

SOAS LANGUAGE CENTRE

LEARNER SUPPORT

LEARNERS' VOICES

Tones – Need Help? The Workshop

An overview of the May 2007 workshop - Last updated: 31 Mar 2008

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What languages are you learning at SOAS Language Centre, and how many tones are there in them?

- Thai, Mandarin: 4-5 tones, but not of the same kind
- Yoruba: 3 tones

Are these tones written?

- Thai: you can get the tones from the written form
- Mandarin: tones are not written on the characters but can be written in pinyin
- Yoruba: tones are written on the vowels

What are these tones used for in the languages?

- To distinguish words from each other, e.g. two or more words may look the same but when the tones are different the meaning changes

What difficulties do you have with hearing and pronouncing tones?

- Remembering which tones are supposed to be on a word
- Hearing the tones when native speakers speak because of dialect differences, fast speech, high-pitched and low voices, or running tones into each other in fast speech
- Hearing tones because you are so pre-occupied with trying to understand the meaning of a word and translating it in your head that you don't have time to spare for tones
- Tones that change once they enter sentences
- Native speakers can produce tones but often know very little about them. They can't explain them to learners the way a teacher can

How can you go about learning the tones?

- Speaking aloud when no-one is listening and hearing you speak
- Gesturing and making body movements, such as standing up a little for high tones
- Mimicry, such as raising your eyebrows for high tones
- Using one word as a "model" for other words that have the same tones
- Learning phrases by heart
- Listening to tapes and CDs repeatedly
- Watching TV and soap operas – in drama series there will always be one character with an exaggerated pronunciation of tones

Produced by Michalis Sivvas, formerly at SOAS Language Centre.

