

In the Name of God

Dedicated to

My Beloved Wife

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Abstract

Despite sufficient attention given to features of syntax and vocabulary under the realm of focus on form, the phonology of foreign language has not received due attention in FL teaching and research. This study aims to fill a portion of the above-mentioned gap in the literature of EFL pedagogy research. Phonemic discrimination is a part of the phonological competence of FL learners. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the effects of explicit and implicit phonetic instruction in improving EFL learners' ability in discriminating English phonemes. To conduct this study, 50 elementary male EFL learners were randomly selected. Then, they were randomly assigned to two equal experimental groups: implicit and explicit groups. Before giving treatment, a KET exam was given to the participants to ensure their homogeneity in general English proficiency. They were also given a pre-test for phonemic discrimination to ensure their homogeneity in phonemic discrimination ability. The results of these tests were analyzed via independent samples t-test. The results showed that the experimental groups were homogenous in both aspects. The phonemes under the instruction were /v/, /w/, /θ/, /ð/, /ŋ/, /i:/, /ɪ/, /u:/, /ʊ/, /ɑ:/, /ʌ/, /aʊ/. In the explicit instruction, participants were given direct articulatory explanations on the way each of the above phonemes is produced. In the implicit instruction, they were only asked to repeat words containing these phonemes without directing their attention to the articulatory quality of the phonemes. The participants took a post-test for phonemic discrimination after the instructions. Pre- and post-test results were analyzed via independent samples t-test, paired samples t-test, and two-way ANOVA. The findings of this study showed that although both implicit and explicit phonetic instruction significantly improved the participants' phonemic discrimination ability, the explicit phonetic instruction had statistically more positive and more significant effective role than implicit phonetic instruction in enhancing the participants' ability to discriminate English phonemes.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Not unlike all language skills, listening is comprised of a number of sub-skills. Rost (1990) breaks listening ability into enabling and enacting skills. Enabling skills are engaged in perception and interpretation of an interlocutor's intended message, and enacting skills are involved in giving an appropriate response to the interlocutor's message. Rost (1990) holds that enabling skills are also comprised of perceptive and interpretative skills. Within the perceptive skill, which is recognizing utterances, discriminating sounds in words (phonemic awareness), discriminating strong and weak variations at word boundaries, and identifying stress and pitch are included. Besides, from a psycholinguistic perspective, Carroll (2008) contends that phonetic and prosodic elements, among which phonemes are paramount, are fundamental and essential for the production and comprehension of language at higher levels of meaning.

Accordingly, phonemic awareness and the ability to distinguish one phoneme from another also leads to accurate production and pronunciation of speech sounds (Keshavarz, 2007), which is in turn a crucial pre-requisite for successful comprehension and production of a foreign language code (Aliaga-García & Mora, 2007; Kelly, 2000; Savielle-Troike, 2005). Rivers (1981) states that while listening to foreigners, native speakers find them difficult to understand not because of their insufficient knowledge of vocabulary and structure but due to their inaccurate and peculiar pronunciation of sounds. Accordingly, Yeon (2008) reminded that inaccurate pronunciation of sounds by non-native speakers causes confusion and blocks understanding.

Therefore, it is transparent that instructing the sound system of the target language to foreign language learners is an indispensable, valuable, and at the same time a demanding endeavor to help them towards wholesome and successful communication in the foreign language. As Rivers

(1981) puts it, “Helping students to acquire an articulation and intonation which are comprehensible and acceptable to native speakers poses one of the most difficult problems for teachers of language” (p. 125).

The sound system is one portion of the native language on which foreign language learners depend to produce or understand the target language (Kenworthy, 1990). Chastain (1988) states “When presented sounds unlike those of their own language, speakers tend to give those sounds first-language interpretation” (p. 194). Consequently, this interference of the native language sound system results in disturbed and impaired recognition of foreign language spoken words (O’Connor, 1998).

Therefore, phonemic awareness instruction is a first stride in pushing language learners towards a systematic appreciation of foreign language phonemic system, which is in turn essential for accurate comprehension and production of a target language (Harmer, 2001).

Phonemes are the basic meaning distinguishing units of a language. Their mastery is highly crucial if learners are to comprehend and produce foreign language code accurately without the interference of the native language phonemic structure (Torabi, 2002).

Learners can be taught the phonemes of a foreign language via several ways. One procedure is to make them imitate and repeat the sounds they hear and expect them to implicitly begin to discriminate one phoneme from the other. Still, another way is to explicitly instruct them how to produce phonemes and accordingly make them alert of the distinction between them (Harmer, 2001; Rivers, 1981).

Thus, this study focuses upon the effects of explicitly instructing learners to discriminate English phonemes compared with the effects of making them imitate and repeat phonemes and expecting them to become implicitly aware of the distinction among them.

1.2. Research Question and Research Hypotheses

In this study, the following research question is explored:

RQ: Is there any difference between explicit and implicit phonetic instruction in terms of improving ELF learners' accuracy in discriminating English phonemes?

Regarding the above-mentioned research question, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H₀: Explicit phonetic instruction does not improve EFL learners' accurate discrimination of English phonemes as compared to implicit phonetic instruction.

H₁: Explicit phonetic instruction significantly improves EFL learners' accurate discrimination of English phonemes as compared to implicit phonetic instruction.

1.3. Statement of the Problem and the Purpose of the Study

Foreign language learners often adopt nearest equivalent sounds in their native language to perceive and to produce particular foreign language sounds (O'Connor, 1988). This intervention of native language in perceiving and producing foreign language phonemes has certain repercussions for successful and meaningful communication in the foreign tongue. First, foreign

speakers will face difficulty in accurately picking up the meaning of words which contain phonemes non-existent or differently produced in native tongue, as in “wet” and “vet” (Carroll, 2008). Second, they will fail to accurately produce those phonemes and subsequently words containing such phonemes for the well-established fact that inability to discriminate phonemes will absolutely lead to inability to pronounce them (Kenworthy, 1990; Keshavarz, 2007). Third, they will also encounter predicaments in reading achievement as they mix up grapheme to phoneme matching especially in beginning levels (Abshire, 2006; Geudens & Sandra, 2003).

Despite its importance, phoneme awareness and pronunciation instruction has been the subject of neglect in language classrooms during the second half of the twentieth century (Jones, 1997). Most language teachers assume that without any formal instruction on sounds, learners can still acquire acceptable mastery in both perception and production of the target language on their own. Despite this neglect on the side of teachers, phoneme awareness and phoneme discrimination instruction not only gives learners ability to distinguish phonemes of a target language, but it also improves their pronunciation and speaking significantly (Aliaga-García & Mora, 2007; Yates, 1995).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the positive effects of instructing the phonemes of English as a foreign language to EFL learners. To accomplish this objective, it will compare the efficacy of two methods of phonemic discrimination instruction, i.e. explicit versus implicit phonetic instruction, to Iranian elementary EFL learners in enhancing their accurate discrimination of English phonemes.

1.4. Significance and Justification of the Study

Language is made up of several components such as sounds, morphs, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, & Harnish, 2001). Sufficient mastery of these components is essential if one is to communicate successfully and accurately via all four language skills (Saville-Troike, 2005). All these components operate synchronously and in tandem to make communication wholesome and accurate. Therefore, the onus is on language teachers and curriculum developers to incorporate all language components into the educational programs in such a way that language learners would be able to internalize and operationalize them in due time.

Sounds, or to be technical, phonemes are the smallest components of a language. Without phonemes, it wouldn't have been possible to compose larger units of language such as words and subsequently phrases and sentences (Zsiga, Lardiere, Lightfoot, Portner, & Schiffrin, 2006; Roach, 2000). Some phonemes are peculiar to one or a few languages, and some others are more common and are shared in most languages identically or with some alternations.

Foreign language learners, while learning a foreign language, are faced with phonemes which do not exist in their own native language or have a different form, distribution and value. This problem may significantly or to some extent hinder foreign language learners' accurate production and comprehension of a target language (Kelly, 2000). Therefore, foreign language teachers should come up with procedures, techniques and exercises so that learners would be able to distinguish and produce target language phonemes accurately (Abshire, 2006; Keshavarz, 2005).

Unfortunately, teachers, after the failure of Audiolinguilism, have been negligent of the importance of phonemic awareness and pronunciation instruction in language learners (Derwing

& Munro, 2008). Consequently, they have not paid due attention to include procedures and instructions to make learners cognizant and aware of foreign language phonemes which are non-existent or differently distributed in learners' native language. This negligence is due to several reasons. The first reason is that teachers, based on wrong assumptions, believe that foreign language phonemes will be naturally acquired and distinguished as learners progress and get more exposure to the foreign language (Harmer, 2001). Still, another reason is the trends dominating Applied Linguistics in the past century, which deemphasized direct instruction of formal properties of language. This issue will be expanded upon in the following paragraph.

Under the influence of communicative language teaching in 1980s, direct instruction of formal properties of language was pushed to periphery in favor of a more focus on functional and pragmatic aspects of language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Recently, however, renewed interest in Focus-on-Form has motivated foreign language teachers to incorporate procedures which attract learners' attention to formal features of language (Nassaji & Fotos, 2007). The reason for this was that mere focus on meaning and fluency, as advocated by communicative trends, developed highly fluent speakers with no native-like accuracy (Saeidi, 2006). Hammerly (as cited in Saeidi, 2006) claimed that Canadian immersion program failed to achieve its objectives due to fossilization of grammatical errors which was in turn caused by insufficient attention of teachers to the grammatical and formal accuracy of their learners. He concluded that any wholesome method must concentrate on form before pushing learners to communicate in foreign tongue.

Recently, authors and language teachers have realized the value of phonemic awareness and the value of phonetic instruction to language learners in due time (Derwing & Munro, 2008). Now, it is crystal-clear that neglect of or delay in the training of learners in the sound system of

the foreign language will deprive learners of accurate and wholesome communication in that language (Cunningham, 1990; Ur, 1984). Consequently, erroneous and inaccurate forms produced and perceived by learners will be fossilized, and they will fail to reformulate correct ones in the future (Selinker & Lakshmanan, 1994).

Therefore, the results of this study are expected to shed light upon the value of phonetic instruction to language learners in early stages of the development of English language. Teachers can rely upon the results of this study in order to incorporate phonetic instruction procedures into their classrooms reasonably and systematically, and therefore, make their students able to distinguish English phonemes, which is in itself a stepping stone for successful communication in English language. Also, theoreticians and practitioners will be made aware of the efficiency and value of explicit versus implicit phonetic instruction in language classes which will subsequently open the gates for further attention, research, and investigation in this area.

1.5. Outline and Organization of the Study

Apart from the current chapter, Introduction, this thesis is composed of four other chapters:

Chapter 2: Review of the related literature in which the prominent and relevant works and research will be introduced. In this regard the history of research into focus-on-forms, form-focused instruction, and its relevant features and tenets to this study will be presented. Also, relevant research and studies into phonetic instruction will be covered in this chapter.

Chapter 3: The methodology employed in the research accompanied by information about the participants, instruments, design, procedure, and measurements will be included in this chapter.