

Evaluating activities to help second language learners self-assess their pronunciation

What this research was about and why it is important

The ability to self-assess one's own performance is considered an important skill characterizing autonomous, self-directed language learning. Learners who can self-assess their performance in ways similar to the assessment of experts (e.g., language teachers or examiners) often display learning gains, compared to learners who have not yet developed their self-assessment skill. However, many learners find it difficult to evaluate their own performance, particularly in terms of fluent speaking and accurate pronunciation, which are considered challenging to develop. Language researchers and teachers have proposed various pedagogical activities to help learners develop their self-assessment skills, including benchmarking (where learners first discuss and then apply pre-established evaluation criteria) and peer-assessment (where learners evaluate the speaking performances of fellow students). Although these activities seem to be beneficial, researchers have thus far evaluated them in relation to specific features of pronunciation, such as the accuracy with which learners produce individual sounds. What is presently unknown is whether benchmarking and peer-assessment can help learners self-assess global dimensions of their pronunciation, including comprehensibility (how easily listeners understand the speaker), accentedness (how closely the speaker approximates the target language), and fluency (how smoothly or fluidly the speaker speaks). Therefore, in this study, the researchers investigated whether benchmarking and peer-assessment are effective at helping second language learners self-assess these global dimensions. The researchers found that these activities were particularly useful for self-assessment of comprehensibility.

What the researchers did

- The researchers recruited 25 university students of second language French enrolled in two sections of a 15-week oral communication course at a French-medium university in Canada.
- All students recorded two oral presentations: one at the beginning and one at the end of the course. The students in the experimental group participated in benchmarking and peer-assessment activities in addition to regular course instruction during the term, while the students in the control group engaged only in regular course instruction.
- All students self-evaluated the first and the second presentation. Both presentations were also evaluated by 10 external listeners, native French speakers training to become second language teachers of French. The external listeners' assessments allowed the researchers to compare how closely the students' self-assessments matched (or aligned with) those provided by the external listeners, before and after benchmarking and peer-assessment.
- The students and the external listeners evaluated the presentations using the same criteria through 100-point sliding-style scales, targeting comprehensibility, accentedness, and fluency.

What the researchers found

- The two groups were mostly similar in their self-assessment of their first presentations (recorded at the beginning of the course), in terms of how closely their self-assessments aligned with the ratings by the external listeners.
- For the second presentation (recorded at the end of the course), the treatment group showed greater alignment in their self-assessments of comprehensibility, compared to the control group.

Things to consider

- Because only the students in the experimental group had engaged in benchmarking and peer-assessment activities before the second presentation, these activities might have affected the degree to which these students were able to align their self-assessments of comprehensibility with the ratings provided by the external raters.
- Benchmarking and self-assessment activities had little impact on the students' self-assessment of accentedness and fluency, and this finding should be explored in future research.
- To encourage the development of self-assessment skills, teachers might wish to encourage second language learners to self-assess their pronunciation, comparing it with the performance by peers during classroom activities.

Material, data, open access article: www.iris-database.org/

How to cite this summary: Tsunemoto, A., Trofimovich, P., & Kennedy, S. (2021). Evaluating activities to help second language learners self-assess their pronunciation. *OASIS Summary* of Tsunemoto et al. (in press) in *Foreign Language Annals*. <https://oasis-database.org>