Second Language Learning and Self-Confidence

Cheryl DiCello and Pedro Faingnaert

Abstract

This study examined the link between Second Language Learners' self-confidence and the use of specific interventions. The participants were random students who ventured into the out-of-class support center called Global Lounge for a variety of reasons, including help with pronunciation. The initial step of coming to the Global Lounge also seemed to cause some anxiety in students as it is an English only space. The students were asked to participate in three sessions to pronounce clusters of words containing the different pronunciation of the letter 'a'. The results of the analyses showed that once students got over the initial anxiety to produce language themselves, and were corrected using the appropriate interventions, they felt more confident than at the initial stage of the study and were able to recognize and pronounce the words correctly.

Introduction

Self-confidence is influenced by how the students view themselves either positively or negatively (Javed & Ahmad, 2014). Self-confidence can be negatively influenced when the students think they produce the second language poorly (Javed & Ahmad, 2014). Therefore, it is important for second language teachers to be familiar with Krashen's Theory of The Natural Approach (1995) to second language acquisition, and also understand which interventions to use to lower a student's anxiety to produce the second language and boost the student's self-confidence (Javed & Ahmad, 2014). The current study aims to infer that by addressing pronunciation of the foreign language, the students will feel more confident, and confidence could translate into academic success.

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Natural Approach

The stages of literacy acquisition, according to the Theory of Natural Approach to language teaching, was written in the hopes to guide teachers to better understand which teaching strategies and activities may work best for English Language Learners, at each stage of their learning process (Krashen & Terrell, 1995). Each stage builds upon the previous one, and it suggested it is important that teachers make sure each student is successfully navigating through each stage to achieve academic success (Krashen & Terrell, 1995) . It also advised teachers to take responsibility in maximizing the student's academic success by using appropriate teaching strategies that best suit each literacy acquisition stage (Krashen & Terrell, 1995). Self-confidence is key for students' academic success and to stay in school, while it gives them more opportunities in life that otherwise would not be attainable (Malouf, Reisener, Gadke, Wimbish, & Frankel, 2014).

Affective Filter

In addition, the teacher should take into account the student's affective filter, which according to Krashen (2013) influences a student's language acquisition curve. This filter is adjustable and influences how language is acquired by letting it happen freely or blocking it all together (Krashen, 2013). A student's motivation, self-confidence and anxiety level influences this filter (Krashen, 2013). For example, a student who is highly motivated will, most of the time, learn at a faster pace than a student who is less motivated. Also a student who

has a higher self-esteem will be more successful when learning a second language (Javed & Ahmad, 2014). A student with a low anxiety level tends to be more open to learning a second language (Krashen & Terrell, 1995). Therefore, a teacher should take several facets of the language acquisition process into account to implement appropriate grade level literacy development strategies for English Language Learners (Krashen & Terrell, 1995).

Emergent Literacy

Students show particular characteristics during the emergent literacy stage. Some students will use their finger to guide them while reading and they will understand that the text is written from left to write and top to bottom (Fiorentino, 2014). For some English Language Learners this is a challenge because not all languages follow the same writing pattern that most Indo-European languages do (Fiorentino, 2014). Because students recognize the sounds and names of letters of the alphabet, they can distinguish between letters and words, and use these as visual cues for the beginning and ending of words (Fiorentino, 2014). Even though students can already locate some words, especially high frequency words, they will rely heavily on picture clues to decipher and make sense of the text (Fiorentino, 2014). Fiorentino also states that at this stage students have little to no regard for punctuation.

Early Literacy

At the early literacy stage of acquisition students become more aware of the text itself and its content, and rely less on pictures for clues (Fiorentino, 2014). They observe punctuation, use more phonetic clues to decode words, and start to monitor their own reading (Fiorentino, 2014). Students will correct themselves when they make a mistake while reading a word or forgetting to observe punctuation (Fiorentino, 2014). At this stage students also have started to build a small data bank of high frequency words that they automatically recognize while reading (Fiorentino, 2014). The teacher can now incorporate a brief discussion activity about the reading, and students will more easily participate (Fiorentino, 2014).

Transitional/Fluent Literacy

The transitional/fluent stage is a fun stage for many students (Fiorentino, 2014). They know a larger number of high frequency words, are able to read the text with more fluency, and respect all punctuation marks (Fiorentino, 2014). This fluency is due to an array of strategies the students are using while reading (Fiorentino, 2014). They can now use problem solving strategies such as monitoring, predicting, and self-correcting while reading (Fiorentino, 2014). Students are also able to participate in longer discussions about the readings because the texts are of a greater variety, longer, and more complex (Fiorentino, 2014).

Interventions Aid Self-Confidence

Linked to the stages of language learning and the state of mind of a student are the interventions used to improve the learning process (Sun, Nam, & Vanderwood, 2010). Having interventions in place and ways to assess them, is imperative to keep all students on track or to provide them with additional support so as to not allow them to go off track (Sun, Nam, & Vanderwood, 2010). Therefore Sun, Nam, & Vanderwood (2010) suggested a three tiered intervention model. In general, first a program-wide screening is used to identify the student with academic difficulties. Second, the at-risk students are provided with intensive support in small group settings (Sun, Nam, & Vanderwood, 2010). Third, the students who do not respond to the intervention might need a more intensive intervention, and could be referred to the out of class support center functions as an out-of-class support team within the program (Sun, Nam, & Vanderwood, 2010). Assessing phonological awareness is essential for the proper placement of new English Language Learners in a program (Sun, Nam, &

Vanderwood, 2010). Using intervention strategies at the out of class support center, which is a relaxed learning environment, allows for a more personal student centered approach. By giving the students the tools to improve, they will also gain more confidence (Sun, Nam, & Vanderwood, 2010).

Method

Location

The out-of-class support center in this case is the Global Lounge. The Global Lounge is a space freely available for all students attending Aichi Shukutoku University where students are able to get additional support to improve on the skills taught during class time. Students are able to watch television, movies, or series in English to improve their listening skills for example. Students have the opportunity to practice their speaking skills with other students or the onsite tutor through games, presentations, casual conversation, and one-on-one topic centered conversations. Students who watch a movie are encouraged to use the accompanied questionnaire as a guide and briefly discuss the movie after having watched it. For the students who want to brush up on their reading skills the lounge provides books, newspapers and magazines in English.

Data Collection and Participants

The data collection was two-fold: testing the students' pronunciation progress and asking them how they felt about their accomplishment and how it made them feel more or less confident. This study then focused on the pronunciation of the letter "a". Pronouncing the letter "a" can be a big challenge for Japanese learners of English as a second language because in Japanese the "a" always sounds the same, while in English it sounds differently, as in: at, age, ball, wallet, can, any. The study does not focus on diphthongs as in: August, aid, day. This study aimed to investigate whether these same students would feel more confident speaking in English if they had had help perfecting their pronunciation in English, in particular the letter "a".

The participants were university students (n =12) from different departments, freshmen, sophomores and juniors, who had already come to the Global Lounge and had asked for help with pronunciation. During one of their visits, they were asked if they wanted additional help with their pronunciation in English. I also verbally asked the reason why they wanted to improve their pronunciation of English and how they were going to practice their skills. All students were native speakers of Japanese. I also inquired about their comfort level while speaking English in class versus speaking English at the Global Lounge. Students were then given the questionnaire (Appendix C) and asked to complete it on site. Then I administered an oral pre-test (Appendix A). Eight percent of the participants were male, and 91% (n =11) of the participants were female. Fifty percent were 18 years old, 34% (n =4) were 19 years old, and 16% (n =2) were 20 years old. Sixteen percent of the participants graded themselves as having poor English skills, 16% (n =2) marked they had fair English skills, and 68% (n =8) noted having good English skills. No students graded themselves as having very good or excellent English skills (Table 1). All students were to attend all three interventions within the same week. Each intervention session was forty minutes long. On the first day we covered two possible pronunciations for the letter "a". The second day we covered the other two possible pronunciations of the letter "a". The third day we blended everything and worked on recognition and production of all of the words practiced. The list of words (Appendix D) was used as the practice words during the interventions. The assessment rubric's phonetic transcriptions of the letter "a" for the pronunciation exercise were based on the Merriam-Webster online edition of 2014. After the three intervention sessions, the students were given a post-test (Appendix C) which was identical to the pre-test. A rubric (Appendix E) was used to grade the students' pre-test and post-test.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants (*n* =12)

1. Age:	18		19		20		21			
	6	50%	4	34%	2	16%	0	0%		
2. Gender:	M		F							
	1	8%	11	91%						
3. Do you think your pronunciation of English is:	Poor		Fair		Good		Very Good		Excellent	
	2	16%	2	16%	8	68%	0		0%	
4. Do you feel comfortable speaking English in class?	Yes		No							
	1	8%	11	91%						
5. Do you feel comfortable speaking English at the Global Lounge?	Yes		No							
	7	58%	5	42%						
6. If your pronunciation were better, would you feel more comfortable speaking in English?	Yes		No							
	12	100%	0	0%						
7. Do you want to improve your pronunciation in English?	Yes		No							
	12	100%	0	0%						
8. Do you want help to improve your pronunciation in English?	Yes		No							
	12	100%	0	0%						

Results

The results showed that 33% (*n* =4) of the students' pronunciation remained unchanged while 67% (*n* =8) of the students showed improvement in their pronunciation of the words presented. The students were debriefed in English. I did not have the Japanese speaking staff member provide feedback in Japanese and tried to share the results without translation. The Japanese speaking staff member later confirmed what the students already knew, or clarified what the students had not understood. The comparison between the pre-test and post-test showed that 67% (*n* =8) of the students showed an improvement in their test scores, while 33% (*n* =4) of the students' pronunciation remained unchanged.

Discussion

Weaknesses

This study carries some weaknesses. Some students had improved their ability to recognize certain sounds the letter "a" can make within different words in English, but three meetings was not enough to tackle the issue in depth. Incorporating words into different conversations and addressing possible funny or amusing misunderstandings when words are not pronounced correctly, and showing the results of such misunderstandings would have been preferable. Word practice was done without a context which may not engage the students, nor encourage retention and participation. The tests of each student were not cross-referenced with the student questionnaires in search of patterns nor analyzed for differences based on each student's grade level (freshmen, sophomores, and juniors). Students were also not tested for any learning disabilities or reading disorders.

Analysis

There may be a possible connection between the practice of pronunciation and the students' confidence, but as it was a pilot study, more research is needed before any conclusions can be made.

Conclusion

It is well known that literacy is important for an individual's academic success and it opens doors to opportunities that otherwise would be out of reach. The education system is composed of stepping stones of academic skill sets, therefore it is imperative that students master each skill set before moving to another level (Krashen & Terrell, 1995). Failure to do so could lead to students falling behind or even dropping out in high

school (Malouf et al., 2014). Hence, Malouf et al. (2014) emphasize that it should be the teachers' responsibility to understand the literacy acquisition stages and develop strategies that maximize the students' abilities at any particular stage. Not doing so could alienate students, confuse students, or even discourage students from continuing their education and undermine their academic success (Malouf et al., 2014).

According to Lovett (2008), it is important to realize that neither the oral language ability, nor the ability to read fluently in their native language is an accurate good predictor of the reading acquisition success of English Language Learners. Specific reading disorders also play a significant factor in the reading success (Lovett, 2008). According to Sun, Nam, and Vanderwood (2010), a three tier intervention model could help identify the students who need the extra support with phonological awareness as an example of such a support. According to Javed and Ahmad (2014), pronunciation matters significantly in the learning of English, especially for effective communication. Correct pronunciation of a language allows for continuous correct language learning. Therefore, identifying the students who need an intervention sooner, will help the students catch up, stay on track, and gain their motivation back.

At the university level in Japan, students may require additional coaching for a successful completion of their programs. Another factor that could influence the students' academic success is the student's affective filter (Krashen, 2013). According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (2013) a student's low self-esteem and anxiety linked to the learning environment could potentially also influence their academic success. Therefore it may be beneficial for teachers to be aware of the learning stages and emotions students go through when learning a new language. This will aid the teachers to implement comprehensive strategies for the English Language Learners' learning environments.

Future research would benefit by focusing, for example, on sophomores or juniors only instead of having students from all grades participate. This will also level the playing field. Additionally, future research would benefit by testing all participating students for learning disabilities and reading disorders and not assume all students are able to read at college level to ensure a sample pool of students of the same skill level. I also suggest increasing the number of intervention sessions to allow for more practice time with each student before being evaluated a second time.

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Appendix A

Pre-test										
1 pt. < 50% correct 3 pts. ≥ 50% correct 5 pts. > 50% correct										Score
/ɑː/	arm	barn	Sparta	tart	harp	are	bark	sharp	dark	car	1-3-5
/Æ/	cat	cab	bag	bat	Dan	rat	tan	cam	pad	flag	1-3-5
/ɔː/	ball	chalk	hall	stall	hawk	flaw	pawn	fawn	ball	tall	1-3-5
/ā/	gate	Nate	hate	snake	rate	base	face	same	mate	flame	1-3-5
Total										
										/20

Appendix B

Post-test										
1 pt. < 50% correct 3 pts. ≥ 50% correct 5 pts. > 50% correct										Score
/ɑː/	arm	barn	Sparta	tart	harp	are	bark	sharp	dark	car	1-3-5
/Æ/	cat	cab	bag	bat	Dan	rat	tan	cam	pad	flag	1-3-5
/ɔː/	ball	chalk	hall	stall	hawk	flaw	pawn	fawn	ball	tall	1-3-5
/ā/	gate	Nate	hate	snake	rate	base	face	same	mate	flame	1-3-5
Total										
										/20

Appendix C

Research Questionnaire

(Check mark where applicable.)

1. Age:
2. Gender: M O   F O
3. Do you think your pronunciation of English is:
    Poor O   Fair O   Good O   Very Good O   Excellent O
4. Do you feel comfortable speaking English in class?
    Yes O   No O
5. Do you feel comfortable speaking English at the Global Lounge?
    Yes O   No O
6. If your pronunciation were better, would you feel more comfortable speaking in English?

Yes O   No O

7. Do you want to improve your pronunciation in English?

Yes O   No O

8. Do you want help to improve your pronunciation in English?

Yes O   No O

Appendix D

Words used to practice /ɑ:/, /Æ/, /ɔ:/, /ā/.									
are	Bart	part	shark	tart	bar	art	harp	arm	barn
dark	Sparta	garter	dark	mart	bark	Mark	dart	sharp	car
cat	cab	bag	snag	back	shack	flag	pram	cam	pad
ram	Sam	dad	had	bad	bat	Dan	rat	tan	hat
Shawn	drawn	lawn	fawn	stalk	awe	law	raw	flaw	falter
walk	chalk	hall	stall	call	tall	hawk	ball	talk	pawn
bake	save	Blake	mate	nave	lame	same	flame	tame	ate
gate	hate	rate	base	mace	paste	lace	face	race	ace

Appendix E

Assessment rubric for pre-test and post-test.			
Sounds	Inadequate, 1 pt.	Developing, 3 pts.	Accomplished, 5 pts.
/ɑ:/ (arm)	Student recognizes and produces the /ɑ:/ correctly less than 50% of the time.	Student recognizes and produces the /ɑ:/ correctly at least 50% of the time.	Student recognizes and produces the /ɑ:/ correctly 100% of the time.
/Æ/ (cat)	Student recognizes and produces the /Æ/ correctly less than 50% of the time.	Student recognizes and produces the /Æ/ correctly at least 50% of the time.	Student recognizes and produces the /Æ/ correctly 100% of the time.
/ɔ:/ (ball)	Student recognizes and produces the /ɔ:/ correctly less than 50% of the time.	Student recognizes and produces the /ɔ:/ correctly at least 50% of the time.	Student recognizes and produces the /ɔ: / correctly 100% of the time.
/ā/ (gate)	Student recognizes and produces the /ā/ correctly less than 50% of the time.	Student recognizes and produces the /ā/ correctly at least 50% of the time.	Student recognizes and produces the /ā/ correctly 100% of the time.