Improving Pronunciation in Spontaneous Speech: A Comparison of Instructional Methods

While mounting evidence from research suggests that “pronunciation instruction works” to improve specific pronunciation features (Lee, Jang & Plonsky 2014), it remains unclear how much these improvements impact global intelligibility and fluency (Thomson & Derwing, 2014). Additionally, research publications often remain superficial in explanations of how exactly pronunciation instruction was implemented, and little research has experimentally compared methods. The lack of clearly defined principles behind the reported effectiveness of methods, combined with the fact that only few such studies are classroom-based, makes it difficult for teachers to envision ways to apply these methods.

In this classroom-based study we compare the effectiveness of two teaching methods in terms of how well they foster improvement in spontaneous speech: explicit instruction and communicative approaches that go beyond explicit instruction (i.e., Trofimovitch & Gatbonton, 2006).

We administered instruction to six real classes in an ESL program. Two (“control” n=10) received no specific pronunciation instruction. Two (“explicit” n=6) received explicit feedback and form-focused instruction, comprising repetition-based exercises that are metalinguistic but not communicative. Finally, two (“communicative” n=9) received explicit feedback and form-focused+communicative instruction, comprising explicit metalinguistic exercises but also genuinely communicative activities that required repetition of target features. Instructional targets were segmentals and suprasegmentals. Students were assessed using three speaking tasks (reading, spontaneous speech, and a group information-gap activity) before and after 7 weeks of instruction. Their productions were rated for comprehensibility and scored for word stress and vowel reduction errors by 5 trained raters.

While the control group showed minimal change, the explicit and communicative groups improved comprehensibility and vowel reduction; however, the communicative group showed more consistent improvements and transferred improvements to spontaneous speech. Results for the word stress task were inconclusive.

References