PROSODY TEACHING MATTERS IN DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS FOR FARSI-ENGLISH INTERPRETER TRAINEES: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT: *The present study investigates the effect of explicit teaching of prosody on developing speaking skills for Farsi-English interpreter trainees. Two groups of student interpreters were formed. All were native speakers of Farsi who studied English translation and interpreting at the BA level at Tafresh University, Iran. Participants were assigned to groups at random, but with equal division between genders (6 female and 6 male students in each group). No significant differences in English language skills (TOEFL scores) could be established between the groups. Participants took a pretest before starting the program. The control group listened to authentic audio tracks in English and discussed their contents, watched authentic English movies, discussed issues in the movies and other hot topics, in pairs in the classroom. The experimental group spent part of the time on theoretical explanation of, and practical exercises with, prosodic features of English. The total instruction time was the same for both groups, i.e. 21 hours. Students then took a posttest in speaking skills. The results show that the prosodic feature awareness training significantly improved the students' speaking skills. These results have pedagogical implications for curriculum designers, interpreting programs for training future interpreters, material producers and all who are involved in language study and pedagogy.*

KEYWORDS: Speaking Skills, Prosody, Interpreter Trainees, Curriculum Designers

INTRODUCTION

Speaking skills are among the most important skills in communicating the message in the execution of the process of interpreting (Zaremba 2014). Well-developed speaking skills enable interpreters to communicate effectively when performing their job. Moreover, Osborn et al. (2008) point out that effective speaking skills result in achievements not only in specific job activities but also in success at other business and personal purposes. Goh (2007) also holds that developing speaking skills for EFL students results in better academic achievement. In order to develop speaking skills, EFL leaners need to be taught language features. An important element would the acquisition of an adequate pronunciation by the learners (Saunders & O'Brien 2006). In similar vein, Harmer (2001) states that EFL learners should explicitly be taught the linguistic features in order to acquire successful communication skills (reported in Derakhshan et al. 2016). Derakhshan et al. (2016) also maintain that, in EFL contexts, speaking skills are among the most important components of successful communication. Therefore, they asserted that this issue demands special attention and that EFL instructors should make an effort to come up with an appropriate methodology for developing effective speaking skills in their learners.

According to Levelt (1989) one of the most important aspects of speaking is the articulation of words and sentences, a process which would be called 'pronunciation'. Busa (2008) holds that in instruction of English as an International Language pronunciation should receive a specific position. She believes that successful communication depends on mutual intelligibility and that pronunciation is the fundamental factor in making speech intelligible when speakers from different linguistic backgrounds interact. Saunders & O'Brien (2006) also hold that pronunciation is the most important element in oral proficiency. But pronunciation is treated as an "orphan" in EFL programs (Gilbert 1994, 2010).. Elliot (1997) holds that instructors view pronunciation not as a practical language skill and it is sacrificed so that instructors would have more time to work on the other areas of language teaching. Elliot also states that the acquisition of sound systems for EFL learners has not received sufficient attention in Europe and North America and that this area deserves much more systematic investigation.

Goh (2007) states that pronunciation has the major role in intelligibility of the speech since mispronunciation would lead to misunderstanding in some cases, especially wrong allocation of stress and intonation patterns which would result in different interpretations (reported in Wang 2014). In EFL curricula pronunciation teaching is included in most cases as a part of the program but in practice it is not addressed systematically (Levis 2005). Similarly, Gilakjani (2012) states that poor pronunciation skills in speaking negatively affect learners' self-confidence, social interactions and as a result negatively influences the EFL learning process. The other issue is that instructors are not proficient enough in teaching pronunciation; therefore, they lack a systematic perspective when dealing with EFL learners' pronunciation problems (Derwing & Munro 2005; Levis 2005, Yenkimaleki 2016). Munro and Derwing (1999) point out that prosodic errors affect intelligibility much more than segmental errors. Supporting this perspective, Schaetzel (2009) asserts that prosodic features of language are important to the comprehension of the message and it is advisable to incorporate prosodic awareness training in training programs (O'Brien 2004; Bailly & Holm, 2005; Gauthier et al. 2009; Yenkimaleki 2016; Yenkimaleki & Van Heuven 2016a,b). O'Brien (2004) has the same perspective towards this issue. She ran an experimental study for Americans learning German and concluded that prosodic features awareness training had much more impact on improving pronunciation than teaching segmentals. In another study by Gordon et al. (2013), with 30 participants, this perspective was confirmed. They concluded that the experimental group, which received explicit teaching of prosodic features, produced speech which was more comprehensible than that of the group which did not receive the treatment.

Field (2005) concluded from an experimental study that prosodic features of the language would play a major role in the comprehension of the message. He asked participants to transcribe recorded materials but he manipulated the word stress and the vowel quality of the materials. He concluded that by shifting the word stress erroneously to unstressed syllables without a change in vowel quality the utterances became less intelligible than when only vowel quality was manipulated. Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) point out that prosodic features determine the meaning and they should have much more prominent position in EFL speaking skills development. However, Van Heuven (2008) has a somewhat different perspective on this issue. He believes that prosody is fully redundant in connected speech and is only used when the segmental information is faulty or unreliable. He further states that unreliable segmental information is what we find in non-native speech (when heard by native listeners, or non-natives who do not have the same native language background as the speaker), in

which case the word prosody becomes more important. He maintains that when "communication suffers from noise, prosody fulfills the role of a safety catch" (p: 56). Wang et al. (2011) reiterate this perspective. They show experimentally that the role of prosody becomes evident when the segmental quality in the speech is degraded as a result of foreign accent, noise or electronic distortion.

Adams-Goertel (2013) states that through prosodic feature awareness training EFL learners can improve their pronunciation skills to speak in a more native-like fashion. Adams-Goertel also believes that it is necessary to incorporate prosody teaching with meaningful communication tasks so that EFL learners' pronunciation skills develop. Adams-Goertel furthermore states that prosodic features even though are the most difficult issues to teach in the classroom, but they are fundamental aspects for the second language learners to acquire.

Therefore, considering the results of recent studies on effectiveness of teaching prosodic features for EFL learners, we need to investigate this domain systematically in wider contexts with different participants so that this issue can be elaborated in depth and the results can be incorporated in interpreter training programs so that the next generation of interpreters will be more proficient. Therefore, we concretely asked the following research question:

Does explicit teaching of prosody yield better speaking skills for Farsi-English interpreter trainees?

Our expectation is that explicit teaching of English prosody enhances the development of speaking skills for interpreter trainees.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Twenty four student interpreter trainees at the BA level who were majoring in interpreting and translation studies at Tafresh University in Iran were chosen randomly to participate in this study. They were randomly divided into two classes of 12 students that each incorporated 6 male and 6 female students. The participants were native speakers of Farsi with an age range of 18-20 years. They participated in all sessions of the training.

Procedure

The participants were divided into control and experimental groups through the application of systematic random sampling. The control group received routine exercises, asking them to listen to authentic audio tracks in English and speaking about the issues brought up in the audio tracks. They also watch authentic movies and discussed the contents of the movie or talked about some proposed hot topic, in pairs in the classroom. The experimental group spent less time on these tasks and instead received awareness training of English prosody tin the form of theoretical explanation by the instructor and practical exercises in prosody for 20 minutes during each training session. The participants took part in the program for 14 sessions (ninety minutes per session) in four weeks, i.e. 21 hours in all.

At the beginning of the program all the participants took a pretest of general English proficiency. The test battery was the standard Longman's TOEFL English proficiency test, with separate modules testing the learner's (i) Listening comprehension, (ii) Reading comprehension and (iii) Structure and writing skills. Then, the control group and experimental group took a pretest of speaking skill so that their basic level of speaking skill could be assessed before they received any type of training.

The control group spent 980 minutes in all doing speaking exercises and tasks in the classroom as explained above, while the, instructor monitored the discussion and provided feedback whenever needed. Moreover, both the control group and the experimental group listened to 280 minutes to the Iranian instructor who explained how to do exercises and also provided feedback in pair discussions and in doing speaking tasks in the classroom. The experimental group altogether spent 700 minutes on speaking exercises and tasks which were the same as those of the control group. Additionally, the experimental group received 280 minutes of English prosody awareness training and did exercises based on the explanations of prosodic matters.

In all the sessions, at different times, formative tests were administered to the participants in order to measure their progress and to diagnose problems on the part of the participants. Then, the control group and experimental group took a posttest on speaking skill so that the effect of treatment could be assessed. Both pretest and posttest were interviews which were run systematically by three lecturers at the interpreting and translation department of Tafresh University so that to evaluate the participants speaking skills. The interviewer used a speaking assessment sheet which addressed four components: comprehensibility, pronunciation, grammar/word order and vocabulary. The latter two rating scales were not the focus of this study but they were included as a sanity check on the specificity of the treatment: grammar and vocabulary skills should not be affected by prosody awareness training. The range of scores for each component was between 0-5. Therefore, the range of scores for each participant was between 0-20 in the rating scale.

Data analysis

In order to see whether the participants were homogeneously distributed over the two groups, a Two-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was run. To see whether the difference between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups is statistically meaningful, t-tests were performed. The correlation between pretest scores and posttest scores was established by Pearson's r.

RESULTS

At the beginning of the program all the participants took of the TOEFL test (see above) of general English proficiency so that we can see whether the participants form a homogeneous group or not. Table 1 shows the participants' overall mean scores and their SD.

Table 1 Overall mean score and SD on TOEFL proficiency test for control and experimental groups.

General English proficiency test (TOFEL)			
Control group		Experimental group	
Mean	561.6	Mean	562.7
SD	69.6	SD	62.6

Table 1 shows that there is no significant difference in the scores between the two groups, t(22) = .040 (p = .968).

Before starting the awareness training program, a pretest (systematic interview) of speaking skills was run to investigate the participants' speaking skills. Table 2 lists the mean scores of overall ratings of speaking skills as well as for the four components and their SD in the pretest as judged by three raters.

Table 2 Mean and SD of rated speaking skills for four components (Comprehensibility, Pronunciation, Grammar, Vocabulary) and total in the pretest (components on a scale between 0 and 5; overall ratings between 0 and 20).

Pretest mean scores and their SD											
Control group						Experimental group					
	Comp.	Pronun.	Gram.	Vocab.	Total		Comp.	Pronun.	Gram.	Vocab.	Total
Mean	3.60	3.20	3.70	3.90	14.50	Mean	3.80	3,.00	3.90	4.10	15.00
SD	.50	.86	.62	.62	2.00	SD	.38	.85	.43	.73	2.00

To see whether the posttest scores by the three different raters are sufficiently reliable the inter-rater reliability was computed in terms of the intraclass correlation coefficient (which is identical to Cronbach's alpha). No individual rater was considered to be more or less important than the others. The intraclass correlation amounted to .955, which indicates a very high degree of agreement between the three raters. On the basis of this result, the mean rating score is considered a valid estimate of the students' speaking skills.

At the end of the training program, a posttest of speaking skills (a systematic interview similar to the pretest) was run to assess the effect of the treatment. An effort was made to make the pretest and posttest have the same level of difficulty but with different types of questions. The mean scores on the four components and the total (and the SDs) are presented in table 3, for control and experimental groups separately.

Table 3 Mean and SD of rated speaking skills for four components (Comprehensibility, Pronunciation, Grammar, Vocabulary) and total in the pretest (components on a scale between 0 and 5; overall ratings between 0 and 20).

Posttest mean scores and their SD											
Control group						Experimental group					
	Comp.	Pronun.	Gram.	Vocab.	Total		Comp.	Pronun.	Gram.	Vocab.	Total
Mean	3.60	3.30	4.10	3.90	15.00	Mean	4.20	4.20	4.00	3.80	16.30
SD	.65	.89	.53	.62	2.10	SD	.75	.83	.56	.60	2.20

In order to compare the results of both the control and the experimental groups and to know whether the difference in the means truly stems from the awareness training in stress at the word and at sentence level for developing speaking skills taken by the experimental group (i.e. treatment), the t-test was employed for computing the participants' scores gain between pretest and posttest. Ideally, for this test, the subjects should be randomly assigned to two groups, so that any difference in response is due to the treatment and not to other factors, which conditions were clearly met in the present case. The result shows that treatment was effective in improving the pronunciation skills of interpreter trainees. The result also shows that the treatment had a small (but significant) effect on interpreter trainees' speech comprehensibility as well. Table 4 illustrates the gain, i.e. the difference between the posttest and the pretest score, for different components of speaking skills together with their statistical evaluation.

Table 4 Results of statistical analysis for different components of participants' scores.

Components	Gain (Post − Pre)	Levene's Test		t-test		
		F	p	t	P	df
Comprehensibility	0,40833	.439	.514	1.75	0,047 (one-tailed)	22
Pronunciation	1,09167	6.194	.021	6.97	< 0.001 (one-tailed)	22
Grammar	−0,33333	.058	.813	−1.31	0,197 (two-tailed)	22
Vocabulary	−0,33333	.068	.797	−1.10	0,251 (two-tailed)	22
Total	0,20833	3.199	.087	5.41	<0.001 (one-tailed)	22

Crucially, the prosody awareness training yields significant improvements only in those speaking skills that relate to prosody, i.e. comprehensibility and pronunciation – as well as the overall scores. This is what one would expect, and the difference between the experimental and control groups can therefore be evaluated by one-tailed testing. No effect of prosody training can be expected for grammar and vocabulary, so that the (very small and unsystematic) differences between the two groups must be evaluated by two-tailed testing.

Figure 1 shows the scores on four rating scales and means obtained in pretest and posttest broken down by experimental and control group. Asterisks mark significant differences between experimental and control group (independent t-test, $p < .05$, one-tailed). For better visual comparison, the overall score has been expressed here as the mean (rather than the sum) of the four components.
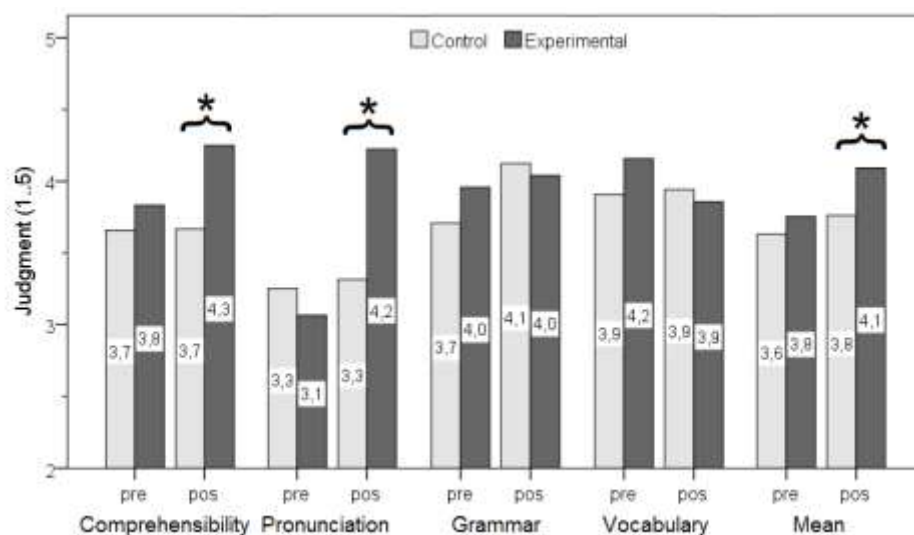

Figure 1 Scores on four rating scales and overall means obtained in pretest and posttest for experimental and control groups.

Figure 2 plots the relationship between the participants' TOEFL scores and pretest and posttest scores for the individual participants pronunciation skill, with separate symbols for participants in the experimental group (red/dark symbols) and in the control group (green/light symbols). Panel A shows the relationship between the participants' TOEFL and pretest scores for speaking skills and panel B shows the relationship between the participants' TOEFL and posttest scores.

Figure 2 shows that the individual participant's pronunciation skill correlates very strongly with the person's TOEFL score as determined before the training program. In the pretest no further difference can be seen between the experimental and control groups (panel A). In the posttest, however, the (judged) quality of the participants' pronunciation is better by about one full point on the rating scale, independently of the effect of the participant's TOEFL score
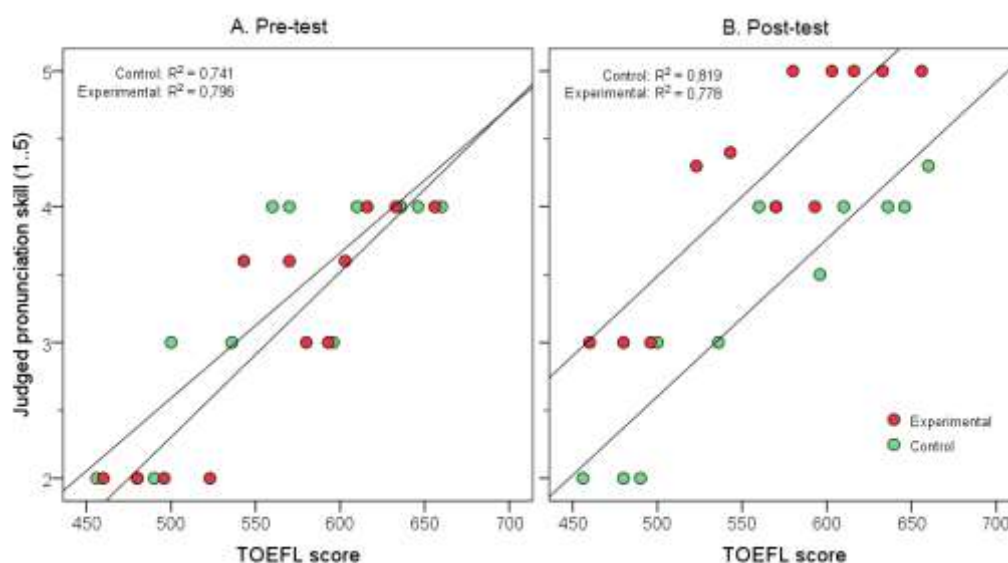
Figure 2 Individual participants' pretest (panel A) and posttest (panel B) scores as a function of their TOEFL scores, plotted separately for experimental and control groups.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effect of prosodic feature awareness training at word and at sentence level on the improvement of speaking skills for Farsi-English interpreter trainees. The result of the study showed that awareness training of prosodic features helps interpreter trainees developing speaking skills. Statistical analysis of the data showed that prosodic feature awareness of stress at word and at sentence level contributes to the participant's speaking skills development. The result of the study converges with Pennington and Ellis (2000) who stated that raising EFL learners' awareness of prosodic features would lead to improved interpretation. This perspective is also supported by Derwing et al. (1998) and Lord (2005) who maintained prosody instruction would yield positive benefits for EFL learners' speech intelligibility and comprehensibility.

The pedagogical implications of this study would be that instructors in interpreter training programs should consider, and then include, prosody teaching in the curriculum, since this will help interpreter trainees in developing their communication skills for successful interpretation performance. EFL language instructors should also consider this issue in teaching speaking skills to their students by the choice of the materials which should be congruent with these perspectives. They should also update themselves by exchanging ideas with researchers in the area of applied linguistics so that they could employ appropriate methodology in teaching of prosodic features. Policy makers for interpreter training programs − and EFL curriculum development − should rethink the position of pronunciation issues in curriculum development and they should not sacrifice the pronunciation aspect for the sake of other areas of EFL pedagogy.

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