

A new method of teaching second language pronunciation with homework activities

What this research was about and why it is important

Pronunciation is an important part of learning a second language, but it is often neglected in the classroom because teachers do not have time to include it in their lesson or are not comfortable teaching it. To find a solution for this problem, the researcher developed a new method of teaching pronunciation that can be assigned as homework, called iCPR. It requires neither teacher feedback nor in-class time. Learners receive pronunciation training in the form of Microsoft PowerPoint units. To show that this method is helpful in improving learners' pronunciation, the researcher tested it in the classroom and compared it to the more traditional in-class pronunciation instruction delivered by a teacher. She found that the homework-based method was as effective as in-class instruction and that, overall, it helped learners improve their pronunciation compared to learners who did not receive pronunciation instruction.

What the researcher did

- They recruited 122 beginner learners of German in 6 different first-semester German classes at a big US university.
- The 6 classes were divided into 3 groups (2 classes in each group): a group that received a new, computer-based pronunciation training as homework, a group that received pronunciation instruction in the classroom, and a group that did not receive pronunciation instruction, but otherwise followed the same curriculum as the other two groups.
- Learners in all 3 groups took 2 different tests twice (i.e., in the 2nd week and the 14th week of the semester). The first test assessed how well learners could perceive an American accent in German words and how well they could discriminate English sounds from German sounds. For the second test, the learners recorded themselves saying 75 German words out loud and reading 6 mini-stories.
- These audio-recordings, which the learners produced in the beginning and at the end of the semester, were cut into individual words and 20-seconds story-chunks. The researcher then played these chunks for 8 German native-speaker raters who rated them based on different categories (for example according to the question "How difficult was it for you to understand this word/sentence?"). A computer software was used to randomize all these words for all the raters and keep track of all the ratings for each learner.
- In between the two tests taking place at the beginning and at the end of the semester, the learners attended a standard German class, but the three groups differed in that (a) the homework group received 30 iCPR pronunciation practice units as homework, whereas (b) the in-class group received a 10-minutes pronunciation training in the classroom from their teacher on 30 days over the semester, and (c) the control group did not receive any pronunciation training.
- Finally, the researcher compared the learners' scores from the beginning and the end of the semester in all three groups and was thus able to see how much each groups' pronunciation of German had improved over the semester.

What the researchers found

- The learners who had received either type of pronunciation training were much better than the learners who had not received pronunciation training. That confirms what other studies had already suggested: even adult learners can improve their pronunciation in a foreign language with instruction and training.
- There were no differences between the learners who had received the in-class pronunciation training or the homework-based pronunciation training. The improvements in both groups in perception and speaking were about the same.

Things to consider

- The findings suggest that effective pronunciation training can be provided outside the classroom, which relieves in-class time pressure.
- Seeing that pronunciation instruction is often neglected in second language teaching, this homework-based iCPR training offers a viable solution because it requires neither instructor feedback nor in-class time.
- It is designed for direct implementation and can supplement existing foreign language curricula with minimal burden on the instructor. This applies to all foreign languages, not just to German.
- It takes a bit of effort and time to create these iCPR units, but once they are created, they can easily be shared.

Materials available from <https://www.iris-database.org/>

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