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Abstract

Developing pronunciation is a difficult skill that many overlook with the hopes that it will correct itself throughout the learning process. For this research, six Japanese university CEFR A2 learners of English were divided into a group of four and two, respectively. They were tasked with enunciating various English sound pairs for the first part of the study, followed by keeping a pronunciation diary about their practices for the second part whilst being exposed to poetry that was specifically designed to test English pronunciation. It was found that the diary was a valuable Assessment for Learning (AfL) tool, and pair work was a more effective method than group work for pronunciation development.

概要

発音を良くすることは、学習の過程で自然と直ることを期待し、多くの人が見落とす難しい技能である。この研究では、日本の大学生六名の英語の CEFR A2 英語学習者をそれぞれ四名と二名のグループに分けた。一番初めの研究では、練習の発音の日誌をつけることが求められた。様々な音の組の英語を明瞭に発音すること、そして次の研究では英語の発音のテスト用に特別に作られた。参加者に色々な英語の発音を厳しく練習させるために、特別な詩をあげた。日誌は学習手段において貴重な評価 (Assessment for Learning - AfL) であり、発音を伸ばす事は、グループ学習よりも二人組学習の方がより効果的な方法であるということがわかった。

Keywords: English pronunciation, cooperative learning, performance assessment

キーワード：英語発音、協同学習、パフォーマンス評価

Introduction

Native-like pronunciation is usually the ultimate target of many second language (L2) learners. Achieving this linguistic goal is time-consuming, and is sometimes not possible. Although some languages, such as Vietnamese, may require a greater focus on pronunciation due to subtle tonal differences that can change word meaning/intention, pronunciation practice itself, within any language, is an imperative feature

of language learning and development. It has been described that “*one of the key requirements for language proficiency is to secure understandable pronunciation for the language learners*” (Gilakjani, 2012, p119). Moreover, pronunciation has also been said to be a harder skill to improve upon in comparison with other language skills (Elliott, 1995). Therefore, it appears to be a feature that is not always properly integrated into language programmes due to lack of time when teaching (Gilbert, 2008). It is usually given superficial treatment (Jackson, 2016), and is only addressed where absolutely necessary, usually via tedious drilling techniques, under the belief that continued language study and long-term L2 exposure will improve pronunciation (Long, 1990), consequently remedying any errors that occur.

This paper owes its foundations to a 2015 paper (Kumar, 2015) on pronunciation improvement through peer review and group work. The research completed in this study (hereby referred to as study A) examined how a group of six Japanese university students learning English as a second language (ESL), within the CEFR A2 band of English, being split into one group of four and one group of two, worked together to better their English pronunciation when introduced to several challenging sound pairs. Despite being CEFR A2 users, as identified by their university’s placement testing system, their previous ESL education had focused more on receptive skills, with a greater emphasis on reading and writing, where vocal production was not a strict priority. Although the participants had a vast vocabulary and good working knowledge of English, all initially found understanding native speakers and expressing themselves difficult due to their minimal experience in enunciating English words and phrases. For example, they were initially unable to differentiate between similar sounds or words, such as “seat-sheet”, “long-wrong”, and “vest-best” among a large number of others, unless it was presented to them in written form, which allowed them to use the visual cue to clarify the distinctions. Study A therefore introduced various pronunciation pairs, and had them practice regularly within their respective groups, under supervision, over a period of three months. Additional practice was presented using tongue twisters that used the different pronunciation pairs against each other with the primary aim of helping them to better verbally discriminate between each similar-sounding pair, with the secondary aim of improving their overall pronunciation of English sounds/words. The study result was that each student made overall pronunciation improvements, with some sounds progressing further than others. However, the pair group’s overall performance advanced to a slightly greater extent and at a faster pace than that of the group of four.

Comparing similar sounds and discriminating between them via the use of similar words, phrases, and tongue twisters was a useful, yet basic, contrastive analytical (Crystal, 2008) approach, as it specifically targeted pronunciation difficulties that Japanese ESL learners face, such as “l/r” distinctions where Japanese does not differentiate between the sounds. The study forced learners to face these differences, and attempt to enunciate them as separate items, whilst also aiming to aid general pronunciation skill support as a part of their studies. Study A also attempted to integrate elements of ‘*cooperative learning*’ (Chiu, 2004; Attle & Baker, 2007; Slavin, 2008), as it has been suggested by language education researchers that group work and cooperative learning has resulted in a number of improvements among students, such as increased learning motivation, and further verbal practice opportunities (Long, 1990; Kim, 1999; Burke, 2011). Even though there are limitations to group work and cooperative learning, such as some individuals’ input dominating others

(Banta & Palomba, 2014) or there being irrelevant discussion unrelated to the current task (Hatch, 2002), it still can be adapted into a useful language education tool. Therefore, it was used in this research to a greater extent than in Study A.

This research aimed to expand upon the previous study, and thus had to move beyond basic sound discrimination. Gilakjani (2012) noted that there are many strategies available to aid learners with pronunciation development by arguing that L2 exposure was a factor that influenced their development, and teachers should '*identify specific pronunciation features that cause problems for learners*' (p125). This was one of the main elements of Study A, and was continued here in Study B; however, it needed to be more expansive than what was previously undertaken. Some researchers argue that the use of literature and poetry in language teaching has multiple benefits not only for productive and receptive skills but also for pronunciation as well. Researchers, such as Hişmanoğlu (2005), Selevičienė (2013), Mittal (2014), and Ahmed (2014), have shown this to be the case within their various contexts, noting pronunciation as one of the many improvements. Selevičienė (2013) reasoned that poetry is a beneficial tool for helping to develop '*phonological awareness*' (p851) for language learners. Therefore, including a similar component in this study, and having students practice it together, added a more interesting feature to further test and improve the student's pronunciation skills. Aside from using literature/poetry, an Assessment for Learning (AfL) element needed to be implemented within the research. This was informally included in the previous study but needed to be properly addressed as using AfL is a progression for '*supporting learning rather than judging achievement*' (Harrison, 2013), where it can aid learners to '*guide their own subsequent learning*' (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p98). This can be implemented via continuous verbal feedback; however, to better augment this, if the participants kept a diary of when, how long, and what they practiced, in addition to any comments they had about their time doing it, they can create a visual log for their own reference, and it will better aid with tracking their progress.

Research Questions

Although both the previous and present studies are only small-scale interpretivist inquiries, they were designed to examine approaches to track the progress and better help lower-level learners with their English pronunciation in the hope of finding a practical application for possible future classroom or personal student study use. For this study, researcher input was reduced compared with Study A, focusing more on supporting learning rather than leading it, as to better the chances of cooperative learning developing between the participants. In addition, two new features were included, the first being a pronunciation diary as an AfL component, and the second being a form of poetry as a more authentic source of information. The research questions were as follows:

- 1.0 Did student-centred cooperative learning have a role in helping participants to better their acquisition of the material?
- 2.0 After introducing new items in Study B2, did they have an effect on learner progress?
- 3.1 After months of practice, were there changes to each individual's English pronunciation?
- 3.2 How does the current study (B) compare with the previous study (A)?

Methodology: Research design and Data Collection Procedures

The participants were the same continuing group of learners from Study A, as outlined earlier in this paper. There was no change to either group's format, and although their overall English ability had improved since the first study, they still fell within the CEFR A2 band. In contrast with Study A, the data collection period for this took place over a longer period. In addition, it was split into two parts, each taking place over a three-months period during two university semesters, collectively covering slightly more than seven months of twice-a-week contact time. The first part of the present study (Study B1 in semester 1) was a continuation of the previous study, albeit covering more complex sound pairs as well as including short reviews of Study A material. The format is very similar; however, as previously mentioned, a more student-centred approach was implemented by reducing researcher input.

The second part (Study B2 in semester 2) introduced a pronunciation diary where the participants had to log the date and length of time that they practiced, alongside what they practiced and any thoughts/comments that they had. This was to introduce a basic structure to their development, gain a better insight into their practicing habits, and track their progress. It also presented an opportunity to address any problems that participants were having by giving them feedback. Three poems were also given to each participant for them to practice the pronunciation sounds, which they had been exposed to in Study A and B1. These were:

- Poem 1 – “Why English is so hard to learn” (Anonymous, 2013)– this is an old poem (date unknown).
- Poem 2 – “I take it you already know” (Nathan, 2008, p26-27).
- Poem 3 – “The hardest poem in the world” by G.N.Trenité in Upward (2004).

The actual data collection procedures for this project were as follows:

- 1 – each student read the same short composition from Study A, which they had previously seen at the beginning and end of Study B1, and at the end of B2 only. However, at the end of B2 an extra, very short, unseen, and slightly more difficult segment was added. This portion of the research was recorded for later comparison.
- 2 – a pronunciation diary was implemented for Study B2, was regularly checked, and feedback was given where relevant.
- 3 – the groups were monitored throughout each session when they practiced.

As in Study A, each group had a 40 to 50 minute session towards the beginning of the week which was then followed-up by a shorter session of 15 to 20 minutes. The latter session was allocated for feedback; however, this was not always the case as, after becoming accustomed to the style they began to request help and asked questions in both sessions, so feedback became a regular feature of both sessions. The pronunciation sets for Study B1 are shown in the following table:

Table 1: Pronunciation sets per session for Study B1:

Set 1 – 6 (2015 Study) Review:		
Set 1: “s” and “sh”; (s & ʃ); Set 2: “th” and “t”; (θ, ð & t); Set 3: “l” and “r”; (l & r); Set 4: “v” and “b”; (v & b); Set 5: “b” and “p”; (b & p); Set 6: “f” and “v”; (f & v)		
Week 1-3		
Set 7: “g” and “c/k”; (g & k) Week 3-4	Set 8: “d” and “t”; (d & t) Week 4-5	Set 9: “i” and “ee”; (i & i:) Week 5-6
Set 10: “e” and “ey”; (e & ei) Week 6-7	Set 11: “ch” and “t”; (tʃ & t) Week 7-8	Set 12: Certain Diphthongs (aʊ, ɔə, ɪə & ɔɪ) Week 8-9
All sets & practice Week 9-10		All sets & practice Week 10-11

These were again presented to each group, via hand outs with only a few examples being modelled each time before they had to practice. An interactive phonemic chart was also used in case they needed additional support. The procedure for Study B2 differed, as poems were presented and modelled, (participants voice-recorded the researcher modelling the scripts), and then were asked to teach and test each other using what they had learnt, heard and recorded. The three poems were not introduced together but were revealed in two-week intervals, after the initial completion of a three-week review session of all Study A and Study B1 material.

Findings and evaluation

-Research question 1.0: after observing the learners from both groups each week over the course of the research, the participants all seemed to interact well with one another. As researcher input was reduced, it resulted in the participants having more practice time, and encouraged them to rely on each other more than before. Both groups, without prompt, developed a pattern where they would individually review the new material for a few moments before engaging one another to test their pronunciation. The group of four took turns with one person reading out one sound, and then another saying the opposing sound; for example “g vs. c/k” one person would say “gallery”, and the person being tested would try to correctly enunciate “calorie”. The pair group did something similar, but also independently began to watch and comment on each other’s facial movements, and occasionally videoed each other’s expressions on their phones to compare with one another. This was not suggested to them and was an interesting peer-teaching tool that they developed. The more student-centred approach allowed for some helpful, and at times resourceful techniques. The outcome of the research would suggest that there was a better acquisition of the material than in study A; however, whether this was due to their natural progression as learners, or a result of the researcher’s reduced input could not be completely or accurately determined at this time.

-Research question 2.0: the diary did not initially have the intended impact, as the majority of the participants were unsure of how they should use it. However, after the third week, they started to use it more effectively, and it worked well, more with the group of four as the multiple opinions and experiences benefited the group as a whole. This is not to imply that it did not benefit the pair group, they just focused

more on their approach towards it, and there was not as much discussion present as with the larger group. The introduction of poetry items specifically designed to experiment with different and, simultaneously, related sounds really surprised them. The sudden spike in difficulty, surprisingly, did not demoralise them; instead, it initially confused most of them. The group of four were initially unsure what to make of it, and proceeded to play with the sounds. They tried to enunciate sounds as a group occasionally over emphasising words they found difficult to pronounce. The pair group instead saw it as a difficult challenge to overcome, and regularly alternated reading lines to one another, stopping after each paragraph to give feedback. Both of these approaches, despite the difficulty of the poems, drastically improved their pronunciation, so much that, other university lecturers commented on their improvement. The diary was the most effective item of the new features, as the participants were able to see what problems they had addressed, and comments they had made, which seemed to better organise their approach to learning.

-Research question 3.1: overall, both groups significantly improved over the course of the study. However, the pair group advanced more than the group of four. They had all managed to improve their general English pronunciation and were better able to enunciate, and differentiate between different sounds and words. Although some sounds, such as the “sh/s” sound pairs, still were occasionally an obstacle, their skills did improve. However, the pair group, seemed to better grasp the majority of the sound and pronunciation differences, as their vocal output sounded clearer and more developed than the other group.

-Research question 3.2: at the time, Study A seemed to act more as a foundation stage for this research. However, it contained a larger number of the more difficult pronunciation sounds for Japanese learners than the current study. Study B was more beneficial to the participants as a whole, when compared with Study A because they had experience of actively comparing and practicing sounds, and had previously developed a system of how to interact with, and peer review each other within their respective groups. This experience, therefore, provided them with a developed approach that they carried into Study B, and thus had had some time for mental preparation. The approaches implemented in Study B may have been more successful if they had been previously implemented. The pronunciation diary, had it been integrated from the start of Study A, most likely would have given the participants a more frequent and stronger form of encouragement to keep them practicing outside of the sessions. It would have acted as a type of formative assessment that may have better empowered them, thus positively influencing their learning behaviour (Craddock & Mathias, 2009) at an earlier stage, as it did in Study B. In short, Study B built on the strengths of Study A and pushed it further in every way by including all of the same elements but on a larger and longer scale. Although it was a challenging experience for the learners, it gave them more opportunities to practice both old and new material while enabling them to develop their pronunciation skills more than in Study A.

Conclusion

The previous study demonstrated that while having them work in groups, exposing learners to different English sounds and discriminating between them, helped. Placing these conflicting sounds within a context better exercised their English vocal range than just focusing on tongue twisters, and it introduced them to

more authentic material. The practice diary was a greater success than originally suspected, as it was only added to encourage the participants to practice outside of the sessions. However, most noted their thoughts on each entry, some with comments and/or questions, and at the beginning of each session at least one student asked a question or requested help on something that they had practiced and recorded in the diary. This is something that teachers could consider implementing with learners, as they will not only have a log of what their students are doing, but it may also act as a platform for feedback for student during their study progression. In addition, it may even be used as a feed-forward mechanism to better aid students with their language development. As for the effectiveness of the poems, one aspect that should have been implemented differently was the length. Easier or shorter poems, or only one verse of a poem should have been covered at any given time.

In conclusion, although the group of four had more members, which provided greater opportunities to practice with different people, it was the pair group that progressed better overall. They developed a strong rapport, and were quick to aid and assess one another. The group of four worked very well as a team, but sometimes expended time organising their approaches and occasionally became distracted when helping each other. They also designed a very good system where one person would enunciate words/sentences, and the others would listen and provide feedback; however, it sometimes reduced each participant's speaking time during the sessions. This meant that each person had less practice time, which may have resulted in their slightly weaker development compared with the pair group; something that should be taken into account in a future application.

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