

Reflective Practice in Pronunciation Learning

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Most of the literature on pronunciation deals with what and how to teach, while the learner remains an abstract, silent body in the classroom. By examining our students' reflections, we give voice to their beliefs and concerns about pronunciation learning. The findings suggest that students benefit from detailed phonetic/phonological instruction, which, in turn, allows them to employ metacognitive strategies in a larger communicative context. The article also underlines that socio-affective factors, while often ignored, are a significant aspect of pronunciation learning.

Introduction

Morley (1994) underlies that the prevalent focus in pronunciation teaching nowadays should be on designing "new-wave instructional programs" (p. 70). Moreover, she stresses that these new instructional designs should take into account not only language forms and functions, but also issues of learner self-involvement and learner strategy training. In other words, students should become active partners in their own learning, who have developed the skills to monitor and modify their speech patterns if necessary.

This action-research study has been driven by Morley's statement. We assume that by giving students the skills to analyze their language learning processes, we would help them keep improving even after they have left the context of the classroom. Reflective practice has played an important role in both teaching and learning. Pennington (1992), for example, asserts that reflective practice should become the means for not only enhancing classroom practices, but also developing motivated and confident second language learners. And yet, while reflections have had an established place in writing courses, it is not traditionally applied to pronunciation learning.

In this article, we share the results of a study, in which we asked the students of three pronunciation courses to reflect on their learning experiences. The reflections served a two-fold purpose. First, they were implemented as a tool of encouraging self-awareness and learner involvement in the process of improvement pronunciation. Second, they enabled us to "hear" our authentic students' voices and perceptions of their learning. Thus, the reflections helped us gain insight into the strategies and components of pronunciation instruction the learners found most valuable.

The Participants

The participating students were enrolled in a graduate pronunciation course in a mid-western university setting. They had diverse language backgrounds (primarily Chinese and Korean, but also Spanish, Russian, Taiwanese, Greek, French, and Indian) and academic majors. While the students' language competency varied, they all had had formal English instruction in the past, although not necessarily in pronunciation. We collected data from students from three pronunciation classes, two sections each, over the course of three quarters. The reflection prompts were open-ended, for example: Why do you wish to improve your pronunciation? What do you find most helpful in improving pronunciation? Students were given detailed consent forms in the beginning of each class, explaining that their participation would not affect their academic performance. While the students were encouraged to remain anonymous, most of them opted to use their names and seemed eager to express their concerns about pronunciation learning.

Listening to the Students' Voices: Major Themes and Findings

The following major themes emerged in the students' reflections:

Value of Phonetic and Phonological Knowledge: Part of the Consciousness Raising Process

Morley underscores the importance of speech-monitoring abilities and speech modification strategies for use beyond the classroom as an important goal for pronunciation teaching. To be able to self-monitor, however, students must be aware of the phonological features and patterns underlying the second language (L2). Nevertheless, the most recent trend in pronunciation teaching claims that we should focus on teaching suprasegmentals rather than worry about the pronunciation of sounds. Our students, however, stressed the value of detailed pronunciation instructions. It is particularly interesting that all of them reflected on the improvement of segments and its role in increased functional communicability. A student, for example, wrote:

I changed my wrong consonant sounds like F, P, B, V and RL sounds into correct enunciation. I was very happy to hear that my American friends told me, "Your pronunciation is getting better."

Another student shared a more dramatic example:

Improving pronunciation is very helpful to my career, because the ability of verbal communication is very important to a nurse. One time, I told a patient that I was going to test his "bladder" function and he thought that I was going to test his "blood." In another time, when a patient needed a blinder to dark the room, I told the aid and brought me a blender. These examples not only cause my job stress, but also embarrass.

These excerpts clearly indicate that students link the acquisition of segments and combinations of sounds with improved communicative abilities. The second student also points out a connection to affective factors in learning, in this case, her emotional reactions.

Pennington's research asserts that, "The typical case in L2 acquisition seems to be that learners approach new values for phonological features gradually and piecemeal, rather than as the outcome of a rapid shift" (p. 95). The following example comes from a student, who had studied English for 14 years prior to coming to the States. It illustrates another essential link -- the one between phonetic knowledge and the ability to self-monitor:

Another big problem is that what I learned about the pronunciation of some words was wrong. And it has become a bad habit to pronounce those words in a wrong way and I even don't notice it. For example, I couldn't pronounce the word "hot" well because my pronunciation of the vowel sound was not correct. But it's kind of difficult to overcome this problem because I thought I was right and it's hard to find someone who is willing to point out all my mistakes during our conversation. "blood." In another time, when a patient needed a blinder to dark the room, I told the aid and he brought me a blender. These examples not only cause my job stress, but also embarrass.

A number of students also reflected on the importance of teaching suprasegmentals. An Asian participant, for instance, wrote:

Before I took this course, my speech tone was very flat. The most important thing is I didn't realize it, but now, I know a lot of how to divide thought groups, and where I should make an emphasis when I read sentences. I really think I make a big progress on it.

This example expresses the students' need to be trained in recognizing the patterns of English. At the same time, it leads us to another of the major themes in the reflections.

Value of Metacognitive Strategies Training

Writing about the role of perception in pronunciation learning, Yule, Hoffman, and Damico (1987) emphasize the need for self-monitoring skills. Self-monitoring is critical for creating independent and competent learners and is a necessary part of the consciousness raising process. A number of instances in the reflections speak of the value of empowering students with metacognitive strategies. A student commented:

And I think now is very important that I realize when I said something wrong and most of the time I correct myself. I still feel I have to work more in all three areas and my best way to improve my pronunciation is to listen more carefully people around me...

The last part refers to the strategies of active listening and mirroring, when a student listens to a native speaker and repeats after him/her. It also illuminates this learner's realization of the relation between listening skills and production of speech. Importantly, students also emphasized the value of strategies in a larger communicative context. In the following segment, a student expresses the ability to transfer these strategies to real-life situations:

I know I can't speak as perfect as a native speaker just after one quarter's study. This is impossible. I am quite clear it is a long way to improve my English speaking. What is important is that I have learned the ways to improve my pronunciation and realized my weakness, then I can practice and apply the rules to me in the future.

We believe that this ability to transfer strategies from the classroom environment to language use in natural settings is a main factor in developing independent learners, who will continue to improve beyond the pronunciation course they are taking. In her final reflection, a participant noted that she found motivation to continue to work on her pronunciation after the course exactly because she felt equipped with the knowledge to approach this task autonomously:

Now that I know what can make my speech more understandable, like opening my mouth, speak louder, lowering my voice pitch, and keep a key words list always with me to work on, I feel I'm constantly improving.

Importance of Balance Between Controlled and Communicative Activities

The majority of reflections revealed that students valued individual attention and targeting specific phonetic features in controlled practice. However, they also pinpointed the need of communicative activities. For example, a French student shared that, "Working with my tutor is very helpful because we work on one on one problem areas, like /rs/ and /ae/." Yet, immediately after that, she adds,

However, I believe that the best way to improve my pronunciation is to practice. I go to a coffee meeting every week where I can talk with some native speakers.

Another student wrote:

Although I have learnt many rules to tell me how to speak correctly, I think the most important is learn from life. For example, I always forget to put my tongue between my teeth when th is pronounced. Thankfully, one of the boys I know is Nathan, so when I call him each time, I can practice this sound. I believe it is time to surf the real life and mature myself from true conversation.

Our own observations indicated that the students who created opportunities to practice outside the classroom using their metalinguistic awareness were the ones to show the highest level of

improvement in the end of the course.

Importance of Socio-affective Factors in Pronunciation Teaching

A look at the scarce research on pronunciation will reveal significant attention on cognitive aspects and issues of what/how to teach, while socio-psychological factors remain vastly ignored. If we are to understand our learners, however, we need to acknowledge them as socio-cultural and affective beings. How aware are we of our students' affective needs, of what brings them to the classroom? Many of the participants commented on the socio-cultural factors of improving pronunciation and named them as a primary motivating force. A learner, for example, says:

Improving pronunciation is a major goal for me. Being able to communicate gives me a sense of belongingness in this society.

We would like to underscore the psychological perspectives of pronunciation learning. According to the reflections, lack of confidence, frustration, even depression, are the emotions that have a profound effect on their learning or lead students to the pronunciation classroom. One student, fluent in English, but with a noticeable accent, approached me after class, and shared that he felt particularly discouraged about his pronunciation. The student, working as a server at a local pizzeria, had recently had an encounter with a customer, who yelled at him: "Go home if you cannot speak English!" While not all of the examples were so drastic, they nevertheless showed that we need to take a closer look at the nexus between pronunciation learning and the affective aspects shaping it. A number of the reflections stressed the issue of confidence in communication and the value of accurate pronunciation. The following example shows how lack of confidence and frustration lead to silencing the students across all of their academic contexts, and, potentially, to reducing the overall success in their graduate studies:

I think by improving my pronunciation I will be more willing to open up and speak in my [other than ESL] classes. Sometimes for fear of people not understanding or misunderstanding you, you prefer to keep quiet and unwilling to ask doubts or involve in other conversations.

Similarly, another student mentioned:

Because poor pronunciation is one of the biggest obstacles to communicate with others in U.S. I felt depressed for I can't express my idea clearly.

Conclusion

In this article, we aimed to demonstrate how reflections could be utilized as a tool of raising students' consciousness in the pronunciation classroom and, at the same time, to voice their beliefs and concerns about pronunciation learning/teaching. Our findings imply that ESL teachers should develop pronunciation programs that integrate the following components:

1. Equally important focus on both segmental and suprasegmental features: Students' reflections strongly emphasized the value of teaching not only suprasegmental features of the L2, but also that of specific sounds. If learners do not have the phonetic and phonological awareness of English, they wouldn't know how to monitor their speech or employ other metacognitive strategies.
2. Balance between controlled and communicative learning environment: While the majority of students expressed a strong preference for individual attention and work on specific segments or suprasegmental features in controlled practice, many of the students recognized the necessity of practicing rules and applying strategies to everyday language use.
3. Understanding not only of our learners' cognitive needs but also of their socio-affective characteristics: Unfortunately, so far, there has been a gap between cognitive and affective

factors in pronunciation research and pedagogy. However, most of the students reflected on the significance of socio-psychological factors related to the acquisition of pronunciation. To them, pronunciation is the physical, most obvious aspect of one's speech, and, thus, represents an inseparable component of their second language identities.

Finally, we argue that we should rethink the traditional teacher role in pronunciation instruction. As ESL professionals we should teach students how to learn pronunciation, not just how to produce sounds or patterns. In other words, learners should be able to analyze their strengths and weaknesses, and have the strategies to transform themselves into confident speakers of English.

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