
|                  |     |
|------------------|-----|
| DECLARATION      | I   |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | ii  |
| ABSTRAK          | iii |
| ABSTRACT         | iv  |
| LIST OF TABLES   | v   |
| LIST OF CHARTS   | vi  |

### CHAPTER 1: PROPOSED STUDY

|                                |    |
|--------------------------------|----|
| 1.0: Introduction              | 1  |
| 1.1: Background of the study   | 2  |
| 1.2: Research problems         | 5  |
| 1.3: Conceptual framework      | 7  |
| 1.4: Objectives of study       | 8  |
| 1.5: Research questions        | 9  |
| 1.6: Significance of the study | 9  |
| 1.7: Hypothesis                | 10 |
| 1.8: Limitation of the study   | 11 |
| 1.9: Definition of terms       | 11 |
| 1.10: Summary                  | 13 |

**CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

|                                                  |    |
|--------------------------------------------------|----|
| 2.0:Introduction                                 | 14 |
| 2.1:Past research                                | 14 |
| 2.1.1:Theory of learning                         | 14 |
| 2.1.2:Theory of language learning                | 19 |
| 2.1.3:Theory of second/foreign language learning | 23 |
| 2.2:Present research                             | 28 |
| 2.2.1:Communicative language learning            | 28 |
| 2.2.2:Task-ased language learning                | 31 |
| 2.2.3:Techniques in task-based instruction       | 34 |
| 2.3:The theoretical framework                    | 35 |
| 2.4:Summary                                      | 36 |



UMS  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

**CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD**

|                                 |    |
|---------------------------------|----|
| 3.0:Intorduction                | 37 |
| 3.1:Research design             | 37 |
| 3.2:Population and sampling     | 39 |
| 3.3:Research instrument         | 39 |
| 3.3.1:Preliminary questionnaire | 39 |
| 3.3.2:Pre test and post test    | 40 |
| 3.3.3:Lesson plan               | 41 |

|                                  |    |
|----------------------------------|----|
| 3.4:Data collection and analysis | 42 |
| 3.5:Summary                      | 43 |

**CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS**

|                              |    |
|------------------------------|----|
| 4.0:Introduction             | 44 |
| 4.1:Responents'background    | 44 |
| 4.2:Result of the experiment | 48 |
| 4.3:Summary                  | 58 |

**CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

|                                         |    |
|-----------------------------------------|----|
| 5.0:Introduction                        | 59 |
| 5.1:Discussion                          | 59 |
| 5.2:Implication of study                | 63 |
| 5.3:Limitation of study                 | 64 |
| 5.4:Suggestions for the future research | 65 |
| 5.5:Summary                             | 65 |

**REFERENCES**

**APPENDIX**

# CHAPTER 1

## STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

### 1.0 Introduction

Intonation, stress, and general “melody” of speech are said to be among the first aspects of speech that human infants attend to, react to, and produce themselves (Lieberman, 1986, P 239). And as observation and experience amply demonstrate, child learners of a second language have little difficulty in acquiring native-like pronunciation and intonation in the L2 than adults. Due to its inherent complexity and to the corresponding difficulty in learning and mastering it, intonation was ignored for many years in language teaching. However, it is now slowly gaining recognition as an integral part of language fluency, competence, and proficiency.

Intonation is a term often used interchangeably with several other terms, and it is often referred to in everyday language as speech melody or sentence melody, terms that focus on pitch variations and modulations. And the main components of intonation include fundamental frequency (or pitch), intensity (or loudness), duration (or length), stress, accents and rhythm. Therefore, the term intonation has been defined as referring to “the distinctive use of patterns of pitch, or melody” (Crystal, 1985, P162). Stress, as one of main components of intonation, it is often used to mean word stress or lexical stress. The other term often used interchangeably with stress is accent. And stress

serves the function of helping speakers to mark word stress as well as sentence stress and helping listeners to identify both individual words and the most salient piece of information in an utterance. Because each component of intonation has its own features, the integration intonation into language instruction is necessary and important. However, just as Van Els and de Bot (1987) noted, "both in the teaching of pronunciation and in research concerning foreign accents, too much attention is paid to the segmental and too little to suprasegmental aspects." That is to say, "hanging intonation onto discourse has not yet been fully developed into teaching materials"(de Bot & Maifert, 1982). This led to heighten instructors' awareness of suprasegmentals and their function in language (Dorothy, 2002). It means that instructors must be able to listen to authentic speech in the target language, train their own ears to recognize stressed syllables and words, and then help learners aware of how the target language (L2) realizes stress so that the learners can in turn perceive and comprehend better and ultimately produce more native-like rhythmic patterns.

### **1.1 Background of the study**

Intonation is one of the most challenging topics to cover in the ESL classroom. Traditional programs of pronunciation teaching, although language teachers stressed the importance of pronunciation, and many textbooks acknowledged that prosody should be learned, "many students are unaware of intonation patterns in their own language." (Moeller, 1986). Just as Bell (1996) mentioned in his study, "the only area of pronunciation which they have been exposed of are those dealing with individual speech

sounds." Students are unfamiliar with, and unaware with of the importance of, suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation such as lexical stress patterns, weak forms, and communicative stress and intonation within sentence. Since most language teachers themselves have learned intonation informally and indirectly and since linguistic accounts of intonation tend to be highly theoretical and not applicable to language learning situations, it is not surprising that most language teachers themselves personally tend to avoid teaching it explicitly in the classroom. In addition, traditional programs of pronunciation teaching, frequently did not include attention to intonation, and they did, then not to the discourse-level functions of intonation. Fortunately, this situation has been gradually changing. Since the mid-1980, there have been a growing number of teacher resource books on teaching pronunciation for ESL/EFL and a number of books specifically address the suprasegmentals and suggest ways of teaching intonation. However, just as Levis (1999) points out "intonation as currently presented in North American textbook bears a strong resemblance to textbook treatments from 30-50 ears ago." He attributed the lack of innovation in adequate teaching materials to two factors: first, an overemphasis on the role of intonation in signaling grammatical relations and in conveying speakers' attitudes and emotions, and second, a lack of communicative purpose and a focus on uncontextualized, sentence-level practice of intonation forms. Therefore, Levis proposed four principles for intonation teaching materials:

- (a) Intonation must be taught in context, (b) intonational meanings must be generalizable, (c) the teaching of intonation must be subordinated to larger

communication purposes, and (d) intonation should be taught with realistic language.

(Levis 1999:37)

Although the nature of communication competence and proficiency goals suggests that improved pronunciation and intonation are of utmost importance, there are few detailed suggestions in handbooks for the teaching of pronunciation or intonation in the classroom. In addition, although neither teachers nor researchers make over reference to intonation, it is hoped that at least in the best-case scenarios, intonation is being taught indirectly. That is, with all emphasis on spoken input, communication, and contextualization, perhaps intonation is attended to and imitated despite not being directly addressed.

Task-based language teaching constitutes a strong version of communicative language teaching, and tasks can function as a useful device for planning a communicative curriculum. Task holds a central place in current Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research and also in language pedagogy. According to Ellis (2003) opinion, the definition of a task is "a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate prepositional content has been conveyed." Using the tasks, teachers can provide learners with opportunities to practice a specific feature in communicative context. Task-based instruction for teaching stress and intonation provides the possibilities not only to improve students' understanding of stress for communicative effect, but also to raise students' awareness of intonation. They may feel

that they can express themselves emotionally.

In task-based language teaching, tasks are employed to make language teaching more communicative. Such tasks are viewed as devices for generating interaction involving L2 learners and through this interaction affecting the course of acquisition. Because interaction has been seen as central of the course of acquisition in SLA, the study of how task design and implementation affects interaction affords important insights into the potential relationship between task and acquisition.

## 1.2 Research Problems

There are 46 Chinese students undergoing Intensive English Language Program (IELP). For them, Mandarin is their first language. And it is not intonation language, therefore they are not used to the patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables in English words. And the only area of pronunciation which they were exposed only to individual speech sounds. They are unfamiliar with, and unaware of the importance of, suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation such as communicative stress and intonation in sentences. Most of teachers in China treat the acquisition of intonation as automatic, even if they teach "stress" in intonation, they just generally follow "Teacher Training Manual" (a reference book giving instruction for new teacher about how to teach "stress" in intonation), and teach students how to use "stress" markers:

- (1) Write some words on the board and have the students say them. Get them to 'clap' out the words to find out how many syllables there are in each one. (2) Then have the students to say which syllable is stronger, or stressed Mark the

stress by putting a small square or circle over the stressed syllable or underlining it. (3) Have the students to say the word and only clap on the stressed syllable or clap out each syllable and clap much louder on the stressed one.

(<http://www.nse.cn/oblog/more.asp?id=85>)

This lead to the result that Chinese students' grammatical competence may be sufficient, but in terms of comprehension, they may not know where the focus of a sentence might be in the L2 and may not be attending closely enough at the point where new information is commonly stressed – that is, they might misapprehend the native speaker's sentence stress. Meanwhile, we found that the messages students employ in class often emotion-less and a little too polite.

Based on Jenkins's (2000) research, practice activities of specific target sounds – minimal pair exercises and drilling – as well as the rules of contrastive and nuclear stress will facilitate learners to move from receptive to productive competence in core problematic areas. It is doubtful that these types of tasks will promote pronunciation skills or motivation in the language classroom. This research aims to prove evidence that task-based instruction for teaching stress and intonation will provide the possibilities not only to improve students' understanding of the discourse function of intonation, but also to create students' awareness of the importance of "correct" intonation. They may feel that they can express themselves emotionally.

### 1.3 Conceptual framework

The proposed study on the importance of task-based instruction for the teaching of discourse function of intonation, will be based on a framework, which is illustrated in this figure:

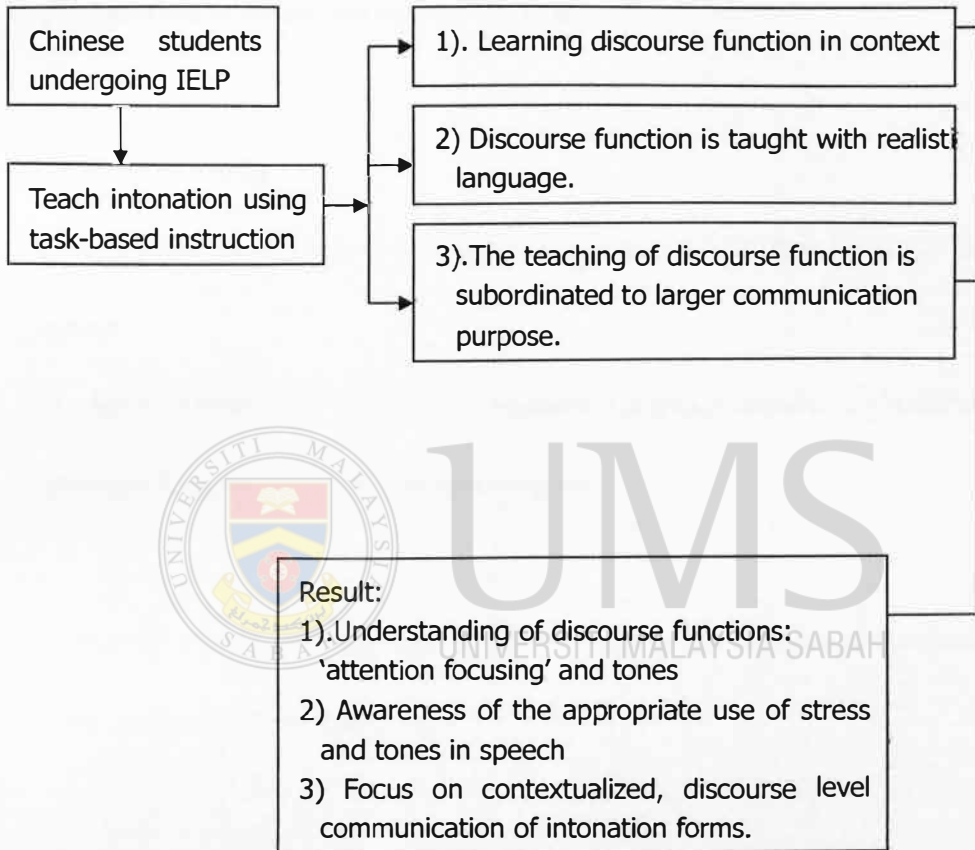


Chart 1.3 Conceptual framework

This research will choose 46 Chinese students undergoing IELP as sample. And teach the experimental group the discourse function of intonation through task-based instruction; the control group through traditional teaching mode. After 5 classes, a post-test will be given to both groups. Through using task-based instruction, students are taught discourse function in context, and also with realistic language.

Meanwhile, the teaching of discourse function is subordinated to larger communication purpose. The result of pre-test and post-test will show that whether the use of task-based instruction helps to improve students' understanding of discourse function, and also whether the use of task-based instruction creates students' awareness of the appropriate use of stress and tones in speech.

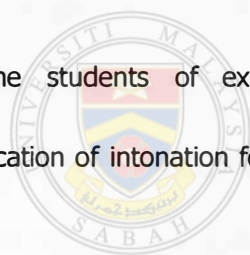
#### **1.4 Objectives of study**

This research invites 46 students to take up the role as participants to fulfill the following objectives:

1. To identify whether the students of experimental group improve understanding of 'attention focusing' compared to control group's.
2. To identify whether the students of experimental group improve understanding of tones compared to control group's.
3. To identify whether the students of experimental group raise awareness of the appropriate use of stress and tones in speech compared to control group's.
4. To identify whether the students of experimental group can focus on discourse level communication of intonation forms compared to control group's.

## 1.5 Research questions

1. Would the students of experimental group improve understanding of 'attention focusing' compared to control group's?
2. Would the students of experimental group improve understanding of tones compared to control group's?
3. Would the students of experimental group raise awareness of the appropriate use of stress and tones in speech compared to control group's?
4. Would the students of experimental group can focus on discourse level communication of intonation forms compared to control group's?



UMS  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

## 1.6 Significance of the study

English is considered a stressed language while many other languages are considered syllabic. It means that, in English, we give stress to certain word while other words are quickly spoken. Generally, if we can understand and communicate more because we begin to listen for (and use in speaking) stressed words. That is to say, stressed words are the key to excellent pronunciation and understanding of English. However, in typical class, students often focus on pronouncing each word correctly and therefore tend to pronunciation in an unnatural manner. And Chinese speakers may have difficulty with the characteristic intonation patterns of English because pitch functions differently in

Chinese (Avery, 2004). Therefore, many linguists and teacher suggest that teachers should focus on teaching stress in order to raise students' understanding of stress and intonation.

In addition, one factor in La acquisition that results in so-called "foreign accent" in L2 is the transfer to patterns of pronunciation from L. Mandarin belong to tone language, it is not same as English that is intonation language. Therefore, there are some degrees of transfer. Speakers convey the mood, emotion and meaning and subtle changes in patterns can result in a different meaning. In order to help students to attain "near-native" and "socially acceptable" pronunciation, the teachers need to design some awareness activities and teach actively in context that as natural as possible, present authentic input. Therefore, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of the task-based instruction for teaching the discourse function of intonation and see whether the task-based instruction is a preferable mode compared to conventional mode. The premise of this study is on the idea that if there is significant difference in the post-test scores of the treatment group and the control group, perhaps this finding may be helpful in improving the teaching of pronunciation.

## 1.7 Hypothesis

Hypothesis Ha 1: Students of experimental group would improve understanding of 'attention focusing' compared to control group's.

Hypothesis Ha 2 : Students of experimental group would improve understanding of tones

compared to control group's.

Hypothesis Ha 3: Students of experimental group would raise awareness of the appropriate use of stress and tones in speech compared to control group's.

Hypothesis Ha 4: Students of experimental group would focus on discourse level communication of intonation forms compared to control group's.

### 1.8 Limitation of the study

The subjects of this study will constitute only a small proportion of the population. Only 46 Chinese students from Center for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PPIB) will participate, and they are at a similar level of English proficiency. And this study will be conducted over a short period of time (2 weeks), and a significant impact of teaching the discourse function of intonation through the task-based instruction may not be readily discerned.

### 1.9 Definition of terms

The perceptions below are to clarify the important terms used in this study:

Attention focusing - The use of intonation to focus the listeners' attention on aspects that are most important in speech. The more predictable a word's occurrence in a given context, the lower its information content is, and the tonic stress will tend to be placed on words which high information content.

Task-based instruction – Tasks provide the basis for an entire language curriculum. And