

What Makes a Language Learner's L2 Pronunciation Better?

Investigating Successful L2 Learners' Learning Strategies and Analyzing Explicit Pronunciation Teaching

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Introduction

Many researchers have proven the effectiveness of pronunciation instructions, though the results do not necessarily lead us to a clear conclusion to answer the following questions. Which aspects of the teaching influenced the learners? What exactly helped them improve their second language (L2) pronunciation? To answer these questions, this study investigates the following points: (a) the significant aspects of explicit pronunciation instructions that might work most effectively in order for learners to gain less accented pronunciation by analyzing school students' improvement in the production and perception of English phonemes and (b) the successful L2 learners' learning strategies by interviewing Japanese learners of English. This research is composed of two studies, the instruction (teaching) part and the learners' (learning) part.

1.1 Study 1: Instruction

This study is designed to investigate the effectiveness and benefits of explicit pronunciation teaching.

1.2 Research Questions

Through explicit pronunciation instructions; (a) do Japanese junior high school students improve their perception of English phonemes? (b) do Japanese junior high school students improve their production of English phonemes and words?

1.3 Data collection procedure

In this study, 174 Japanese junior high school students practiced pronouncing 10 English phonemes through MARIA Method (see 1.4). Each instruction lasted 10 minutes during their regular English classes for 2 weeks. The total instruction time was approximately 60 minutes. Then their pronunciation was analyzed after the instructions.

1.4 MARIA Method (explicit pronunciation instruction)

MARIA Method is a new way of teaching English pronunciation. This approach is encapsulated in the acronym (Mimic And Repeat, Instruct And...). MARIA Method is based on and builds across a number of fields: education, pedagogy, phonetics, English phonology, and psychology. Furthermore, it builds upon a variety of established teaching strategies, such as Phonetic instruction, Phonics, Phonological awareness, use of teaching materials such as lips and tongue models, mirrors, instruction cards, and also, corrective feedback and recast through repeated production exercises and practice.

1.5 Results

Paired sample t-tests were performed between the pre-test and post-test. The result showed significant improvement in the students' pronunciation (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

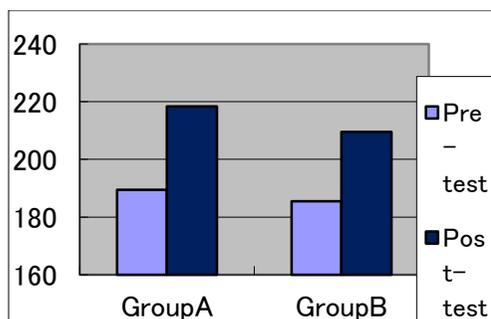


Figure 1. Reading Task (n=48)

Group A, $t(24)=7.07$, $p<.01$,

Group B, $t(24)=5.71$, $p<.01$

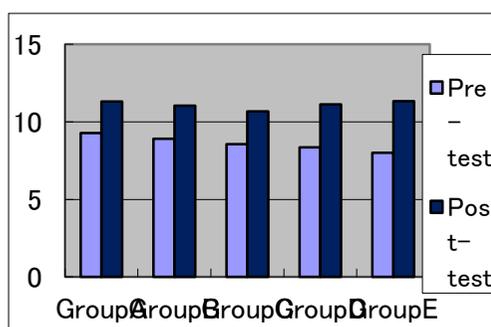


Figure 2. Listening Task (n=166)

Group A, $t(25)=5.63$,

Group B, $t(23)=6.76$,

Group C, $t(40)=7.53$,

Group D, $t(39)=7.89$,

Group E, $t(39)=11.40$, $p<.01$

The results show (a) that the instructions might have helped the learners, (b) that MARIA Method seems to have worked, (c) that through the explicit instruction, the participants seem to have benefitted from specific attention to the pronunciation features of English inexistent in Japanese.

2.1 Study 2 : Successful learners

The primary goal of this study is to identify the factors and learning strategies that the successful language learners have or utilize to attain L2 pronunciation.

2.2 Research Question

What learning strategies do successful learners use to improve their L2 pronunciation?

2.3 Method

In this study, the participants were asked to reply to a questionnaire. Three of them had an additional interview session individually after answering the questionnaire.

2.4 Data collection procedure

Five Japanese learners of English participated in the study. All the participants have no measurable exposure to the language until they were 15 years old. The minimum age of the participants is 19, and the maximum age 40. Their exposure included immersion time in English ranging from zero to several years. In

this study, the participants were selected based on their English proficiency and pronunciation by the author. The research procedures for selecting participants will be planned and introduced in the future studies. The study was designed and conducted referring to the studies of Moyer (1999), Nasu (2015), and Takeuchi (2007).

2.5 Result

The participants **(a)** have received some explicit pronunciation instructions (written by 4 out of the 5 participants), **(b)** pay attention to the target sounds and notice the differences between the native speakers' / model English and their English(5), **(c)** try to mimic, repeat and copy the model pronunciation (5), **(d)** self-teach; recording their own voice (2), listening to the target sounds many times (5), **(e)** have received feedback from native speakers (4), **(f)** monitor their pronunciation through utilizing the feedback or comparing their own sounds with the target pronunciation(5), **(g)** practice (5)

The participants shared similar language learning strategies and have been practicing the target pronunciation repeatedly and regularly. The results of this study highlight the fact that the learners appear to be able to achieve near-native pronunciation with the above-mentioned items such as a great deal of production practice, awareness and self-monitoring etc.

3. Conclusion and Discussion

Although more detailed analyses of the collected data –both the teaching method and the learning strategies of successful learners– are necessary, it seems that combining the pronunciation instructions with a great deal of practice and self-monitoring does help learners acquire L2 phonological patterns. The results of the two studies seem to provide a basis for future empirical research. The future research will investigate more successful learners and examine their learning strategies. Those meticulous examinations would enhance the importance of teaching and help advance MARIA Method and other teaching methods.

References

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