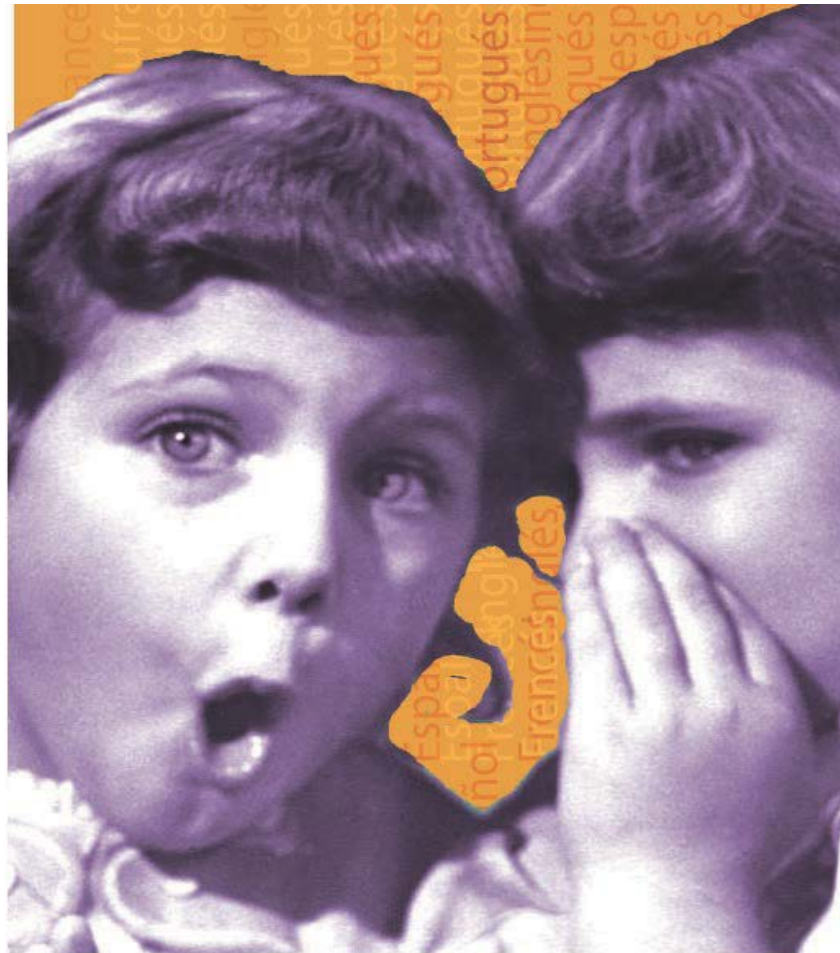


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Didáctica de la Fonética de las Lenguas Extranjeras

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STUDENTS' ASSESSMENT OF SEGMENTAL AND SUPRASEGMENTAL FEATURES FOR INTELLIGIBLE PRONUNCIATION AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This presentation aims to explore which particular aspects of pronunciation – considering both segmental and suprasegmental- hinder comprehension the most among students learning English at a private institution in Mar del Plata. For such purpose, participants in the study listened to two recordings: one displaying inappropriate sentence stress, and the other with inaccurate sounds pronunciation. Students' degree of comprehension of speakers' performance was evaluated to identify which features of pronunciation posed a greater challenge to understand the content of the pieces of discourse listened to. Researchers also examined students' assessment of overall pronunciation and level of language proficiency of the speakers in the recording. An analysis of the data collected will be presented together with the results and conclusions of this study. The presentation will end with a discussion of the pedagogical implications of the findings.

Key words: Pronunciation - TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) - Intelligibility - Listening Comprehension - Students' assessment

STUDENTS' ASSESSMENT OF SEGMENTAL AND SUPRASEGMENTAL FEATURES FOR INTELLIGIBLE PRONUNCIATION AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Introduction

Numerous research studies have cast light on Native Speakers' (NSs) perceptions of pronunciation regarding Non-Native Speakers' (NNSs) pronunciation (Gilakjani 2011; Gilbert 2008; Hahn 2004). However, when considering the current status of English as an International Language (Hülmbauer, C. et al. 2008), an examination of NNSs' assessment of other NNSs' intelligibility gains as much relevance.

The present study examines how sentence stress and phonemes pronunciation of NNSs affect NNSs' comprehension and it examines NNSs' assessment of overall pronunciation of other NNSs. For such purpose, 20 students (SS) with a pre-intermediate language proficiency from a private English institute in Mar del Plata were selected as participants. SS were exposed to two NNSs' recordings as input exhibiting, one of them, inaccurate sounds pronunciation, and the other, inappropriate use of sentence stress. Comprehension of both recordings was measured through a free-recall activity and a True or False exercise. SS' assessment of the NNS's speeches was also analyzed to explore what aspects of pronunciation - considering both segmental and suprasegmental ones- participants assign the most value to.

Theoretical Framework

EFL teachers everyday face the challenge of helping their SS develop linguistic skills and improving their mastery of the language. However, though many instructors would not advocate it in theory, in practical terms, explicit instruction concerning some aspects of the target language is disregarded. Pronunciation commonly falls among those neglected areas (Calvo Benzies 2013; Gilbert 2008; Wei 2006).

Since the advent of communicative methods and approaches, there has been a marked focus on the development of the four so-called main skills. Spelling and Pronunciation are comprised within the category of Sub-skills (House 2011), whose development is contingent to that of the former. Some sub-skills still occupy a considerable part of the teaching agenda, but pronunciation does not seem to receive equivalent attention. This is observed in curriculum design, classroom materials, syllabuses and in teachers' planning. Pronunciation is properly treated when it is considered as an integral part of oral communication (Gilakjani 2011). Thus, pronunciation instruction should contingently take place when developing, not only speaking skills, but listening skills as well. Morley (1991: 494) emphasizes the need to set "a focus on the link between listening and pronouncing/speaking and a need to expand the nature and the range of pronunciation-oriented listening activities".

Achieving native-like pronunciation is no longer a goal in the EFL classroom (Otlowski 1998; Pickering 2006). Such an aim seems fairly unrealistic and, in addition, the change in the role of English has shifted to that of an "International Language" or a "Lingua Franca" (Hülmbauer et al. 2008), which modified the reasons why individuals are interested in learning the language. In present times, SS do not learn English to communicate only with NSs, but to be able to interact with other EFL and ESL speakers all over the world. Therefore, the importance of pronunciation has shifted towards the achievement of a level of "comfortable intelligibility" (Kenworthy 1987), or a more "listener friendly" pronunciation (Gilbert 2008). According to Smith and Nelson (1985) intelligibility is a three-fold concept, as it involves both comprehensibility on the part of the listener to understand the meaning of a word or utterance and interpretability to understand the intention behind the word or utterance which has been produced at the same time. Therefore, degree of listener effort is currently considered a fundamental marker of good pronunciation (Trench 1991; Yates, Zielinski & Pryor 2011).

When it comes to actual oral exchanges, pronunciation seems to be a more critical descriptor of intelligibility for communication. Fraser (2000: 7) assures that "with good pronunciation, a speaker is intelligible despite other errors; with poor pronunciation, understanding a speaker will be very difficult, despite accuracy in other areas". This claim reinforces the need to consider the listener when trying to develop SS' intelligibility.

Many pronunciation textbooks focus on sound discrimination, and even if this practice is useful, a proper pronunciation class should include much more than sounds contrast in minimal pairs and accurate production of consonant and vowel sounds (Wei 2006). The

components of a comprehensive pronunciation course should also consist of several important suprasegmental features of pronunciation, like intonation, rhythm and sentence stress, also referred to as primary stress (Hahn 2004). This study is mostly concerned with sentence stress. In English, a stress-timed language, rhythmic patterns are based upon a fairly regular recurrence of stressed syllables, meaning that stressed syllables normally occur at regular time intervals (Scarcella and Oxford 1994). Sentence stress emphasizes speaker's most important part of the utterance or the one he or would like the listener to concentrate on. This distribution is connected directly with semantics as the most important words of the utterance are made more prominent and carry a stronger stress than those which are not so relevant (Sabater 1991). Problems may arise when trying to comprehend a monotone stretch of oral discourse as nothing is made prominent and there is, therefore, no signal as to which is the most important information within the utterances. Some studies have also drawn attention to other extralinguistic aspects to be considered when assessing speakers' intelligibility. Some of these aspects are interlocutor familiarity (Gass and Varonis 1984; Kenworthy 1987) and attitude of the hearer (Lindemann 2002; Rubin 1994). In fact, Nakashima (2006) pointed out how "attitudes of the interlocutor towards the speaker can influence the evaluation of a speaker and the success of communication". This should have a direct impact on foreign language instruction, as teachers should make sure SS are aware of the different types of factors that are at play for effective communication to take place.

Method

Context and participants

Participants in this study were two groups of EFL SS aged 13/14, of comparable proficiency level. Both groups of young teenagers study English at ICA, in Mar del Plata, Argentina. ICA is a private English Institute where SS have 4 modules of 50 minutes each per week. The participants are taking their 4th level of English (intermediate-level proficiency), and they all attend private schools, where they have learned English for -at least- 8 years. To carry out this experiment, researchers worked separately with each group of learners. The choice was deliberate, in order to reach higher reliability in the results, by cross-checking the data collected.

Research instruments and Procedures

The instruments utilized for data collection were two different texts extracted from the textbook *Inspired 3* (Garton-Sprenger & Prowse 2012). Though appropriacy regarding the linguistic level and topic were considered in the selection of the texts, these were slightly adapted for pedagogical purposes (mainly to ensure both pieces of discourse had a comparable length, and that they did not display vocabulary that could be challenging for SS).

To evaluate the data that would be obtained from the SS, both texts were segmented into linguistic units or clauses, following the usual procedure used to measure prose objectively (Lee, 1987). In the end, 14 linguistic units or “ideas” were identified in one of the texts, “Hamburgers” (consisting of a total of 116 words), while 12 were recognized in the other text, “Harley Davidson motorcycles” (of 118 words).

In the treatment session during which the data were collected, participants were instructed to listen carefully to two audios, trying to understand and remember as much information as possible (however, note-taking was not allowed during the procedure). Each of the groups listened to two recordings: one featuring inaccurate sounds and the other using inappropriate sentence stress. However, the content of the audios did not vary regardless of the phonological problem each exhibited. After participants listened to the texts twice, they were given seven minutes to retrieve information and write down (either in English or Spanish, to facilitate expression of ideas) all which they had understood. Then the audios were played a third time for participants to carry out a brief True or False exercise, scanning for specific information. Finally, students completed a questionnaire about their perceptions of the speakers’ performance.

Data analysis and results

The data analyzed were the summaries collected from the groups, true or false exercises and the questionnaire carried out at the end of the two aforementioned tasks. In order to calculate the number of ideas SS had remembered, researchers carefully examined SS’ productions, identifying and counting how many linguistic units out of the ones previously identified SS had recalled. The “master rating” (total number of main ideas counting all SS in each group) for the text “Hamburgers” was 140, and for “Harley

Davidson motorcycles”, 120. The total number of main ideas recalled in each group was compared to its corresponding master rating.

| | Inappropriate use of sentence stress | | Inaccurate sounds pronunciation | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Hamburgers (Group A) | Harley Davidson (Group B) | Hamburgers (Group B) | Harley Davidson (Group A) |
| N° of ideas retrieved | 39 | 22 | 40 | 11 |
| Master rating (Total n° of ideas) | 140 | 120 | 140 | 120 |
| | INDIVIDUAL SCORE: 27,85% | INDIVIDUAL SCORE: 18,3% | INDIVIDUAL SCORE: 28,57% | INDIVIDUAL SCORE: 9,16% |
| | MEAN SCORE: 23,46% | | MEAN SCORE: 19,61% | |

As the table shows, after listening to the audios which featured sentence stress problems, participants in group B retrieved 27,85% out of the master rating consisting of 140 ideas, while participants in group B were able to recall only 18,3% out of the 120 total linguistic units. The total mean score considering both groups listening to the audios with inappropriate sentence stress was 23,46%. When listening to the audios displaying inaccurate sounds pronunciation, participants in group A could retrieve 28, 57% ideas out of 140 in the text “Hamburgers”, and 9,10% out of the 120 linguistic units in the master rating of the “Harley Davidson motorcycles” text. In this second case, the mean score of both groups A and B was 19,61%.

When analyzing the mean scores in relation to the total number of ideas in both texts, results showed that, even if there was a slightly higher retrieval of ideas in the audios with sentence stress problems (a 3.85 difference), the percentages obtained did not result in a significant breach. The results obtained in the True/False exercise carried out afterwards were consistent with the previous findings, as there was only a 1% difference in the number of correct answers.

| Audios with inappropriate sentence stress | Audios with inaccurate sounds pronunciation |
|---|---|
| Correct answers: 72% | Correct answers: 73% |
| Incorrect answers: 26% | Incorrect answers: 26% |

| | |
|-----------|-----------|
| Blank: 2% | Blank: 1% |
|-----------|-----------|

Participants' perceptions also concurred with the results obtained in the aforementioned data. The chart below summarizes the findings concerning students' assessment of the speakers in both audios.

| Categories | Inappropriate use of sentence stress | Inaccurate sounds |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Level of English | Very Good: 7 Good: 8 Regular: 3 Blank: 2 | Very Good: 2 Good: 4 Regular: 11 Blank: 3 |
| Pronunciation | Very Good: 6 Good: 7 Regular: 3 Blank: 1 | Very Good: 1 Good: 3 Regular: 6 |
| Difficulty in understanding | a lot: 4 a bit: 10 not hard: 6 | a lot: 9 a bit: 5 not hard: 6 |

Conclusions and pedagogical implications

The results obtained in this study indicate that inaccurate pronunciation of sounds and an inappropriate use of sentence stress affect comprehension to a similar extent for EFL SS of an intermediate level. Several studies have suggested that suprasegmental problems tend to affect intelligibility the most and require greater listener effort for comprehension (Hahn 2004; Lambacher 1999; Sole Sabater 1991). However, most of those studies have explored NSs' processing of NN speech. In the particular context of this study (NNSs' processing NNSs' speech), sentence stress has not proven to have a more significant impact than inaccurate sounds pronunciation on comprehension, contrary to what usually occurs with NSs' processing of spoken input.

It is worth mentioning that during the treatment sessions, one of the groups of SS listening to the recording with segmental problems, started laughing uninterruptedly. Those SS manifested they found the speaker's pronunciation "funny and bad". Thus, in this case, certain external factors (listeners' expectations regarding English pronunciation) interfered with speech processing. The type of pronunciation of the speaker in such recording proved distracting for participants, as it did not match their expectations

regarding English pronunciation. Instead of focusing on understanding the content, SS' attention shifted towards reacting to the speakers' inaccurate pronunciation of English sounds.

A relevant teaching implication of these results revolves around the need to reflect upon the features of pronunciation commonly taught in the EFL classroom. Most instructors assign more importance to teaching segmental features through drills, repetition, and contrastive analysis of minimal pair of sounds than to other relevant aspects of an intelligible pronunciation. This is shown in SS' reaction towards the speaker with poor pronunciation of segmental features. The participants felt surprised, disliked the type of pronunciation and laughed at it, getting distracted from the actual message of the speech. The aforementioned claim is also consistent with the results obtained from the analysis of participants' assessment of speakers' performance. Most participants assigned lower scores to the speaker with poor sounds pronunciation in terms of "Level of English proficiency" and "Overall pronunciation". SS simply established a correlation between producing native-like sounds and being a proficient English speaker. The results of this study support the claim that there should be a stronger and more sustained effort towards teaching suprasegmentals if SS are expected to assign a certain value to them and to recognize them as central in the development of an intelligible pronunciation.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that this study will be replicated in a setting with more participants to obtain results that are more representative of the student population, and therefore more generalizable.

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