

Enhancing Phonological Awareness in EFL Reading Acquisition: A Case Study

ELEVER LE NIVEAU DE LA CONSCIENCE PHONOLOGIQUE AU COURS DE LA LECTURE D'ANGLAIS COMME LANGUE ETRANGERE : ETUDE D'UN CAS

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Abstract: In this paper, the role of phonological awareness in EFL reading acquisition is investigated through a case study: an analysis of a speech sample by a Cantonese (L1) speaker in both segmental and suprasegmental levels. The analyses of her pronunciation errors help to establish a clear understanding of the sources of some of her pronunciation problems, mainly the interference and transfer of the L1 sound system on FL, and an over reliance on visual clues for decoding words, which indicates the necessity and positive effects of promoting phonological awareness for EFL learners as a means of improving reading skills. Finally, ways of enhancing phonological awareness are discussed for the purpose of improving EFL learner's reading ability. This also gives much thought to EFL reading teaching.

Key words: phonological awareness, EFL reading skills, phonological awareness assessment and instruction

Résumé: Après avoir analysé ,dans cet article , l'exemplaire de lecture d'un Cantonais apprenant l'anglais comme langue étrangère, on a trouvé ses problèmes de lecture au niveau segmental et supersegmental . D'après les analyses de ses problèmes de prononciation et les caractéristiques du système phonétique de sa langue maternelle , on a souligné , dans cet article , que son manque de capacité de lecture résultait principalement de l'insuffisance de conscience phonologique pour l' anglais comme langue étrangère. Cela montre que la conscience phonologique a une grande influence sur la capacité de lecture de l'anglais comme langue étrangère . Ainsi les évaluations systématiques de la conscience phonologique et l'enseignement de phonétique effectué d'après ces évaluation peuvent-ils aider à renforcer cette capacité .

Mots-Clés: conscience phonologique, capacité de lecture de l'anglais comme langue étrangère, évaluations de la conscience phonologique et l'enseignement

1. INTRODUCTION

“Phonological Awareness (PA) involves the ability to notice, think about, or manipulate the individual sounds in words” (Torgeson and Mathes 1998: 2). Research of more than two decades has affirmed the importance of Phonological Awareness in relation to reading acquisition. “The presence of phonological awareness is a hallmark characteristic of good readers while its

absence is a consistent characteristic of poor readers. The gains in phonological awareness directly affect the ease of reading acquisition and subsequent reading achievement’ (Smith, Simmons & Kameenuj, 1995). It has been hypothesized and strongly supported that “a reciprocal relation exists between phonological awareness and reading acquisition: PA facilitates and influenced by reading acquisition. And this relation means that phonological awareness is important prior to and during learning to read” (Smith, Simmons & Kameenui, 1995).

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How relative is phonological awareness with respect to improving reading skills of foreign/second language learners? Lesaux and Siegel (2003) stated, "Little is known about the development of phonological skills or other important precursors of reading for children with ESL backgrounds". At the same time, the present foreign/second language learning instruction does not always include phonological training, especially in early stages when little attention is directed toward raising students' awareness and comprehension of the phonological rules of English. Therefore, the present study is to investigate the importance of phonological awareness in relation to foreign language learner's reading skills. We hypothesize that PA has significant impact on learning to read for EFL speaking learners as it does for L1 speakers and unless they raise some knowledge of PA, they may continue to struggle with reading. In addition, ways of enhancing PA are also suggested.

2. STUDY DESIGN

2.1 The subject and objective of the study

The subject of this case is a Cantonese (L1) speaker, a 29-year-old female from Fuzhou Province, P.R.China. She has studied English for 13 years and has ever been in the USA for 4 years. She was taped reading a passage. By analyzing her reading from phonological perspective, we hope to understand how EFL learners' reading problems arise and how PA relates to their reading ability.

2.2 Chinese Writing System

The Chinese language is ideographic, and words and morphemes are represented by thousands of written characters. The characters usually give clues about their pronunciation through their formation. For example, the pronunciation of the following characters are those of their parts: 吗 妈 嘛 骂 码 玛 蚂. In addition, Chinese language is a tonal language. Tones determine meanings. In the Cantonese dialect, each word or syllable can have up to seven tones.

Based on these, we hypothesize that if Cantonese learners do not develop an awareness of English phonological rules, their reading ability in English may be negatively influenced by: a) interference and transfer of the L1 sound system, and b) an over reliance on visual clues for decoding words instead of implementing more effective cognitive and metacognitive strategies to read effectively.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Orthographic transcript of the speech sample:

"Please call Stella. Ask her to bring these things with her from the store: six spoons of fresh, snow peas, five thick slabs of blue cheese, and maybe a snack for her brother Bob. We also need a small plastic snake and a

big toy frog for the kids. She can scoop these things into three red bags, and we will go meet her Wednesday at the train station"

Phonetic Transcript of the speech sample:

[plʰs kɔ:l ster → as hɔ tɔ brʰn *sɔnz wɔ
hɔ frʰm n st sɔks spu:ns ɛv frʰsnɔ pi:z
fa *k snɔbs → blu tɔi:s ɔn meɔb *snɔk fɔ
hɔ brʰr bɔp wɔ ɛlsɔ n → smɔ plast
snei:k *k tɔ frɔ: fɔ n kɔs *kɔn skun
nɔs * *tu *rɔ ret bɔs ɔn wi: wɔl gɔ mi:
hɔ wenzd ɔn treɔm steɔn]

3.1 Segmental level

3.1.1 Inteferece of native tongue

Drops of final consonants: the speaker drops the final consonant completely. "ask" is pronounced [as], "meet" is pronounced [mi:], "frog" is pronounced [frɔ:], "bags" is pronounced [bɔs]. The speaker also systematically drops the final consonant sound /r/. She says [stɔ] for "store" /stɔr/, [fɔ], for "for" /fɔr/ and [hɔ] for "her" /hɔr/. This is possibly because there are few final consonants in the Cantonese dialect, therefore, in English, individual final consonant sounds clusters can be problematic for foreign language learners.

Improper consonants voicing: Voicing is a distinctive feature of English consonants and learners need to attend to the differences between voiceless/voiced phonemes as a strategy to determine lexical meaning. This process is problematic for Cantonese speakers because the English voiced consonant stops /b/, /d/ and /g/ do not occur in the dialect. As a result, Cantonese speakers tend to replace the voiced stops with the voiceless stops /p/, /t/ and /k/. For example, the speaker uses the voiceless /k/ instead of the voiced /g/ in the words "big"/bɪg/, pronouncing it as [bɪk] and pronounces the name "Bob" /bɒb/ as [bɒp], "red" is pronounced [ret].

Indiscrete pronunciation of some phonemes: The phonemes /θ/ and /ð/ are confusing sounds for the speaker possibly because they do not exist in the Cantonese dialect. Examples of this pattern are: "the" /θ/ is pronounced [tɛ], and the phrase "these things" /θi:z θɪŋz/ which appears twice in the passage the speaker initially says [tɛ θɪŋz], and repeats the same phrase as [nɔs θi:z] in a subsequent utterance.

The errors mentioned in the discussion above are mainly due to the interference of the speaker's first language sound system, especially when some sounds do not occur in the Chinese sound inventory. This indicates that the English phonological rules are still not acquired.

3.1.2 Reliance on visual clues for decoding words

The speaker confuses contrasting voiceless and voiced

phonemes /s/ and /z/ in the final position. For the words “please” /pli:z/, “cheese” /tʃi:z/ and “kids” /kɪdz/, the speaker uses [s] in the final position, pronouncing them [plɪ^hs], [tʃi:^hs], and [kɪ^hs]. This pattern is also evident when the speaker says the word “these” /θi:z/, as [n^hs]. However, there is an inconsistency to the pattern because the speaker correctly says “peas” /pi:z/ with the final voiced phoneme /z/ in and not [pi:s]. This could be attributed to a visual orthographic prompt (e.g., the spelling of the word end). In the previous examples, the words “please” and “cheese” and “these” end in “es” and the phoneme /z/ is pronounced [s]. In contrast, “peas” ends in “s”. The speaker may be attending to the visual form of the word “peas”.

In some Cantonese dialects, the phonemes /●/ and /■/ are used interchangeably and are allophones. The speaker generally does not have problems distinguishing between the two sounds, except in the word “slabs” /slɤbz/ which she pronounces as [●■ɤ●]. Prior to uttering this word, the speaker hesitates briefly which may indicate that she does not understand the meaning and is uncertain how to pronounce it correctly. While dealing with her confusion regarding pronunciation, she incorrectly says /n/ instead of /l/. This inconsistency may indicate a reliance on visual cues and semantic information instead of knowledge that English /l/ and /n/ are separate phonemes. She still lacks phonological awareness necessary to discriminate between the English /l/ and /n/ sounds and is unable to accurately decode the unfamiliar word ‘slabs’.

3.1.3 Context cues

Finally, the speaker correctly pronounces the word “spoons”/spu:nz/ but misreads “scoop”, /sku:p/ as [skun]. These words are visually and semantically similar and the learner recognizes the correspondence between the spelling pattern and phonological features of the two words. However, the speaker is unable to read the word accurately and discriminate the difference in meaning. When she reads the word “spoons” earlier in the passage she temporarily internalized the representation in her phonological memory. This causes her to misread the word “scoop”. Learners with incomplete or faulty phonological processing strategies often “guess unfamiliar words by attending to context cues or initial letters, but they lack decoding skill so they cannot analyze letter-sound relations to read unfamiliar words” (Castiglioni-Spalten & Ehri, 2003: 28). However, since the Chinese writing system is non-alphabetic, it may take longer for L1 Cantonese learners to become accustomed to the pattern of English spelling and phonological rules.

3.2 Suprasegmental level

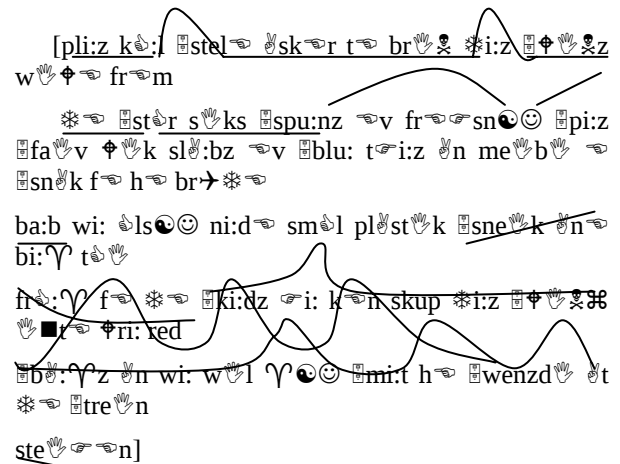
Prosody: Stress and Pitch

To see the problem in suprasegmental level, we made a contrast between a native English speaker's reading and the L1 Cantonese speaker's. The following two

transcriptions illustrate the relevance of stress and pitch in phonological awareness and the reading process.

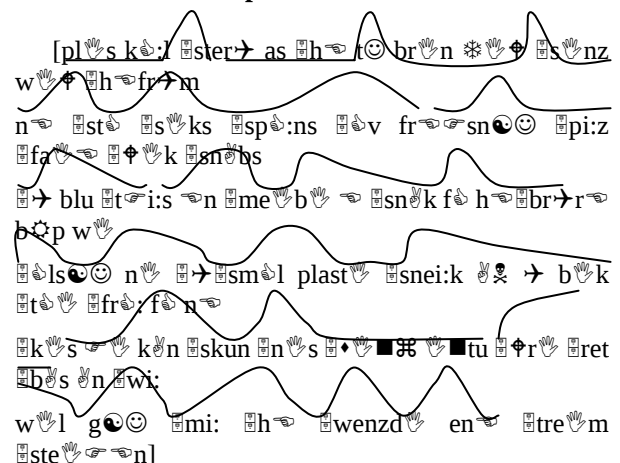
Speech transcription #1 (number of stressed words: 15; Pitch rise: 13)

Native English speaker – Vancouver, Canada



Speech transcription #2 (number of stressed words:36; Pitch rises: 22)

L1 Cantonese speaker



3.2.1 Stress

In English the way stress is placed on words within a sentence is an important element in conveying meaning and speaker intent. The content words, like nouns, main verbs, adverbs and adjectives tend to carry the most information in a sentence and are generally stressed. Functional words such as prepositions, conjunctions, articles and personal pronouns receive less stress.

However in Cantonese, linguistic units are monosyllabic and speakers tend to pronounce the syllables with equal prominence. As a result, when speaking English, Cantonese learners often stress more syllables than necessary in a sentence and have difficulty distinguishing unstressed syllables and reduced forms.

For example, the total number of words in the

speech sample is 69. The native English speaker places primary stress on 15 words that highlight the main ideas in the passage. In contrast, the Cantonese speaker stresses 36 words, more than double the number of the native speaker. She adds unnecessary stress to several non-content words and does not focus on what is important.

Therefore, in the context of reading, word stress as an element of phonological awareness, has an important role in lexical development. As learners become more familiar with determining which syllables and words receive greater or lesser stress, they improve and reinforce their knowledge of words which convey the most information. This helps them form stronger mental representations of words in their working memory and become more efficient readers.

3.2.2 Pitch

Similarly, pitch contours highlight new or important information. English is an international language and pitch contours. In an utterance, different levels of pitch contour are used to convey emotion, emphasis or signal the end of a sentence. In addition, the rising-falling contours separate a sentence or passage into smaller syntactic chunks. In contrast, Cantonese is a tonal language and changes in pitch indicate meanings of individual characters and syllables.

In the native speakers' reading transcript, there are 13 pitch rises. The reader hesitates at the appropriate juncture, marking the beginning of a noun or verb phrase. Unstressed words and syllables are reduced. In the transcript of the Cantonese speaker, there are 22 points of pitch rise. Interference from the L1 causes the reader to randomly cluster two or three words at a time instead of longer streams of speech. Most of the syllables in the passage are carefully pronounced. The unstressed syllables were not properly reduced at all.

In the context of reading, awareness of pitch contours can be a useful method of organizing thoughts around separate ideas and breaking down sentences syntactically. By acquiring this metacognitive strategy, L2 readers can develop a better awareness of the rules of sentence formation and word combinations within sentence. Attending to phonological awareness of pitch contours could be another useful strategy for L2 readers learning how to manipulate basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns.

To conclude, the problems in the L2 speaker's speech made her reading unpleasant to ears and hard to follow. With more knowledge on PA, a lot of them could have been avoided and the reading could have been much better.

There are also two more aspects noteworthy: one is her 4-year residence in USA. 4 years is long enough for her to develop the PA and reading skills. This may be evidence showing that without explicit PA instruction only the exposure to native language is not enough. The other is her age. Even though she's 29, PA ability can

still be possibly improved. "As far as metalinguistic abilities are concerned, there is no critical period. Metalinguistic ability is not fixed by 12, and developmental progress on metalinguistic awareness can be achieved after 12 years old" (Edwards, H.T. & Kirkpatrick, A.G., 1999).

4. WAYS OF ENHANCING PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

Our study shows that phonological awareness does influence greatly the L2 learners' reading ability; therefore, it's necessary to help learners raise phonological awareness to enhance the effectiveness of reading acquisition.

4.1 Instruction: Phonological awareness is teachable

Many studies show that it is possible to stimulate growth in phonological awareness by explicit instruction and training. "With 15 minutes a day of direct instruction in phonological awareness activities, kindergartners can develop skills in phonological analysis at a faster rate than in a developmentally appropriate curriculum without this direct instruction" (Foorman, B., Francis, D., Beeler, T., Winikates, D., & Fletcher, 1997). The positive effects of teaching phonological awareness have been reported with strong evidence, that significant gains in phonological awareness can be achieved with teaching.

4.2 Systematic assessment

Early and appropriate assessment can provide early identification of the difficulty the students are facing, thus giving the teacher a detailed picture of students who may be struggling. Based on this diagnosis, the teacher can make the corresponding instruction to improve students' reading before it's too late. It is typically assessed in tasks that involve the manipulation of phonological segments of language—for instance, breaking words down into their constituent syllables or phonemes (segmentation) or blending together sequences of individually uttered phonemes or syllables to form words (blending).

Explicit phonological instruction and systematic assessment are critical to a model of early reading acquisition. As far as our subject is concerned, with a systematic assessment and explicit instruction, her PA ability can be improved, and so can her reading ability correspondingly.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, through an analysis of a speech sample by a Cantonese (L1) speaker from the phonological perspective, we discuss how phonological awareness relates to EFL learners' reading skills - an aspect that has not been covered in detail in the existing literature on EFL reading acquisition. The aim of this case study is to help EFL learners understand why some characteristic reading problems arise and then to provide the evidence to support the necessity of promoting phonological awareness in EFL learners as a means of improving reading skills. It proposes that

phonological awareness enables learners to better understand how words are represented in print. Therefore, proficient readers are able to consciously recognize and manipulate sounds within language. Phonological awareness training includes a systematic assessment of current levels (early identification of reading difficulty) and timely intervention can significantly facilitate EFL students' reading acquisition as they do to native English students. However, analysis without practice is useless and impossible to lead to a better reading skill. Consequently, further researches are encouraged to explore strategies in teaching phonological awareness to EFL learners when helping them improve reading skills.

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