

EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION OF POST-LEXICAL PROCESSES TO AID LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL¹ LANGUAGE

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“Syllables, words, sentences run together like a watercolor left in the rain.”

Bill Bryson

1. INTRODUCTION

Assuming that post-lexical processes significantly affect the English spoken language when in connected speech, and that this is one of the main reasons why students of English as an additional language find listening comprehension so difficult to cope with, this study investigated the connection between listening comprehension and the teaching of pronunciation using a top-down approach. That is to say, starting from the whole picture and based on the organization of the language in chunks in the fluidity of speech. This is an action-research, conducted with two groups of upper-intermediate students during one semester. It was based on the assumption that by raising students' awareness of post-lexical processes, with the support of the Lexical Approach

¹ I have chosen to use the term *additional language* rather than *foreign* or *second language* for the same reasons given by the International Academy of Education (IAE) “The term ‘foreign’ can, moreover, suggest strange, exotic or, perhaps, alien—all undesirable connotations. Our choice of the term ‘additional’ underscores our belief that additional languages are not necessarily inferior nor superior nor a replacement for a student’s first language.” (JUDD, Elliot L.; TAN, Lihua; WALBERG, Herbert J. 2001, p.6)

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(LEWIS, 1994, 1997) which encourages teaching language in chunks, teachers can help students to be better listeners.

By acknowledging the differences in form and character between spoken and written English, teachers could be helping learners to become aware of the fact that in the transition from written to spoken, English somehow turns into another language. Not only do pronunciation and spelling fight a continuous battle to dictate the norms upon which the words should adhere to, but also, and most importantly, connected speech processes significantly affect spoken language. This operation of merging word boundaries, to produce the stream of speech, gives rise to the rupture of the English language into a spoken and written form³. The written language is the one where word boundaries dictate the norms, whereas the spoken language does not conform to those rules as its pace needs to be much faster: words running over subsequent ones rendering a sort of domino effect.

This ‘fluidity’ in spoken language is produced by post-lexical processes⁴ - such as elision, assimilation, devoicing, lenition, insertion, among others - as well as change in stress, rhythm, intonation, and a variety of factors which make words pronounced in isolation rather different from when they are in the ‘stream of speech’. However, these factors are hardly ever shown to students learning an additional language. Our failure to do so is perhaps rooted in our strong tendency to think of language as written.

It is also noticeable that among the four skills – listening, writing, speaking and reading - listening tends to be rated by a great number of students as the most difficult to acquire. Most students struggle to deal with the idiosyncrasies of the spoken language as opposed to the written one. These peculiarities can be produced by the linking devices that engender the interwoven units of connected speech.

There is a gap, which must be bridged, between the teaching of pronunciation for spoken purposes only, and the teaching of listening with more emphasis on pronunciation features. These features affect not only students’ ability to put

³ Written and spoken language also differ in other features such as grammar and lexis.

⁴ According to Spencer (1996, p.201) “Post-lexical processes are phonological processes which are triggered solely by phonological structure, and which thus do not have lexical exceptions or morphological conditions. For this reason they are sometimes called automatic processes. Many of these processes operate across word boundaries or are affected by the phonological structure of a whole phrase, so they are often referred to as connected speech processes or phrasal phonology.”

their intended message across but also their ability to understand spoken English. This means that teaching pronunciation is much more about raising students' awareness of the idiosyncrasies of the spoken language, and enabling them to understand and produce intelligible language, rather than trying to make them sound like native speakers.

Moreover, most pronunciation teaching traditionally tends to be mainly at the segmental level, that is to say, teachers focus on phonemes and their articulation. For a long time pronunciation activities were limited to the teaching of contrast using minimal pairs (e.g. the contrast between *ship* and *sheep*) and word stress; as if being able to pronounce words in isolation accurately was all a learner needed to know as far as pronunciation is concerned. More recently, however, this focus has shifted to some more work at a supra-segmental level, including sentence stress and intonation. Such activities, which are frequently found in modern coursebooks together with work on phonemes and word stress, comprise the stock-in-trade of English pronunciation teaching. It is the 'whole picture', however, that has been left aside, as little work on the features of connected speech seems to have been done.

2. CONNECTED SPEECH

Connected speech is defined here as naturally occurring speech, language that is constructed as it is gradually delivered, "the inescapable fact of the real-time, step-by-step assembly of a spoken utterance" (BRAZIL, 1995, p.17). It is real language in action, it happens when the words run together in a string of spoken language, breaking their boundaries, turning into the amorphous mass of speaking. This 'blurring' of word frontiers establishes the major differences between spoken and written language. It is this considerable contrast that most teachers of additional languages fail to point out. As a result of such neglect, students' view of language tends to be focused on its written form only. (CRYSTAL, 2002)

The phonological processes that are the result of such rapid changes of the vocal organs when the words run together are: assimilation, elision, vowel shortening, linking and intrusive sounds, juncture, among others. These post-lexical processes are certain to occur in both formal and informal unscripted speech. According to Brown (1990, *apud* Shockey, 2003) there is little difference in phonological structure in different styles. The main difference between those two spoken registers are the lexical choice and the 'intensity', because informal speech tends to be less careful thus rendering more simplifications. This is so because such processes are automatic, working on a subconscious level.

The rate of delivery of the utterance, as one may expect, surely affects this fluidity of speech. However, according to Shockey (2003, p.14 to 19) other factors influence casual speech reduction, namely:

- Frequency - the more frequent a word is, the less it needs to be clarified phonetically to achieve communication status;
- Discourse – first mentions or focal mentions of a lexical item tend to be given a more complete articulation than its following repetitions;
- Syntactic functions – pronouns often show more reductions than nouns; short, frequent function words (of, and) are more likely to be shortened than longer ones (moreover, nevertheless);
- Morphological classes – in some dialects the morphological class of a word affects its realization;

It should be added to the above categories, the pronunciation of chunks, which are lexical items, “socially sanctioned independent units” (LEWIS, 1994, p.90) that could be made of one or lots of words together – thus belonging to discourse. Such expressions are used so often that sometimes their individual parts have got completely lost in its pronunciation form, having turned into an ‘unintelligible’ amorphous number of phonemes. This may leave non-native speakers completely at a loss, unless they have these expressions in their repertoire, and know their pronunciation as a chunk.

2.1 Rhythm and intonation

The English language overall rhythm is dictated by the placement of the nuclear stress, which holds the principal change of pitch⁵, and an alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. Stressed syllables are louder, longer, and with a higher pitch (thus more prominent) than the unstressed. The result is that stressed syllables tend to be clearer and are realized in their full phonetic value, that is to say, they are pronounced more comprehensibly whereas unstressed ones are shortened and tend to have a more obscure overall quality. This characteristic is common to each and every variety of L1 English. (UNDERHILL, 1994)

⁵ Underhill explains pitch (1994, p.76) as such: “The vocal chords vibrate during speech. This vibration is heard, and the pitch of this sound varies according to the frequency of the vibration of the cords: the higher the frequency of vibration the higher the pitch that you hear. When you sing a pitch or note you usually hold it for a time before jumping or sliding to the next note. But in speech the pitch of your voice varies continuously so that your speech is not heard as a tune. This pitch variation extends over single phonemes, sequences of phonemes, and whole utterances.”

Because of its overall rhythm, English tends to be called a stress-timed language as opposed to syllable-timed Portuguese. This division is a rather controversial issue that creates different opinions among experts. The idea of a stress-timed language comes from the belief that those languages follow some patterns that reoccur in established intervals of time. According to McCarthy (1996, p.91): “While this distinction may correspond to some strongly felt perception of the different characteristic rhythms of languages, there is little hard instrumental evidence for it. In fact, in recent years, quite a lot of convincing counter-evidence has been presented”. As a matter of fact, research in the area shows that the so-called stress-timed languages are not more rhythmical than the syllable-stressed ones. This feeling of ‘rhythmicality’ that the English language evokes may be due to the fact that one of its distinctive features is the contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables.

2.2 Word and Sentence Stress

When we talk about intonation two things arise: word stress and sentence stress. Together they dictate the rhythm of the language. Word stress or accent is defined by the language and therefore is totally out of the control of the speaker. Changing word stress will only make the words incomprehensible and break the communicative flow. In fact that is one of the main sources of comprehensibility break down.

Moreover, as Shockey (2003, p.16) points out, English is a ‘topic-comment’ language, that is, “the old information comes first, followed by the new.” Thus, the nuclear stress tends to fall towards the end of the utterance. This triggers another phenomenon which affects connected speech: the beginning of the utterance, not carrying the nuclear stress, tends to be spoken more quickly and less clearly than the end, unless the speaker wants to emphasize a word to convey specific information (SHOCKEY, 2003). This intelligibility problem contributes to increasing students’ anxiety as they panic, because they cannot cope with the beginning of the utterance, therefore, losing concentration and missing the whole thing. Hence, it is important to make students aware of this fact, so that they know that the message tends to be clearer towards the end, and that the ‘somehow obscure beginning’ is related to some information he/she already holds.

One cannot talk about stress without mentioning weak forms. They are the most unstressed part of the utterance: function words such as articles, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, etc. They are words which do not carry content information.

They might as well be left out like the words excluded in old-fashioned telegrams. In spite of this, the majority of students tend to give full value to those words, producing some spoken language that sounds formal and sometimes stilted. Moreover, when listening, they expect spoken language to do the same and end up lost when familiar words sound alien as they lose their strength.

Students need to be made aware of them and thus train their brains not to expect to hear every single word with the same strength in the fluidity of connected speech. They also need to know that they can get back their strength in certain situations. Much more than including this feature in their own speech, students need to recognize weak and strong forms, as failure to acknowledge them in connected speech is likely to cause communication breakdown. In fact, it is one of the main sources that lead to incomprehensibility, contributing to greater strain when trying to understand spoken language. As Brown (1990, p.56) points out: "From the point of view of the comprehension of spoken English, the ability to identify stressed syllables and make intelligent guesses about the content of the message from this information, is absolutely essential".

2.3 Post-Lexical Processes

There is a close relationship between words in a string of speech: they influence each other, conjoin to become almost one single word, let intrusive sounds come between them, reduce length, get stressed, elide the last sound of others, thereby interacting to form the fluid mass of spoken language. This relationship is somehow dictated by post-lexical processes which are, as Spencer (1996, p.200) states, automatic, entirely triggered by phonological structure.

Such processes are: assimilation - when sounds modify the quality of a neighboring phoneme in transforming some of its distinctive features⁶, elision - when sounds are deleted or elided, vowel reduction, liaison - when, as the name suggests, we link words or when an alien sound is introduced to smooth the connection between words in connected speech, intrusive sounds, juncture - when two words come together in such a way that it is nearly impossible to determine where one ends and the other starts, among others⁷. They are mostly responsible for the problems students face when trying to understand spoken language, especially when two or three of them happen at the same time, something that is bound to occur very frequently.

⁶ Distinctive features are a set of characteristics inherent to a phoneme, such as: nasal, voiced, bilabial (produced bringing the two lips together), etc.

⁷ I did not mention some of these processes such as aspiration, clear/dark /l/, retroflexion,

3. LISTENING COMPREHENSION

In real life, according to Doff (1993, p.198), there are basically two kinds of listening: ‘casual’ or ‘focussed’ listening. This author explains that in the former, we do not listen very closely and do not have any specific reason to do so. Thus, our attention span varies depending on what is being said. If it interests us, we concentrate more. Otherwise, we just skim through what is being said for the gist. This is the kind of comprehension we get when we are chatting to a friend or listening to the radio, or the television while doing something else. As for the latter, we listen with a purpose and therefore concentrate on the important information we want to get from it. We scan through what is being said to suit our purposes, be it for communication or to retain some important information.

In both cases, according to Rost (1990, p.33), we go through two stages in our way to understanding the message: the physical aspect/auditory perception, and the cognitive aspect/linguistic processing. Those stages happen almost simultaneously, because in the process of listening, there is not much time to process information as the flow of new speech acts keeps coming. Such stages require as much of the listener’s active performance as the speaker’s. Thus, we cannot call the listening skill a receptive skill only. It is the listener’s active processing of information that makes him/her understand the spoken language.

As Underwood (1993, p.2) states, although the act of listening takes place fairly quickly, it goes through stages: first the utterance is taken in by the listener and organized into chunks which remain in the ‘echoic’ memory for no more than a second. Following that, this raw material which has been roughly ‘processed’, is stored in the short-term memory. At this point, if the listener had not been able to segment the speech into meaningful chunks, he/she may not manage to take in the next piece of information that comes right after that. This segmentation of chunks is aided by the listener’s knowledge of the structure of the language, lexical range, and familiarity with the ways these chunks are pronounced in spoken language. Rost (1999, p.38) explains:

Listeners who anticipate hearing ideal pronunciations of words will have considerable difficulty in decoding connected speech since **all phonemes change their perceptual features in different phonetic environments**. As such, any ideal phoneme is an unrealistic standard against which to match heard forms. (ROST, 1999, p.38)

among others, because they do not influence much intelligibility as far as listening comprehension is concerned.

This is one of the major sources of oral communication breakdown when students are expecting to hear the words as if read aloud from a written text. As students' expectations do not match what is actually uttered, there is a battle between their knowledge of the language, which is based on the written form, and the spoken language that is being produced. This continual battle prevents students from understanding, rendering frustration and demotivation. The listening comprehension process is thus blocked before it can be analyzed for the gist or specific information and transferred to the long-term memory.

This process of analyzing information, when it is only raw material in the short term memory, is aided or hindered by the listener's ability to recognize chunks of language. "As the learner gets more used to listening, and has at the same time learned more of the language, he/she can process some often-heard chunks more or less automatically, thus leaving 'space' and energy to deal with the more difficult or less familiar input." (UNDERWOOD, 1993, p.2) That is when the main principle of the Lexical Approach (LEWIS, 1994) comes into play: language is not produced from scratch. We are not as creative as we tend to think, we use a wide range of formulaic set expressions to communicate. By raising students' awareness of those expressions, as well as the way they are pronounced in connected speech, we are equipping students with powerful tools to be better listeners.

Another essential factor to take into account is that throughout the process of listening comprehension, we 'hear' much more than it is actually there, especially those formulaic expressions. Some of these expressions, being so often uttered, have become an amorphous mass. We successfully make them out only because we understand the context and know in advance that they would be appropriate there. As Lass (1984, p.296/297) explains:

[...] the listener applies, in a CS [casual speech] situation, all his knowledge of linguistic structure: syntax and morphology, semantics and lexis – as well as pragmatic cues – and finally, of course phonology. And he approaches the task of interpretation, under normal conditions, with the expectation that messages make sense, and he does his best to ensure it. [...] So the speaker listens not to what it is - strictly – being said, but to what his knowledge of the basic structure of the language tells him ought to be being said. (LASS, 1984, p.296/297)

Taking this into consideration, we can somehow understand an advanced learner's problem whose command of the language is very good, but has trouble with listening comprehension. It may be that, in spite of the fact that their syntactic, morphological, semantic, lexical, and pragmatic knowledge of the target language is considerable, their phonological understanding of the spoken language

needs improvement. As Rost (1999, p. 33) says: “the intelligibility of what is heard is reciprocally linked with the interpretability of what is heard through cognitive effects as the listener attends to speech.” Thus, we cannot separate the two stages - the auditory perception and the linguistic processing - as one merges into the other throughout the whole process of understanding. As in connected speech, there are no boundaries: one cannot identify where the physical process ends or the cognitive starts.

Another significant factor to include is the co-text, as Underwood (1993, p.3) says:

One important part of this overall situational context in which the listener places what he/she hears is, in Brown and Yule’s terms, the ‘co-text’, which they define as ‘whatever has already been said in a particular event’. It is by placing what follows in relation to what has already been said (either by the current speaker or by other speakers) that the listener establishes the speaker’s meaning. (UNDERWOOD,1993)

Having said that, if asked what makes listening difficult, most students are bound to say that people speak too fast so they cannot understand each and every word as they would like to. In fact, this was what a great number of students from this research said when asked this question. They also mentioned their inability to cope with familiar words in connected speech, problems with lexis (especially idioms and slang), and difficulty in concentrating and remembering what had been said. Only 5.2% of the students mentioned pronunciation and 2.6% accent.

What students do not realize is that most of the problems they mention have an intrinsic relationship with pronunciation. The impression that native speakers speak too fast, is due to pronunciation features, such as assimilation, liaison, weak forms, elision, etc, those simplifications of the spoken language which give the idea that connected speech goes at an incredibly fast pace. As for their inability to cope with familiar words in connected speech, this is also explained with the help of phonology, especially as there is a tendency for words to appear in spoken language in chunks. Formulaic expressions that have been turned into a block of spoken language sound very different from when their components are spoken as isolated words.

When not aware of the fact that language is produced in chunks, students tend to try to hear each and every word. This can lead to loss of concentration and tiredness. Talking about this problem, Underwood (p.19, 1993) says that “sometimes, even when the topic is interesting, students simply find listening work very tiring, because they make an enormous effort (often greater than is useful) to follow what they hear word by word.” It is the role of the teacher to

raise students' awareness of such chunks and formulaic expressions, and develop students' ability to recognize them, even when part of it somehow disappears in connected speech.

Apart from these factors mentioned above, there are certainly others that can hinder listening comprehension, such as accent, register, regional idioms, jargons, lack of cultural knowledge, concentration, among others. There is also the amount of information as opposed to the amount of time one needs to process such data, and the fact that spoken language is not always well organized. However, as this research focusses mainly on pronunciation, these factors are not discussed here.

4. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative action-research of pedagogical intervention and of an experimental type. The data for this study was collected from the tests, questionnaires, interviews, some exercises from the English File Upper-intermediate coursebook⁸, and activities especially devised to raise students' awareness of the post-lexical processes in the English language. These activities were applied in lessons taught in one semester to one of the two chosen groups.

To establish the groups' level of proficiency in the listening skill, the Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE)⁹ listening test was used as a diagnostic test. This is one of the tests of the main suite of international exams devised by the University of Cambridge – Cambridge Assessment. One such test was carried out at the beginning of the semester, and two others at the end in order to attempt to assess students' performance development. Cambridge produces past examination papers to be used for practice when preparing students for their exams, the listening tests to which students were submitted were taken from such papers. The choice of an FCE listening test was due to their internationally respected standards in preparation and production, ensuring consistency in level between the first and the last test in this research.

They did the whole listening test, however, for the subject of this research, the grades were given considering their performance in Part 2 only. This is because this part tests candidates' abilities to listen for specific information whereas the others focus on gist and also assess students' interpretative skills. It

⁸ English File Upper-intermediate, (OXENDEN and LATHAN-KOENIG, 2001). From now onwards when students' course book is mentioned, that is the one.

⁹ This exam is now called B2 First.

is in part two that candidates need to have the ability to break up the fluidity of connected speech into chunks to find specific information. The straightforward simplicity of filling gaps with information that comes in the same order of the text makes part two a very reliable assessment tool to measure students' abilities to understand connected speech. Such information is precise, if they do not manage to understand the very moment it is uttered, they will not have another chance. It is pure understanding of words embedded in connected speech, and it is considered by the majority of the students who are preparing for the test, the most difficult part. Statistically, at least from my experience with this test, this part is the one which students score the lowest.

The students in this research were in their first year of the upper-intermediate course, which means at least two years behind the required level to do the FCE exam. Undoubtedly, this would be a challenge for them. Therefore, their performance was expected to be weak, as scoring low at the beginning would make room for improvement at the end.

The description of the groups and the students came from a questionnaire which they answered after taking the listening test. The information about the questions some of the students left unanswered was collected on an individual basis in subsequent lessons. At the end of the semester, students from the experimental group gave a short, filmed interview, and then talked about what they had gained from the experiment.

Two groups took part in this research: the Experimental Group, with whom I tried the experiment in order to test my hypothesis, and the Control Group with whom I worked in following the coursebook without applying any activity related to pronunciation awareness connected to listening skills. I tested both groups listening abilities at the beginning and at the end of the semester. The results of the first test determined the choice of the group I was going to apply the experiment to: I chose the one which was weakest at listening. It also helped measure the groups' listening abilities (diagnostic test), and provide data to be used at the end of research when comparing students' improvement in listening comprehension.

The Experimental Group (19 students) attended lessons every Friday morning for two hours and ten minutes. In this group there were mostly women (79%) and the average age was higher than the Control Group. The majority of students (63.15%) were adults ranging from 22 to 37 years old. The Control Group (20 students) had lessons on Monday and Wednesday afternoon for one hour and fifteen minutes each. This group was younger, mostly teenagers, ages

ranging from 15 to 20 years old (80%), with a slightly higher number of men (55%) than women (45%).

For most of the students, English was their first and only additional language. There were two students (10.6%) in the Experimental Group who said they spoke Spanish. In the Control Group nobody spoke any other language apart from English and Portuguese (their native language). There was only one student studying another additional language (French) and at a pre-intermediate level. There were only three English teachers¹⁰, two in the Experimental Group and one in the Control one. The teachers were not experienced, and none of them had worked with phonology in their classes or had ever done a course which included pronunciation. Hence, we can say that in none of the groups students had recourse to previous knowledge of phonology or of another language to perform better when doing listening tasks.

This illustrates the lack of pronunciation teaching in general: in private language schools, teachers are either intimidated by the phonemic chart or too busy covering the syllabus, with the effect that pronunciation is left aside as an incidental issue, coming up only when a student mispronounces a word. In general schooling, the subject is not even tackled as the major focus is on reading skills. Moreover, being a topic considered difficult by a vast majority of teachers, it is, most of the time, deliberately avoided.

The lessons I taught with the Experimental Group took place within a semester, which made 13 meetings, not counting the regular tests and revisions, nor the first and last listening tests. These 13 meetings of two hours and ten minutes were all I had to cover a very tight timetable and incorporate a variety of pronunciation exercises which had not been officially included in the syllabus. The Control Group had the course standard lessons with the occasional pronunciation activities which are part of their coursebook. However, they were assessed with the FCE listening test at the beginning and the end of the semester for comparison with the other group.

The main difference between the lessons conducted with the groups is the fact that the Experimental Group was given explicit instruction on pronunciation matters to aid listening comprehension, whereas the Control Group was just exposed to the language without prior work on pronunciation. The term 'explicit' may give a false impression that the rules should be given to the students mechanically without much thinking. However, this explicit instruction can be

¹⁰ I am considering teachers who taught English either at primary or secondary state or private schools, as well as teachers who gave private lessons.

done either deductively or inductively. Deduction is the most traditional¹¹ way where teachers present the rules before looking at the language itself. Induction is where students are encouraged to formulate those rules by themselves. This can be done through discovery activities with the aim of developing an awareness that will help students improve their understanding of how the language works by using their reasoning processes. This makes students understand that language is analyzable, as they can look for regularities themselves, and that they can benefit from their attempt to make sense of how it works.

The lessons taught to the Experimental Group took both a deductive and an inductive approach depending on the complexity of the phonological process involved. It was one of the aims of the study to find out to what extent this explicit instruction of some of the phonological features of connected speech, be it deductive or inductive, enabled learners to be better listeners.

Students in both groups did not have much contact with the English language outside the classroom, only 5.2% stated that they had someone in their immediate family with whom they spoke in English regularly. A total of four students (10.4%) did not answer this question. As for contact with native speakers, an overwhelming majority (94.8%) said that they never or hardly ever had face-to-face conversations or talked on the phone with them (100%). Apart from films, which they all watched with subtitles in Portuguese, songs and the occasional chat on the internet, mostly through writing, these students were in touch with the spoken language only when at the language school. Hence, they had to rely a lot on classroom time for exposure to the target spoken language, which made the development of their listening skills a challenging task.

Besides the minimum contact the students had with native speakers outside the classroom, their experience within an English environment was almost non-existent. Only 7.2% had ever been to an English-speaking country and only for a short time. The majority (87.6%) had never experienced being immersed in the target language culture or interacted with a native speaker in their environment. Their input came almost exclusively from films and songs, where they played the passive role of outside observers. Therefore, they could not have relied on such experience to improve their listening abilities.

Confirming the assumption that, in general, students find the listening skill the most difficult, 69.2% of all students stated that of the four skills listening was

¹¹ Although I used the term ‘traditional’ here, it is important to point out the fact I do not mean the memorization of rules disconnected from context, but the fact that those rules are made explicit to the students.

the hardest to master. Among these students, there were 50% in the control group, and a huge majority of 89.5% in the experimental group. As far as their listening competence was concerned, 74.4% of all the students did not consider their listening skills in the target language satisfactory, the figures being 94.7% for the experimental group as opposed to only 30% for the control group. This fact, together with the first FCE listening test result, determined the choice of groups when deciding with which of them the experiment would be carried out. It was clear that the students in the experimental group needed to work to improve their listening skills.

The fast delivery of connected speech was rated as the feature of spoken language that rendered it hard to understand by 36.8% of the experimental group as opposed to only 10% of the control group - 23.1% of all the students. Following this came the ability to understand every single word, together with lexis (idioms and slang), rated by 17.9% of the students in general.

None of the students had ever done any pronunciation course. In general, students' contact with pronunciation was restricted to the incidental explanation in class and some rudimentary overview of the phonemic chart from exercises on individual phonemes done in class throughout the course.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS

As previously mentioned, the results of the diagnostic test helped me decide on the group I should apply the experiment to. The group whose students had the lowest mark in the test was chosen. This group was henceforth called the *Experimental Group*. In fact, this group's overall performance in part 2 of the test was 5.6% as opposed to 27% in the other group - namely the *Control Group*. As for the Experimental Group overall performance in the whole diagnostic test, it was very poor, only 19.4% as opposed to 42.5% in the Control Group.

Looking more closely at the performance of both groups in part two, where students had to manage to single out 10 words in the string of speech, we can clearly see the difference in performance between them (see Table 5.1). The Control Group far outperformed the Experimental one. Considering that this test is way above their level – and that the average student should be ready to do it only after another two years of language lessons¹², the performance of some students (35.29%) in the Control Group was outstanding¹³.

¹² This is due to the fact that they are not in an English-speaking environment.

¹³ The average grade to pass this exam is 60%. The students who obtained 4 to 6 correct answers, four semesters short of taking the exam, and manage to keep those standards, would be expected to perform brilliantly in the actual test.

Table 5.1 – Comparison of groups’ performance in part 2 of the Cambridge FCE Listening Test.

GROUPS	Number of correct words out of 10						
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6 (pass mark)
Experimental (Number of students out of 16)	9 (56.25%)	5 (31.25%)	2 (12.5%)	-	-	-	-
Control (Number of students out of 17)	2 (11.76%)	3 (17.64%)	4 (23.53%)	2 (11.76%)	3 (17.64%)	1 (5.88%)	2 (11.76%)

As for students’ feedback after the test, there was not much difference between the two groups. Both groups considered the test either difficult or extremely difficult. Only two students in the Control Group found it not so difficult. However, the difference between the two groups in their attitudes towards listening was remarkable. The Experimental Group, in general, felt intimidated by it, whereas the Control Group, in general, did not feel much anxiety when having to face a listening task. This was the first change that I noticed in the Experimental Group. As the semester went by, this group was feeling more and more at ease with listening tasks. Maybe this was due to two different factors. First, I made them do more of these tasks than they had ever done before, and that forced familiarity which helped diminish their anxiety towards them. Second, by attempting to understand spoken language through pronunciation awareness exercises, students started to get over the feeling of helplessness towards a listening task.

From my experience as a language teacher, I have noticed that when pressed by a time constraint, teachers tend to skip listening tasks in favour of grammatical points that will certainly be covered in the test. Worse still is formal¹⁴ pronunciation activities, which are completely forgotten when one does not have much time to cover the entire syllabus. Moreover, the time constraint is a big issue for those groups that meet only once a week. That was my first feeling of accomplishment, when I realized that I had managed to slot in those extra listening and pronunciation exercises in spite of being pressed for time. I then perceived that not only is it possible to include more listening activities in the lessons, but also some formal pronunciation teaching, without impairing the teaching of grammar and lexis. This was an issue that had worried me when I first thought about doing this experiment with this particular group.

¹⁴ By formal I mean not incidental, as most pronunciation practice tends to happen because a student mispronounced a word or the teacher wants to focus on difficult words, etc.

In fact we managed time so well, due to students' cooperation as they had become so highly engaged in the project, that I had an entire lesson to administer the final FCE listening test with the Experimental Group. This was when I made my biggest mistake. I decided to award this group an episode of the sitcom *Friends* before doing the actual test. To make matters worse, I did so without letting them have subtitles in English. That was because I wanted them to feel that they were able to understand spoken English without the help of the written captions.

Students were quite happy to have understood a lot of the episode. However, after thirty minutes of undivided attention, as they made a great effort to try to understand everything, their attention span went down considerably, thus affecting their concentration when doing the actual listening test. I realized this when they started complaining about tiredness even at the beginning of the test. I should not have persuaded them to do this listening test. As for the Control Group, I had done the test fifteen minutes after the lesson had begun, just to give some time for the late comers to arrive.

The result of this first final listening test, as far as the Experimental Group was concerned, was rather discouraging, as students' performance, albeit improved, did not live up to my expectations. This group went from an overall performance of 19.4% to 28.3% in the whole test. In part 2 they obtained 17.8%, as opposed to 5.6% in their diagnostic test. I was disappointed because such improvement would be expected after one regular semester working with the groups in a traditional way, without much emphasis on pronunciation exercises. The only other noteworthy factor is the students' feedback on the test, as not many of them found the test extremely difficult: 43.75% of the students in the diagnostic test compared to 28.57% in the first final test.

As for the Control Group, their results were as expected, a slight increase in listening abilities after one semester's work. What is noticeable is that the students found the test less difficult than the first one: 64.7% had rated the diagnostic test as difficult, contrasted with 21.47% in this first final test. Comparing the 12.2% improvement in the Experimental Group (for part 2) with 11.6% in the Control Group, one may catch a glimpse of the importance of teaching pronunciation awareness exercises in order to improve listening skills. However, this is not enough to validate the claim that such exercises did help those students improve their listening comprehension. This was my first feeling when I calculated the results of this first final test.

Nevertheless, from my experience as a teacher, I knew that one of the facts that hinder students' performance in listening comprehension is lack of

concentration, which is something that is vital to the whole process. Motivated by this thought, and the incident that had happened to the Experimental Group, namely the loss of concentration because of tiredness, I decided to do a second final test¹⁵. This time I gave the test to both groups fifteen minutes after the beginning of the class. Not surprisingly, the results were significantly different.

Now the Experimental Group's performance was outstanding, 45% in part two as opposed to 5.6% and 17.8% in the diagnostic and the first final test respectively. Looking closer at their performance, I could see that those pronunciation awareness exercises did play an important role in developing those students' ability to understand spoken language. In part 2 of the second final test, 12 out of 16 students (an overwhelming 75%) performed satisfactorily. They got between 4 to 8 correct words out of ten (among those, three students got the pass mark or above), which, considering their level and the standard of the FCE listening test, is quite an accomplishment. As for the Control Group, although they performed slightly worse than in the first final test, the overall differences in part two were not substantial: 33.8% as opposed to 27% and 38.6% in the diagnostic and the first final tests respectively. Looking closer at their performance, what stands out is the fact that there was not a considerable change in their ability to understand spoken language. They maintained their level throughout the semester, improving only what would be expected.

This conclusion is even more evident when we compare both groups' performance¹⁶ (see Table 5.2), and their diagnostic test results to their best performance (see graphic 1). The difference between the two groups' improvement is noticeable.

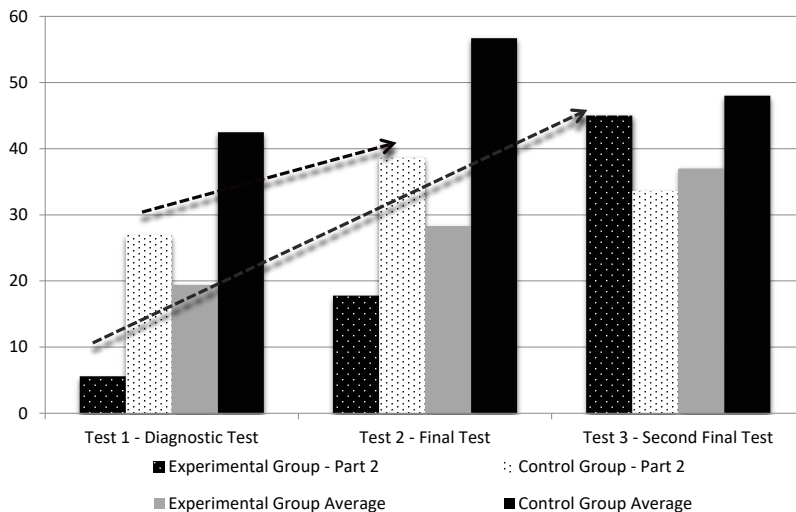
Table 5.2 – Comparing students' performance between the diagnostic test and the average of the first and second final test.

GROUPS	DIAGNOSTIC TEST		FIRST and SECOND FINAL TEST AVERAGE		IMPROVEMENT	
	Part 2	overall	Part 2	overall	Part 2	overall
Experimental	5.6%	19.4%	31.4%	32.65%	25.8%	13.25%
Control	27%	42.5%	36.1%	52.35%	9.1%	9.85%

¹⁵ It is important to point out that the tests which were administered with the groups were exactly the same, that is to say, the same diagnostic test to both groups, the same first final and the same second final test. By doing so, I was making sure students from different groups had exactly the same level of difficulty in each test.

¹⁶ In order to be more accurate, I decided, to use the average grade of the first and the second test as a basis for comparison with the diagnostic test in spite of the fact that the results of the students in the Experimental Group may have been impaired by students' lack of concentration.

Graphic 1 – Comparing students’ performance between the diagnostic test and their best performance in the final tests.



From the students’ recorded statements, it was evident that nearly all of them considered that this experience helped them develop their listening as well as speaking skills. It was also mentioned that those exercises helped reduce anxiety when facing a listening task. Another important point, touched on by a lot of students, is the fact that they were listening to ‘real language’ for the very first time. They said that this experience finally linked them to the way real language is spoken. Interestingly enough, their coursebooks are full of conversations, and its listening tasks are supposed to be based on real language.

Two different inferences may be drawn from this information: firstly, students somehow subconsciously understand that written and spoken language are different, so by becoming more aware of how spoken language works, they had the feeling of getting in touch with it for the very first time. Secondly, as Michael Lewis’ Lexical Approach claims, we are not teaching real language to our students, but some prescriptive language disguised in so-called communicative tasks. It is about time we started facing up to language the way it happens in real life, and stopped simplifying it unnecessarily.

5.1 Research Conclusions

The main aim of this study was to investigate the connection between listening comprehension and pronunciation. Based on the assumption that spoken

and written English are very different, and that most of the problems students have with listening comprehension is due to this difference, this study looked into phrasal phonology, searching for the main features that make word boundaries unrecognizable, thereby resulting in the blur of connected speech. It was assumed that this gap between spoken and written language, as far as listening comprehension is concerned, could be bridged by the explicit instruction of some pronunciation features of connected speech. Therefore, activities specially made to develop students' awareness of the underlying rules that govern streamed speech, were applied to a group of upper-intermediate students in order to find out if they could benefit from such activities to become better listeners.

When doing such pronunciation tasks, some comparisons were made between English and Portuguese, which is the students' mother tongue, concerning voice-setting, rhythm, intonation, syllables, and vowel and consonant sounds. By doing so, I wanted to find out if, with the help of students' L1 providing some familiar ground to fall back on for support, students would understand the phonological features of the target language better, thus turning mother tongue from hindrance to support.

Although not using specific exercises but following the main premise of the Lexical Approach, the teaching of language in chunks in tandem with their pronunciation was also investigated to see if it would help students deal more efficiently with the interwoven units of connected speech.

The results, in general terms, point to the teaching of pronunciation awareness raising exercises as a powerful tool to aid listening comprehension. The students from the Experimental Group, who were explicitly instructed on pronunciation matters, outperformed the ones in the Control Group, even though they had been the weakest at the listening skill at the beginning of the semester. Their results in the final listening test were outstanding.

Having said that, when looking back at the exercises I did with the students throughout the semester, I realize that although such activities helped students develop a greater awareness of the phonological system of the language, it was my attitude as a teacher that made all the difference. It helped students view the language from an entirely different perspective. By attitude, I mean the way I always incorporated a 'pinch' of pronunciation into every activity, be it lexical or grammatical. This may have helped students understand that language is holistic, and that pronunciation plays an important role in it. It was those short moments of explicit instruction together with the pronunciation exercises done in the lessons that promoted better understanding of the language.

I consider this conclusion, the fact that it is the teachers' attitude towards pronunciation that needs to be changed, as one of the most important findings from this study. This may sound rather simplistic or obvious, but what I mean here, is that no matter how many pronunciation exercises the teacher incorporates in his/her lessons, if he/she does not understand that the scope of pronunciation should encompass the whole language lesson - drawing students attention to stress, prominence, writing the spoken version of a new lexical item on the board in phonemic transcription, making pronunciation a living presence throughout the lesson - he/she will not be fostering students' understanding of the spoken language and its idiosyncrasies.

It is certainly the respect that the learners have for the written form that somehow prevents them from understanding that the spoken form takes a rather different shape. The use of the IPA symbols helped students visualize language and thus look at it from a new perspective. I noticed that when my students were able to 'see' spoken language and understand the processes such spoken language had gone through because of connected speech, they stepped forward to overcoming the fear of helplessness towards a listening comprehension task.

It was as if they had finally realized that it was not entirely their fault that they sometimes could not understand what was being said, but the problem was the intricacies of connected speech which made words so diverse from their citation form. This understanding helped boost their confidence and may help students feel more at ease in asking for clarification when interacting with another speaker. In fact, I realized that students tend to put their failure down to understanding spoken language through their own inability as learners, when it could be the failure of teacher training courses which do not instruct teachers on helping students 'see' and understand the regularities of some pronunciation features of spoken language. By concentrating on what really causes communication breakdown, teachers can reduce learners' workload as well as the level of anxiety which is so often connected with speaking and listening skills.

Teachers' negative attitude towards pronunciation reflects the lack of formal training on the subject. It is about time we considered the teaching of pronunciation as important as grammar and lexis in teacher development courses, for it is a fundamental part of the language, influencing deeply its communicative scope.

As for listening itself, the importance of the post-listening phase should be emphasized. It is when all the problems concerning communication breakdown can be dealt with, and to prevent it from happening again for the same reason. Those post-listening phases were a constant in the group I applied the

pronunciation exercises to, and the students' feedback on what made them not understand or misunderstand specific utterances, made them process the language more carefully, thus getting more familiar with the features of connected speech.

Another important fact to point out about listening from this research is that this skill is not what we tend to think it is. That is to say, we do not need to understand every single word of what people tell us. In reality, what actually is said is sometimes far different from what is being understood. We reconstruct the incomplete oral information using our knowledge of phonetics, syntax, grammar and lexis. What we think we listen to is not always exactly what was uttered. This is even more evident when we have a closer look at formulaic expressions which somehow get lost in the fluidity of speech. Teachers should draw students' attention to the fact that language works in chunks and that the pronunciation of those chunks in spoken language can be simplified so much that it turns into an amorphous mass, extremely different from its written form. Students also need to start to get a grip on tone units, which is the starting of understanding the rhythm of the language.

Moreover, an awareness of those formulaic expressions, together with knowledge of collocations facilitates the learner's task of processing spoken language. The process of listening comprehension for native speakers is boosted by their ability to predict what piece of language comes next. Such an ability is also based on their knowledge of those chunks and collocations. I experienced this when I had to transcribe my students' recorded feedback on the experiment. As they spoke in Portuguese, which is my mother tongue, I should not have had any problem understanding what was being said. However, sometimes I had to listen to it over and over again, and it was my knowledge of the way Portuguese works that helped me make out those unintelligible instances.

As for explicit instruction, the results in this study suggest that in attempting to unveil the complexities of speech production, the explicit teaching of pronunciation features of connected speech do help students cope more efficiently with spoken language. It also helps students notice some differences between their mother tongue and the target language, diminishing the former's interference over the latter. Moreover, explicit instruction draws students' attention to some features of the language that would otherwise be overlooked. By preventing students from understanding those underlying regularities within the language, teachers are undervaluing a powerful tool of language teaching.

Finally, this study has shown that the principle that spoken language is different from written form, should be acknowledged in the classroom. It is a fact

that more recently, there has been an increasing interest in the spoken language in general. The publishing of some books on the subject, has drawn ELT attention to this difference as well as left some doors ajar to further research in this area. Together with this intensified inquisitiveness about spoken language, pronunciation features, if looked into with a more holistic view, may start to get their own deserved place in language teaching.

This study has just tried to shed some light on this issue, and to make teachers more aware of its importance. Further studies on phrasal phonology and prosody will certainly open an array of possibilities for the teaching of additional languages.

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