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RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Engaging learners in pronunciation: Developing learner autonomy via an action research approach

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1. Introduction

This article highlights key issues arising from the first phase of an action research (AR) project on learner phonological development and learner autonomy in a UK University context. This project specifically aimed to examine the extent to which learners were able to develop goals for their own pronunciation learning. Previous research studies and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) debates have highlighted that 'intelligibility' and 'communicative context', rather than 'nativeness' are key in supporting learners to develop realistic, user-based pronunciation goals (Jenkins, 2005; Yazan, 2015; Cook, 2016; Walker, 2017). Research has also emphasised the value students place on pronunciation learning, and the need for awareness-raising of both segmental and suprasegmental features (Derwing & Monro, 2005; Baker, 2014; Levis, Sonsaat, Link, & Barriuso, 2016). In addition, the benefits of learners developing 'metacognitive' reflective strategies (Hedge, 2000; Dornyei, 2001) and of individualised pronunciation instruction are viewed as an important part of the learning process (Thomson & Derwing, 2015; Couper, 2016).

2. Research rationale and methodology

A gap between theory and practice was identified within the research literature. While individualised goal setting for pronunciation was advocated, no known studies had attempted to examine how teachers could facilitate this process within the classroom. This project therefore took an AR approach to explore this with a group of six multilingual learners in a general English class in a UK University. The project combined awareness-raising and learner training on a range of phonological features and contextual issues within the classroom, and independent work using an online computer assisted pronunciation teaching (CAPT) programme (Sky Pronunciation, 2014) in the University Language Learning Centre over a six-week period. This was part of an AR project, and focuses on aspects of the data relevant to the first phase of the research. A further cycle is planned to further explore issues raised with a different learner group.

In terms of research participants, the six learners were assessed to be roughly at B1 level Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Five were Japanese first language (L1) speakers (three female and two male) and one was a Mandarin Chinese L1 speaker (male). The Japanese speakers were studying on English language degree programmes in Japan, and were on exchange programmes at the university. The Mandarin Chinese speaker was studying English in order to enrol for future undergraduate study in the UK. In an initial needs analysis questionnaire, the majority of learners expressed 'integrative' motivations (Ellis, 1997), identifying communicating with native speakers (NS), such as host families and non-native speakers (NNS), such as other international students in the UK, as key objectives. In terms of confidentiality, there were challenges in anonymising such a small group. It was therefore decided not to ascribe nationality to the letters given to anonymise the students' names (K, L, M, N, R and Y).

Inevitably small-scale, 'inductive' and qualitative in nature, the AR process made use of 'method triangulation' (Atkins & Wallace, 2012), ongoing reflection and revision to enhance consistency and

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internal reliability. This included class discussions and initial and end-of-project questionnaires encouraging learners to reflect on their experience, awareness and attitudes to pronunciation. Ongoing written reflection by learners and teacher, following in-class sessions, individual out-of-class activities and CAPT sessions, were a further part of the AR process. At the end of the project cycle, learners produced a written action plan outlining goals for developing their pronunciation abilities. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted with learners and two teachers or 'critical friends' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011) within the department to further explore issues raised.
Research questions were as follows:

1. To what extent are learners able to identify and reflect on their own strengths, needs and goals in their pronunciation learning?
   1a. What are learner attitudes to and expectations of 'nativeness' versus 'intelligibility'? To what extent does an 'NS-like' pronunciation goal preference exist for this group of learners?
2. How can teachers support learners to set individualised pronunciation goals? In particular, how can teachers raise learner awareness of segmental and suprasegmental features, and of communicative context in order to encourage individual learners to set personally-relevant goals?
   2a. What are learner preferences regarding the balance of teacher-led, peer and individual learning in this process?

3. Research findings

For research question 1, findings indicated that with teacher scaffolding, learners were able to reflect on their pronunciation strengths and needs, and articulate goals related to 'real-life' functions and uses (Cook, 2016). One of the learners (K) stated that his goal was to speak to 'foreign friends' to discuss football strategies when playing with students of a range of nationalities at the university. One of his stated strategies was to listen footballer interviews on YouTube, note rhythm and stress and 'mimic' the footballers' pronunciation patterns. Connections between pronunciation learning and receptive skills were cited, with another student (N) outlining that her main goal was to note stress patterns to help her identify key points in 'TED talks and English TV dramas' that she enjoyed.

Learner goals also reflected the fact that intelligibility was valued in both NS and NNS contexts. For research question 1a, an initial questionnaire and class discussion did not, as predicted on the basis of previous research findings, identify a strong preference for 'native-like' pronunciation goals (as identified by Timmis, 2002; Qiong, 2004; Kang, 2015; McCrocklin & Link, 2016). In a question adapted from Timmis (2002), 'Who would you like to sound like when you speak English?', five of the six learners selected 'student B: I can pronounce English clearly now. Native speakers and non-native speakers understand me wherever I go, but I still have the accent of my country', rather than 'student A: I can pronounce English just like a native speaker now. Sometimes people think I am a native speaker'.

Reasons provided by the learners included being able to communicate with 'NS and NNS' (K), 'there is no one correct accent' (M) 'Japanese and Chinese English is also English' (L) and 'communication is the most important' (N). Y also explained the concept of ELF to other classmates during discussion, as 'a World English to communicate with other non-native speakers'. This level of awareness of ELF issues was rather unexpected. However, it emerged that four of the learners who were from the same university had taken classes in ELF as part of their degree, which was likely to have been a significant factor within this group.

Some contradictory attitudes were, however, expressed with one of the students (Y) claiming in the final interview that it is 'not important to sound like a native speaker', then stating 'but if I can speak like a native speaker when I work, maybe the boss choose me' because they 'tend to like the person who can speak English like native speaker'. K additionally expressed a lack of confidence in NNS teachers as pronunciation models, stating that it was difficult for him to distinguish certain vowel sounds because 'teachers who teach English in my country also cannot pronounce them clearly'. Such views have also been reflected in research highlighting NNS teacher anxieties around using their own pronunciation as a model (Jenkins, 2005; Couper, 2016; Levis et al., 2016). Within this group, this also suggested that NS 'status' aspirations were still at least partially in evidence.

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While lacking at the outset, learners demonstrated a greater level of suprasegmental perceptual awareness by the end of the project (research question 2). Research by Levis et al. (2016) emphasises the importance of suprasegmentals in increasing comprehensibility in spontaneous interactions. Five of the learners identified suprasegmental features ('linking' (intrusion and catenation), sentence stress and weak forms) as goals to improve their listening comprehension while in the UK. This also highlights the learners' increased understanding of the connection between pronunciation learning and listening comprehension skills in NS contexts that Baker (2014) has highlighted as important.

Despite this, some learners still referred to their spoken pronunciation in highly negative terms in the final interviews (for example; 'I'm bad at pronunciation' (Y) or finding it 'annoying' when not being understood and viewing repeating herself as a failure (M)). It seemed therefore that perceptions of their own productive 'deficits' and a focus on speaker rather than listener responsibility appeared to persist for the learners throughout the course of the project.

In terms of research question 2a, teacher and learner reflections further highlighted that building from receptive to productive practice was key to pronunciation development, as was a balance of teacher 'scaffolding', individual and peer learning, and 'freer' or more 'authentic' pronunciation tasks both within and outside the classroom. These 'authentic' pronunciation tasks that were later included in this project cycle, are outlined in further detail in the subsequent 'Reflections' section.

4. Reflections on the AR process and next project cycle

The benefits of AR have been widely noted in terms of providing in-depth data on learning experiences and teaching practice within the classroom (Atkins & Wallace, 2012), in improving connections with students and colleagues, and enhancing research engagement (Edwards & Burns, 2016). As a teacher, I found writing structured reflections based on the Gibbs (1988) reflective cycle and making subsequent revisions to be a valuable part of the AR process. During the project, these reflections helped to highlight a concern I felt about the fact that many pronunciation materials are highly manipulated and imitative, thus potentially limiting 'real-world' applicability (as noted by Baker, 2014). This led me to add two further elements to the project. The first was an 'authentic listening project', in which learners were encouraged to listen to out-of-class interactions, for example with host families, at the university, within TED talks, YouTube clips or TV programmes. They were asked to note down particular phrases, marking 'stress, weak forms, linking or intonation' and then reflect on their learning or raise questions about what they heard in an online journal entry.

The second project addition was an in-class discussion on NS and NNS pronunciation goals and the importance of communicative context in determining the relevance of particular phonological features. Learners were asked to listen to a selection of NS and NNS recordings from the Speech Accent Archive website (no date) with a variety of accent backgrounds and asked the deliberately provocative question 'Which accent has the most 'correct' pronunciation of English?'. This led to an explicit focus on the idea that there are multiple accents of English, both for NS and NNS and that each of these has its own (valid) pronunciation features, the most important being 'intelligibility'. It also aimed to encourage learners to consider which phonological features may be useful for them in NS, NNS or local contexts. The importance of such contexts in determining 'intelligibility norms' has been highlighted by Deterding and Mohamad (2017). I considered this focus on context to be an important part in raising awareness and reducing stigma around the 'deficit' perceptions of NNS pronunciation identified within this group, and in supporting learners to make informed choices about their pronunciation goals.

In acknowledging limitations, this was a small-scale AR project cycle, which cannot be considered typical or representative of wider learner populations. Findings are specific to this group of learners who had an awareness of ELF issues and motivations to engage with both NS and NNS communities during their UK university sojourn. A second project cycle is therefore planned at this university to replicate and explore the project aims with a different group of learners. While it is at the time of writing on hold due to the Covid-19 situation, the rationale for this is the concept of AR as a continuous, reflexive process that should be based on more than one project cycle (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). For

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the most part, the aims and methods of the first phase would be replicated in order to examine awareness, attitudes and goals in pronunciation learning with a different learner group. Having also reflected on areas to develop from the first phase, a further component of the AR project is planned to include a specific focus on 'negotiation of meaning' (Walker, 2017). This would involve developing learner confidence with strategies to check communicative success and repair communication breakdowns. Broadening responsibility to include both speaker and hearer (as discussed by Yazan, 2015) aims to reduce anxiety around perceived productive deficits identified within this project. In terms of external contexts, it would be interesting for additional AR studies to investigate different learner populations (perhaps in NNS contexts) to compare findings and further understanding in this area.

Overall, two personal reflections from conducting this first phase of the AR project are outlined. The first is that I found combining the teacher and researcher role in the classroom to be highly beneficial in allowing the teacher to reflect on learner beliefs and experiences, and their own teaching practice. Secondly, in relation to the aims of this project, I believe that raising awareness of communicative context (NS, NNS and local) and supporting learners to set pronunciation goals based on 'real-world' uses is a valuable part of the teaching role. Ultimately, this aims to encourage learners to make increasingly autonomous decisions about their own pronunciation learning.

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