

Basics

When you speak, your voice has a tone and demonstrates an attitude. The pitch of your voice – whether it is high, low or somewhere in between – and the volume, speed and emphasis of your speech all affect what attitude you express. Your attitude is your feeling about what is being discussed.

The academic context

There are two things to consider here. Firstly, if you are taking a listening exam, you may be asked what the speaker means when there are a number of possible meanings. By giving special attention to the tone of the speaker, you will better understand what they want to convey. You may even be asked how a speaker feels. Secondly, in a tutorial, lecture, etc., the tone used may be significant, as it can indicate changes in the speaker's attitude towards the subject matter. For example, if a speaker uses different tones to make two different points, this might indicate they think one of them is more important than the other.

Key features

- Volume – how loud or quiet a voice is – is important, because it is used to convey anything from certainty and amusement to anger and disappointment.
- The pitch of a voice helps you understand the speaker. For example, in English, rising pitch at the end of a sentence can show a question is being asked.
- How fast someone speaks also plays an important part. For example, if your lecturer slows down, it may be that they want to emphasize something you need to know. Speeding up when speaking can indicate heightened emotions, such as excitement.
- It is important to be able to recognize how subtle differences in tone relate to the words spoken, because this means that you can differentiate between attitudes that are difficult to pinpoint, such as sarcasm, irony or disappointment. You will certainly need this ability in your working or social life too!

Challenges / difficulties

The difficulty of listening for a speaker's attitude may depend on how you listen in other languages you speak. In some languages, changes in tone can completely change the meaning of individual words. This is not so in English. Instead, a change in tone shows what attitude the speaker has, or affects the meaning of the sentence in a more subtle way. If your other language uses changes in tone differently, you will probably need to work harder to identify them when listening in English.

How can I develop this skill?

Happily, this is a skill which you can work on very easily. If you are aware of the need to focus on tone and attitude in your interactions when using English, you will soon find yourself improving as a listener and a speaker as you identify spoken nuances more and more. Watching TV programmes or films is also a great help. Use the English subtitles to see what is actually said, and observe the reactions of the on-screen listeners. You will soon identify interesting relationships between the spoken word and the attitude of the speaker. You will also enjoy the achievement of watching English comedy, drama, etc. and understanding it well.

Learning outcome

- You will be able to understand people more accurately when you can see how the tone and attitude affect what they are saying.
- You will become a better listener *and* speaker, as these skills cross over. Your fluency and understanding in English will develop.

Theory to practice

1 Read the transcripts. Tick the tone/attitude you expect the speaker will convey.

a

The level of noise in the stadium is growing steadily. The two teams are coming out of the players' tunnel. The crowd are clapping and waving.

- ☐ excited
- ☐ happy
- ☐ neutral

b

I'm from the Emirates, and I lived in Australia for one year. When I wanted something, a coffee or a sandwich, I couldn't ask in Arabic, of course. So I was always speaking English, every day. I had no choice!

- ☐ angry
- ☐ amused
- ☐ positive

c

A So what are you going to do now?
B Well, I'm going to sleep for a while!

- ☐ humorous
- ☐ negative
- ☐ sarcastic

2  **01** Now listen and check your answers.

3 How did you identify the tone/attitude?

Ways to get more practice

One way to improve this skill is to listen to and copy a proficient English speaker using different attitudes and tones. Search online for a speaker expressing those tones and attitudes you find more difficult to recognize or reproduce. If you find a dialogue, you could practise with another student – this can be a lot of fun.