Aspects of Pronunciation for a Japanese Adult EFL Learner

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Abstract

In this pilot study, one Japanese speaker learning English as a second language practiced increasing pronunciation skills by reading and creating sentences related to segmental and suprasegmental targets to train in phonetic speech through organized pronunciation training. This investigation covered a 1-month examination process using reading out loud and writing assessments. Data from the assessment assisted the learner with utterance problems that were due to first-language phonological impact, second-language transfer alterations, and preconceived misinformation. By the end of the assessments, the participant could self-correct specific mistakes in phonetic pronunciation.

Keywords: Adult ELL, EFL, phonemes, pronunciation training

Introduction

The aim of this project was to formatively assess a Japanese adult who was learning English as a second language (L2). Lessons occurred over 6 weeks, and one session was held each week for approximately one hour. Using Brown and Abeywickrama's (2019) meaning of formative assessment, "evaluating students in the process of 'forming' their competencies and skills with the goal of helping them to continue that growth process" (p. 7), I observed the case study's (i.e., participant's) skill progression based on his personal goals. That is, the participant wanted to improve upon his speaking skills in English as a foreign language (EFL) by uttering specific phonemes he believed were problematic in his speech patterns. Prior to the study, the participant produced /mʌnθes/ instead of /mʌnθs/. The participant was concerned about uttering the same structure mistake in English if unassisted. For this project, the participant and I focused on a specific structure mistake. To do this, the participant targeted a problematic word (a word that the participant had difficulty uttering and was the target of improvement) to troubleshoot the structure mistake. This paper describes the strategy we used to assist a Japanese English language learner in his fifties in correcting a problematic pronunciation target specific to his needs. This will provide evidence that older EFLs can correct pronunciation issues with objectives that are developed for individualized learning.

Literature Review

A structure mistake is when a language learner utters a word with the incorrectly produced sound or tone (e.g., /mʌnθes/ instead of /mʌnθs/), in pronunciation (Wong & Strange, 2017). One such issue that creates a structure mistake is fossilization (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2013). Fossilization was defined by Mitchell et al. (2013) as the "stabilization of the interlanguage system, in a form divergent from the target language system" (p. 296). In other words, the language of focus was difficult to comprehend for

learners who had memorized the language target incorrectly and did so for a long period of time without correction. Li (2016) stated that issues differentiating /l/ and /r/ sounds and their associated words (e.g., light and right, which are sounds Japanese learners have problems distinguishing) become extrinsically more difficult as learners age. However, Saldaña (2013) advocated individualizing interventions based on each learner's needs. One hypothesis is that this strategy of individuation could trot fossilization, for example, distinguishing light versus right after meetings. Due to the lack of literature on this topic, there is a need to assess such learner needs so that future researchers and teachers can better their understanding of assessing pronunciation.

Why Assessment?

Three main types of assessment are incorporated in language learning: self-assessment and formal and informal assessment (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). Concerning pronunciation, Martin (2020) recommended self-assessment, which was referred to as self-rated proficiency. In this study, Martin had 122 participants rate their speech proficiency following pronunciation training for a task-based assessment conducted outside of the classroom. One of three groups performed the out-of-class procedure and yielded higher production. The group that applied outside learning felt satisfied with their learning goals and achievements as opposed to the controlled group and in-class groups. Self-assessment led to self-motivated learners in this case. Self-assessment comes in many forms, for example, understanding and evaluating one's mistakes from practice (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019).

Alternatively, formal and informal assessment applies structure and professional input for which, with self-assessment, the results stem from the learners who have not yet mastered their goals (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). Formal assessments include both standardized (e.g., the Test of English for International Communication [TOEIC]) and unstandardized tests (e.g., when instructors make the tests; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). Informal assessment is a spontaneous type of test often with coaching involved, and it is usually followed up with feedback (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). All assessment tools have their uses: self-assessment encourages learners to see their strengths, formal assessment gives an idea of how learners score among others, and informal assessment is a way for a professional to help learners progress.

During an assessment, Gilbert (2013) contended that teachers should recognize whether learners understand the elements of what they were learning for clear speech. Language learners from all backgrounds, whether EFL or English as a second language, must pay attention to the variations and aspects of sounds to learn them (Gilbert, 2013; Underhill, 2011), for example, understanding how the schwa works in speech. Gilbert explained that when learners were informed of schwa phonemes (e.g., /ə/, /ɚ/, /eə/, /əʊ/, /iə/), they were able to avoid structure mistakes when assessed. Thus, learners should focus more detailed attention on the schwa when issues exist with this factor. In other words, focusing on problematic issues, such as when using the schwa, will elicit stimuli from learners so that they can overcome language obstacles.

Empowerment

One method of assisting adult English language learners (ELLs) with structure mistakes is uttering sounds slowly, giving learners time to distinguish the sounds by listening (Underhill, 2011). Underhill (2011) said in his lecture that teachers should say sounds

slowly, so ELLs heard English phonemes and that, in time, the learner would acquire the knowledge of how to say the sound. While teaching the sounds slowly has its advantages, namely for auditory learners who can have time to consider what they hear (Underhill, 2011), this might have a reverse effect. This is why other researchers argued participants are better empowered by practicing (Saldaña, 2013). Listening alone may not empower the learner or produce the desired outcome. An example of empowered learning is Saldaña's (2013) task-based roleplaying, where the teacher and student read different parts of a dialogue. Saldaña also theorized that an organized and structured method engaged and also empowered the learner during the activity because the learner helped with scaffolding the environment of the lesson.

A factor to consider with empowerment for learners is that English has become an international language (EIL; Jenkins, 1998; Jenkins, 2002). Jenkins (1998) stated that the aims of learners changed when EIL became a factor because learners should be able to communicate their wants and needs in their L2. Jenkins questioned the appropriateness of classroom-based assessment of pronunciation because of the needs of learners. Jenkins (2002) later stated that teachers should adjust how they think to teach learners. For example, if a learner pronounces a word awkwardly, the instructor should accept the way the learner said the word rather than correct them. Jenkins stated persons whose L1 is English should "make receptive adjustments rather than expecting" L2 learners of English "to alter their production in EIL contexts" (p. 98). Understanding that not all accents are the same is important in pedagogy (Jenkins, 1998). Nevertheless, if a learner's goal is to sound a certain way, then teaching toward their learning focus is advantageous for their motivation and needs (Saldaña, 2013). Moreover, Derwing and Munro (2015) extensively expressed why accurate pronunciation is important. In one example, a plane crash occurs because the pilot did not understand instructions from an ELL.

Hypothesis
The hypothesis for this study was that an ELL in his mid-50s could correct long-term structure mistakes by targeting a specific problem over 6 weeks. The null hypothesis was the ELL would not be able to correct the structure mistake.

Methodology
Participant
The participant's chosen alias was Dates. Dates was a male in his mid-50s from Japan. Dates' speaking proficiency was intermediate for an ELL. The term intermediate was based on Dates' score of 600 on the TOEIC conducted in Japan and on information from the Educational Testing Service (2021). A score of 600 was considered (high) intermediate according to the TOEIC testing center (Educational Testing Service, 2021).

Procedures
The six meetings were conducted over Skype once a week in the evening. Skype supplied a means to meet the participant with their camera on. Skype was the most convenient method to meet because the participant and I lived in different prefectures of Japan.

To organize the meeting structure, the participant wrote down 18 sentences on a piece of paper, and I added the sentences to a table for organization (see Table 1). While Dates created the responses, I implemented Saldaña's (2013) role-playing strategies to generate spontaneous questions to elicit Dates' pre-written answers. The questions were

random to elicit semi-spontaneous responses. Dates was able to respond with accurate sentences to my questions. The target phoneme was /mʌnθs/ and the problematic word was "months." The sentences in Table 1 were part of a role-playing dialogue that Dates and I used. Following the final session, Dates said the sentences during a formal assessment. I graded each of his sentences on a 6-point Likert scale based on Linacre's (1999) assessment strategy. Potential responses were the following: did not improve (1), slightly improved (2), somewhat improved (3), improved, but moderately (4), greatly improved (5), and completely improved (6). When responding to my questions and saying the sentences aloud (Table 1), Dates scored 6 for each response accurately producing the phoneme. I also tested this by comparing Dates' pronunciation of /mʌnθs/ with the pronunciation of the word from an IPA English pronunciation app. Moreover, I asked a professor of English to double-check my scores. He listened to Dates' recorded responses and agreed with the score of 6 for each sentence.

Table 1

Participant's Target Sentences Responses

Problematic word: Months	Target Phonemes: /mʌnθs/
Session 1, Sentence 1	I taught English for several months.
Session 1, Sentence 2	I spoke English for 8 months.
Session 1, Sentence 3	I read English for 2 months.
Session 2, Sentence 1	I haven't seen my daughter for 5 months.
Session 2, Sentence 2	How many months is this class?
Session 2, Sentence 3	How many months old is your baby?
Session 3, Sentence 1	Aya is my granddaughter. She is 5 months old.
Session 3, Sentence 2	The baby is 5 months old.
Session 3, Sentence 3	Isn't 3 months a long time?
Session 4, Sentence 1	She said months, not wants.
Session 4, Sentence 2	Aya is 5 months old.
Session 4, Sentence 3	Her first set of teeth should come in 2 months.
Session 5, Sentence 1	We haven't been to the castle in 6 months.
Session 5, Sentence 2	Will you go to the castle with me in 2 months?
Session 5, Sentence 3	I had been a guide there for many months.
Session 6, Sentence 1	Months is difficult for we Japanese to pronounce.
Session 6, Sentence 2	I think I can pronounce months fine now.
Session 6, Sentence 3	Thank you for meeting me for almost 2 months.

Sessions

During our first meeting, one utterance mistake Dates made consistently was saying "*monthes*" (/mʌnθes/) instead of months (/mʌnθs/). So, he and I decided to assess the structure mistake as a target of the study for all sessions. To begin, I coached Dates with pronouncing the phonemes of the problematic word /mʌnθs/. Simply saying, "Say *monthes* (/mʌnθes/) instead of months," does not teach the learner that they are saying something incorrectly (Swan & Smith, 2001). Instead, helping the learner understand through differentiating the utterance helps them notice the difference between what they say versus the accurate sound to build long-term correction (Gilbert, 2013). This is through training the participant with the phoneme sounds (Underhill, 2011).

Thus, I advised him to utter "*Ma n ce*," or /mʌ/ /n/ /θs/. Dates repeated what I

uttered. Next, for the activity, Dates wrote sentences using the word months (see Table 1). He practiced saying the sentences for 5 minutes. Then, Dates said the sentences without reading. During the first session, I relied on self-assessment for which Dates noticed the structure mistake himself (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019).

During the second session, Dates said months perfectly. The slow sound utterance process (Underhill, 2011) gradually helped Dates notice improvement during self-assessment. During the third session, however, Dates uttered the same mistake as before, saying "monthes" (/mʌnθes/).

During the fourth session, I noticed that, upon self-assessment, for the third time Dates was not catching his mistake. He was writing sentences that made sense, but when he would say /mʌnθs/, the sounds /mʌnθes/ were uttered. Self-assessment was not working on its own, but Dates was able to form meaningful sentences without mistakes, showing that his writing ability as an ELL was high.

During our fifth session, I applied empowerment strategies, in this case roleplaying to informally assess (applying corrections when necessary) Dates' skills and help him feel empowered during the assessment. Dates read a script that he wrote using the target phonemes and problematic word. I asked questions to prompt the response based on the script Dates used. Note that I am RE for "Researcher" in the dialogue that follows:

RE:	Have you been to the castle recently?
Dates:	No. *We haven't been to the castle in 6 months*.
RE:	Okay. Let's go together soon then.
Dates:	Okay. Sounds good. *Will you go to the castle with me in 2 months?*
RE:	Yes. Sounds fun.
Dates:	That's great. *I had been a guide there for many months*. I look forward to guiding you at the castle.

By the sixth session, Dates did not make the same mistake and uttered the phoneme correctly. I gave verbal and written assessments in English and Japanese so Dates could remember the correct pronunciation in the future.

Discussion

This paper discussed how empowerment leads to improved learning and how learners can feel empowered by doing rather than just listening as argued by Saldaña (2013). Dates felt empowered by creating the dialogues and participating in the design of his lessons, which he felt led to more motivation to correct the problematic utterance. The process of improving his pronunciation further gave him more confidence in his L2 because he could accurately say a previously problematic utterance. Moreover, he had the tools to correct the issue in the future if he made the same mistake later in life. This led to Dates wanting to correct other problematic utterances in the future. To test the generalizability, I followed up this study with two other small studies in Japan and one larger study 1 year after this one. Dates participated in the study 1 year later. It had 21 participants from Japan and nine raters who rated the problematic phonemes of the participants. Dates was able to produce the target phoneme (/mʌnθs/) from this study accurately when informally assessed 1 year later. One example assessment of many questions follows:

RE: How many months until your birthday?
Dates: It's 6 months until my birthday.

I noted that Dates pronounced /mʌnθs/ clearly during each response. Dates said that this was because he was made aware of the problem and given time to practice with someone who was able to correct him when the problematic utterance occurred.

Conclusion and Limitations

One could argue that, over time, Dates will forget how to pronounce the target problematic word. Additionally, Dates' target phoneme pronunciation progression might have been from repeating the word so many times. However, the sessions indicated that although at first, the participant did not remember how to pronounce the phonemes, by the end he uttered the target correctly and distinguished the difference after informal assessment and roleplaying. He continued to show that the original problematic word and sounds were no longer an issue 1 year later.

Lastly, a limitation of this study was the narrow focus. While Dates wanted to work specifically on the sound /θ/ in connection to /mʌnθs/, the session might have focused on other elements related to problematic words that occurred when adding /s/ to the end. For example, the study might have assisted Dates in connecting /s/ to the end of /kloʊðz/ "clothes." Another limitation was the small sample size of a single case. Future studies employing the strategies with more participants might inform teachers on the best ways to help ELLs who make similar structure mistakes.

Acknowledgments

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