

DELAY IN ORAL PRODUCTION AND PRONUNCIATION ACHIEVEMENT IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Darío Barrera Pardo

Department of English Philology, University of Vigo, Spain

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on experimental research based on the assumption that a methodological focus on well-founded receptive skills is essential for the eventual development of productive competence, and that this is especially relevant in the learning of foreign language (FL) pronunciation. In order to test this hypothesis, an experiment was designed in which a control and an experimental group (N = 9 for each group) followed the same program of instruction (L1 = Spanish, L2 = English), differing only in the method of instruction (perception-only for the experimental group, perception and production for the control group). The results of this experiment indicate an advantage for the control group.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research into the learning of foreign or second language pronunciation is relatively scarce. Although progress has been made in recent years, we are for the most part lacking substantiated answers to questions such as which strategies learners employ to approximate their speech to the target models, or which teaching methods best contribute to pronunciation achievement.

In this study I tested the hypothesis that the development of adequate speech models in perception facilitates eventual attainment in pronunciation production. It has been argued by several researchers, notably Postovsky [11], and Gary [4] that a comprehension-first approach to foreign language learning has a number of advantages over methods that require immediate production. The methodological construct by which this comprehension approach is implemented in the teaching practice is what is known as "silent period". Specifically, these authors claim that the incorporation of a silent period in the beginning stages of

instruction will enhance the learners' acquisition of the foreign language. As a general teaching procedure, the silent period has been fostered mainly by Krashen and his associates (e.g. [2]). In the area of pronunciation teaching, some authors have explored the effects that a silent phase in instruction have for phonological acquisition, with seemingly positive results. It is perhaps the study carried out by Neufeld [9] the one that shows a stronger correlation between an initial silent period and ultimate acquisition of the target sounds. Other researchers [12] include an initial silent phase in their pronunciation training programs. In addition, FL methods such as *Total Physical Response* incorporate a silent period in their instruction program.

There is some rather inconclusive evidence in support of this theory coming from child second language studies in natural settings [3], and more recently other researchers have included a perception-only stage in their pronunciation training studies [10].

2. PERCEPTION/PRODUCTION IN FL PHONOLOGY

That FL learners need to construct adequate target speech models before making attempts at production is an idea that has gained recognition in the field (e.g. [7]). In fact, one explanation that has been advanced for the foreign accent of learners is that some FL speech approaches are based on the wrong assumption that "phonological representation should be easily, if not automatically, determined by second language learners within a phonemic model of phonology" ([1] p.247). Rather, learners face the taxing task of constructing their own representations, a goal they attain in many cases at best only partially.

On the other hand, there is evidence that points toward a perception/production split in FL speech

competence. Neufeld [10] found that his subjects performed on a native-like level in listening and phonological discrimination tasks, although in terms of speech production they were rated as "poor articulators" by native judges. These subjects' sound knowledge of L2 phonology therefore was not matched by equivalent productive skills.

3. EXPERIMENT

3.1. Subjects

18 monolingual Spanish-speaking university students who volunteered to participate in the experiment were assigned to a control group and an experimental group (each group N = 9). These subjects had no knowledge of English, and were told that they would acquire basic "survival" English skills.

3.2. Method

The control and experimental groups were presented with the same input, with a focus on the following English phonemes: /i:/, /ɛ/, /æ/, /t d/, which are typically problematic for Spanish-speaking learners for the reasons that follow:

- 1) maintaining the quality-quantity distinction in the pair /i:/, /ɪ/, normally merged to the Spanish high front vowel /i/.
- 2) maintaining the quality distinction between /e/ and /æ/, which may be realized as either /e/ or /a/ by Spanish learners.
- 3) realizing /t d/ as alveolar plosives, rather than dentalizing them as is the norm in Spanish; adjusting the Spanish VOTs for the durational values of these English consonants (e.g. the aspiration of [t^h]).

The rather restricted input of the experiment presented learners with numerous instances of words containing these phonemes (a minimum of 20 words for each target phoneme). All main allophonic variants of the target phonemes were represented in the input words (for example, [t^h] [t^l] [t] for /t/; [i:] [i:] [i] for /i:/). Both groups met with the instructor two hours per week during a four-week period, following the same training in the type of language

situations in which these sounds were presented, that centered around topics such as learning about foods to order in the US and some simple routines regarding the pragmatics of this linguistic task.

3.3. Procedure

The control group was instructed with a traditional approach, in which speaking on the part of the learners was encouraged from the beginning of the training. *Listen and repeat* activities were frequent in the classroom interaction, and active oral production from the part of the learners was also encouraged.

It must be noted, however, that a focus on correct pronunciation was not an aim here. In the experimental group, on the other hand, subjects were not required to respond *orally* or to talk with any regularity until the last week of instruction. To adapt their training to this less orthodox methodology, *active listening* was encouraged. According to this orientation, the subjects did not limit themselves to receive language input (in particular oral input) passively, since they had to answer to questions and instructions directed to them (identifying words, pictures, performing physical and gestural activities, among other modes of response).

3.4. Analysis

Once the four-week training program was completed, the 18 subjects of the study were presented with a list of 30 words to be read and tape-recorded in the language lab (5 words for each of the 6 target sounds that were the focus of the experiment).

This procedure yielded 30 recorded tokens for each subject. The test words for each focus sound represent a selection of contextual and positional variants of the sound being tested. Thus, for the focus sound /i:/, the first test word "tea" [t^hi:] is a token of the open-syllable variant [i:]; "beats" [bi:t^s] and "eat" [i:t] both contain the voiceless consonant syllable-closed [i·], in which the otherwise long vowel is significantly shortened; finally, "cheese" [tʃi:z] and "bean" [bi:n] are instances of the opposite case, that is, a voiced consonant

syllable-closed [i:]. All the test word occurred frequently in the input to which the subjects were exposed.

These recordings were next presented to three volunteering native-speaking judges (American students with little knowledge of Spanish), who rated the recorded test words according to a scale measuring degree of *accented speech* with mid-points for ease of evaluation (see Figure 1). Judges listened to the recordings in a random order in the language lab. Therefore each of the 30 words was given a value from 0 to 5 according to how *accented* it was rated by each judge.

3.5. Results and discussion

The results of the experiment are plotted on Table 1. These show a slight advantage for the control group (4,48 % less accented than the experimental group), thus refuting the perception-first hypothesis for FL phonological learning. This performance difference is significant [$t = 1.90$ (one-tailed), $p < 0.05$].

Our results therefore contrast with those obtained in previous studies [4, 9, 10, 11, 12] in which the group that was treated with a delay in oral production showed more improvement in pronunciation than learners who were instructed with a production approach since the beginning of training. A few reasons come to mind that may explain the divergent results obtained in our experiment:

1) the subjects of our instruction program were not encouraged in any explicit way to concentrate their learning efforts on approximating their speech to the target models (this, for instance, is an important difference with experiments such as [12]).

2) the material used in the program of instruction [5] and its *methodological approach* had a marked communicative orientation, and learners probably attended more to meaning than to phonological form (i.e. subphonemic aspects of the input such as aspiration of /t/ may have been largely ignored). This rationale is in consonance with some explanations advanced for poor pronunciation in second language acquisition [6].

3) it may in principle seem logical that 8 hours of instruction (2 hours/week X 4

weeks) should of necessity produce little result in terms of language acquisition and all the more in the domain of phonological acquisition, but it must be reminded that those FL phonology studies in which a training period is incorporated, it has typically a short duration. (cf. [8]).

The hypothesis that this study has explored is nevertheless worth being followed up in future research. As a factor in phonological acquisition, the perception/production dichotomy and its correspondingly different learning strategies from the part of learners is an issue that has attracted the interest of researchers in the field from time to time; it will undoubtedly be a center of interest in the future as well.

4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of our study was to assess the effect that an oral delay in production has for FL pronunciation ultimate attainment. The present results show a more positive effect for an approach that involves students in both perception and production since the early stages of instruction.

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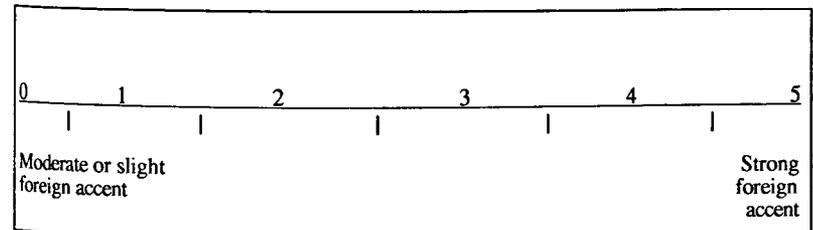


Figure 1. Scale measuring degree of accented speech used by the experiment judges

Table 1. Assessment of degree of accented speech

	N	M	SD	df	t	degree of foreign accent
Control group	9	293,9	17.62	16	1.90	65,3 %
Experimental group	9	314,2	26.76			69,8 %

$p > .05$