

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1 General Overview

Throughout my academic development, I have given a great importance to pronunciation. As an adult in interaction with Native English Speakers (henceforth, NESs) I have also witnessed the importance of this feature to my interlocutors. As a professor of English I used to believe that a person could acquire a good pronunciation at any age, and if they did not have a native-like pronunciation they were going to be very difficult to understand. After studying theories regarding language acquisition (such as the Critical Period Hypothesis in chapter 2) I started to disregard such beliefs. As a consequence, I began to believe that a person does not need to be perfect in his/her pronunciation in order to be understood. However, I wanted to study the possibility of teaching pronunciation to adults, and observe if this instruction could bring some benefit to the learner in terms of intelligibility and comprehensibility.

In my years of teaching English it never occurred to me the idea that pronunciation could be taught. I used to believe that learning the pronunciation of any language was inherent in the process of learning the language in general. This means that by having the sole input of the professor using the language, someone could acquire the phonological aspects of it.

It was perhaps from my experience as a language learner that I used to believe that there was no need to teach pronunciation. In my years of learning English (my second language), I do not remember being explicitly taught how to pronounce words. I remember learning English by singing, reading Clifford stories and watching cartoons in the target language.

However, what does the term 'pronunciation' include? How many times have I heard the comment from English learners 'I have a bad pronunciation' or 'I don't know how to pronounce words in English'? These concerns tell us that knowing how to produce the target language gives the learner a sense of confidence which helps the learning of it and it is for this reason that it becomes important to address it.

It seems to me, that when a person thinks of the word 'pronunciation' the aspects regarding the production of certain sounds of the target language are triggered. This is supported by Derwing (2003), who concerned with the adult immigrants' perception of their own pronunciation, conducted a study where she asked 100 ESL immigrants what they perceived their problems in pronunciation to be. Derwing (2003) found that when the participants were asked to identify their major pronunciation problems; 79% of the participants related their problems to their difficulty to produce sounds like 'th' the distinction between 'l' and 'r' and other consonant sounds. However, pronunciation does not focus only on achieving the perfect pronunciation of consonant and vowel sounds.

If seeking a perfect pronunciation should not be the goal of language learners, what should it be? According to Morley (1991), the learner needs only to be intelligible in order to communicate effectively. Intelligible pronunciation is essential for the act of communicating; learners should not be focused on being perfect pronouncers of English, but intelligible, confident users of the target language. It is for this reason that *it is the objective of this thesis project to show that after explicit pronunciation training a group of people can improve in terms of intelligibility and comprehensibility.* Furthermore, I want to show that *there is not always a positive correlation between foreign accent and*

comprehensibility, which means that a *speaker's heavy accent* does not always relate to a bad comprehensibility.

The present thesis project is based on a study carried out by Derwing, Munro, and Wiebe (1998). They worked with learners enrolled in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program in a university in Canada. After teaching pronunciation explicitly to a group of these students they found that comprehensibility and foreign accent improved significantly. I want to show in the current study that a group of Spanish speakers enrolled in a English as a Foreign Language program can also show an improvement in intelligibility and comprehensibility. Although foreign accent and its reduction through pronunciation instruction was one of the objectives in Derwing et al. (1998)'s study, this study focuses rather on the relationship between foreign and comprehensibility.

For this reason, this thesis is addressed to those language professors teaching in an EFL setting, especially to those professionals who have an interest in the role played by the pronunciation of any language and its teachability.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The learning of English has become central to education in Mexico. Twenty years ago, English was studied by people who were seen as privileged; to learn English was a synonym of giving oneself a luxury. As a student and as a teacher of EFL, I have witnessed the importance that English has acquired over the years. The popularity that EFL has gained results from the assumption that

if one does not speak English, one will not be able to get a good and well-paid job and succeed in professional life. As a result, the organism in charge of providing public education to Mexican people known as the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (SEP), has included English in the curriculum of basic education. For this reason, EFL has become a mandatory subject in schools in Mexico from junior high (7th grade) to college. Recently the SEP has announced that English will be mandatory in kindergarten, elementary and secondary school by 2012 throughout Mexico (Martínez, 2009)

However, learning EFL does not only focus on the idea of knowing that 'table' means 'mesa' in Spanish, or that the names of colors in English are to be learned in a memorized way by translating from Spanish to English, such as 'rojo-red' or 'azul-blue'. Learning EFL means to be able to communicate in the target language, to listen to any speech and being able to get the general idea, to read and to understand what the reading was about, and to write a sentence to express one's ideas: effective communication is what learning a language is about (Morley, 1991).

Before I move on to point the difference between ESL and EFL I want to draw the reader's attention to the more recent use of English; that of English as an international language (henceforth EIL). According to Jenkins (2006) EIL is defined as the 'contact language used only among non-mother tongue speakers' (p. 160). On this regard, English learners' purpose is no longer to communicate with Native English Speakers (NESs), but to other Non-Native English Speakers (NNEs), who shall not continue to be labeled as 'foreign' speakers but as 'international' speakers of English, considering that the EIL

speakers have outnumbered the amount of ESL and EFL speakers altogether (Crystal, 2007).

For the above mentioned reason, learning ESL, which is taught in English-speaking countries to non-native speakers of English; EFL, which is taught in countries where English is not spoken as a mother tongue or a second language; or as an International Language (EIL), requires from the learner the ability to be able to communicate. According to Morley (1992), the objective of teaching any language, should be to empower the learner by giving them the necessary tools that can be used in an effective communicative setting

In spite of the fact that 'being able to communicate' with other NESs is a realistic goal in an EFL context, and with other Non-native speakers (e.g. other learners of English) in the EIL paradigm, it is important to consider the aspects of the language that have to be taught and how they are going to be presented to the learner. Throughout the teaching methods of foreign languages, there have been changes in regards to the importance given to these aspects, such as the four skills that constitute the teaching of a language such as: reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Even though it is difficult to label one of these skills as the most important, teaching a language requires the presence of the four language skills above mentioned in order to be able to serve its communicative purpose. Pronunciation though, has been an ability which has been undervalued within the history of language teaching. Compared to the study of grammar and vocabulary (e.g. the Grammar Translation Method starting in the 1840s), pronunciation began to be studied systematically before the beginning of the

twentieth century (Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D., Goodwin, J., 1996). It is for this reason that the objective of the present study to emphasize the role of pronunciation instruction through the ability of speaking.

The reason why the speaking skill has been chosen as the most important ability to be developed comes from the idea I sustain that it is through the oral production of the target language that a person can label himself/herself as a successful language learner. Also, because it is through this ability that a person can attain his ultimate goal when learning a foreign language: to express ideas that can reach a larger number of people, to interact with other NESs or NNEs and to communicate.

In addition, there is still a concern regarding pronunciation on the learners' behalf related to attitudes. When asking a group of 100 ESL immigrants learners about their perceptions of listeners' attitudes towards their accents, 53% reported that they thought that NESs (e.g. Canadian) would respect them better if they pronounced English well (Derwing, 2003). In this sense, Derwing (2003)'s study backs up my concern of paying more attention to pronunciation as one of the learners' needs.

In order to fulfill the learners' needs regarding pronunciation, what should be taught? And most importantly what should be the objective of it? As mentioned earlier, students need be intelligible in order to engage in an effective communication (Morley, 1991), and even more, they need to be comprehensible. As it will be described in Chapter 2, the terms intelligibility and comprehensibility co-exist as they refer to the interlocutors' ability to decode and respond to a message.

Intelligibility and comprehensibility as the desired goal of pronunciation could be achieved through pronunciation teaching. However, I perceive a gap between pronunciation teaching and the attainability of intelligibility and comprehensibility. How can it be expected to develop the speakers' intelligibility and comprehensibility if the component to achieve it does not exist? For this reason pronunciation instruction can improve a student's chance of achieving this goal.

In my experience as an EFL instructor, I have witnessed the lack of importance given to pronunciation. Furthermore, most of the times the syllabus focuses only on vocabulary, grammatical structures and reading abilities where the main role is played by grammar.

By adapting a study carried out by Derwing, Munro and Wiebe (1998) where they show that after explicit pronunciation instruction a group of students improve in terms of intelligibility and comprehensibility, I will try to show that spending some time on the explicit instruction of pronunciation in the EFL classroom can significantly improve the attainability of intelligibility and the speakers' comprehensibility in the foreign language context. One of the reasons why I decided to undertake their study comes from the idea to support the fact that pronunciation can be taught and that it can yield results in favor of intelligibility and comprehensibility.

Particularly, the present study focuses on teaching pronunciation and its effects. Its main concern is with the improvement of intelligibility, comprehensibility and its relation to accentedness. This research will contribute to the area of foreign language teaching by informing about the possibilities of

pronunciation improvement after explicit pronunciation instruction and the relation existing between comprehensibility and foreign accent in an EFL context.

I expect that this study will support my claim that teaching pronunciation is effective in terms of the improvement of intelligibility and comprehensibility. Now that I have stated my argument and the purpose of the current study I will present the research questions and hypothesis.

1.3 Research Questions and Hypotheses

Since this research reduplicates the research methodology used in a previous study, it is based on the methodological precedents of Derwing, et al. (1998) and Munro and Derwing (1999). Therefore, it will be reviewed in more detail later in Chapter 3. However, before presenting the research questions of this study, the reader is briefly introduced to the general design of my study.

The experiment was carried out with Mexican young adults studying EFL at the same level. There were two groups, one of them will receive an explicit pronunciation instruction and the other one will not. Participants of both groups will be recorded once before and after the instructions takes place (time 1 and time 2). These are the independent variables. The dependent variables of this study, which are expected to change according to the instruction and time of recording will be the intelligibility and comprehensibility and its correlation to accentedness.

In order to find out if intelligibility and comprehensibility improved after explicit pronunciation instruction, as showed in the original study, the following two questions were addressed:

- 1. Were students from the experimental group more intelligible at time 2 than at time 1 compared to students from the control group?***
- 2. Were students from the experimental group more comprehensible at time 2 than at time 1 compared to the students from the control group?***

For both questions, it is expected to find a significant improvement within these two variables. That is, students from the experimental group will be more likely to get better scores on the intelligibility and comprehensibility tasks at time 2 than students from the control group at the same time.

Additionally and with the objective to understand if there is a correlation between foreign accent and its repercussion to the learner's intelligibility, the following question will be asked:

- 3. Did the degree of foreign accent affect the experimental and control group's intelligibility?***

Since this study is concerned with the improvement of intelligibility, comprehensibility and its relation to accentedness as a result of explicit pronunciation instruction, a within- and a cross-reference-group comparison will be carried out. The purpose of the cross-reference comparison is to find out if the experimental group and the control group are comparable at the beginning of the study, which will mean that any change perceived during the post-test would have to be product of the presence of pronunciation training (in the case of the experimental group). The within-group comparison will be used to observe if the experimental group improves after pronunciation training (time 2), and if this improvement is significant compared to the control group. Also, addressing the third question will help to identify a correlation between strong foreign accent and intelligibility.

1.4 Assumptions

It is under the assumption that language learners become aware of their pronunciation and therefore desire to be able to improve their production of the target language in any given communicative act, e.g. conversation, speech, etc that this study was carried out.

In this sense, my first assumption is that pronunciation can be taught. As has been shown by Munro and Derwing (1999) and Derwing, Munro and Wiebe (1998) speakers have improved on their intelligibility, comprehensibility and foreign accent after explicit pronunciation instruction. As teachers we cannot expect that our students learn pronunciation by osmosis; they need their

attention to be drawn to the important aspects of the pronunciation of the target language.

As a consequence, my second assumption, resulting from the study carried out by Derwing et al. (1998), is that intelligibility and comprehensibility can be improved. This requires the language professor to be acquainted with the features of the sound system of the language, such as the segmental (pronunciation of vowels and consonants) and suprasegmental (intonation, rhythm, sentence stress) aspects of English.

My third assumption is that the time devoted to pronunciation training plays a determining role in the attainability of intelligibility and comprehensibility. Learners' production cannot change without time devoted to practice. As a result, if the students from the control group improve in terms of intelligibility and comprehensibility due to their contact with the target language, or any other exposure to it, it is assumed that the experimental group will improve even more due to the explicit pronunciation instruction they will receive.

Finally, I assume that comprehensibility and foreign accent are variables that are not positively correlated. After observing Munro et al. (1999)'s results I believe that a person with a very strong foreign accent can be comprehensible enough to be able to communicate effectively.

After posing my assumptions regarding the current study, I will follow to present the possible outcomes of my research design.

1.5 Possible Outcomes

Taking into consideration the results obtained in Derwing, et al.'s (1998) study, I anticipate that the experimental group will experience a significant improvement in intelligibility and comprehensibility as a result of pronunciation instruction. In addition, I do not expect to observe differences in the results obtained by the students from the control group.

As a result of my own successful interaction with non-native speakers with a strong foreign accent, I expect to find a negative correlation between the speakers' foreign accent and intelligibility. In this regard I predict that if the speakers of the current study are rated as having a strong foreign accent, they will not be rated the same on comprehensibility, such results were found in Derwing et al. (1998)' study.

After having established the purpose of my study, as well as the research questions and arguments I will proceed to introduce the reader briefly to the organization of the present thesis project.

Before presenting the setup of my study, I will first review the related literature which provide the theoretical foundations for the present study. Hence, the following chapter will comprise the definitions of basic concepts such as: intelligibility, comprehensibility and foreign accent. I will also explain the relationship between these three concepts and research carried out in this area. The following chapter will also present the role that pronunciation has played within the emerging of teaching methods and how these have developed according to the learner's needs. Finally, two approaches focused on pronunciation will be described. These approaches target the instruction of two

major areas in the phonology of a language. Its importance in the attainability of intelligibility, comprehensibility and accentedness will be supported by research carried out in this area.