Enhancing Learners' Motivation and Concern for Improving their Pronunciation at a Translator Program in Argentina

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This paper aims to evaluate the implications of using collaborative assessment in an English language course (LII) with a pronunciation component at an English/Spanish Translator Program, Universidad CAECE (the University), Argentina. The participants of this study were 17 students whose L1 was Spanish. In this research, the students recorded their speech, listened to it and then transcribed it. Later, they graded their own performance and compared their outcomes with those coming from their teacher's assessment results. Data were gathered from the learners' achievements and their self-assessment reports. The findings revealed that after completing this activity, the learners developed a major concern and motivation to improve their L2 oral communicative skills. Based on these findings, some recommendations for further research were given.

Key words: Collaborative assessment, motivation, pronunciation skill teaching

En este trabajo se analizan las implicancias del uso de la evaluación cooperativa en un curso de Lengua Inglesa que integra un componente de pronunciación y que pertenece al Traductorado en Lengua Inglesa, Universidad CAECE, Argentina. Los 17 participantes -hablantes hispanos- grabaron sus propias producciones orales, las escucharon, las transcribieron, y, finalmente, se asignaron una calificación y compararon sus propios resultados con los obtenidos por el instructor a cargo. Los instrumentos utilizados fueron las producciones de los alumnos y sus informes de auto-evaluación. El análisis de los datos muestra que esta técnica promovió una conciencia crítica en los alumnos y aumentó su motivación para continuar mejorando su discurso oral. Finalmente, algunas recomendaciones fueron brindadas para la realización de futuras investigaciones en el área.

Palabras clave: Evaluación cooperativa, motivación, enseñanza de pronunciación

Introduction

Contemporary language-teaching methodologies make the assumption that taking an active, independent attitude to learning contributes to generating and enhancing student motivation and concern for improvement, and this may be beneficial to second language acquisition (Dickinson, 1995). However, although some influential researchers in the field of motivation have thus far come up with some helpful "taxonomies of relevant classroom-specific motives" (Dörnyei, 2001, p.116), they seem to have failed to acknowledge the practicality and applicability of these theoretical constructs in the L2 classroom.

Indeed, in this paper an applicable motivational teaching technique -collaborative assessment- will be used with the intention of developing students' self-speech awareness, self-responsibility and monitoring skills for improving their L2 pronunciation and overall communication skills. The effects and implications of employing this technique at the College will be described and analyzed.

This paper will describe some concepts and notions related to motivation, learner autonomy, and self-assessment of pronunciation skills which will serve as criteria against which the effects and implications of using collaborative assessment will be examined.

Theoretical background

Although motivation to learn is a complicated construct which involves an umbrella of variables that have little to do with each other (consciousness vs. unconsciousness, cognition vs. affect, reduction vs. comprehensiveness, parallel multiplicity, context, and time) (Dörnyei, 2001), "when the target of the learning process is the mastery of an L2, the picture becomes even more complex" (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 46).

With regard to this intricacy, Dörnyei, (2001, p. 46) states that "there has been a considerable diversity of theories and approaches in the study of motivational determinants of second language acquisition and use". Indeed, he goes on to say that "these theories focus on different aspects of the complexity of human motivation and cover a varying number of components, some of which overlap with each other while others are unique to a particular model" (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 18).

Nonetheless, far more research has been carried out thus far to recognize diverse causes and to corroborate motivational theories than to develop techniques to boost

students' motivation (Dörnyei, 2001). Motivation has conventionally been seen as a cause or product of language learning accomplishment given that there seems to be a close connection between positive learning experiences and L2 attainments. It is because of this that fostering learners' motivation and concern for improving their L2 skills should be considered an essential requisite to teaching efficacy (Ushioda, 2001).

"Although the education-oriented publications" on motivation "in the 1990s were helpful in that they provided taxonomies of relevant classroom-specific motives, they did not offer a sufficient serviceable guide to practitioners because the proposed lists of motives themselves were not readily applicable" (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 116). Indeed, what most teachers would like to know is when, exactly, should they intervene and how they should go about this intervention in their classes in order to enhance their learners' motivation and concern for improving their L2 development. Worded differently, teachers are not fully interested in the theoretical constructs underlying the nature of motivation itself, but in the different tools and resources that they can bring into play in their classes to boost their students' motivation to learn and improve their overall mastery of L2 (Dörnyei, 2001).

Being cognizant of the lack of satisfactory practical suggestions and guidance on how to motivate students to improve their pronunciation in the current literature, I propose in this paper an innovative hands-on teaching and assessment technique which may be used to increase students' concern and motivation to improve their spoken English and, in particular, their pronunciation skills.

This assessment technique, which highlights learners as active creators, allows them to make real choices and to share responsibility with their teachers for their own learning process. The development of an independent mode of self-monitoring skills and the recognition of self-responsibility helps learners to become more confident and comfortable in using their English in class, and this, it might be argued, is conducive to generate and enhance students' motivation and concern to continue learning.

This technique, through which learners can be involved in their own learning process, is collaborative assessment. By means of this technique, students can be more in control of their own learning as they share power with their teachers (Dickinson, 1993), receive explicit directions and goal-oriented participatory guidelines that help them develop study awareness, and develop speech monitoring abilities and speech modification strategies for use in and beyond the classroom setting (Taylor, 1991).

On looking back at these assumptions, it seems that a concern such as this implies a need to adopt a global conception of pronunciation pedagogy. This holistic notion of L2 phonology teaching implies a broader interpretation, extending to the level of interactive discourse rather than directing attention to pronunciation instruction with only segmental content. However, this atomistic view to pronunciation teaching is, in fact, still *the* current pronunciation approach most widely used in many different contexts worldwide.

A multidimensional approach for teaching pronunciation, nonetheless, seeks to integrate the general features of communicability (overall precision and clarity, general vocal effectiveness in oral discourse, overall planning and structuring of speech, overall control of grammar and vocabulary and overall effective use of expressive non-verbal features) with specific elements of pronunciation (clarity and precision of articulation of sounds, overall rate of speech, and intonation patterns and pitch range points) (Morley, 1994).

Indeed, a global approach to pronunciation instruction as the one suggested above and used in this course, aims at directing learners' attention to lexical development, syntactic well-formedness, discourse organization, phonological accuracy, and, in so doing, allows room for the development of learners' self-monitoring and communication skills (Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1998).

The principles underpinning this section will be moderately used as criteria to evaluate the usefulness of employing collaborative assessment in this small-scale research.

The context and participants

To sign up in the Translator program offered at the University, the students are expected to master an English proficiency level equivalent or superior to that required by the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

LII is taught in year two of this program, after students have completed a succession of other courses aimed at developing general linguistic performance. The learners enrolled in LII come into this class after taking Language I, a course on English language with a strong emphasis on the development of communicability skills at a more basic level, as an academic requirement. In parallel with LII, students take a course on English Phonetics and Phonology taught with a segmental focus and based, mainly, on mechanical exercises focused chiefly on repetition and imitation.

LII, however, is an eight-month course on English language with a dual-focus instructional model that combines discrete points of speech production and general characteristics of speech performance. The purpose of this course is to enable the prospective translators to acquire a highly acceptable non-native pronunciation which will allow them to use the spoken language effectively, while retaining some features of their L1 -Spanish- accent. To meet this end, I combine both fluency and accuracy-focused activities with consciousness-raising tasks aimed at integrating the learners' modified speech pronunciation patterns into free speech production (Luchini, 2004b). I meet this class for one 3-hour session per week.

Out of the 23 students enrolled in this course at the time this study was conducted, only 17 were present the day they completed the task in which both the learners and the instructor were involved in the collaborative assessment task. I worked as facilitator, assessor and evaluator of this activity.

The implementation of the collaborative assessment task

As was said earlier, the main purpose of this course centers around the development of communicative activities which aim to help learners integrate their modified speech patterns into naturally occurring creative speech in both partially planned and unplanned talk.

Consistent with the type of activities that learners frequently do in this course, this time I decided to put into practice and appraise the effects of collaborative assessment. The aim of this task was two-fold: a) to raise the students' awareness of those key deviant phonological forms that may threaten intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000) and "high acceptability" (Cruttenden, 2001, p. 302), and b) to share responsibility with the instructor for the assessment of their own oral productions and for their learning process as a whole.

This activity was performed in the language lab at the College where each student, working individually, was asked to look at two pictures and compare and contrast them. Visual stimuli are an economic and effective way of providing a topic of conversation without giving the learners words or phrases to manipulate. Although the talking topic is somehow limited by the pictures, as was this case, there is a lot of opportunity for personal expression and interpretation, a fact which, I assumed, would enable both learners and instructor (myself) to gather a considerable amount of unprompted speech data for later analysis of specific elements of pronunciation as well as general features of communicability (Luchini, 2004a).

To complete this task, the students were required to talk for about one minute and record their answers on a Sony Console LLC-9000 system in the College language laboratory. As students completed and recorded their outcomes onto tape, I listened to them without disrupting their speech production. Simultaneously, on the students' feedback sheets, I transcribed those phonological and communicative oral discourse features that I considered the students needed to change. The written evidence of this crucial information served two purposes: first, as corrective feedback for the students, and, second, as concrete evidence on which I, on the one hand, based the allocation of the marks I assigned each one of the students, and, on the other, spotted nonstandard common core items (both at phonological and discoursal levels) which I would exploit afterward as the foundation of remedial-work sessions in subsequent classes.

After the learners recorded their tasks onto tape, they were required to transcribe their productions and highlight those faulty areas that they themselves considered needed to be improved.

Then, the learners were asked to look at the following marking scheme for assessing oral production (Table 1), which had been previously presented to and negotiated with them at the beginning of the course, and to complete it with the information coming from the assessment of their own productions.

Discrete elements of Pronunciation	Segmentals	30%	60%
	Suprasegmentals	30%	
Communicative Oral Discourse features	Planning & Organization of speech	10%	40%
	Clarity & Intelligibility	10%	
	Command of Grammar	10%	
	Vocabulary Expansion	10%	
Total Average			**100%**

Table 1. Marking scheme assessing oral production.

Finally, the students were asked to allocate themselves a final grade. After listening to the learners' productions, I also completed one marking scheme for each

one of the students assessed and gave them a final mark. Once the students had finished doing their transcriptions, highlighted those areas they considered in need of improvement, completed their marking schemes, and come up with their own final marks, I gave them their feedback sheets with my comments and my final grades on them. The learners, then, upon receiving all the assessment information, took a while to analyze, compare and contrast their self-assessment results with mine. Then, they submitted all the assessment papers to me and left the lab so that I could keep on with the next student until I finished with everyone.

As regards the allocation of marks, we had agreed that if our marks were completely different, which was not the case, we could get together after class to discuss them. Table 2 below shows the results coming from this collaborative assessment task. The first column includes the marking system used which ranged from Excellent, Very Good, Good, Poor to Failing. The second and third columns present the students and teacher's assessment results shown in number of students (No. of Ss.) and in percentages (In %), accordingly.

Final Marks	Students' assessment		Teacher's assessment	
	No. of Ss.	In %	No. of Ss.	In %
Excellent	-	-	-	-
Very Good	-	-	3	17.54%
Good	8	47.05%	11	64.70%
Poor	4	23.52%	1	5.88%
Failing	5	29.41%	2	11.76%

Table 2. Students and teacher's assessment results.

A quick look at the results emerging from this chart indicates that the majority of the students, when self-assessing their own works, allocated themselves lower marks than the ones given by their instructor. This unplanned fact, although it may be considered incidental to the study, may have contributed to enhancing the students' self-confidence, self-esteem and motivation to continue learning and improving their pronunciation skills as the students' explicitly expressed in their self-assessment reports below.

Although the learners considered this type of activity slightly face-threatening because they claimed they had felt intimidated when talking to a machine under tight time constraints, it revealed that by sharing responsibility with their teacher for their own assessment, the learners were endowed with a position of moderate power. This position of power on the part of the students emphasized changes in the relationship between learners and teacher. Indeed, it is through this process of change that students can be taught how to become positively self-involved, how to become an active forceful partner in their own learning, and how to develop personal skills and strategies for monitoring and altering their own speech patterns.

The collaborative assessment technique, as many other techniques that promote the independent mode of self-monitoring, can begin as a gentle, consciousness-raising act with the aim of aiding learners to develop speech awareness, self-observation skills, and a positive attitude toward them (Dickinson, 1993). These factors will be discussed below when analyzing the students' self-assessment reports.

Learners' self-assessment reports

After we finished with the collaborative assessment activity, I asked the students to write a succinct report stating their feelings and perceptions regarding the value of using collaborative assessment in their pronunciation class, and to refer to its impact on their learning process. Although all the students wrote self-assessment reports, which were systematically analyzed for the purpose of this paper, only six testimonies will be shown below to illustrate partly the findings obtained.

In their writings, it could be observed that most of the students acknowledged the usefulness of using collaborative assessment as a means of raising their awareness of how pronunciation works in discourse. They also recognized that awareness-raising tasks are beneficial to the acquisition of L2 phonology, and this task contributed in that sense. Regarding this issue, two high-achieving students pointed out the following:

Student A: After I listened to my speech and I transcribed it on paper and looked at my mistakes, I became more aware of the mistakes I had made. Now I am more aware of the stress patterns and intonation and the correct sounds I need to make to speak well. Of course, I have to practice much more because this is a very long process.

Student B: With this activity I have realized the kind of mistakes I always make and now I am working on them to correct most of them. It was a good experience to work alone.

Many students recognized the importance of self-assessment; that is, monitoring their own learning for the development of effective learning autonomy. In relation to this, two middle-range students said the following:

Student C: This was very useful for my pronunciation and oral skills. After doing this activity, now I know what changes I have to make to sound better. I learn that I can record myself at home and listen, transcribe my text and correct it and learn what I need to improve. I think these strategies are very helpful.

Student D: Analyzing my own speech after recording it was a very good exercise. I like because I felt I was the teacher. This will give me many chances to improve my pronunciation and intonation in the future.

One low level student, however, was resistant to working collaboratively with the assessment of her production (see Student E below). Bottom-range students, as was this case, usually feel that it is their teacher's responsibility to educate them, evaluate their work and make them become aware of those linguistic aspects that they need to improve. Conversely, another low level learner (see Student F below) acknowledged the importance of having used collaborative assessment and its major contribution to increase his self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation.

Student E (bottom-range): I didn't like when we had to listen to our recording and correct ourselves. The teacher should do this, not us! He can explain to us what we have to improve, he can correct our mistakes, so we can realize them and learn better.

Student F (bottom-range): It is very important to get feedback, especially when our mistakes are big and we don't know how to correct them. When we listened to our productions and had to give a grade, and we then compared it with your grade, I felt good. I had given myself a very low mark, but when I saw your mark, then I felt ok. This encouraged my self-esteem! Thanks so much! Now I want to continue learning pronunciation in this way. Maybe this can be good for other frustrated students!

Methodical analysis of these data reveals that using collaborative assessment may give rise to a considerable number of advantages. First, it allows for consciousness-raising at lexical, syntactical, phonological and discoursal levels, and this, as one of the students pointed out above, is a necessary step towards second language acquisition. Second, by allowing students to make genuine choices and sharing responsibility with their instructor for the assessment of their own outcomes, learners are given positions of self-control within the classroom setting, and this is

valuable as it helps them move gradually from the dependent mode of teacher-monitoring to the autonomous mode of self-monitoring (Morley, 1994).

The results emerging from this collaborative assessment task suggest that the majority of the students coincidentally received higher marks than the ones they themselves had given. Although this incident was unplanned, differences in learning achievement and in quality of learning experience, as is this case, involve significant qualitative differences in how learners perceive their motivation to continue learning L2 (Ushioda, 2001).

As motivation and successful learning go hand in hand, the use of collaborative assessment in this particular context was valuable in that sense. A scheme of collaborative assessment which personalizes the learning process, promotes learner autonomy, and increases the learners' linguistic phonological awareness of how pronunciation works in free speech production, as was this particular case, is successful on many counts.

Final discussion

In this section, some limitations to this study will be discussed. Earlier in this paper, I mentioned that fostering a comfortable, low-anxiety classroom atmosphere was an essential requisite for students' maximum achievement. To complete this task, the students had to talk to a microphone in order to have their responses recorded on tape. Undoubtedly, as there was no supportive teacher-student interaction during this phase of the task, some students might have felt intimidated as regards talking to a machine and, as a result, they could have been inhibited when expressing their ideas plainly and accurately. Nonetheless, shortly afterwards the students completed this task, I could observe that most of these learners developed both a positive motivational disposition to participate actively in class using their L2 and a great concern to improve those deviant phonological features that they had noticed, during the implementation of the collaborative assessment task, they needed to modify.

Although a larger sample size of subjects might have been required to ensure adequate external validity, the positive results obtained in this study provided very interesting and helpful information. These findings, indeed, contribute to reinforce the belief that using collaborative assessment in the English language class provides students with a number of advantages for the development of their awareness and concern for improving their pronunciation.

With the intention of strengthening the validity of the findings of this project, it would have been interesting to have gathered concrete evidence on the students' attitudes and perceptions about their self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation regarding their spoken L2 before the implementation of this work. Using a repeated measure design (pre- and post-implementation) would have enabled the researcher to compare results and, thus, corroborate the results obtained in this present study.

Interestingly, in May, 2006, a similar project was conducted with student teachers at Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata (UNMDP), Argentina, where collaborative assessment was used to analyze the students' results and perceptions regarding their development in their pronunciation skills. On that occasion, thirty-four student teachers, enrolled in Oral Discourse II -a course with a strong emphasis on L2 suprasegmental phonology taught in second year of this Teacher Training Program- took part in this study. These trainees were asked to report their perceptions and feelings about their self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation in connection with their use of spoken English in class, and, specifically, their pronunciation. Then, they were made to record on tape and later transcribe an impromptu speech, which was also assessed by their instructor (myself). Finally, after the instrumentation of these tasks, the students wrote self-assessment reports where they expressed their views regarding the gains or changes in their attitudes towards the development of their oral skills.

Although the final account of these findings has not been finished yet, at this stage it can be said that those results and the ones emerging from this current study are very much alike. Once the study at the UNMDP has been finished and reported, I will be able to compare results and, thus, be in a stronger position to make more conclusive claims regarding the effectiveness of using collaborative assessment in the L2 class.

Listening to the students' speech productions in the language laboratory as they were recording them on tape, writing down some comments based on their outcomes, and then awarding an overall final mark to be then negotiated with the students proved to be time-consuming and strenuous activities.

Notwithstanding some of these observations, a comprehensive evaluation of the results obtained in this work divulges that the integration of collaborative assessment into the English language class turned out to be a rewarding experience. Upon completion of the activities presented here, the learners were able to raise their self-awareness, develop their monitoring skills of how

pronunciation works in free speech production, and boost up their motivation to continue learning, three indispensable ground rules for second language acquisition to occur.

Conclusion

In this small-scale study, the effects and implications of using collaborative assessment in the English language class were explored. Some interesting considerations stemmed from this investigation based on the notion that pushing students to take an active, self-regulating attitude to learning is conducive to the development of learners' motivation and concern for improving their spoken English, and, above all, their pronunciation. This assumption takes root in Rogers' (1961) claim in which he, a long time ago, warned that "the only kind of learning which significantly affects behaviors is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning" (in Dörnyei, 2001, p. 131).

It can be assumed, then, that encouraging learners to self-regulate their skills (Dörnyei and Skehan, 2003) may lead to a considerable increase in their autonomy, self-confidence and, hence, their linguistic performance. Although this study described and evaluated just one technique which can be used in the English language class to enhance learners' motivation to improve their L2 phonological and communicative oral discourse performance, additional research in this field is necessary to be able to lay fair claim to the contribution of this type of techniques to the effectiveness of L2 attainment.

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