

A New Approach to Teaching Pronunciation: An Exploratory Case Study

Pedro L. Luchini

Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, Argentina

This paper reports an explorative case study in which the researcher, working as a teacher and evaluator, used a new methodology for teaching English pronunciation at a teacher training college, Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata (UNMDP), Argentina, and measured what happened as a result. In order to reassure the validity of this research, different elicitation instruments were used to collect the data obtained. The results were analysed and interpreted against pre-established criteria, and in the light of the findings obtained, some recommendations and avenues for further research are highlighted.

For a long time, from the literature it would seem that pronunciation teachers in many Asian contexts have been using what some would typify as a traditional methodology for teaching English pronunciation based on drilling and mechanical exercises. The result of this reveals that many learners retain some critical deviant phonological forms when they communicate in a second language (L2), a problem that sometimes threatens intelligibility. A concern such as this may imply a need to generate a change in methodology whereby tasks function as a central focus in a supportive and natural context for language study. Under this new task-based approach, learners are expected to improve their communication skills and, in so doing, repair those deviant phonological forms with the intention of guaranteeing phonological intelligibility.

This paper consists of an exploratory case study conducted at a university

in Argentina where the first language (L1) is Spanish and the L2 English. The study aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of the implementation of *Discurso Oral II (DOII)*—a course on English pronunciation with a strong emphasis on suprasegmental phonology—using a new methodology. This course was intended for student teachers of English, attending year two at a teacher training programme at UNMDP, Argentina (hereafter, ‘the University’).

In the first part of this paper, the empirical background to the study will be presented. In the next part, the case study will be outlined. Finally, after discussing the findings obtained, some recommendations and areas for further research will be given.

EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

In the last decades, there has been a steady growth in the attention to the importance of pronunciation teaching, as the general goals of teaching worldwide have prioritised the effective use of the spoken language. This phenomenon, however, has brought about a growing debate about the models, goals and, particularly, the methodology used for teaching pronunciation. For some, such changes and the uncertainty of debate are confusing, so a study to resolve some aspects of the debate is a valuable contribution to the profession.

In the more distant past, traditional approaches to teaching pronunciation primed attention to phonemes and their meaningful contrasts, along with some structurally based interest in stress, rhythm, and intonation. From the pedagogic point of view, instruction focused on articulatory descriptions, imitation, and memorization of patterns through drills and dialogues, with extensive attention to correction, all this, in the hope that learners at the University would eventually pronounce the vowels and the consonants like a British native speaker. This concern for accurate pronunciation, based on native models, aimed at enabling learners to come as close as possible to the native-like performance of a single prestige accent—Received Pronunciation (RP).

Later on, under the notional-functional approach, nevertheless, came the need to get learners to use the language freely to express their own ideas and communicate their messages. In this way, drillings and other types of mechanical practice were considered old-fashioned and, indeed, the focus was placed mainly on meaning and not on form. In this situation, pronunciation teaching was relegated pedagogically as a result of difficulties in aligning it with and incorporating it into more communicative approaches to language teaching since work on phonology, it was thought, could get in the way of communicative practice and thus threaten learners' self-confidence (Jenner, 1996).

However, in recent years, and with the renewed professional commitment to empowering students to become effective speakers of English, there has been a persistent movement to bring pronunciation back on stage since, as many influential researchers point out, it is an essential component of communicative competence and, as such, it should be given high priority (Morley, 1991; Taylor, 1991; among others). Today, and perhaps as a result of this emergence, many more people are again interested in pronunciation, but the truth is, as was said earlier, that we are not completely convinced of which models, goals and methodology are more beneficial for students and teachers alike.

In reference to the different approaches to teaching pronunciation, the bottom-up approach, on the one hand, begins with the articulation of individual sounds and works up towards intonation, stress and rhythm. On the other hand, the top-down approach begins with patterns of intonation and brings separate sounds into sharper focus as and when required. In the bottom-up approach, the basic idea is that if you teach the segments, the suprasegmental features will take care of by themselves. In the top-down approach, however, the assumption is that once the prosodic features are in place, the necessary segmental discriminations will follow accordingly (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994).

Regarding this issue, Jenkins (2000) states that the implications of using a holistic or top-down approach for teaching pronunciation, that is, starting

from voice quality or settings and thence moving on to work on individual sounds, are that learners have another articulatory setting, which needs to be unlearned and replaced by the L2 setting:

...learners of a second language approach its pronunciation with their articulators still geared to the production of their L1 (mother tongue) sounds (and prosodic features – though these are rarely mentioned by name). Thus, they begin the process of trying to acquire the phonology of L2 (target language) at a serious disadvantage, since many of its sounds are virtually impossible to produce unless the articulators adopt the same positions, types of movement, and degree of muscular activity as those employed by L1 speakers. (p. 157)

Concerning the polemic claim presented by many pronunciation writers which asserts the view that suprasegmentals are more basic and contribute more to intelligibility and accent than segmentals do, Jenkins (1996, 1998, 2000), rather contentiously, argues that the view that most segmental errors, though noticeable, do not hinder understanding, is something of an overstatement, since most mishearings between NSs-NNs and NNs-NNs, according to her own data sources, can be identified as occurring at a segmental level. According to Jenkins (2000), “segmental transfer errors can prove highly detrimental to successful communication in English” (p. 39). Along these same lines, and to provide support for her claims, Anderson-Hsieh (2000) reported that “very few studies have actually investigated the relative roles of the segmentals and suprasegmentals in intelligibility, but also that the few that have been conducted have been *suggestive* (emphasis on original) rather than strongly conclusive of the greater influence of suprasegmentals” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 135).

In view of these debatable opinions, at least in my particular context, in order to meet the learners’ needs participating in this study, a satisfactory aim would be to establish a degree of segmental-suprasegmental balance through which learners, for personal or professional reasons, are allowed to choose whether they wish to sound as close as possible to native speakers of English or not. However, even with these needs in place, although it may sound

discouraging, many students will never acquire through formal instruction all the suprasegmental features because some of these, especially pitch movement, are plainly not teachable and can only be acquired over time—if at all—through extensive non-pedagogic exposure (Roach, 1983; Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994; Nelson, 1998; Jenkins, 2000; among others).

In line with this, and for pedagogical purposes, it might be helpful to think about the teachability—learnability scale as presented by Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994) which proposes that there are certain aspects of the English pronunciation which seem to be easily taught; namely, sounds and stress while others, such as intonation, are extremely dependent on individual circumstances and thus nearly impossible to separate out for direct teaching. In her study, Jenkins (1996, 1998, 2000) points out that even if it were possible to teach pitch movement in the classroom, she does not believe that the use of native speaker pitch movement matters very much for intelligibility in interactions between NSs-NNs or NNs-NNs since this feature very seldom leads to communication breakdowns, and when it does, it is accompanied by another linguistic errors—generally phonological.

Nuclear stress, and in particular contrastive stress, however, unlike intonation, operates at a more conscious level and is essential for intelligibility. In her data, Jenkins (2000) found out that most of the errors that caused unintelligibility were segmental, a substantial minority comprised intonational errors and, of these, almost all related to misplaced nuclear stress, especially contrastive stress, either alone or combined with segmental errors. Once more, this last finding provides support for the view that the greatest phonological obstacles to mutual intelligibility between NSs-NNSs and NNs-NNSs appear to be deviant sounds in combination with misplaced and/or misproduced nuclear stress.

On looking back at this discussion and turning back to the concern about setting realistic and achievable goals for teaching pronunciation, it could be sensible to argue that instead of pushing learners to strive for perfect pronunciation, a focus on pedagogic attention on those items which are teachable and learnable and also essential in terms of intelligible pronunciation,

appears to be a more reasonable and attainable goal. As for this study, the main pedagogic goal is that, upon the implementation of this new methodology for teaching pronunciation, these student teachers are expected to develop their communication skills effectively, and in so doing, become fluent bilingual speakers, a fact which will allow them to act as good models for their learners and of other second language learners (Cruttenden, 2001).

After examining the different approaches to teaching pronunciation and what appears to be teachable and learnable for classroom settings, I will now refer to the type of methodology that, according to some influential pronunciation scholars and my own experience, seems to be more beneficial for learners and teachers alike. As was stated earlier, the formal instruction of those common core features of English pronunciation—vowel length, nuclear stress (especially, contrastive stress), and voice setting—which seem to be vital for establishing intelligibility enable learners to take maximum advantage of both their receptive and productive pronunciation skills.

With regard to production skills, interactive or “reciprocal” (Ellis, 2001, p. 49) tasks with a specific focus on form are crucial for the development of key phonological features (Thornbury, 1993; Jones & Evans, 1995; Jenkins, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 2001; among others). More controlled sessions, on the other hand, are essential to classroom work in accommodation skills and where changes to L1 phonological habits are necessary, as learners will not be able to converge with one another on more target-like pronunciations unless it is within their capacity to produce them effectively.

In fact, practice activities of specific target sounds—minimal pair exercises and drilling—as well as the rules of contrastive and nuclear stress, for instance, will facilitate learners to move from receptive to productive competence in core problematic areas (Jenkins, 2000). However, this kind of tasks is very unlikely to promote pronunciation skills or motivation in the language classroom. Although drilling exercises might be of significant importance to bring about crucial changes in L1 phonological habits, they should not be overused in the pronunciation class at the expense of other types of more communicative tasks through which learners may have the

opportunity to develop the appropriate use of specific phonological features, and in particular, their accommodation skills.

Indeed, less controlled pair and small group work, especially involving joint problem-solving situations, as Gass and Varonis (1991) claim, are better than those which are “non-reciprocal” (Ellis, 2001, p. 49) because they involve negotiation of meaning and thus more opportunities for learners to adjust and accommodate their receptive as well as productive pronunciation skills (Jenkins, 2000). According to Thornbury (1997), students should be provided with opportunities for “noticing gaps which, even if essentially meaning-driven, allow the learners to devote some attentional focus on form, and, moreover, provide both the data and the incentive for the learners to make comparisons between interlanguage output and target language models” (p. 327).

Consistent with a consciousness-raising approach to teaching pronunciation (Rutherford, 1987; Schmidt, 1990), it follows then that teachers should try to promote noticing in their classes, by focusing their learners’ attention on specific targeted phonological forms in the input, and on the distance to be covered between the present level of their interlanguage, on the one hand, and the target form, on the other. The comparison by learners of their version with the input model presents them with constructive evidence of yet-to-be-acquired phonological features, and this process of noticing, it might be argued, turns input into intake, and serves to reorganize the learners’ developing linguistic competence. Indeed, this kind of tasks reverses the order of traditional models of teaching, which go from accuracy to fluency, as, for instance, when learners are presented with a rule for later use in freer practice activities. This task-based mode of instruction, in turn, proposes a fluency-to-accuracy sequence which pushes learners to complete the task set by using whatever linguistic resources they have within reach, and at the same time, allows for consciousness-raising at the discoursal, syntactic, lexical, and phonological levels (Rutherford, 1987; Schmidt, 1990; Thornbury, 1997).

On looking back at the above discussion on the implementation of different types of tasks for the pronunciation class and their ultimate impact

on learners' acquisition of specific phonological features, it could be pointed out that, as for my research, the aim would be to establish a degree of controlled to less controlled task-type balance appropriate to a monolingual class composed of students of different talents, different motivations, and even different stages of development but sharing a common mother tongue.

As regards their receptive skills, learners need to range far beyond the limits of the dominant native-speaker accents such as RP (the standard British accent) or GA (General American) in their receptive repertoires in order to be able to cope with the different accent varieties of their interlocutors whom they are most likely to meet, whether they are Ns or NNs English speakers. The best way for this familiarity to be achieved is through repeated pedagogic exposure to assorted L1 and L2 accents of English with a focus on areas of difference, especially those which are considered highly risky for establishing mutual understanding. The aim of exposing learners to these different accents is to help them develop greater awareness of the fact of L1 as well as L2 accent variations—particularly in vital phonological areas—and a readiness to attempt to cope with them, especially when faced with a completely new accent (Jenkins, 2000; Walker, 2000; Rosewarne, 2002).

The proposals underpinning this section will be partly used throughout this study as criteria to determine the effectiveness of the implementation of the new methodology for teaching pronunciation.

THE CASE STUDY

Yin (1984) defines the case study research method as an in-depth empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used with the intention of setting up generalizations about the wider population to which that phenomenon belongs.

As this exploratory case study, which took place in Argentina, yielded very interesting results, it would be worth replicating it in other contexts in order to corroborate the validity of its generalizations (see Luchini, 2004 where I conducted a similar case study in a Chinese context).

Participants and Assessors

I worked as evaluator, assessor and facilitator within the course being evaluated. The 43 students attending this course agreed to participate in this research. While all of them wrote up self-assessment reports after listening to and analysing their own productions, only nine were sampled purposively - three learners were high achievers, three from the middle range and the other three were from the bottom- to record semi-structured interviews. This selection was done with the intention of obtaining, at least, some recognition from alternative strategies. Besides, a teaching assistant observed some of my classes and wrote up interesting instances that took place in action as I implemented this new methodology for teaching pronunciation.

Context

To enrol in this teacher training programme offered at the University, students are expected to master an English proficiency level equivalent or superior to that required by the First Certificate in English (FCE) test or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

DOII is taught in year two of this programme, after students have completed a series of other courses aiming at developing general linguistic performance and initial teacher training skills. The students enrolled in DOII come into this class after taking Phonetics and Phonology I and II as an academic requirement. In these two courses, which are taught during the first year of this programme, students are exposed to explicit theoretical knowledge about the production of speech sounds of English and are provided with some phonological practical skills acquired through mechanical exercises focused

chiefly on repetition and imitation.

DOII, however, is a four-month course on English pronunciation that aims at enabling the student teachers to acquire a highly acceptable non-native pronunciation which will allow them to use the spoken language effectively while retaining some features of L1. I teach part of this course in combination with three other pronunciation teachers. The group of 43 students meets for four 2-hour sessions per week, each session being taught by a different teacher. While the three other teachers focus mainly on theoretical aspects related to stress, rhythm and intonation, my contribution to the course centers around more communicative aspects where students are engaged in consciousness-raising tasks, among other things, aiming at integrating theory with practice.

In the next section, I will briefly explain the foundations of this methodology for teaching pronunciation, and how this was implemented.

IMPLEMENTATION OF A NEW METHODOLOGY FOR TEACHING PRONUNCIATION

In the past, in this University, a rather traditional view to teaching pronunciation was used in which, on the one hand, under the instruction of the same other three teachers who are now in charge of the present course, the students were mainly presented with the rules that govern stress, rhythm and intonation in English using a rather conventional and systematic approach. On the other hand, the teaching assistant and myself were in charge of conducting a series of more communicative activities that *without* focusing on specific phonological target forms, aimed at providing the students with a space for language practice in an attempt to have them transfer on their own, the knowledge they had presumably gained in the theoretical sessions to actual free speech situations. This is a faulty assumption based on the claim that by simply using language, learners would develop continuously (Skehan, 2002). In addition to these communicative language sessions, however, some

more controlled exercises were done in a language laboratory where the students were made to repeat and imitate tape-recordings of native English speakers using the dominant Received Pronunciation (RP) accent.

For more than five years, all four teachers in charge of DOII have been using this methodology for teaching pronunciation and, although we managed to bring about some changes, in particular in the teaching materials we employed, the results were not fully satisfying. Indeed, and as a general consensus, we all assumed that as prospective teachers of English, the students should, on the one hand, be better phonologically equipped to set themselves as future pedagogic models for teaching their own pupils and, on the other hand, as Marton (1988, p. 47) says “teachers should be prepared for any linguistic emergency” (Berry, 1990, p. 99) in that they should be able to use the target language effectively in real communicative situations.

Having these assumptions in mind, and after having explored significant and influential literature on the teaching of English pronunciation, in 2003, and before the course started, I decided to bring about a change with regard to my pedagogical contribution to DOII and to monitor its implementation in order to determine its impact on the students’ achievements.

This year, I proposed a battery of progressive tasks aimed at raising the students’ awareness of specific phonological target forms. Consistent with a consciousness-raising approach to teaching pronunciation based on a top down paradigm departing from voice setting as an overall embracing view of phonology. However, it should be borne in mind that in the previous academic year, the students had already been presented to the sound systems of English. The task sequence below will partly illustrate the progression used in a typical class in my pronunciation course:

- 1- Students are presented with some kind of comprehensible input (especially, in the form of videos or tape-recordings) featuring the phonological target form they will then have to produce.
- 2- Students are generally put to work on collaborative tasks in pairs or small groups. At this point, guided by the input session, students are

expected to complete the task by using their interlanguage resources.

- 3- As the task is performed, students may notice gaps in their outputs (while completing the task, students might turn to Spanish as their only available source at that time and this might help them establish phonological differences and/or similarities between L1 and L2 later)
- 4- Once students complete their tasks, a discussion session is held in groups or in pairs where students analyse and usually compare their own performance with the material used in the input session. Then, students report their findings to the class and, at this time, the target language focus may be introduced.
- 5- Students are put to work on a similar task which will require them to consciously use the same target form introduced in the previous task, but this time in a different context. This task is generally used as recourse to check the level of internalisation, if any, of the new target form.
- 6- A final discussion and reflection section follows aiming at raising awareness of what happens phonologically when learners are engaged in tasks that promote free oral speech. Also, students have a chance of looking at the methodological implications underlying each task done and how that may contribute to self-monitoring and thus self-regulating their own learning processes.
- 7- After that, students are made to read relevant literature related to the topic of discussion in order to expand and reflect on their classroom practices.

The type of task-framework generally used in this study lays emphasis on a meaning–form–meaning progression that seeks to recognize gaps. Worded differently, first, I present the students with a set of semantically as well as linguistically enhanced input data where, the students are implicitly exposed to the target forms they will afterwards have to produce. Next, in groups, the students are put to work on tasks to notice gaps in their existing interlanguage repertoires, thus a linguistic need is created. The challenge is then to direct

the learners' attention from meaning to form in a way that enables them to perceive and be aware of their relation. Through these types of tasks, the students are expected to recognise their gaps in their present interlanguage while in the process of making meaning which is, then, filled out in following language focus sessions by making comparisons, and bringing about discussions, always focusing on phonological target forms (Samuda, 2001).

In reviewing the components pertaining to the previous methodology used for teaching pronunciation, one could claim that that approach was based, essentially, on automatization in that we started with the presentation of something new, for instance, —falling tones—so that the students, in a supportive environment, could slowly and with great effort gain control over this new form. Then gradually, through the practice and production stages, support was withdrawn until, finally, the students hopefully learnt how to use these forms effectively in a less controlled manner. On looking back at this approach, Skehan (2002) would claim that

This skill-based view of learning undoubtedly applies to many domains. But it is questionable whether it applies to language... It is not realistic to treat language learning as comparable to (say) learning scales on the piano or juggling. Language learners are not blank slates, waiting for teachers to devise instructional sequences: they need to internalize and work with rule-governed systems. Drumming material in through practice activities runs the risk that all the compliant and talented learners will do is learn to produce what the teacher wants, under classroom conditions, and that such learning may not truly take root. (p. 290)

As was said earlier, a concern such as this implies a need to bring about a change in pedagogy towards a more task-based oriented methodology. Task-based instruction, as opposed to other more conventional approaches, emphasises three main aspects. Firstly, the framework for task-based methodology is generally based on naturalistic language use since it asserts the view that learners do not follow the progression of sequences that are typically expected in classrooms. Secondly, second language acquisition advocates that language improvement involves the development of an interlanguage—

the speech of non-native speakers from different L1s as they engage in interaction—(Jenkins, 2000) which mirrors the learners' needs for mastering those patterns of the target language that have not been internalised yet. Lastly, there is an increasing need for individualisation of instruction, so that the students at different learning phases can benefit in relation to the point which they have arrived at (Skehan, 2002).

In view of these controversial assumptions, as for my study, I decided to implement a new methodology for teaching pronunciation which, though it may combine some insights from communicative language teaching, has an organised focus on specific phonological forms. This methodological framework offers the possibility of using different types of tasks which function as a central focus in a supportive and natural context for language study. The aim of these tasks is three-fold: first, as was pointed out before, to raise the students' awareness of key phonological aspects of English pronunciation and their contribution for establishing both receptive and productive intelligibility, second, to function as a vehicle for individualization since learners, when engaged in collaborative tasks, are enabled to pool resources and thus go beyond their individual competences, aptitudes, motivations, and even different stages in development (Skehan, 2002) and, lastly, to create a real purpose for language use where teachers can work with their learners to actively promote a focus on form while tasks are being done (Willis, 1996).

In the following section, I will describe the methods of data collection used and analyse the findings obtained.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The data sources gathered for this study consist of students' interviews and students' reports. These data sources will be described and analysed separately and in combination to provide checks on one another in order to strengthen the evaluation.

Interviews with Students

In this section, the information coming from semi-structured interviews held with nine of the students participating in this study will be described and analysed. The type of possible questions used in the interviews, though they were not predetermined by the interviewer, were piloted with six other students, who were similar to those participating in this course, in order to make the necessary adjustments to obtain the information I was really looking for.

On analysing the interviews, I decided to code the data by classifying the information into recurring themes to simplify their interpretation. In this way, I gathered data related to the students' perceptions regarding the contents of the course, their feelings about the use of this new approach for teaching pronunciation, the effectiveness of this approach and its impact on their learning process, the methods of assessment used, and the implementation of reflection and analysis tasks.

In terms of content, most of them replied that now they are aware of the relationship between intonation, stress and meaning though they also recognise that they find it very difficult to combine all these elements in free speech, information that was also present when I discussed the students' self-assessment reports (see below). However, they also added that the acquisition of all these linguistic components will eventually come along with time and further practice. In reference to this, two students pointed out:

Student A: ... now I'm aware of the relationship between intonation, stress and meaning. Though it's very difficult to introduce them in everyday speech. I think we need more practice and this will come along with time ...

Student B: ...we are now more aware of the relationship between intonation, stress and meaning. We've become more fluent but we need more time and practice...

Turning back to the issue of awareness and consciousness-raising, which

was one of the aims of this pronunciation course, most of the students interviewed admitted having developed a strong sense of awareness of how pronunciation works and of their self-regulation strategies, which they felt were useful to monitor their progress. During the interview, and in line with the students' feelings about this new approach to teaching pronunciation, two students said:

Student C: I took the subject last year, with the old system, and was totally lost. I didn't know how to pronounce and didn't have the resources to do it. Now I feel this approach is better because I'm more aware of how to use pronunciation. Now I can monitor myself and can try or attempt to improve it. I think it is better in that sense and in the sense that we practised a lot here in class, with the teacher helping you and we had a lot of exposure too...

Student D: ... now I feel I'm more aware of my mistakes of why I make them. This is because now I understand things, things are clearer. I didn't know rules, now I know them, so I can tell when I make a mistake.

It seems that although most of the students interviewed claimed optimistically that, in the long run and with further practice, they would acquire those phonological elements that by that time they had been unable to produce, especially in free speech, theory also played a crucial part in their learning process. They admitted that when combined with practice, theory acted as a trigger to develop awareness and this, in turn, allowed them to notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge. In accordance with this issue and with the impact this approach had on the students' learning process, one of them reported:

Student E: ... I think this approach was very useful. At the beginning I felt confused talking about the tasks we did, but now I got used. In the past, we never reflected on what we did. We acted on input. We worked separately from the teacher. We were not guided. We had a different guide here, and *this* was a process because you were there to make us be aware of what we do in the moment. We could work on theory but integrating it with what we do here. Theory alone is useless. In this class, we combined theory with

practice and this was great.

In reference to the type of activities done in this course, another student stated:

Student F: ... the activities we did here are thought-provoking. Dictations, for instance, are rather mechanic... it's like behaviouristic. I prefer this other approach because we are part of the learning process, here we got the elements that will help you learn in the future.

Close examination of this last comment, reveals that many of the students interviewed acknowledged having received some elements or tools that would help them learn and improve their phonological skills in the future, and this could also be related to the methods of assessment used in this course. On analysing this theme, two participants responded:

Student G: ...the methods of assessment used were great, the reports, the pre-test and the post-test! Mmmm... a bit scaring!! But it's a very good way of students seeing their progress. Then I can listen to myself and become aware if I have improved or was in the same situation I was at the beginning.

Student H: ... listening to the pre and post tests, making a personal evaluation, makes us aware of our performance and of which aspects we have to improve. Maybe in other classes, you don't have the possibility to evaluate yourself. This was very useful.

The benefit of using different methods of self-assessment linked with a combination of reflection and analysis tasks could have also contributed to the development of students' consciousness-raising and the subsequent increase in self-awareness of their own performance and of the aspects they had to modify to produce a highly acceptable non-native English accent. In reference to the use of reflection and analysis tasks in this course, two other students suggested:

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Student I: ... I find this reflection and analysis very useful, it helps us to be aware of why we are doing what we do. Even if we don't have great ideas at the moment of assessment, we acquire the practice of reflecting of what we do, slowly, and perhaps, that will become a habit with time again.

Student J: ... talking about the activity we performed is important because we know the objective of the activity. We put value in the activity, the activity is going to improve our next performance. Maybe in the discussion, we talk about the important aspect of the activity, so you can take profit of that. You also know the opinion of your partners and the teacher can add something relevant too.

After discussing these different views regarding the implementation of this new approach to teaching and learning pronunciation as presented by these nine students taking this course, one could claim that the results obtained are sufficiently satisfying, at least at this developmental stage in their learning process. However, I wonder how far these same students will be able to turn the speech awareness, the self-observation skills and the positive attitude about their learning process, which they say they have gained taking this course, into actual phonological improvement in the future. Indeed, much more research is needed before I can say with confidence that this new methodology for teaching pronunciation is really effective.

Students' Self-assessment Reports

The method of collecting information discussed in this section includes the students' self-assessment reports. The students' performance was recorded on tape before and after instruction. Once the course was over, the students were asked to monitor and assess their own progress by listening to and comparing their own speech productions and writing some comments with regard to their perceptions about their outcomes on a separate sheet which, later on, had to be submitted to their instructor.

To ensure that students can spontaneously and sincerely comment on and judge their own learning experiences, it is essential that the reports are not

highly structured or that limits are not set on what students write about (Lynch, 1996). Indeed, the design of these self-assessment reports aimed at letting the forty three students participating in this study write freely about their perceptions with regard to their learning outcomes and processes.

Nevertheless, the findings obtained revealed that most of the learners focused on the same common areas, a fact which allowed me to systematize the information into meaningful categories or patterns thus facilitating the analysis of findings.

These same common areas as presented by students in their self-assessment reports are displayed in the form of a matrix (Table 1) with columns and rows into which data are placed:

TABLE 1
Students' Same Common Areas

Students' same common areas as they appeared in their self-assessment reports	None	Little	Some	A lot of	No reference to this area	Total Number of students
I noticed improvement in my pronunciation	4	13	12	4	10	43
I developed a sense of awareness of how pronunciation works and of my monitoring skills			1	13	29	43
I need more practice				16	27	43
I forget or find it hard to use intonation when I speak spontaneously and this breaks my fluency and accuracy			10	18	15	43
I noticed my own mistakes in pronunciation and grammar			7	18	18	43
I feel more confident and sure about the use of intonation when speaking after taking this course	1		5	8	29	43

A scale ranging from NONE to NO REFERENCE TO THIS AREA was used to indicate the degree with which the students' perceptions and feelings about their outcomes and learning processes with regard to the impact of instruction on their learning outcomes were measured. The figures inside each one of the boxes represent the number of students, who on expressing their opinions, coincidentally agreed or not on same common areas and degrees measured. The blank boxes, however, stand for those areas and degrees which were not considered by participants.

The results in the matrix show different opinions. Out of a total of forty three students who submitted their reports, ten made no reference to the area of improvement whereas four learners said that, by the end of the course, they had noticed no advance at all in their achievements. Thirteen students, however, reported having made just a little progress in their overall productions, while twelve others claimed that they had observed only some evolution. This was all the more striking when, on looking at the reports, only four students admitted they had really made significant headway regarding the development of their pronunciation skills. Below, some excerpts taken from the students' reports regarding their achievements will help illustrate the findings obtained:

Student A: I think I was a bit more hesitant during the re-test because I was over-monitoring myself. I was trying to concentrate on how to use the tones correctly and I didn't think about what I was actually saying. As I didn't have clear ideas, it was even more difficult to use tones properly

Student B: I think I haven't improve much. Maybe I speak more fluently but I cannot incorporate the intonation patterns. I think I organized my ideas better in the re-test, but I spent a lot of time monitoring myself.

Student C: ... in conclusion, I know I've improved (at least a little) but I still have to work hard in intonation, final sounds, grammar, language and pronunciation (in everything!) but at least now I am more aware of what we have learned.

Student D: I improved a bit during the post-test. This happened because during our classes we have been working on speaking spontaneously, so I

was more trained. Speaking with a partner makes me feel *safer* (emphasis on original). It gave me time to think about my ideas while the other person was talking. However, I still find it difficult to concentrate exclusively on intonation. When I do so, I hesitate and forget what I was talking about.

Student E: I think I've improved a lot my proficiency – though, I still have some problems with intonation. I know all I have to know about the theory but I cannot put it into practice. When I focus on intonation and stress, I end up less fluent and unable to express my ideas clearly. Maybe I need to practice much more and make my speech more natural by not monitoring myself so much.

All this presupposes that what seems to worry students the most, among other things, is the big effort they have to make, at least at this initial stage, to combine consciously pronunciation, particularly the suprasegmental features, with all the other different components of language, in order to produce a meaningful piece of discourse in free speech.

As for this study, the results seem to indicate that while a considerable number of students said they had developed a sense of awareness of how pronunciation works and of their own monitoring skills, most of them revealed that this gain, however, brought about a detriment in their oral fluency and accuracy as they found it very difficult to integrate intonation and stress with meaning, all at the same time. It is perhaps worth noting that this is their perception.

This discrepancy between form and meaning, present at this developmental stage in their learning process, seemed to have a strong impact on the students' performance and, above all, on their feelings of self-confidence and self-assurance when learning a second language. This phenomenon may help explain why only thirteen students, who had also reported having made some or considerable improvements in their outcomes, explicitly expressed a positive feeling of self-confidence about their use of intonation when speaking freely after taking this course. The rest, however, either denied having gained self-confidence when using L2 or directly did not make any

comments regarding this area, and this, in turn, correlates with their apparent feeling of dissatisfaction related to their nonexistent or little improvement made in their pronunciation.

On looking at the reports, it emerges that this incongruity between form and meaning could be solved through focused practice (Skehan, 2002). Sixteen students out of the forty three claimed that, in order to improve their pronunciation, they need to work further and practice a lot. Some of these students, however, recognized that by the end of the course, they had already started using some of the intonational contours and stress patterns they had been formally presented with, but they acknowledged they still had a long way to go if they meant to use them spontaneously in free speech. Some others, on the other hand, attributed their phonological gains to the use of collaborative tasks, pointing out that when they did use the correct tones, for instance, they occurred spontaneously and unconsciously, and that was the result of intensive focused practice with other partners during class time.

After interpreting this information, one could claim that, in the eyes of the students, this new methodology for teaching pronunciation proved to be beneficial. Although some of the students participating in this study, in the short term, did not recognise a substantial improvement in their outcomes, many of them acknowledged having developed a sense of awareness of how pronunciation works and of their own monitoring strategies, tools that in the long run, will hopefully help them regulate their own learning and, thus, progressively, contribute not only to the acquisition of a sophisticated non-native phonological competence, but also to their *overall* second language acquisition.

As was said above, this study is in its embryonic stage. In order to be able to claim that this new approach to teaching pronunciation is in fact effective, it would be necessary to try it out a second and, perhaps, a third time. This would allow for comparisons of results coming from a much wider population obtained at different times, a fact which would have enabled to make more reliable claims. Despite the many assessment instruments used throughout this study, no pre-test/re-test technique was used, a procedure which would

have allowed the researcher to measure the impact of instruction on the learners' outcomes providing invaluable evidence to support the rest of the qualitative findings obtained in this study.

DISCUSSION

In analysing and comparing the findings obtained, it could be said that the implementation of this methodology used for teaching pronunciation was effective, at least at this developmental stage in the research. However, in order to claim that the development observed in the students' outcomes was truly brought about by the course and not by any other factors external to it, below I will examine some interesting issues which are worth discussing.

With regard to the possibility of replication of this study in other contexts, I wonder to what extent the conclusions reached in this evaluation can be generalized to other programme settings. That is, to what degree can I claim that this pedagogic innovation will work equally well for another group of students with similar or different characteristics, needs, in another locations, and at another times? Obviously much more research will have to be conducted in this field in order to determine the viability of implementing this new approach for teaching pronunciation in other contexts.

The students participating in this research, as was explained earlier, had already been introduced to segmental phonology in previous courses. In view of this, I wonder whether the results obtained in this study would have been the same, if these same students had not come into DOII with some knowledge about articulatory phonetics and the sounds of English, a fact which, indeed, and rather noticeably, gave the students and me something to fall back on before and while I presented them with this new methodology for teaching pronunciation.

In both the students' self-assessment reports and in the interviews, learners claimed having gained substantial speech awareness, self-observation skills and an encouraging attitude about their learning process. However, as I said

previously, I wonder whether in the long term and after intensive practice, as students explained, these factors will ever turn into true phonological advancement. A possible way to investigate this further would be to conduct a similar study with these same students right before they graduate.

The fact that I worked as assessor of the course being evaluated could have, to a certain extent, predisposed the information obtained coming from the students' self-assessment reports and the recorded interviews. That is, in their desire to pass the course, the students, because they wrote their names on their reports and held their interviews face-to-face with me, might have chosen to attune the information they gave me so that I heard what they thought I wanted to hear.

As I pointed out in the description of the context of this study, DOII was a pronunciation course shared by four instructors—myself included—who had different responsibilities for implementing the course. On looking back at this context, it could be fair to say then that some of the gains achieved in the students' outcomes could also have been the result of these other teachers' work combined with that of my own intervention. Obviously, my colleagues' contributions to this course must have been influential, at any rate and to some extent; otherwise, learners would not have been able to refer in my class to theoretical notions which they presumably had already been introduced to by these two other teachers. However, it is also true that unless some kind of pedagogic change had been effected, such as the one presented in this study, the results obtained in subsequent years would have continued being unsatisfactory.

It should also be brought to mind that while the students involved in this study were attending DOII, they were also taking in parallel other courses in English which also belonged to year two of the same teacher training programme. In these other courses, although the linguistic focal point was not specifically phonology, it could be assumed that the exposure to NSs and other NNSs (teachers as models, classmates, tape-recordings, among other sources) combined with some teacher intervention and some activities aiming at developing the students' language competence in general, could also have

contributed to enhance their phonological skills. In view of this, it is evident that some factors external to the course could also have been responsible for the students' phonological gains.

In this study, no pre-test/re-test technique was used, a procedure which would have allowed the researcher to measure the impact of instruction on the learners' outcomes. This evaluative instrument would have provided invaluable evidence to support the rest of the qualitative and quantitative findings obtained in this study.

In spite of these critical observations, after interpreting and comparing the results obtained coming from the different data sources used in this study, it is fair to say that the implementation of this new approach for teaching pronunciation was, at this preliminary phase, effective. However, I think that much more research is essential in this field in order to be able to claim assertively that the methodology for teaching pronunciation employed in this investigation is really useful for both students and teachers alike.

CONCLUSION

This study consisted of an exploratory case study which aimed at monitoring the implementation of a new methodology for teaching pronunciation in an attempt to measure its effectiveness. Different methods of gathering qualitative data were used and the information gathered was interpreted and critically analysed.

In the light of the findings obtained, some interesting conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, it appears that a certain degree of balance between the segmental and the suprasegmental features of English, especially if they are put together thus making it easier for learners to allow suprasegmental and segmental aspects to work in unison, seems to be more beneficial for learners since it prepares them and gives them tools for future learning. Secondly, considering that a certain amount of English pronunciation cannot be learnt successfully in classrooms, it seems that one should focus specifically on

what is relevant in terms of intelligibility between Ns-NNs and NNs-NNs and what is realistic, that is, teachable in the sense that learning follows teaching (Jenkins, 2000). Thirdly, those phonological areas which seem to fall into the category of teachable, then deserve explicit pedagogic intervention. Indeed, an approach for teaching phonology based on consciousness-raising tasks whereby students are made to converge, combined with optimum exposure to varied native and non-native English accents, followed by a period of reflection and analysis, seems to be preferable for phonological acquisition gains.

Although this study achieved its major goal, it was limited in a number of ways, some of which were discussed in the previous section. However, much more research is necessary to target the improvement of the implementation of different methodologies for teaching English pronunciation.

THE AUTHOR

Pedro Luchini holds an MA in ELT and Applied Linguistics from King's College, University of London. Head of Language Department at Mar del Plata Community College, Argentina. Currently works for the chairs of Oral Discourse II, Advanced Communication I and II, Teacher Training Programme, Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, Argentina. 1997/98: Fulbright Scholar as Spanish instructor at College of DuPage, Illinois, USA. 2003/04: EFL instructor at Shanghai Normal University, China. Currently Associate Editor of Asian EFL Journal.

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