Pronunciation for communication: an investigation of the effects of explicit and selected teaching of pronunciation in the Brazilian EFL classroom

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Most textbooks and materials adopted by schools and language institutes in Brazil are produced by international publishers that aim the world public, taking as basis language learners with different native language backgrounds. Therefore, Brazilian EFL classrooms end up using ESL materials, which may either focus on pronunciation aspects that cause no challenge whatsoever to Brazilian Portuguese speakers or neglect areas that are essential in pronunciation teaching for this specific audience. Also, the EFL context poses the great challenge of teaching (and learning) a second language mainly through explicit classroom instruction. The fact that many language learners succeed in such a context, thus, provides researchers with data that can help better understand the role of formal instruction in language pedagogy as well as that of explicit knowledge in L2 ultimate attainment.

Therefore, based on the strong interface view of explicit teaching, this master’s research has analyzed the effects that the explicit and selected teaching of pronunciation has on Brazilian EFL students’ ultimate attainment of the phonetic-phonological features of the L2. The explicit pronunciation instruction was selective in the sense that it took advantage of students’ L1 homogeneity, recognizing their specific difficulties with English sounds, as demonstrated by the current literature (e.g. Avery; Ehrlich, 1992; Kelly, 2000; Yavaş, 2006; Godoy; Gontow; Marcelino, 2006; Collins; Mees, 2008).

As an interventionist action research, this study investigated two classes of basic level, teenager learners. All participants were recorded reading from a list of words and phrases that tested all sounds considered difficult to Brazilian Portuguese speakers according to the aforementioned authors, and this recording served as a diagnostic test. After the recordings were phonetically transcribed and analyzed, the intervention was planned. In the research-group class, besides having their regular EFL classes, students had weekly interventions of explicit pronunciation lessons for one semester, whereas in the control group there were no specific pronunciation lessons, just their regular EFL classes. Both classes had the same regular teacher and the research group received the (extra) pronunciation instruction from the researcher. The explicit instruction followed Celce-Murcia et al’s (1996) “communicative framework to teach pronunciation”, which basically consists of demonstrating the sound to students, comparing and contrasting it with sounds familiar to students, practicing in a controlled way, practicing in a guided way and, finally, practicing communicatively. All participants were recorded two more times: one right after the semester with the interventions was over, and once again 10 months after the second recording. This third recording was done in order to provide the research with a longitudinal aspect, allowing for the analyses of not only the short-term but also the long-term effects of the explicit pronunciation teaching.

All recordings (i.e. the diagnostic test, the immediate post-test and the delayed post-test) were phonetically transcribed and analyzed. In addition, some of students’ regular classes were observed and participants were interviewed, which contributed to the overall analyses. The results show that there are invaluable short-term and long-term effects in the explicit and selected teaching of pronunciation on EFL students’ phonological interlanguage development.

References:
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