

# Communicating Pronunciation

A Review of:

Elliott, Raymond. 1999. On the Teaching and Acquisition of Pronunciation within a Communicative Approach. *Hispania*, Vol. 80, No. 1. (Mar., 1997), pp. 95-108.

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*Reviewed by Thomas E. Payne*

## Introduction

The article under review describes a set of experiments designed to determine whether explicit instruction in pronunciation significantly affects native English speaking university students' ability to pronounce Spanish words with native-like fluency. In particular, the researchers were interested in whether certain "classes" of sounds were more responsive to phonetic training than others. They also tested whether different pronunciation tasks (reading aloud, conversing, and repeating after native speakers) are more affected by phonetic training than others. Students' pronunciation was tested before undergoing phonetic instruction, and after a 20 week instructional period. Results show slight improvement in overall pronunciation after explicit phonetic training. The most significant improvements were in the pronunciation of liquid and stop phonemes. Pronunciation of nasals was not significantly affected. Pronunciation of vowels improved slightly, but not to a significant degree.

## Context

There have been many studies attempting to measure the effects of explicit phonetic training on pronunciation in the second language classroom. The author of the present study (Elliott 1999) mentions studies by Murakawa (1981), Elliott (1995), Neufeld (1977, 1978), Neufeld and Schneiderman (1980), and Suter (1976). However, according to Elliott, not

enough attention has been paid to pronunciation in classrooms implementing the "Communicative Approach" (Tshirner 1996, Whitley 1993). The goal of the present study was to determine whether explicit pronunciation instruction in the communicatively based classroom would significantly improve students' overall communicative competence. He also intended to be more explicit than previous studies in that he measured pronunciation improvement in terms of various pronunciation tasks and various classes of segmental phonemes and allophones.

## **Evaluation**

The experiment consisted of a "pre-test", a twenty week instructional period (a normal university semester), and a "post-test." Differences in pronunciation accuracy between the pre-test and post-test were supposed to indicate pronunciation improvement or lack thereof as a result of explicit phonetic instruction. Subjects were sixty-six undergraduate students at Indiana University, Bloomington, enrolled in an intermediate Spanish course. A control group of twenty-three subjects received no phonetic training, and an experimental group of forty-three subjects received phonetic training as part of their course. All other aspects of instruction for the two groups were identical.

Data for the study was collected via a pronunciation test developed by Elliott (1995), administered during the second week of classes (the "pre-test") and again at the end of the semester (the "post-test"). Judges for both tests were one native Spanish speaker, and three "near-native" speakers, including the principle experimenter. The judges were not told which group each student being tested was assigned to.

In my opinion, there are three points on which the methodology of this study may be criticized: 1) the size of the database, 2) consistency in the evaluation metric, and 3) interpretation of the results.

First, the size of the database was rather small. With only forty-three students in the experimental group, one wonders whether incidental variables, rather than the phonetic instruction that constituted the dependent variable of the study, may have accounted for the observed results. No mention is made of how randomness was achieved between the control and experimental groups. For example, was the control group an early morning class, and the experimental group a late morning or afternoon class? It is well-known in university pedagogy that learning is significantly affected by time of day in which instruction takes place. Were the two classes ability-selected? No mention is made of how such incidental variables were controlled.

Second, possible variation in evaluation criteria and qualifications of the judges was not sufficiently addressed. Only one of the three judges was a native speaker of Spanish. The other two were "near native speakers". While Elliott takes pains to describe the educational backgrounds and how long each near native speaker has spent in Spanish dominant countries, no other indicator of the judges' ability to evaluate the pronunciation of others is provided, and no idea of how consistency in evaluation was achieved. One of the judges only had two years of experience in Spanish dominant countries. Furthermore, the judges had experience in different Spanish dominant countries (Chile, Colombia and Spain). These countries are known to have widely differing pronunciation patterns. The reader of the study does not know whether the judges were evaluating the students against their own pronunciations or against some unstated "standard."

Third, the results were interpreted only in terms of improvement (or lack thereof) in pronunciation. While the experimental group did seem to improve in pronunciation to a slightly significant degree, one wonders whether the time spent in pronunciation instruction (10 to 15 minutes out of each hour of overall Spanish-language instruction) could have been more productively spend on other communicative tasks. In other words, while the

experimental group seems to have improved their pronunciation of Spanish to a greater extent than did the control group, the reader doesn't know whether the control group may have improved in other areas of communicative competence, as a result of having 10-15 minutes more per class session concentrating on those other areas. So the value of phonetic training *in comparison to similar time spent on other areas of competence* was not measured.

## **Conclusion**

Overall this is an interesting, well-organized and indicative study. While it does seem to show that explicit instruction in pronunciation is effective, it fails to address the main question facing second language teachers when it comes to pronunciation -- namely, is time spent in explicit pronunciation instruction "cost-effective" in terms of improvement in overall communicative ability? Elliott does note that improvement in pronunciation may have "affective" value for students. It is known that self-consciousness over pronunciation causes many students to refrain from entering into communicative situations with native speakers and others. In other words, if students are more confident of their pronunciation, they are more likely to be willing to engage in activities that will, over time, improve their overall fluency. For this reason, there may be a value in pronunciation instruction that goes beyond the mere statistical analysis.

## **References**

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