

The role of pronunciation instruction in improving the comprehensibility and nativeness of adult L2 learners' pronunciation

What this study was about and why it is important

Pronunciation is a notoriously difficult part of learning a foreign language. This study investigated how explaining pronunciation in detail can help Japanese learners of English improve their pronunciation of certain English sounds that do not exist in their first language. The goal of the study was to see if making learners more aware of certain English sounds can help improve learners' pronunciation. The study specifically looked at how much of a foreign or native accent the learners had and how easy or hard they were to understand. The study found that explaining pronunciation did not help learners sound more like native speakers, but it did help in making learners easier to understand.

What the researchers did

- The learners were 20 intermediate Japanese learners of English in the USA. All the learners were around 27 years old and they all just arrived to New York to study at the university level.
- The learners were divided into two groups of ten. One group received no pronunciation instruction and the other group, the experimental group, received four hours of pronunciation instruction.
- Before the instruction both groups completed a sentence reading task which contained sentences that were loaded with eight English sounds that are problematic to Japanese learners and a picture description task.
- The experimental group received four hours of detailed explaining on how to pronounce eight different English sounds: /æ/ (**happy**), /f/ (**food**), /v/ (**visa**), /θ/ (**think**), /r/ (**read**), /w/ (**when**), /l/ (**letter**), /ð/ (**they**). The instruction was carried out in a lab using both English and Japanese to ensure that the learners fully understood the instruction given.
- After the experimental group had received four hours of instruction, both groups of learners were required to complete a sentence-reading and a picture description task similar to those they completed before the instruction took place. The sentence-reading task was done to measure learners' performance at controlled speech and the picture description task was done to measure learners' performance at spontaneous speech. Learners' speech was then given to four native English speakers who have had experience working with learners of English to evaluate it in terms of how easy or hard it was to understand and how much they had a native or a foreign accent.

What the researchers found

- Explaining pronunciation did not help learners achieve native-like pronunciation either in spontaneous nor in controlled speech.
- Explaining pronunciation did improve learners' comprehensibility especially in the sentence-reading task.

Things to consider

The findings of this study are encouraging to raise teachers' and learners' awareness of pronunciation teaching for the purpose of enhanced comprehensibility rather than accent reduction. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that students' improvement was clear only when their performance was tested via sentence reading and not for spontaneous speech ; the author made a strong call for more studies which will examine the effects of not only form- but also meaning-oriented instruction in L2 comprehensibility.

In your teaching: Do you provide your learners with pronunciation instruction? If so, what kind of goal do you set up for students (comprehensibility rather than nativelikeness) and how do you teach (contextualized rather than decontextualized instruction)?

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