

The effectiveness of segment-focused pronunciation teaching and suprasegmental-focused pronunciation teaching

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Abstract

This paper is an interim report on a quasi-experimental study which aims to examine the effectiveness of segment-focused teaching and suprasegmental-focused teaching for enhancing the comprehensibility of Japanese English learners' oral production.

Instruction with these focuses is being conducted in two classes of first-year high school students respectively.

Their performance is to be assessed by judges, and their listening comprehension ability will be measured by a test. In the present paper, I discuss data from pronunciation assessment conducted halfway through the treatment.

Keywords

segment-focused teaching method,
suprasegmental-focused teaching method,
comprehensibility

Introduction

In English education in Japan, grammar and vocabulary are regarded as crucial, and, by contrast, pronunciation is not emphasized. There are a wide range of problems that Japanese English teachers have in this field. Some of them are as follows: 1) not enough time, 2) teachers do not know much about phonetics, and 3) teachers do not know how to teach. Thus, improving learners' pronunciation is a great challenge in TEFL in Japan.

In this study, segment- and suprasegmental-focused methods of pronunciation teaching are compared. While Japanese learners need both of these sorts of training (see Major 1987; Ellis 1994), not enough data have been accumulated that show to what extent each of the above methods is relevant to the comprehensibility of learners' spoken English.

'Comprehensibility' shall mean 'perceived ease of understanding', as the term is defined by Venkatagiri and Levis (2007) on the basis of a

definition in Munro and Derwing (1995). In other words, the term shall mean the ease with which listeners can grasp the message, not the ease with which they can identify the words.

1 Literature review

Some studies suggested that suprasegmental-focused pronunciation teaching has an impact on the comprehensibility of learners' output.

In Derwing, Munro, and Wiebe (1998), two groups of ESL students received instruction in global phonology and segmental features respectively. It was revealed that only pronunciation teaching that was based on suprasegmental features affected comprehensibility of the learners' production as far as narrative reading was concerned.

Derwing and Rossiter (2003) gave evidence that a priority on prosody results in better comprehensibility at least in the short run. On the other hand, Elliot (1997) found that significant improvements result from segmental instruction for English-speaking learners of Spanish.

Although some studies were conducted in ESL environments, few attempts have been made to test the validity of segment- and suprasegmental-focused pronunciation teaching in the Japanese classroom, which is an EFL environment.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study are about 80 first-year students at a school in Saitama, Japan. The school is considered to be near the top of the academic spectrum among high schools in Japan. The participants have been divided into two classes of approximately 40 students each which are to be given the two kinds of treatment mentioned below.

2.2 Procedure

The two classes are being taught with a focus on segmental sounds and one on suprasegmental features respectively. Each class meets twice per week, and in each meeting of the class, the students receive pronunciation teaching for about 10 minutes. The total number of treatment sessions will be 13. Students have been instructed to record their pronunciation before, during, and after the treatment. Their performance in the mid-test has been evaluated for comprehensibility on a scale of 1 to 5 by two native speakers of English and one non-native speaker of English.

As data from the two groups were analyzed following the mid test, data from participants who scored 4 or 5 were not included: they turned out to have native or near-native proficiency, and it was judged that they should be considered to be outliers. Table 1 indicates that there is no significant difference in average score between the two groups after the elimination of those high scorers.

3 Results and conclusion

T-tests were conducted to compare the scores of the pre- and mid-tests, and the results are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: The result of pre-test

| | Supra Pre | Seg Pre |
|------------------|-----------|---------|
| Mean | 2.14 | 2.26 |
| Observations | 28 | 23 |
| SD | 0.77 | 0.62 |
| P(T<=t) two-tail | 0.54 | |

Table 2: The result of mid-test

| | Supra Mid | Seg Mid |
|------------------|-----------|---------|
| Mean | 2.43 | 2.39 |
| Observations | 28 | 23 |
| SD | 0.73 | 0.72 |
| P(T<=t) two-tail | 0.85 | |

There was no significant difference in score between suprasegmental- and segment-focused groups in the mid-test. This indicates that, at least in the short run, the difference between the specific focuses mentioned here is not reflected in the comprehensibility of learners' pronunciation. However, the average progress in the suprasegmental-focused group was larger than that in the segment-focused group in actual score, hinting at a possibility that more treatment may enhance the comprehensibility of the former group.

4 References

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