



Chapter XVIII

Using an Interactive Feedback Tool to Enhance Pronunciation in Language Learning

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the effect of a learning environment in which biological, physical and technological ways of perceiving Mandarin Chinese sounds have been used. One of the most important tools of this environment is the use of a speech analysis tool for audio and visual feedback. This is done by way of incorporating a visual representation of student's production that can be easily compared to the speech of a native speaker. It is the contention of this chapter that such an interactive feedback tool in conjunction with other feedback mechanisms can provide opportunities for increasing the effectiveness of feedback in language learning.

Introduction

This chapter reports on an experiment of restructuring the learning environment using a variety of computer-enhanced language tools with the explicit aim of training students to perceive Mandarin (hereafter referred to as “MC”) sounds. It focuses on the effect of creating a learning environment in which biological, physical, and technological ways of perceiving MC sound have been taught to students. It is hoped that access to these different approaches to perception will help students to know how to better perceive MC sounds outside the classroom context. One of the most important parts of this environment is the use of a speech analysis tool for offering audio and visual feedback by way of incorporating a visual representation of student’s production that can be easily compared to the speech of a native speaker. It is the contention of this chapter that an interactive feedback tool such as this can provide opportunities for increasing the effectiveness of feedback in language learning. It is hoped that through the exploration of the results of this research, clearer directions on how this technology can be generalized to other learning contexts with other languages can emerge.

Critique of Various Ways of Teaching Pronunciation

Practitioners of both “traditional” and “modern” approaches of language teaching have generally acknowledged good pronunciation as a very important objective in learning a second language (L2). As perception is intricately connected to speech production, training to perceive sounds necessarily becomes an important part of language acquisition and good pronunciation acquisition. However, in the history of foreign language instruction, pronunciation has not always been regarded in this light.

The grammar translation method, which focuses almost entirely upon written texts, has always considered pronunciation nearly irrelevant. The cognitive code approach also de-emphasized pronunciation in favor of grammar and vocabulary, because it was thought in the late 1960s and early 1970s that native-like pronunciation could not be taught anyway (Scovel, 1969).

Subsequent approaches, however, put more emphasis on oral communication. For example, the direct method has claimed that pronunciation is very important and presents it via teacher modeling. This methodology assumes that sounds practiced in chorus or even individually will automatically be transformed into

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