

Developing Effective Techniques of Correcting First-Year Students' Pronunciation Errors

I. Purpose:

Because the Chinese sound system is difficult for non-native speakers, beginning-level students usually cannot accurately produce certain vowels (e.g., u:), consonants (e.g., j, q, x), and tones (e.g., the third tone), especially when they are combined with other sounds, after the Chinese phonetic system is introduced in the first two weeks of class. Even if some students are able to grasp these sounds early on, either individually or in bisyllabic words, their accuracy drops when these sounds occur in different phonetic environments or in longer sentences. If these errors are left uncorrected, or they are not corrected effectively after introductory classes, we miss the critical period during which we can help students develop decent pronunciation. As a result, errors can persist beyond the beginning-level and become fossilized. However, if all pronunciation errors are corrected during class at the same time as grammar errors are addressed, this tactic can discourage certain these students.

Although I consider it important to correct students' pronunciation errors strategically and effectively, my actual in-class teaching performance reveals otherwise. According to my colleagues' observations as well as my own self-assessments, there are two major problems with my approach: 1) I corrected my students' pronunciation errors far less frequently than I thought I did. A five-minute video of my teaching second-year students shows that I consistently corrected grammar, but I only corrected four out of eighteen pronunciation errors. Often I sympathize with beginning-level students who struggle with the language at so many different levels, and therefore, I do not want to discourage them through constant correction. 2) The methods that I used to correct pronunciation errors are mostly recast, i.e., repeat the word with the pronunciation error corrected, and that did not address all types of errors effectively. For example, some students pronounced the tones of many words incorrectly not because they could not pronounce the tones correctly, but because they did not know which tones these words carry. Recast does not help them memorize proper tones for each word. Also, some brief instructions on how to pronounce certain difficult sounds (e.g., xue instead of shue) coupled with recast would ultimately be better than recast alone, since this method help change their habitual ways of mispronouncing certain sounds.

The purpose of my action research is to increase the quantity of pronunciation error corrections while not compromising the classroom atmosphere and to develop effective correcting techniques that correspond to different types of pronunciation errors along the way. I am going to carry out this action research in the fall of 2014 while teaching the first-semester of first-year students of Chinese.

II. Action Research Questions:

- 1) Does the teacher/researcher increase the number of times she corrects pronunciation errors in her teaching of first-year students over the first-semester? Do her students perceive her corrections as positive?
- 2) Does the teacher/researcher improve her techniques for correcting students' pronunciation errors in the process?

III. Review of Related Literature:

Lyster and Ranta (1997) identified six different corrective feedback strategies: explicit correction, recasts, clarification requests, metalinguistic information, elicitation, and repetition. Ajideh and FareedAghdam (2012) reported that recast was the most frequently used corrective strategy for phonological/phonetic errors made by the ESL learners in their study. However, they did not further categorize different types of pronunciation errors, and they did not examine the effectiveness of recast in relation to different types of pronunciation errors.

In my action research, I will adopt Lyster and Ranta's classification of corrective feedback strategies and hand movement which is commonly used by Chinese language teachers to visualize pitches of tones, and examine whether the strategies I myself employ effectively address my students' pronunciation errors, which now roughly fall into 1) vowel errors, 2) consonant errors, 3) tone errors, 4) combination of the previous kinds. After I have collected my data, I will be able to refine the error-type classification.

IV. Procedures:

Different models have been proposed in order to represent the action research process (Lewin, 1952; Kemmis, 1988; Stringer, 2004)). However, they all more or less characterize an action research as a spiraling cyclical process wherein each cycle contains the following essential components: 1) collect data, 2) analyze and interpret data, 3) design action step, and 4) implement the action.

Table 1: Methods of Data collection and analysis to address the action research questions

Action Research Questions	Data Collection Methods	Data Analysis/Evaluation
1. Increase quantity of pronunciation error corrections?	Classroom teaching videos	Count the percentage of correction among all pronunciation errors
2. Discourage students?	Students' questionnaires	Evaluate whether students perceive the correction positively
3. Effective techniques of correcting students' errors?	Classroom teaching videos and interview of students	Two experienced teachers and I review the videos and evaluate the effectiveness of the techniques; Check if the students can pronounce the wrong ones correctly after class

My action research will be conducted from the third week of class after the Pinyin system is introduced. It consists of three cycles and each cycle lasts for four weeks. Each cycle will end with a revised action plan to be implemented at the beginning of the next cycle. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the action plan of each cycle, the following data will be collected:

1) One-hour of in-class teaching will be video-taped. Two experienced teachers of Chinese will be invited to review the video along with me. We will calculate the percentage of my corrections among all pronunciation errors that the students make. We will also examine and discuss whether students' pronunciation errors are corrected successfully, which includes assessing whether or not the error is corrected by an effective method and whether or not a student can incorporate the change in his or her uptake, i.e., students' utterances following the correction.

2) Students' questionnaires will be collected in order to gather information on whether students themselves perceive the correction positively.

3) Two or three students who have been corrected in class will be randomly chosen for an interview a week after the class so as to evaluate the long-term effect of the correction.

V. Timeline:

Week 1 & 2: Introduction of Chinese sound system
 Brainstorm pronunciation error correction techniques
 Develop students' questionnaire

First Cycle:

Week 3 & 4: Collect data (i.e. video-taping class, collecting students' questionnaires, interviewing students)

Week 5: Data Analysis

Week 6: Come up with action plan 1

Second Cycle:

Week 7: Implement action plan 1

Week 8: Collect data

Week 9: Data Analysis

Week 10: Come up with actions plan 2

Third Cycle:

Week 11: Implement actions plan 2

Week 12: Collect data

Week 13: Analyze and interpret data

Week 14: Come up with action plan 3

Week 15: Start to write the report of action plan research

VI. Estimated Budget:

1. Compensation for transcribing classroom videos: $\$50 \times 3$ (hours) = \$150
2. Compensation of experienced teachers reviewing classroom videos: $\$50 \times 3$ (hours) $\times 2$ (people) = \$300
3. Photocopying of questionnaires: \$50

References:

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