

Self-assessment in English Pronunciation at University Level: Preliminary Results

Area: Phonetics

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Abstract

Self-assessment in EFL pronunciation can be conceived as both a learning and metacognitive strategy (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Ingels, 2010) that allows students to reflect on their performance, revise which aspects of their linguistic competence should be reinforced, and set learning goals based on this self-assessment (Ur, 1996). This paper presents a pedagogical proposal which includes self-assessment for the teaching of English phonetics at university level. In this work, we will describe the preliminary findings of the analysis of our corpus, identify students' perceptions of their oral performance and analyse those recurrent patterns that will guide our future research.

Keywords: self-assessment, English pronunciation, university level, students' perceptions

Introduction

The teaching of pronunciation of English as a foreign language (EFL) presents certain challenges, especially at university level. From our teaching experience in this particular area, there emerged the need of incorporating learning strategies that could allow students to develop skills for becoming more autonomous learners and to adopt a more active role all through their learning process. With this objective in mind, a pedagogical proposal was designed in the form of a workshop. The target audience were first-year students enrolled in the English courses at undergraduate level at the School of Languages, National University of Córdoba. This pedagogical intervention incorporated an instance of self-assessment, which is conceived as a metacognitive strategy and as an instrument for learning that allows students to reflect upon their own performance, revise which aspects of their linguistic competence should be strengthened and set concrete learning objectives based on the findings of the self-assessment (Ur, 1996). In the present study, the results emerging from the analysis of the data collected from the instance of self-assessment are reported. The corpus was analysed drawing upon quantitative as well as qualitative methods. Finally, the pedagogical implications that the results entail are described.

Theoretical Framework

Self-Assessment in EFL Contexts

The assessment of foreign language performance has always attracted the attention of teachers and researchers in the field. It is a pivotal point in the area of teaching EFL and of teaching English as a second language (ESL)⁵ because of the relevance of the data collected during the assessment process and the decisions and consequences involved in it. Those in charge of assessing foreign language students' linguistic abilities have a great responsibility, which confronts them with several questions and dilemmas that are not always easy to deal with. Studying and doing research on different aspects of language assessment in educational contexts will surely contribute to the transparency, objectivity, and fairness of this process.

In educational contexts, such as that of the present study, assessment of students' oral performance in English forms part of the teaching practice. Assessment is used to collect information that will later have an impact not only on students but also on the decisions made as regards programmes of study, course contents, teaching methodology, assessment and scoring methods and instruments, kind of feedback, among others. Measuring language ability through a test or examination is a complex phenomenon that involves a variety of issues that need to be considered simultaneously such as construct definition, test reliability, validity of scores, inter-rater reliability, fairness, consequences of test use, and test taker or background characteristics (Cheng & Curtis, 2010; Kunnan, 1995).

Even though English language assessment has traditionally been carried out by teachers, students can also be the ones who assess their own performance or their peers' production. In the last decades, following Falchikov, and Havnes and McDowell (as cited in Disasa Worabu, 2013), there has been a "shift from teacher-controlled assessment to learner-involved/negotiated through self and peer assessment" (p. 22). In the light of this changing world, where people need to become autonomous lifelong learners so as to keep up with the demands of the job market, self-assessment has gained a protagonist role. Bolívar-Cruz, Verano-Tacoronte and González-Betancor (2015) point out that teachers are the ones responsible for encouraging learners' autonomy. They claim that students "should be capable of giving and receiving feedback and assessing their own work and that of others, which in turn would increase their professional competence" (p. 22). If students are engaged and deliberately instructed in how to reflect and critically monitor and assess their progress, this may help them increase their independence and also boost their motivation.

Authors such as Boud and Brew (1995) and Geeslin (2003) define students' self-assessment as the process of setting criteria and judging their own learning process, especially their achievements and results. Results of research studies on self-assessment (Campbel, Mothersbaugh, Brammer C. & Taylor, 2001; Falchikov, 2005; Ross, 2006; Sebba, Deakin-Crick, Lawson, Yu, Harlen & Durant, 2008; Topping, 2003) show that it fosters deep approaches to learning; encourages the use of higher order cognitive skills; develops reflective and critical skills; increases autonomy, self-esteem, and motivation; improves on-task behaviour; and fosters commitment to subsequent performance and participation. It may also have an impact on schemata activation and integration and it may help

⁵[1] Even though *second language* and *foreign language* learning environments are related to different contexts and, consequently, the amount and quality of input also differ, in this study the terms will be used interchangeably because the underlying fundamental psycholinguistic processes involved are similar in both situations (Bilash, 2009; Gass & Selinker, 2008).

students manage and direct their own learning process. In spite of the positive impact that self-assessment may have on learning, according to Luoma (2004), learners are rarely put in charge of rating their own performance.

Fluency and Clarity of Expression

Defining what is meant by fluency and clarity of expression in the context of this research study is of prime importance. According to Richards, Platt and Weber (1985), fluency can be defined as "the features which give speech the qualities of being natural and normal, including native-like use of pausing, rhythm, intonation, stress, rate of speaking, and use of interjections and interruptions" (p. 108). These authors also claim that, in second and foreign language learning, fluency is used to characterize a person's level of communication proficiency, including the ability to:

1. produce written and/or spoken language with ease;
2. speak with a good but not necessarily perfect command of intonation, vocabulary, and grammar;
3. communicate ideas effectively;
4. produce continuous speech without causing comprehension difficulties or a breakdown of communication (Richards et al., 1985).

As regards clarity of expression, it can be defined as the quality of being easily understood, which is very much related to being 'comfortably intelligible'. The term 'comfortable intelligibility' has been widely used since it was first coined by Abercrombie in 1956. He defined it as "a pronunciation which can be understood with little or no conscious effort on the part of the listener" (p. 37). Brown (2014) states that the pronunciation of speakers who are comfortably intelligible may possess some features of the speaker's native language but not those that will impair wider international intelligibility. He goes on to add that comfortable intelligibility may be reached by focusing on features contained in Jenkins' (2000) *Lingua Franca Core*, among which the mastering of consonant sounds, vowel sounds, and stress patterns are highlighted.

Context and Participants

The experience took place at the School of Languages, National University of Córdoba, during the second term of the academic year 2015. The participants of the present study included 45 undergraduate first-year students taking the course *Práctica de la Pronunciación del Inglés* (English Pronunciation Practice). These students have Spanish as their mother tongue.

As our teaching context is a public university where a significantly high number of students attend classes and there are few human resources able to systematically monitor students' performance in a detailed way, the development of metacognitive strategies is of paramount importance so that they can build up the skills for becoming more autonomous learners in the process of learning English pronunciation.

Thus, a pedagogical proposal was designed in the form of a workshop with a series of activities with a highly practical component. The workshop was divided into two parts. During the first one, students had to work with different exercises aimed at practising and revising key aspects of the

course syllabus. During the second part, students had to work with self-assessment with an *ad hoc* instrument (see Appendix B).

Methodology

The instance of self-assessment was carried out with the practice activity of retelling. This is a skill that consists in telling a story (narrative) in English, and, according to the syllabus of English Pronunciation Practice, it is taught and developed during the second part of the academic year.

Regarding the materials of the present work, a story (see Appendix A), similar to the ones with which the students work in class, was selected for them to complete the self-assessment task. The procedure followed during the stages of preparation and actual assessment involved a series of steps. First, the students had to “prepare the story” they were going to tell. The instructors elicited, with the whole class, the strategies that could be put into practice previous to the telling of the story so that it would be easier to do it (paraphrases of ideas, search of synonyms for complex terms, dictionary work to check pronunciation of unfamiliar words, marking or transcription of certain words, etc.). Then, a period of 15 minutes was allotted to carry out this preparation in small groups, and another period of 15 minutes was devoted to the actual oral practice. It is worth pointing out that the objective of following this procedure closely was to raise students’ awareness of the importance of applying learning strategies and of the need to carry out systematic practice in order to develop the skill in focus.

Once this stage was completed, the students were instructed to record their oral production with any voice recorder app in their smart phones. They were not given indications as to how many times they were allowed to record themselves. The following step consisted in students’ listening and assessing their own performance. In order to do this, they were provided with a self-assessment sheet that had been designed for these purposes. The descriptors and rubrics in the assessment sheet were explained in detail to the students prior to the completion of the task. The worksheet provided involved three small sections. In it, the students had to register, first, the assessment of their performance globally; that is, they had to rate their fluency and clarity by choosing among “Excellent”, “Very good”, “Good”, “Regular”, and “Lack of fluency/clarity”. Next, they had to state whether or not they were satisfied with their performance, and were required to provide further elaboration on their answers. Finally, they were asked to mention positive aspects of their production as well as aspects that needed to be improved.

It is worth clarifying that, even though the workshop was carried out in English, for the self-assessment section, the explanations of instructions as well as rubrics and answers provided by instructors and students, respectively, were developed in Spanish. This decision was taken considering that the subjects were first-year students, so it was necessary to make sure that the instrument was clear for them and that the language of instruction would not hamper the process of self-assessment.

In total, a number of 45 students completed the self-assessment task. This constitutes the corpus of the present study.

Data Analysis and Findings

In this section, the results obtained are presented in terms of frequency and some possible explanations that could account for the findings are provided. The interpretation of the findings has implications that are outlined in the following section and are considered extremely useful for future work in research as well as teaching practices.

When considering the ratings for fluency and clarity, in general, the categories most frequently employed were “Good” and “Regular”, for both aspects. None of the 45 students used the category “Excellent” to rate their fluency or clarity. This means that students perceive their overall performance as being average or below average; that is, they have a negative impression of it. This could be related to the fact that many students think that the objective of the course is to achieve native-like pronunciation, and so they measure their production against that model. Then, when comparing both aspects, fluency was perceived to be weaker than clarity (see Table 1). As the subjects of this study are first-year students and the activity of retelling involves producing spontaneous speech, there are factors other than pronunciation that are at play and which could hamper their oral performance, namely poor grammar or vocabulary. Then, apparently, these factors affect the students’ fluency rather than their clarity, or, at least, they consider this to be the case.

These interpretations are grounded in the distribution and frequency of the students’ answers, which can be observed in Table 1.

Table 1. Absolute and relative frequency for fluency and clarity

Descriptor	Fluency	Clarity
Excellent	-	-
Very good	3 (6,66%)	6 (13,34%)
Good	17 (37,78%)	19 (42,22%)
Regular	22 (48,89%)	19 (42,22%)
Deficient	3 (6,67%)	1 (2,22%)

As regards fluency in particular, most of the students (56%) considered it to be rather poor, as 49% rated it as regular, and 7% perceived it as deficient⁶. The remaining 44% had a more positive opinion, 7% considered it to be very good, and almost 38% rated it as good, but nobody rated it as excellent. Thus, the tendency was to be rather critical of their oral performance in terms of fluency.

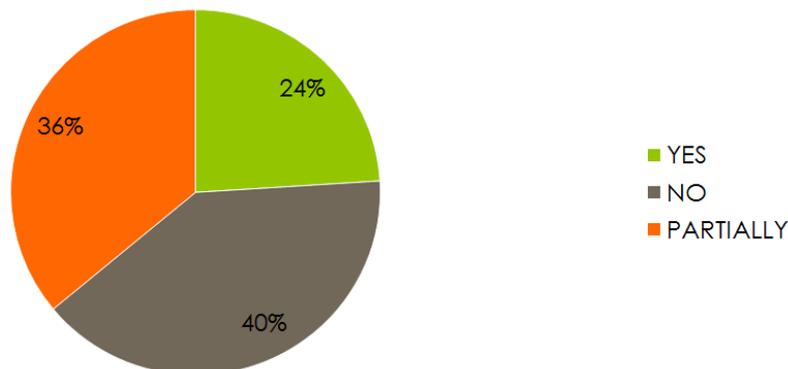
Regarding clarity, the results are inverted. Fewer than half of the participants (44%) considered this aspect to be poor, since 42% stated it was regular, and 2% thought it was deficient;

⁶ We use this term in the analysis of the data to refer to the ratings in the categories “lack of fluency” and “lack of clarity” present in the instrument designed.

while most of the students (56%) were optimistic – 42% judged their clarity in delivering the message to be good and 13% said it was very good.

The second section of the self-assessment involved the students stating whether or not they were satisfied with their performance, and supporting their answers. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the answers provided out of a total of 45, as this is the number of students that makes up the population of the present study.

Figure 1. Degree of satisfaction with performance



It can be observed that 76% of the participants expressed not being satisfied or being partially satisfied with their oral production. In fact, 40% stated they were not satisfied with their performance, and, among the reasons, the students mentioned lack of fluency, lack of practice, flawed pronunciation, and difficulty to express ideas. On their part, 36% showed being partially satisfied with their production, making reference, mostly, to the lack of fluency or to the need to improve the production in general. The students who claimed to be satisfied (24%) provided different reasons like good production in general, good use of grammatical structures or clarity in getting the message across. Figure 2 shows some of the answers⁷ that the students provided .

Figure 2. Sample answers from corpus

Why YES?	Why NO?	Why PARTIALLY?
"Good production in general" "I improved my fluency" "Good use of grammar structures" "Precise and concise production, intelligible message" "The message can be understood despite the lack of connection of some ideas"	"Lack of fluency" "Lack of clarity when expressing ideas" "Flawed pronunciation" "I need more practice" "I'm very shy and this does not allow me to advance"	"There was improvement but still there are mistakes" "I have to improve my production" "I lack fluency; I get stuck frequently" "I was quite clear when expressing ideas" "I avoided difficult words and used synonyms or paraphrased statements" "Fluency"

⁷ The answers the students provided were in Spanish. Thus, in Figure 2 we present the translations into English that we have done of them. We have included the original Spanish versions in Appendix C.

These findings accord with the pattern that emerged from the rating of fluency and clarity; that is, it is shown that the students are highly critical of their own performance. It is interesting to notice that some students assessed their language in general, rather than focusing on their pronunciation only, as it is evidenced from their comments related to grammar or lexis. This could show that they see pronunciation as integral to language, at least to language expressed orally; and that there are other factors that determine, or rather influence, the degree of satisfaction with their performance.

The last part of the self-assessment consisted in identifying strengths and weaknesses in their production. There were 43 instances of positive comments, and 4 students did not mention any positive points. On the other hand, there were 72 instances of comments related to aspects that called for improvement, and 2 students did not mention any weak points. The fact that the negative points overweigh the positive ones by 40% is proof, once more, of the disapproving judgement on the part of the participants.

For each group, positive and negative comments and the most recurrent aspects mentioned were identified in order to analyse them within each group of comments and to compare them across groups. At this point, it is relevant to state that different categories were created on the basis of the identification and grouping of recurrent aspects. Table 2 shows these categories together with their corresponding absolute and relative frequency indexes. The two most recurrent aspects in each group were highlighted.

Table 2. Frequency of positive and negative aspects of performance

Aspect	Positive	To be improved
Fluency	9 (21%)	23 (32%)
Clarity	6 (14%)	-
Retelling skills	5 (12%)	3 (4.2%)
Pronunciation in general	5 (12%)	9 (12.5%)
Practice	-	11 (15.3%)
Endings	1 (2.3%)	9 (12.5%)
Verb tenses/forms	2 (4.7%)	6 (11.1%)
Vowels and consonants	3 (7%)	9 (12.5%)
Weak forms	-	6 (8.3%)

The positive aspects mentioned are mostly related with fluency (21%) and clarity when communicating ideas (14%). Regarding fluency in particular, it appears that it is an area very much in focus, as the students mentioned both that it was a positive aspect (9 comments) and that it was an

aspect to be improved (23 comments). This could be due to the influence of instruction, since professors highlight its importance on a regular basis, be it in class or during feedback sessions. Concerning clarity, 44% of the students had declared that they considered their clarity was poor; however, we see here that nobody claims that this aspect needs to be improved. The use of retelling skills and good pronunciation in general are in the third place, with exactly the same frequency (12%). It can be seen that the positive comments involve global aspects of their performance; that is, they are related with the performance in general rather than with elements at the microlinguistic level – production of segmental features in particular was mentioned only three times for vowels and consonants, and once in relation to endings. Moreover, nobody mentioned the use of weak forms as a positive aspect of their production, but 8.3% claimed it was an area that needed to be improved.

With regard to the weaknesses, we find fluency (32%) in the first place and practice (15.3%) in the second place. It is assumed that the students refer to the lack or need of practice, and it is interesting to see this course of action appearing in the second place, in terms of frequency, instead of an element from the system itself. On the other hand, this aspect is absent from the group of positive points. Then, this is a hint that students are well aware that practice is key in developing retelling skills, and that they are conscious of how much training they need, or, based on what they declared, that the amount of practice devoted to the preparation of the story was not enough. The following negative aspects mentioned were endings (12.5%), pronunciation in general (12.5%), vowels or consonants (12.5%), and use of verb tenses and forms (11.1%). It can be seen that, different from the positive points, the comments in this group pertain to the global performance as well as to the production of segmental features in particular, and one aspect involves the field of grammar.

The results of these findings gave way to a series of pedagogical implications that are detailed in the following section.

Conclusions and pedagogical implications

After our experience, we were able to draw some interesting conclusions. First of all, the analysis of the corpora has shown that there is a marked tendency among the participants towards making a very critical evaluation of their oral performance. Most of the students who have taken part in this study rated their fluency and clarity as good or regular. What is more, none of the 45 participants have used the descriptor “Excellent” to describe their performance in relation to these aspects. Another related finding was that most students were not satisfied or were partially satisfied with their oral production. In addition, there were more comments related to the areas that needed to be improved than to the positive aspects of their performance identified. On the other hand, the students claimed that the lack or need of practice was an issue that needed to be addressed. Also,

many participants stated that their clarity in delivering the message was below an acceptable level; however, they did not include it as an area that called for improvement. Finally, it appears that the positive aspects of their production involve their performance in general, whereas the factors that affect it negatively pertain to the global as well as to the microlinguistic level, to a similar extent.

These results suggest the need for reshaping students' expectations about the goals and objectives established in the English Pronunciation Practice course in relation to what performance is expected. It is important to raise students' awareness of working on the issues that affect their clarity, as this aspect is very much related with gaining an acceptable degree of intelligibility, which, at the same time, accords with one of the objectives set for the course in question. There is also a need to work on the conception of error and its fundamental role in the learning process. Moreover, raising awareness about how to identify mistakes should be developed and practised with constancy so that students can work towards effective solutions to overcome them. Then, in order to meet the students' need of practice, extra activities should be designed drawing upon additional resources available, such as the virtual classroom, with focus on the features of pronunciation that were more recurrently identified as affecting their performance. Finally, self-assessment should be carried out systematically in the light of its contribution towards autonomy and the adoption of a more active role in the learning process on the part of students.

Beyond the useful findings that emerged from the present study, and aware of the possible limitations that it could have, some ideas for future research considering the notions of reliability and validity of self-assessment are outlined. Reliability "can be thought of as the degree to which test scores are free from measurement error" (Bachman, Davidson, Ryan & Choi, 1995, p. 52) or "the extent to which test scores are consistent" (Alderson, Clapham & Wall, 1995, p. 294). In order to measure intra-rater reliability, the same test may be administered twice over a period of time so as to correlate the results and evaluate consistency of the rating done by the same rater. This is called test-retest reliability. Following a similar procedure, the participants in our study could rate the same piece of oral production later in the academic year, so that it would be possible to see how the results from the two different instances compare. Another possible area for research involves inter-rater reliability, defined as the consistency between the scores assigned by different raters to the same performance using the same assessment criteria. In this sense, it would be interesting to establish a comparison between students' perceptions – through an instance of self-assessment – and instructors' assessment of students' oral performance in order to design efficient subsequent pedagogical proposals based on the findings

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