The Role of Form-Focused Instruction in Teaching Foreign Language Pronunciation in the Classroom: A Review

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Abstract

Despite a growing body of research in the effectiveness of instruction on second language (L2) morphosyntactic development from the perspectives of *Form-Focused Instruction* (FFI) and continuous modification of FFI in the Japanese EFL context, L2 pronunciation instruction has not kept pace with the insights gleaned from the development of FFI[1]. A brief review of L2 pronunciation research in the last decade exhibits that there still remains the question of whether the *focus-on-form* approach is effective in L2 pronunciation instruction in the formal setting[2]. This study reviews the possibility that FFI instruction in the formal setting makes a difference for L2 pronunciation, helping learners notice the target form, establishing meta-competence through explicit instruction.

Keywords: FFI, L2, pronunciation instruction

1. Introduction

Throughout the attempts to reform classroom language teaching that have continued since the Reform Movement of the late 19th century, second language classroom research has developed three general approaches to foreign language instruction, namely, *Focus on Form* (FoF), *Focus on Form*s (FoFs), and *Focus on Meaning* (FoM)[3]. According to Norris and Ortega, who examined 250 *instructed SLA* studies published from 1980 to 1998, the most effective approach was explicit FoF, with a large effect size, followed by explicit FoFs, implicit FoF, and lastly, implicit FoFs[4], demonstrating that FoF is most likely to yield the greatest benefit for the learning of a foreign language.

However, in L2 pronunciation studies, the FoF type of instruction has not always and completely outperformed FoFs[5]. A brief survey of the history of L2 pronunciation teaching shows that the ability of learning a pronunciation is different from morphology and syntax[6]. Further investigation is thus required to answer the question, *Is FFI appropriate to promote acquisition of L2 pronunciation in the classroom?* At present this line of inquiry has just started.

2. Background to the Teaching and Learning of L2 Pronunciation

2.1. L2 pronunciation teaching: a brief survey

The history of English pronunciation teaching over the last 100 years falls into two parts, before and after the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the 1970s. It seems sufficient to look back to the Reform Movement of the 19th century for the on-going argument to consider the impact of FFI and FoM in L2 pronunciation pedagogy[7]. The Reform Movement, as it is often called today, was 'a remarkable display of international and interdisciplinary co-operation'[8] with contributions to English language teaching by several European phoneticians who were dissatisfied with the traditional grammar-translation method in use at that time. They assumed that language is primarily speech, and that teaching materials should begin with colloquial speech[9]. The inheritance of this basic principle can be found in the Oral Method in Britain and the Oral Approach in the US during the wartime period and after.

A few classroom studies investigating the advantage of FoFs in L2 pronunciation research have been conducted in Japan in the past. Ueno compared the effects of the

segmental-oriented approach (i.e., 'the focus of instruction is on the accuracy of segmental sounds…to enable students to articulate individual sounds of English') and the suprasegmental-oriented approach (i.e. 'the focus of instruction is on the suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation…to enable students to identify and produce suprasegmental features'[10]. Her major research question was which approach would be effective in L2 pronunciation in a Japanese college classroom. The results indicated no significant difference, which led the researcher to conclude that 'a combination of these two approaches may be preferable to make pronunciation teaching more effective'.

Akita presented comparative analysis of two instructional techniques (i.e., the segment-oriented approach and the prosody-oriented approach) that examines changes in learners' abilities of the perception and production conducted at regular classrooms in a university[11]. Both groups followed a typical FoFs approach, for instance, listening-comprehension exercises, controlled dialogue practice, and role-playing. The results demonstrated that 'the prosody-oriented approach was effective in improving both learners' perception and production; furthermore, it was more effective than the segmental approach regarding production'.

On the other hand, the basic philosophy of CLT was, as we saw in section 1.2, an attempt to overcome traditional synthetic syllabuses and methods. Widdowson contended that 'the problem is that students, and especially students in developing countries, who have received several years of formal English teaching, frequently remain deficient in the ability to actually use the language, and to understand its use, in normal communication'[12]. This sort of dissatisfaction also led to empirical investigation in pronunciation, conducted in the 1990s in pronunciation instruction with a view to examining the relative effects of FoM and FoFs, which resulted in FoFs outperforming FoM[13].

However, Gabrys-Barker proposed another look at the CLT movement, which led to 'the changed pattern in language education' with an effect of 1) a notion of learners as active creators not as passive recipients, 2) a movement to provide an increasing focus on individual learner differences, 3) a formal and functional system of the language and so forth[14]. Thus, the 1990s could also be considered a transitional period from focus on forms or meaning to focus-on-form, since some studies modified the FoM approach by incorporating training of form in a communicative classroom.

2.2. FFI in L2 pronunciation instruction

L2 pronunciation studies in the last decades shifted their interest to examining the assumption that FoF approach vigorously investigated in morphosyntax and lexicon might contribute to the betterment of L2 pronunciation.

Park investigates the relationship between form and/ or meaning focused instruction and the acquisition of L2 word stress in a formal setting. The study questions 1) whether FoFs, FoM, or FoF instruction affect the accuracy of L2 word stress perception and production, and 2) whether the different type of instruction affects the L2 word stress perception and production[13]. To answer the question, she designed three experimental groups; FoFs, FoM and FoF, and a control, each of which consisted of approximately 10 subjects. The length of treatment was 65 minutes and 10 classes taught by the researcher. The subjects' performance was assessed using pre- and post -tests, respectively, just before and immediately after the treatment. The results demonstrated that both the FoFs and FoF group showed significant improvement after the treatment, and that the FoF group showed more significant improvement than the FoFs group. The findings led the researcher to contend that 'FoF instruction had the most effect on word stress accuracy' (p.vi).

Yam also examines the effects of three different form and/or meaning focused approaches on the productive acquisition of L2 English consonant clusters, by post-secondary EFL learners in Hong Kong[15]. The core questions seem to be 'Research Question 2: Which treatment, Focus-on-Forms, Focus-on-Form- and Meaning or Focus-on- Meaning is more effective in improving subjects' accuracy in the production of English words with consonant clusters in onset and coda position?' (p. 78). The study deployed 168 Cantonese- speaking learners and used the pre-test- treatment. The immediate and delayed post-tests were designed to investigate six research questions and two sets of hypotheses. Their performance in the pre- and post-test were then compared and analysed, which demonstrated that 'FoFs was the most effective' (p.iii), and suggested that 'the communication-based methodology that has proven to be effective is tested mainly on the area of syntactic and semantic acquisition…Thus, the same kind of

treatments may not be effective for the acquisition of pronunciation since phonetics and phonology is a unique module of its own' (p. 159).

Chang reported the findings of an empirical study that examined the growth of awareness of a phonological form in FoFs instruction and the prosodic development of eight Mandarin speakers in Canada[16]. The researcher deployed an ethnographic study which consisted of classroom teaching, participants' self-reported exposure to English and independent practice. Participants were instructed via teacher-fronted activities, i.e., listen-and-repeat exercises, which led them to become more aware of the prosodies of L2 English and the need to consciously understand the rules concerned. This FoFs approach consequently demonstrated the growth of performance at a specific stage of assessment. The result also manifested that, although learners had not been aware of prosodic aspects of L2 English at the initial stage, the growth of awareness and improvement of intonation, showed that 'explicit teaching in conjunction with meta-linguistic discussion raise awareness of phonological form' (pp. ii- iii).

Sicola is in line with task-based research in SLA, which examines the possibility that L2 learners would be able to negotiate for phonological forms when working on tasks, as in a two-way interaction map task[17]. The researcher provides evidence, answering three major questions (pp. 34-35): 1) When working together on communicative pronunciation tasks, can NNSs draw each other's attention to targeted phonological forms in ways generally understood to facilitate SLA? 2) If NNSs do provide each other with corrective feedback that focuses on the target form, are there specific ways in which they do so? 3) If NNSs do modify their target form production, do the modifications result in more target-like pronunciation? In order to maximize the need to negotiate the target phonological form, i.e., the voiceless interdental fricative /Ɵ/, task design balanced the inherent communicative value and the target form essentialness in colloquial discourse. After treatment for four days a week, for 65 minutes each, learners attained fluency in using the target form; thus, Sicola concluded that 'the task was found to provide feedback to the dyad, identifying miscommunication that neither interlocutor had recognized', and 'the controlled discourse of the task design also succeeded in providing important context to holding the target form essential to task completion' (p. 89).

In his quasi-experimental study deploying a pre-test and post-test design, Saito investigated the instructional effects on L2 pronunciation of *focused tasks* that integrate comprehension with production tasks so that learners can develop their argumentative skills in English, at the same time, drawing their attention to the target form, /ɹ/, through 1) structured input, 2) typographically enhanced input, and 3) output-focused tasks[18]. A four-hour FFI treatment (one hour × two lessons per week × two weeks), which aimed to observe and practice the target form in the context of meaning-focused instruction was given to learners who were subdivided into an 1) FFI- only group (n=25) and 2) FFI + CF (i.e., pronunciation-focused recasts) (n= 29), as below, where S stands for a student, and T, for a teacher;

S1: car or people walk and drive on this…
S2: lane?
S1: *road* [loud]?
T: *road* [roud]
S2: *road* [roud]

The collected data were compared with the control group (n= 11), which simply focused on meaning-oriented lessons. Saito suggests that L2 pronunciation development might require not only *enhanced positive evidence* (i.e., focused tasks) but also *immediate negative evidence* from the teachers (i.e., CF) (p.65).

Couper's study comprises a series of cumulative L2 pronunciation research programmes, all discussing the effectiveness of a specific instructional approach deploying qualitative and quantitative analysis (study 1), an ethnographic approach to learners' perception (study 2) and a quasi-experimental study investigating the effects of Socially Constructed Metalanguage (SCM) and Critical Listening (CL) (study 3)[19]. Study 1 examined whether explicit pronunciation can work with a series of short input and practice sessions for two weeks among 71 participants. The results were that while the control remained unchanged, the treatment group made a significant difference and the attainment was retained for 12 weeks. Qualitative data were also collected via interviews with learners who attended the experiment, which demonstrate learners' comments about the instruction: for instance, 'The students could see the potential benefits of CL activities, but some of them did comment that it was too difficult and they could not always hear the difference' (p.105). The second study further analysed the result of the first study to examine the

role of SCM and CL in the learning and teaching of L2 pronunciation. The results demonstrated the progress of syllable epenthesis at the pre-, post- and delayed post-test stages, the final test of which was conducted eight weeks later. Study 3 examines the findings of Studies 1 and 2 and the possibility that the SLM and CL might play a role in determining the success of L2 pronunciation teaching. Learners were instructed as follows: 1) SCM+ / CL+, 2) SCM+ / CL-, 3) SCM- / CL+ and 4) SCM- / CL-, where + or – indicate the presence (i.e., +) or absence (i.e., -) of SCM or CL in the treatment. The results showed that SCM led to the significant development of production and CL affected improvement perception.

3. Conclusion

The review of the L2 pronunciation in the last decade confirms the significance of the timely combination of form-focused and communication-oriented instruction for successful L2 development in pronunciation. Thus, it seems that helping learners discover rules or declarative knowledge in the learner interaction likely to be more successful than merely presenting the target form, even with explicit explanation. However, there still remains the question of whether the *focus-on-form* approach is unambiguously effective in L2 pronunciation instruction. More importantly, the inquiry of adolescent learners' development of L2 pronunciation has received little scholarly attention or analysis. Future studies should answer the following questions:

(1)   Does explicit FFI affect the interlanguage pronunciation of Japanese learners of EFL?
(2)   If FFI has an effect on EFL learners' acquisition, does this approach affect the receptive and productive acquisition?
(3)   Is it appropriate to teach a target pronunciation whose English proficiency level is around a specific stage on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*?

The present author hopes that the result of this study, demonstrating that carefully designed pronunciation instruction can help learners improve their performance, will motivate future attempts to teach foreign language pronunciation in the classroom.

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