LEARNER PERSPECTIVES ON PRONUNCIATION FEEDBACK

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ABSTRACT

Corrective feedback is an essential part of L2 pronunciation instruction. The type and source of feedback may vary depending on the context. Most earlier studies suggest that corrective feedback facilitates learning in general, but there are few studies that focus especially on the effectiveness of corrective pronunciation feedback.

This study focused on advanced learners of English and on their opinions and preferences regarding pronunciation feedback. We asked a group of participants (N=46) to respond to Likert-scale statements on pronunciation feedback. Our results suggest that pronunciation feedback is found very useful and teacher feedback is preferred. Opinions towards peer feedback are more varied but mostly positive. The variation in general attitudes and emotions towards pronunciation feedback is possibly due to individual learner characteristics. The results also suggest that providing feedback is a skill that should be practised during teacher education to increase prospective teachers' confidence and competence in providing feedback.

Keywords: corrective feedback, advanced learners, pronunciation teaching strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

There is overwhelming evidence that pronunciation instruction facilitates the learning of second language (L2) pronunciation skills [9]. An essential part of such instruction is corrective feedback (CF). CF refers to explicit or implicit acknowledgement that the learner's L2 performance has contained an error [e.g., 6, 13], and it may be formulated with the aid of metalinguistic information and terms. Through CF, learners are believed to notice gaps in their knowledge and incorrect patterns in their behaviour [11]. Combined with practice, CF can help learners increase the accuracy of their performance. Furthermore, when learners' self-evaluation skills improve, their chances for autonomous learning increase.

CF can vary depending on who provides it. In formal learning contexts, learners' errors can be corrected by teachers, peers or the learners themselves [14]. There are many contextual factors determining which strategies benefit the learner the most. As teachers are considered competent experts and authorities in their fields, feedback from teachers is valued and found useful. It should be borne in mind that pronunciation is often considered to be very intimately connected to one's identity, and pronunciation teaching and feedback may also cause negative feelings for the learners [1, 5, 12]. However, learners might find feedback from peers less threatening and experience less anxiety in learner-to-learner discussions. To provide good peer feedback requires that the pronunciation and analytical skills of the learners are satisfactory for the target level in question.

Moreover, analysing learners' pronunciation skills and providing CF based on the analysis is very time-consuming for teachers [14]. If learners are advanced and well aware of the phonetic features of the target language, they should be able to provide CF and receive it from their peers fairly accurately and efficiently, while the teacher can monitor the discussions and focus on the most common errors or errors that may have been ignored in peer feedback. Considering large group sizes and limited contact-teaching time, this makes pronunciation teaching more efficient, while ensuring that learners still receive CF on their performance.

The types and effectiveness of feedback have been studied, but earlier studies have seldom focused on pronunciation feedback in particular [6, 8, 9]. Earlier studies have also suggested that pronunciation errors might be more difficult to correct on the basis of feedback than errors in grammar [2]. Teachers' and learners' perceptions of the most useful CF may also differ [4]. Finally, providing (and receiving) feedback is a skill that can be practised: after CF training, university-level learners have been shown to be more confident and willing to provide peer feedback [10].

In L2 teacher education it is essential that pre-service teachers have an opportunity to consider how to give feedback that best supports learning. In foreign language contexts, pronunciation teaching for pre-service teachers is often geared towards their own pronunciation skills, whereas aspects related to pronunciation teaching can more often be overlooked [3]. In consequence, teachers gain experience as learners but their didactic abilities might not improve. Novice and experienced teachers have been found to differ in their perspectives on the importance and effectiveness of different types of feedback: novice

teachers are influenced by their own learning experiences, whereas experienced teachers are able to analyse the role of CF in the particular learning context more thoroughly [7].

The purpose of this study was to investigate the learner perspective on corrective pronunciation feedback. We focused on the perceived usefulness of feedback (section 3.1), affective attitudes towards feedback (section 3.2) and the preferred sources of feedback (section 3.3).

2. METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this study, we focused on a group of university learners of English (N=46) who responded to statements on pronunciation feedback with a 5-step Likert-scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree). In the results, we have combined steps 1 and 2 as well as 4 and 5 to give the proportion of participants disagreeing and agreeing, respectively. The participants were first year students of English, most of them (84%) women. The median age of the participants was 20 (range 19–46). The participants were about to finish an obligatory course on English pronunciation. English was a major or minor subject in their MA degree. All participants did not aim at a career in teaching, but it was an alternative they could choose later during their studies.

During the BA-level course the participants had frequently monitored their own production, received individual and group feedback from a teacher, and practised giving feedback to other students. The participants attended different teaching groups, but all groups were taught by non-native speakers of English. The pronunciation course included segmental and suprasegmental pronunciation exercises, ear training and phonetic transcription exercises. In this study we focused on learner attitudes towards pronunciation feedback.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Usefulness of pronunciation feedback

In general, pronunciation feedback was considered very useful. The participants agreed almost unanimously over the facilitative awareness-raising effect of feedback. Corrective pronunciation feedback supports learning by making learners more conscious of their pronunciation and drawing their attention to aspects they may have overlooked before. The participants also objected to the negatively phrased statement on the uselessness of feedback almost unanimously. In addition, more than half of the participants reported that they could not learn how to pronounce English without feedback from a

teacher (see also 3.3). The statements related to the usefulness of pronunciation feedback are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Usefulness of pronunciation feedback.

Statement	Ave.	Agree	Disagree
Feedback helps me notice things I may have otherwise overlooked	4.8	98%	0%
Pronunciation feedback makes me conscious of my pronunciation	4.6	96%	0%
Feedback helps me to learn	4.6	96%	0%
Improving my pronunciation is easy when I get feedback	3.5	57%	15%
Giving feedback to a fellow student helps my own pronunciation as well	2.8	26%	37%
I could learn how to pronounce English without feedback from my teachers	2.4	11%	52%
I don't find pronunciation feedback useful	1.1	0%	98%

Most participants thought that improving one's pronunciation is easy after receiving feedback, but the number of unsure answers was also high with this statement. This could reflect the fact that, in general, improving one's pronunciation skills was not considered easy. Finally, we also asked the participants to consider whether providing peer feedback is useful for their own pronunciation; the responses were fairly evenly divided between learners agreeing, disagreeing or not being sure.

3.2 Affective attitudes towards feedback

Most participants were happy to receive pronunciation feedback. It should be pointed out, however, that there were a number of learners who did not like receiving pronunciation feedback. This might reflect individual differences in self-confidence or anxiety levels [see 1, 5]. Preferences for certain types of CF or learning situations may also affect learner opinions and explain variation. A similar effect stemming from different learner characteristics can explain the fairly evenly distributed responses to statements regarding the effect of feedback on self-confidence and feelings of anxiety or shame. However, negative feelings were not usually increased by the worry that fellow

learners could hear the feedback. The statements related to pronunciation feedback are in Table 2.

Table 2: Affective attitudes

Statement	Ave.	Agree	Disagree
I like to receive pronunciation feedback	4.0	65%	13%
Giving pronunciation feedback is challenging	3.8	67%	7%
Receiving feedback increases my self-confidence	3.1	30%	22%
I feel anxious when I get pronunciation feedback	3.0	43%	39%
I feel ashamed of my mistakes when I receive pronunciation feedback	2.9	35%	41%
I get nervous when I have to comment on someone's English.	2.9	35%	39%
I feel confident when giving pronunciation feedback	2.5	13%	46%
I feel more ashamed when I am given grammar feedback than pronunciation feedback	2.4	22%	54%
Giving pronunciation feedback is easier than giving feedback on grammar	2.4	24%	59%
I like to comment on my friends' pronunciation skills	2.1	13%	74%
When I receive feedback I worry that the other students might hear it	2.1	15%	76%

In addition, only 22% of the participants were of the opinion that pronunciation feedback makes them more ashamed than grammar feedback. This means that for most learners pronunciation does not appear to be more intimately connected to their identities and causing stronger emotional reactions. Most participants did not find pronunciation feedback easier to give than grammar feedback. The opinion that grammar feedback is easier to give can stem from an emphasis placed on grammar during earlier education. Accordingly, learners might also be more used to receiving and giving feedback on grammar.

The questionnaire also contained statements that focused on peer feedback. Most participants considered giving feedback challenging, and a clear majority did not like to comment on their friends' pronunciation skills. The responses were fairly evenly distributed when it came to nervousness when giving feedback, and almost half of the participants did not feel confident when giving feedback. This lack of confidence can mean that the participants had not practised giving feedback before university, and would also require advice on how to give the kind of corrective pronunciation feedback that is appreciated by other learners and best supports learning.

3.3 Sources of feedback

Our questionnaire also contained more specific statements on the preferred sources of pronunciation feedback. On the whole, the participants mostly disagreed with these statements, which also reflects the wording. Based on the responses, the participants trust pronunciation feedback from both teachers and native speakers. The assumption is that native-speaker teachers during earlier education have been rare, and at the time of the questionnaire the participants were taught by a non-native teacher. Most participants reacted neutrally to the statement that native speaker feedback would be preferable. These statements are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Sources of feedback.

Statement	Ave.	Agree	Disagree
It's difficult to accept pronunciation feedback from a person whose pronunciation is weaker than mine	3.4	54%	26%
I'm more relaxed when I receive feedback from a teacher than from fellow students	3.1	33%	28%
I would rather receive pronunciation feedback from native speakers	2.8	18%	30%
When I listen to my own pronunciation, that's the best feedback I can get	2.4	9%	59%
I do not trust feedback from a fellow learner	2.3	15%	61%
It's better to receive feedback from fellow learners than teachers	2.1	4%	70%
I do not trust feedback from a native speaker	1.6	0%	91%
I do not trust feedback from a teacher	1.1	0%	98%

In contrast, a clear majority was of the opinion that they prefer feedback from teachers to feedback from fellow learners. 9% thought that listening to their own pronunciation gives them the best kind of feedback

on their skills. Most learners found feedback from weaker learners difficult to accept, but 26% of the participants disagreed with this statement, implying that weaker learners can also give feedback to their more proficient peers. When it comes to feelings of anxiety, the participants were fairly evenly distributed as to whether feedback from a teacher or a fellow student is less stressful to receive: 33% considered feedback from a teacher less stressful and 28% were of the opposite opinion. The rest reacted neutrally, which means that they did not think that the source of feedback had any effect on this matter. This is another indication of the fact that learner preferences vary when it comes to corrective pronunciation feedback.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In our study, learner opinions on corrective pronunciation feedback were found very positive. The statements related to the usefulness of pronunciation feedback were often unanimously agreed with: learners considered corrective pronunciation feedback useful and thought that it facilitates learning. This suggests that CF has a central role in supporting the learning process in formal learning contexts. However, only 26% of the participants thought that giving peer feedback helped their own pronunciation.

Affective attitudes towards pronunciation feedback varied, reflecting the role of differing learner profiles. Despite the generally positive attitudes, our results suggest that a large proportion of our participants felt anxious or ashamed when receiving CF. Moreover, most participants did not feel confident when giving pronunciation feedback. These results lend support to earlier findings on the negative experiences caused by pronunciation teaching [1, 5] and show that university-level learners are not ready to give pronunciation feedback without practice [7, 10].

When the sources of feedback were considered, the teacher was regarded as the best source of corrective pronunciation feedback. The native language of the teacher was not, however, viewed as a decisive factor. Considering that our participants were advanced university-level learners of English, the emphasis placed on teacher feedback may be even somewhat surprising, but the explanation might lie in the fact that pronunciation feedback has been uncommon or unsystematic prior to this level. University-level learners are assumed to be quite autonomous, but our results suggest that teacher input is clearly needed in pronunciation feedback.

On the other hand, even though teacher feedback was preferred, our results suggest that many learners find receiving peer feedback less stressful. This

implies that a combination of both would be ideal. Furthermore, individual learner characteristics may determine which source of CF is most successful. The proficiency levels of learners need to be fairly even as the majority of participants thought that CF from less proficient learners is difficult to trust.

The results related to student confidence are especially thought-provoking. Lack of confidence may be related to the learners' own pronunciation skills: less proficient learners may find providing CF challenging, especially if they have to provide feedback to a more proficient learner. Although our participants had practised giving feedback during the course, they may feel that practice has been insufficient.

It is important to address the possible negative feelings that pronunciation teaching and feedback may cause. Awareness-raising can help pre-service teachers to become more confident and competent when providing feedback. Furthermore, it can also prepare them for dealing with their own students' anxieties in the future. Anxieties and insecurities can be lowered through practice, and therefore it is also important to practise giving and receiving feedback in different peer group combinations to get used to different kinds of learners during teacher training [cf. 7].

Although based on a limited sample, our study has illustrated learners' views on pronunciation feedback from different perspectives. While many of the participants of the study will become teachers, it should be noted that not all of them will choose a career in teaching. Nevertheless, they do all aim for a career as experts on the English language. One part of this expertise is to be able to comment on other speakers' English pronunciation skills. Often university-level L2 education aims at improving learners' L2 proficiency without any explicit emphasis on simultaneously learning didactic aspects [4]. Our results lend support to suggestions that in L2 teacher education pronunciation teaching methods should be an essential part of the curriculum.

The next objective of our project is to look into the practices of pronunciation feedback and to investigate how peer feedback is given and which aspects are given the most attention (e.g., the proportion of segmental and suprasegmental issues). It is important to compare learners' beliefs with their practices. As earlier research has shown that providing feedback is a skill which can and needs to be practised, it is essential that pre-service teachers are given these opportunities during their studies.

5. REFERENCES

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