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PGO-verslag
British English
January-June 2007

Instruction of Fluency and Pronunciation: Does it Facilitate and Motivate

Introduction

In the first year of the Educational Masters programme I realised my master thesis in which I conducted a literary analysis of the effects of pronunciation and fluency focussed instruction. In my second year of the Educational Masters programme I get the opportunity to do some practical research at the schools I will be doing my apprenticeship. As an extension of my literature study, I would like to use this opportunity to conduct a study in the area of L2 oral fluency and phonological accuracy. An outline of the design of this study is sketched below.

Near the end of my thesis many suggestions for further research have already been made. Many of them are practicable and very relevant for the language teaching practice. We have also seen that there is little research conducted into the area of fluency and pronunciation instruction and that more research is needed to provide a clear picture about the effect and effectiveness of teaching L2 speaking skills.

In my research, however, I would like to study other aspects of L2 speaking skills. I want to focus on the underlying principles of teaching L2 oral fluency and phonological accuracy. In chapter 1.1 of my MA-Thesis we have seen several arguments to teach fluency and pronunciation skills to Second or Foreign Language learners. One of them was that “being able to speak each others’ language properly [...] improves the sense of belonging to another culture and without dependence on an interpreter conversations develop more naturally” (4). I further claimed that “[m]otivation of L2 learners could also be improved by means of pronunciation and fluency instruction. Being able to speak the target language fluently and naturally can give learners self-confidence and learning pleasure” (4). Contrastingly, Harlow and Muyskens (1994) state that students “worry about pronunciation a great deal because they feel insecure about how they sound to other people” (146). However, except for the study by Harlow and Muyskens (1994) that only concerns pronunciation, there is a lack of empirical evidence to endorse these claims.

Theoretical Framework

An area that is untouched by most of the research conducted into SL/FL fluency and pronunciation instruction is the area of motivation. Not only is motivation important to learn a language, it also affects the effect and effectiveness of instruction. When a student is motivated, he or she will engage more enthusiastically in the activities employed in class and results will be better than those of unmotivated students. In the area of oral fluency and phonological proficiency motivation could also play a very important role. From the studies included in the inventory only Elliott (1997) briefly touches on the idea that instruction in the relevant areas motivates students to use the target language more extensively and more accurately in spontaneous speech. He states that “teachers and researchers have long recognized the importance of affect in language acquisition” (103). He further claims that “[t]eaching pronunciation early on may increase student concern for developing native/native-like pronunciation, lower their affective filters and help students to feel less anxious about speaking” (104). According to Elliott (1997) contact with native speakers will become easier, more intense and pass off more pleasantly for SL/FL learners when they have confidence in their speaking skills which in turn enhances students’ ultimate degree of acquisition (104). The focus of Elliott’s (1997) paper is on pronunciation but it could very well count for oral fluency instruction too.

Although Elliott’s (1997) claims are strong, his claims remain hypotheses, because he offers no empirical evidence. To test these hypotheses, however, I conducted an empirical research to examine whether this is the case in the acquisition of the English language secondary schools. The main question was: *Do students become more motivated to speak the target language by means of instruction and practice of oral fluency and pronunciation in class?* Because the aspect of motivation is a collective noun for all kinds of factors I would like to narrow down the focus of this question to the ‘willingness’ and ‘courage’ to speak English in and outside the classroom.

Study Design

The design of the study follows the pretest- post-test principles. At the start of the first half year of teaching practice the students will be asked to fill out a questionnaire (see appendix 1) about the effect and effectiveness of fluency and pronunciation instruction. By means of this questionnaire I want to get a clear picture about the students’ willingness, courage to speak and their frequency in actually speaking the TL. I further want to fathom their view on their own speaking abilities and whether or not they believe instruction can

enhance or facilitate them. During the instruction period I want to give fluency and pronunciation instruction to 2 classes and refrain from doing this in the other 2. These last groups will serve as control groups to see whether instruction makes a difference. As a post-test, a similar questionnaire (see appendix 2) will be filled out after a 3-4 weeks teaching period to assess whether there have been any changes in the results above.

The teaching focus on TL fluency and pronunciation will take place according the principles proven to be effective, as can be seen in my literature study; The last 10 minutes of every class, which takes 75 minutes I want to (1) focus 5 minutes on words that have been mispronounced (incidental feedback). I will do this either in the classical way of letting the class repeat the correct pronunciation or writing the words on the blackboard and pointing them out for the class to pronounce them several times while a CD is playing a background beat. I call this last method the Free-Style Pronunciation Rap. To give the students the opportunity to improve their fluency skills I'll reserve the other 5 minutes in which they will have to speak English only to each other while retrieving information about various subjects by means of various conversation methods.

To conduct this research, several methodological principles must be respected. In the first place the subjects are all upper secondary school students with an age ranging from 16 until 20 years. Secondly, the instruction will be *incidental*, focussing on *global pronunciation features*, contain *rich TL input* and *stimulate TL output*. In short, the instruction will follow the principles of effective L2 fluency and pronunciation instruction as formulated in my MA-Thesis. The drills, however will be *non-incidental*, but will deal with sounds difficult to pronounce or difficult contrast for Dutch speakers, so called *marked sounds*. Thirdly, instruction will be *classroom-based* to facilitate generalisations to other classroom settings.

Lastly, I would like to focus on several variables that could influence the results. In the first place, *type of learner* could effect motivation by means of L1 background, motivation to learn the TL in general, level of education and self reported level of proficiency. Secondly, the *type of instruction* is important. The students could, normally speaking, have very formal instruction with little attention to speaking in class or highly communicative instruction in which they are required to use the TL in class. They might prefer one type of instruction over the other, which will influence their opinion of fluency and pronunciation focus in class. By means of the results of the questionnaires I will try to provide a complete picture of the differences between the subjects concerning these variables.

I hypothesise that the findings of this research will give an insight into the motivation of students to acquire L2 speaking skills that are useful for SL/FL classroom practice and for future research conducted in the areas of SL/FL Oral Fluency and Phonological Accuracy.

The Results

Firstly I will summarise the results of the pretests for both classes. Most of my students from the pre-final year are rather positive about their speaking skills and 80 percent of them like to speak English. There is a great variety between students in speaking English inside and outside of the class. 60 percent of my students further think they will be more willing to speak English when there would be more instruction focussing on fluency and pronunciation. Students from my Final year are also positive about their skills, but only 40 percent likes to speak English. There is less variety in speaking English among students and 70 percent think fluency and pronunciation instruction will motivate to use the TL.

After the treatment I described in the above I did the post-test with the same students and the results were as follows. None of my students in the treatment group was more willing to speak English in class. Despite the fact that their prediction about their willingness is proven wrong, this is not shocking, because they already liked to do it, as can be seen above. 30 percent further claimed that their confidence had grown during the treatment period. From my control groups 15 percent claimed be more willing to speak English and 15 percent also claimed to be more confident. This seems a strange result, but I also asked these students to speak English in class, as in the treatment group, which might have influenced the results a bit.

We could conclude from the results of the test that there is a difference between the classes in which I focussed on fluency and pronunciation and the classes in which I did not. Especially confidence is built up by a group of students, albeit a rather small group, so it does prove to be effective to pay attention to the development of speaking skills of your students.

Because the questionnaires were rather simple and did not provide much information about how the students felt about my treatment I decided to interview a few students from the classes that received instruction about their skills, my instruction and their improvement.

The first student I interviewed was a female student of 17 years old. She is an average student and is rather positive about her own speaking skills. Student 1 was rather positive about the treatment, because she said that the treatment made my lessons different from other classes. She did say that the treatment was rather short and that I should have done it more often and longer during class

The second student I talked with was a male student from the other class I teach. He was also rather positive when I asked him, but he was less enthusiastic. He did like the fact that we did something else once in a while instead of doing grammar and reading all the time. However, he did not feel confident about his skills and said the treatment did not really help him to speak English more often and with more pleasure. Both students agreed that the incidental feedback on pronunciation errors was very useful and that doing speaking exercises are necessary to do every now and then to learn to speak English fluently, but there is still much anxiety at the start of these exercises.

Conclusion and suggestions

We can conclude from the questionnaires and the interviews that giving instruction about pronunciation and fluency is useful for students. Although the motivation to speak English in class does not necessarily improve, Students' confidence grows when they practice speaking regularly in class. By making room for speaking exercises in pairs or in groups like I did during my treatment students are forced to speak English, which is not always the case in every FL learning environment, and probably learn to speak English more fluently and phonologically correct, when the necessary feedback is given.

My suggestion for the improvement of your students' skills in the areas of phonological accuracy and oral fluency is to 10-15 minutes of every class to these specific aspects of language learning. There are many ways to do this: speaking about your daily habits with a neighbour, presenting yourself in 5 minutes, give instruction about how to pronounce a specifically problematic sound and of course by constantly reminding your students to speak the TL in class.

There are of course numerous activities you can use to engage your students in pronunciation and fluency exercises. It would be rather exhausting to name even the slightest bit of the range of websites or methods that specifically address these issues. Every teacher interested in these skills can find many exercises by using the most famous search engine in the world. It will surely be worth the small trouble of searching when you and your students are motivated to work on these language skills.

Lastly, the students that participated in this research were all upper secondary school students that received English classes at a high level. The treatment was suitable for their level of education and fitted inside their curriculum. In the future they will probably have to speak English a lot and therefore they might see a greater relevance of practicing pronunciation and fluency in class. Therefore the results of this study are difficult to

generalise. It would be good to investigate the motivation of lower, younger secondary school students to see whether it would be good to start practicing pronunciation and fluency from the beginning and see whether it influence their future motivation to speak the Target Language. The treatment would have to be simplified, because the level of education is lower and will require less proficiency, but the main components of the treatment, incidental pronunciation feedback and regular fluency practice will be easily applicable, also in the lower grades of secondary school.

Works Cited List

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Appendix 1:

Pretest Questionnaire

Naam:.....

Leeftijd:.....

Klas:.....

1. Wat is je moedertaal?.....
2. Heeft een of meer van je ouders een andere moedertaal dan het Nederlands? **Ja / Nee**
Zo ja, welke taal?.....
3. Geef jezelf een cijfer van 1-10 voor je beheersing van het spreken van Engels.....*
(*vul hier NIET je rapportcijfer in, maar wat je jezelf zou geven)

4. Spreek je zelf graag Engels? **Ja / Nee**
a. Wanneer je **Ja** hebt omcirkeld, wat is daarvoor de reden?

Reden	Uitleg
Kan ik goed	
Vind ik leuk	
Leer ik van	
Anders nl.	

- b. Wanneer je **Nee** hebt ingevuld, wat is daarvoor de reden?

Reden	Uitleg
Kan ik niet	
Voel me onzeker	
Geen zin in / niet nuttig	
Anders nl.	

5. Hoeveel minuten spreek je per week Engels **Binnen** en **Buiten**de les?
6. Zou meer Engels willen en durven spreken als er in de les meer aandacht zou zijn voor uitspraak en Engels spreken?
Ja, omdat.....
Nee, omdat.....
7. Wat zou je nog meer kunnen helpen beter Engels te spreken in de les?.....
.....
.....

Appendix 2:

Post-test questionnaire

Vragenlijst Engelse (Uit)spraak

Naam:.....

Leeftijd:.....

Klas.....

8. Geef jezelf een cijfer van 1-10 voor je beheersing van het spreken van Engels.....*
(*vul hier NIET je rapportcijfer in, maar wat je jezelf zou geven)

9. Spreek je zelf liever Engels dan 4 weken geleden? **Ja / Nee**

10. Heb je meer zelfvertrouwen gekregen om engels te spreken in de les **Ja / Nee**

11. Wat is hiervoor de reden?

- Aansporing leraar
- Uitspraak oefeningen
- Gespreks-oefeningen
- Mondeling

12. Hoeveel minuten spreek je per week Engels **Binnen** en **Buiten**de les?

13. Wat zou je nog meer kunnen helpen beter Engels te spreken in de les?.....
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