International Journal of Educational Investigations 2018 (June), Vol.5, No.3: 57-64
Available online @ www.ijeionline.com ISSN: 2410-3446

Effect of Teaching Phonological Awareness on Iranian Elementary EFL Students' Pronunciation Performance

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Abstract **–** This study is an investigation of the effect of phonological awareness on EFL learners' pronunciation performance. The participants in this study consisted of 34 learners at elementary level studying English in Iran institute in Arak as EFL learners. An experimental design was used for the study. To ensure the criterion of homogeneity, a pretest was administrated. Thirty-four students were selected from 136 learners in an institute based on the result of the Oxford Placement Test which was conducted at the first session of the study. There are two pretests in the study and one of them is researcher -made. The experimental group was taught phonological features and pronunciation while the control group did not receive a direct treatment. The treatment lasted for two months. A test analysis of the pretest and posttest results confirmed the superiority of the experimental group to the control group in learning pronunciation.

Keywords**:** Phonological awareness, Pronunciation, EFL learner

1. INTRODUCTION

English pronunciation is one area of language acquisition which until the beginning of the1990s had received limited attention by FLA researchers. There is a need for continued research in the area of phonology and phonetics if we are to fully understand how native-like accents are achieved in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and how teachers, on the practical level, can help students develop proficient SL pronunciation. Phonological awareness is essentially how the language acquirer learns to identify and understand the system and patterns of speech sounds. Because of the abstract and complex nature of phonology, the Non-Native Speaker (NNS) needs to learn to deal with the mental aspects of the L2 language system. In contrast to phonological awareness is phonetical awareness, which is learning to understand the physical sounds or articulatory structures of the L2 (Yule, 2006, pp. 30, 43-44). Language is a means of communication which is used by humans to communicate and interact with each other. By language, people express their ideas and emotions. Phonological awareness (PA) refers to the ability to perceive and manipulate the sounds of spoken words (Mattingly, 1972). Phonological awareness is one of the most important education concepts of this decade. In fact, phonological awareness is most commonly defined as one's sensitivity to, or explicit awareness of, the phonological structure of words in one's language. In short, it involves the ability to notice, think about, or manipulate the individual sounds in words. Pronunciation is a crucial ingredient

of the learning of oral skills in a second language. Phonological awareness is important because it strongly supports learning how the words in our language are represented. It is the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds in spoken words and the understanding of various ways in which oral language can be divided into components and manipulated is essentially how the language acquirer learns to identify and understand the system and patterns of speech sounds. Because of the abstract and complex nature of phonology the Non-Native Speaker (NNS) needs to learn to deal with the mental aspects of the L2 language system.

1.1. Research Question

This study attempted to highlight the role of phonological awareness features on elementary students' pronunciation, and aimed at answering the following question: Does teaching phonological awareness make any difference in EFL learners' pronunciation?

1.2. Research Hypothesis

Based on the above question, the following null hypothesis was developed: Teaching phonological awareness does not have any effect on elementary students' pronunciation.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Participants

All participants who participated in this study were 136 students. A total number of Iranian EFL students who were studying English at Iran institute in eight different classes in Arak 34 and they were selected for this study. Some of the students were at high school level. All participants were female, and differed in terms of age. They range from 12 to 15 years old. None of them had ever lived in a foreign country or traveled to an English speaking country. The classes were conducted in the afternoon twice a week and 60 minutes a session.

2.2. Instruments

The instruments were utilized to achieve the purpose of the study: Oxford placement test, a researcher-made test. The Oxford Placement Test measures a test taker's ability to communicate in English. It provides information about a person's language level. This test is comprised of 60 items. The reliability of the test is about 0.65. A test of pronunciation as pre-test for the study was designed by the researchers. This test assesses students' ability to pronounce the words correctly but in the written form. It includes 20 items. The time allowed was 30 minutes. In order to ensure the reliability of the test, the researchers used coefficient Alpha reliability analysis to compute the reliability and to determine if they could be employed in the language center classes in Iranian EFL context. According to Coefficient Alpha formulae, the reliability was nearly 0.65 which indicated that the test was reliable enough. The test of pronunciation was used a both pretest and posttest for the study.

2.4. Procedure

The present study was a quantitative research and of a quasi-experimental design, after selecting the whole population (N=136), Oxford Placement Test was administered by the researchers and based on the results of the test, two groups (Number of each was 17) whose scores were one standard deviation above or below the population mean were selected as the sample for the study. The groups were randomly assigned as the experimental group and the control group of the study. To assess their initial knowledge in pronunciation a pre-test of pronunciation was administered. It was a test of pronunciation consisting of 20 multiple-choice designed by the researcher. Then the treatment started. The researchers gave consciousness-raising tasks to the experimental group and practice to the control group. The treatment lasted for two months. Afterward, all participants were given post-test of pronunciation. Finally, the results of both pretest and posttest were compared for data analysis.

The material of teaching during sessions was several lessons of the secondary school English book.

An example of consciousness-raising task

The term, consciousness-raising tasks was coined by Ellis (1991). The main purpose of the consciousness- raising task was to teach grammar explicitly. Since it has some principles which are applicable in teaching pronunciation, the researchers utilized those facets in order to teach pronunciation explicitly. Here are some aspects of consciousness- raising task delivered by Ellis 1991. Ellis (1991) argued that consciousness- raising tasks can be inductive or deductive. In the case of the former, the learner is supplied with data and asked to construct an explicit rule to describe the feature which the data illustrate. In the case of the latter, the learner is provided with a rule which then used to carry out some task. Since the participants in the present article were at elementary level, and sometimes they were allowed to use their native language, the researchers utilized inductive task.

Table 1 provides a simple example of an inductive task designed by the researcher who inspired by Ellis (1991) to raise learners' awareness about the pronunciation differences among some words with “ed” endings. This problem has been designed with number of points in mind. First, the intention is to focus on a known source of difficulty; learners frequently fail to differentiate among pronunciation of final “ed” suffix. Second, the data provided must be adequate to enable the learners to discover the rule that governs the usage of these suffixes. To achieve this purpose, the data, include sentences with both true and false pronunciation. Third, the task requires minimal production on the part of learners; instead the focus is on developing an 'idea' of when different forms are utilized. Finally, there is an opportunity to apply the rule in the construction of personalized statements. This is not intended to 'practice' the rule but to promote its storage as an explicit knowledge.

Table 1: An example of conscious raising task

1. Here is some information about three friends who decided on specific "in" place (club)	
Tony	**prefers Soul Club**
Rick	**stayed at home**
Mike	**prefers Casablanca Club**
2. Study these sentences about these people. When is 'Id', 't', or 'd' pronounced with underlined words.	
3. I wanted to go to Soul Club because it is always packed.	
4. Rick needed to study to study, so he stayed home.	
5. Mike liked Soul Club because it is located in a nice place.	
6. Tony liked Casablanca Club because he loved the music.	
7. Which of the following verbs are ended with 'Id' sound? Why?	
8. I wanted to go to Soul Club because it is always packed.	
9. Rick needed to study to study, so he stayed home.	
10. I liked Soul Club because it is not crowded.	
11. She waited in line for an hour because of the crowd.	
12. Which of the following verbs are ended with 't' sound? Why?	
13. I liked the Soul Club because of the fashionable people.	
14. I walked to the Club because we it was near our house.	
15. Rick stayed home and studied.	
16. Try and make up a rule to explain when 'Id', 't', and 'd' is pronounced.	
17. Make up two sentences about how you spend your free time by using verbs ended by 'Id', 't', and 'd' sounds.	

The researchers gave traditional way for teaching pronunciation to the control group. First, they isolated a specific feature for focused attention; they asked to produce sentences containing the targeted feature. Then the learners were provided with opportunities for repetition of targeted feature. The learners were expected to perform the feature correctly. The learners received feedback on whether their performance of the structure was correct or not.

2.5. Validity and Reliability of the Measures

The most important quality of test interpretation or use is validity, or the extent to which our inferences or decisions on the basis of test scores are meaningful, appropriate and useful (American Psychological Association). In order for a test score to be a meaningful indicator of a particular individual's ability, it must measure that ability and very little else (Bachman, 1990, p. 25). In other words, validity deals with answering this question, 'How much the score obtained from a test is affected by language abilities we want to measure'? And with maximizing the effects of these factors on test scores

Reliability on the other hand, concerned with answering the question, 'How much the score obtained from a test is affected by measurement errors, or the factors other than language ability we want to measure'? And with minimizing the effects of these factors on test scores.

In the present study, the researchers controlled the influence of all variables except the one under investigation (independent variable). Without control it is impossible to evaluate unambiguously the effects of an independent variable on dependent variable. In brief, the researchers wanted to attribute the outcome to the experimental treatment, he controlled all the extraneous variables to maintain the internal validity of the test scores, i.e., to make a reasonable inference about the result.

One way to control the variables was that the pre-test was not the same as the post-test, but they were parallel. Taking a test once may affect the subjects' performance when the test is taken again (Bachman, 1990, p. 182). In designs using a pretest, students may do better on posttest because they have learned subject matter from pretest, have become familiar with the format of the test and testing environment, have developed a strategy for doing well on the test, or are less anxious about the test the second time around.

Selection is a threat when there are important differences between the experimental and control groups even before the application of the experimental treatment. In order to obviate this problem, the researchers selected the groups randomly. After selecting the whole population, the Oxford Placement Test was administered. The SPSS software version 22 was used to get descriptive and inferential statistics.

3. RESULTS

Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics encompassed the means, standard deviations, and frequency counts obtained from the scores of students in the experimental groups and control group both on Oxford Placement test, pre- test, and post-test. They were used to reveal a general picture of the two groups under investigation. Inferential statistics comprised the application of an Independent Sample T- test to test the null hypothesis at the. 05 level of significance.

The present study attempted to highlight the role of phonological awareness on elementary students' pronunciation, and aimed at answering the following question: Does teaching phonological awareness make any difference in EFL learners' pronunciation? In order to see any possible effect of task types on students' listening skill the researchers chose a large group of 136 students studying English at Iran Institute in Arak. 34 students were discarded from the study because their score on Oxford Placement Test were one standard deviation above or below the population mean. The selected groups then were divided into two subgroups of experimental and the control group based on the mean and standard deviation of their proficiency scores. To reveal the purpose of this study, the researchers tried to find the confirmation or rejection of null hypothesis presented here:

Research Hypothesis

Teaching phonological awareness does not have any effect on elementary students' pronunciation.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for all participants (Oxford placement test)

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Placement	136	36.00	19.00	55.00	35.7353	8.95440
Valid N	136					

All the data including mean, maximum score, minimum score, range, and so on were shown in Table 2. As can be seen the number of participants was 136.

A. Independent Sample T-test

First of all, it is worth noting that *Independent Sample T-test* is used to determine whether there is any significant difference between the means of two independent groups. Since there were two groups in the present study, the researchers used *Independent Sample T-test* to compare the means of groups.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for two groups in pre-test

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control	17	5.00	8.00	13.00	11.0625	1.34009
Experimental	17	6.00	8.00	14.00	11.1875	1.75950
Valid N	17					

Table 3 provides useful descriptive statistics for the groups. The data include the mean, the standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores. The table shows that there was statistically no significant difference between the means of the groups.

Table 4: Output of the Independent Sample t-test analysis for two groups in pre-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
control	Equal variances assumed	1.31	.26	-.226	32	.823	-.12500	.55293	-1.25	1.004
experimental	Equal variances not assumed			-.22	32	.823	-.12500	.55293	-1.25	1.007

Table 4 indicates the output of the *Independent Sample T-test* analysis and whether there is any significant difference between the means of two independent groups. As can be seen in this

table the significance level for the groups is 0.82 which above 0.05. Therefore, there was statistically no significant difference between the groups at the beginning of the study.

Table 5: Descriptive data for two groups in post-test

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Control	17	5.00	11.00	16.00	12.9333	1.94447	3.781
Experimental	17	4.00	13.00	17.00	14.6000	1.40408	1.971
Valid N (list wise)	17						

Table 5 provides useful descriptive statistics for the groups. The data include the mean, the standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores. The table shows that there is statistically significant difference between the means of the groups. The mean for the control group is 12.93 while the mean for the experimental group is 14.60.

Table 6: Output of the Independent Sample t-test analysis for two groups in posttest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Task	Equal variances assumed	7.056	.013	2.69	32	.012	1.66667	.61927	.39815	2.9351
	Equal variances not assumed			2.69	32	.012	1.66667	.61927	.39248	2.9408

As the data tabulated in table 6 it can be seen that, there was statistically significant difference between groups as determined by *Independent Sample T-test*. The table reveals that the mean difference between the groups is significant. In other word, there was statistically significant difference between phonological awareness and practice (p= 0.012). From the data it was concluded that, pronunciation awareness instruction was effective.

4. CONCLUSION

In brief, according to the obtained results, the Consciousness-raising in EFL students tended to improve participants' pronunciation. It catered for explicit knowledge of pronunciation. It increased learners' declarative knowledge. Consciousness-raising does not contribute directly to the acquisition of implicit knowledge, it does so indirectly. In other words, consciousness-raising facilitates the acquisition of the pronunciation knowledge needed for communications. Another shortcoming is that when students were given reading comprehension practice the sometimes made pauses on the words started with target feature, that is, their fluency was

reduced to some extent. One study was carried out to investigate the effect of conscious raising techniques on the learning of the present and past simple tenses by EFL learners. The purpose of the study was to find out whether these techniques can be used with the study's participants together with the advantages they have as a means of learning. Generally, techniques are thought to have the ability of drawing EFL learners 'attention to how the target language works. Phonological awareness can be defined as the ability to manipulate, combine, and blend sound units (Anthony & Francis, 2005). It is important to improve EFL learners, phonological awareness. Phonological awareness proficiency is essential for English learners to develop their English word decoding and reading comprehension abilities (Oakhill, Cain, & Bryant, 2003). So it is important for decoding abilities and word reading. In contrast, the main purpose of practice is to develop implicit knowledge of pronunciation that is to develop the kind of automatic control of pronunciation features that will enable learners to use them productively and spontaneously the kind of tacit knowledge to needed to use the structures effortlessly for communication. The conclusion that may be made from the above statistics analysis is that both activities; consciousness-raising was more effective than the practice**.**

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