The Effect of Direct Instruction on Pronunciation: Only Evident When Conditions for Monitor Use Are Met?[1]

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Direct or explicit instruction is hypothesized to result in conscious learning, not subconscious acquisition. If this hypothesis is correct, language acquisition theory predicts that the effect of explicit instruction will appear only when three conditions for the use of conscious learning (Monitor use) are met: When the second language performer (1) consciously knows the rule, (2) has time to think about the rule, and (3) is thinking about correctness, or is focused on form. So far, research results are consistent with these predictions for grammar instruction (Krashen, 1982, 2003).

A helpful recent review allows us to begin to investigate whether these predictions hold for pronunciation instruction. Saito (2012) reviewed 15 studies of the effect of instruction on accent, and reported that in only five of the 15 were subjects tested in spontaneous speech situations, that is, on a test in which they were supposedly unable to use consciously learned knowledge, where at least one or more of the three conditions for Monitor use seemed not to be met.

Of these five studies, Saito reports that instruction had a positive effect in just two. In one (Derwing, Munro and Wiebe, 1998), instruction in "global" aspects of pronunciation ("speaking rate, intonation, rhythm, projection, word stress and sentence stress," p. 399) improved "fluency" and "comprehensibility" but did not improve not accent. Direct "segmental" instruction, focused on individual sounds, had no significant effects on any of the measures requiring spontaneous

271

speech. Also, the investigators did not provide the actual scores, but only stated that the difference was statistically significant; it was not possible to calculate effect sizes (see Derwing et. al., p. 405).

In the second study, Saito and Lyster (2012) trained Japanese speakers of English as a second language on one sound, the English "r" sound, combining direct instruction and corrective feedback when students mispronounced the target sound. The treatment lasted four hours (four one-hour sessions, twice a week for two weeks), and focused on teaching both English argumentative skills and pronunciation accuracy. (Students were encouraged "to notice and practice the target feature in the context of meaning-oriented instruction," p. 607).

On the "spontaneous" test subjects described pictures with only five seconds to prepare; four pictures were designed to elicit words with the target sound (in initial position only) and four were distractors. Subjects who had the training produced more accurate versions of the target sound, compared to controls who had no training (d = 1.14, a large effect). Another group that had direct instruction on the "r" sound without correction was not significantly different from the controls. Also, only the instruction plus correction group significantly improved their pronunciation of "r" from pretest levels (d = .81).

At best, this study suggests that pronunciation training has a genuine effect (that is, instruction impacts acquired and not just learned competence) when it focuses on only one aspect, and provides not just instruction but also correction. But there are good reasons to suppose that all three necessary conditions for the use of the Monitor were met on the "spontaneous" test.

1 All subjects had experienced a four-hour training session that included instruction and correction on the target sound. They were thus quite aware of how to produce it.

2. Focus on form: Several factors suggest that subjects might have been thinking about correct pronunciation of "r" during the picture description test. The pre-test, the instruction and other post-tests clearly sent the message that the purpose of the picture description task was to test their pronunciation of "r". Also, along with each picture, subjects were provided with written "word cues" to encourage them to use certain words containing "r": "For example, a picture of a table left on a driveway in the rain was accompanied by three word cues (*i.e. table, driveway, rain) and was used to elicit the target word rain ...*" (p. 611). Finally, asked what they had learned from the 4-hour session, 63 out of 65 subjects responded that while

272

their primary concern was learning argumentation skills, their secondary concern was "the importance of an English "r" and "l" contrast. As the investigators stated, this contrast is considered a "top priority" among Japanese speakers acquiring English, and subjects were probably aware of this.

3. Time: Subjects had only five seconds to prepare their comments, but the time pressure associated with normal conversation was not present. Subjects were apparently free to take their time while speaking and access their conscious knowledge of how "r" is pronounced.

The Saito and Lyster study is the only one that provides possible evidence that instruction can influence the acquisition, and not just the learning, of accent. Thus, the entire case supporting the hypothesis that instruction and correction can lead to the acquisition of improved pronunciation is based on a single study involving training on one sound, and there are plausible reasons to hypothesize that acquisition did not take place. Follow-up testing, with an even longer period of time between the instruction and the post-test, under conditions where Monitoring is highly improbable can resolve this issue (e.g. a real conversation with people not associated with the pronunciation instruction, with no suggested target words presented).

References

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273

Appendix

Commercial Accent Improvement Software:
Any Evidence it Works?

I examined six websites advertising accent improvement software. All six websites claim that their software will help those acquiring English as a second language develop a better accent in American or Canadian English.

Five of the six companies simply claimed that their system worked, and that their customers were happy with their product. No research was mentioned supporting their software or any other accent improvement software. The companies are:

1. English without accent: http://englishwithoutaccent.com/,

2. Pronunciation workshop: pronunicationworkshop.com,

3. Executive Language Training:

   http://www.eltlearn.com/pronunciationsoftware.html

4. English Talk Shop: http://www.englishtalkshop.com/accent-reduction-software/accent-improvement-for-academics

5. L2 Accent Reduction. http://www.L2accent.com

Accent Master (http://www.accentmaster.com) is the only software company that claims that its approach is based on research. They cite, however, only one study, an unpublished MA thesis done in Putra University, Malaysia (Farzanfar, A. 2008). I attempted to download the thesis from several sources but only the first seven pages were available. The abstract claims that subjects' accents improved, but we do not know what the testing conditions were: As noted above, my prediction is that direct teaching of accent will only show an effect on tests in which subjects have time to monitor, are focused on correction, and are tested on what they have been trained on (the conditions for Monitor use; Krashen, 2003).

Apparently, the case for accent improvement using commercial software is based on one fugitive, unpublished MA thesis. This is a sad state of affairs.

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275