IMPROVING STUDENTS' USE OF STRESS THROUGH COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES

Ibrahim MAIGA

University of Bamako, Faculty of Letters and Language Sciences, Mali

ismaigaibrahim@gmail.com

Abstract : The traditional methods of pronunciation instruction still dominate Malian EFL classes. The courses are mainly based on providing the learners with overwhelming rules. Learning those rules may permit the learners to have good grades in the written tests; yet more than the majority of them find it difficult to speak confidently in English and fail to achieve functional oral communication because of their poor pronunciation. This study aims, then, to enhance the students' pronunciation and spoken intelligibility through the communicative approach. 38 first year university students participated in the project. They were engaged in pronunciation activities including drilling of everyday phrases and sentences, critical listening, and Jazz chants. The results revealed that the approach helped improve the learners' pronunciation and increased their self-confidence in English speaking.

Key words: stress, spoken intelligibility, communicative approach

Résume : Au Mali les méthodes traditionnelles dominent toujours l'enseignement de la prononciation de l'Anglais. Les cours sont principalement basés sur le fait de fournir aux apprenants des règles encombrantes. L'apprentissage de ces règles peut permettre aux apprenants d'obtenir de bonnes notes aux tests écrits ; cependant, plus de majorité d'entre eux ont du mal à parler avec assurance en anglais en raison de leur mauvaise prononciation. Cette étude vise à améliorer la prononciation des étudiants à travers l'approche communicative. 38 étudiants de première année ont participé au projet. Ils étaient engagés dans des activités de prononciation, notamment la répétition de phrases de tous les jours, l'écoute critique et les chants de Jazz. Les résultats ont révélé que l'approche a permis d'améliorer la prononciation des apprenants et d'augmenter leur confiance en eux en anglais.

Mots-clés : Accentuation, Intelligibilité orale, Approche communicative

Introduction

Clearly, pronunciation can no longer be characterized as suffering from "the *Cinderella syndrome* (kept behind doors and out of sight)" (M. Celce-Murcia, D. M. Brinton & J. M. Goodwin, 1996, p. 323). Most English teachers agree that explicit pronunciation teaching is an essential part of language courses (H. Fraser, 2000). In Mali, pronunciation instruction is much appreciated by most teachers, thus Phonetics constitutes a major discipline in the curriculum; however, the majority of Malian University students have problems of listening, as well as problems of pronunciation.

In general, there are combinations of sounds that are difficult for them to produce; nonetheless, this difficulty is a relatively minor aspect of the problem. In the researchers' experience, it is the poor use of stress that is severely impeding their intelligibility, which is a priority for learners of English within the framework of World Englishes (D. Crystal, 2003). In this regard, M. Celce-Murcia, D. M. Brinton & J. M. Goodwin (1996) state that in addition to influence from L1, the most noticeable difficulty related to intelligibility is stress. Prosodic errors are more serious than segmental errors for non-English speakers (J. M. Munro & T. M. Derwing, 1999). L. Hahn's (2004) study showed that sentence stress errors have a negative impact on intelligibility. Intelligibility refers to "the extent to which a listener actually understands an utterance", and comprehensibility is "a listener's perception of how difficult it is to understand an utterance" (T. M. Derwing & M. J. Munro, 2005, p. 385).

In fact, most of the students often cite stress as being very important and a priority for them, but they also find the courses too difficult. The problem is that teachers place high level knowledge demand on the students by spending most of the courses on stress shift rules which is why many would choose to keep quiet in class. Besides, even those who show understanding of the lessons struggle to speak intelligible English.

Unlike other subjects, pronunciation is not learnt merely by listening to the teacher. Pronunciation is learnt through practice. Therefore, a communicative approach to pronunciation teaching appears to be more appropriate. The communicative approach to pronunciation teaching takes into account several important factors in making pronunciation teaching effective. Classes must be learner-

centered in the sense that learners should be able to practice speech that will be directly useful to them in their real lives (H. Fraser, 1999). The role of the teacher is to constantly encourage learners to take risks.

A few works have highlighted the role of the communicative approach in pronunciation instruction. For example, C. Ochoa et al. (2016) explored the relationship between communicative language teaching activities and their effect on students' motivation to learn the English language. The research results showed that EFL students considered communicative language teaching activities to be motivating because such activities helped them improve their fluency, pronunciation, and performance when using English for communication. The students felt more confident when they interacted with one another in communicative activities such as class discussions, games, pair/group work, role plays, and oral presentations within groups.

A. Shorouq and H. A. Anas, (2019) examined the effect of using communicative language teaching activities on EFL students' speaking skills at the English Language Institute of the University of Jeddah. The researchers conducted the study in two classes of 21 female EFL students each; one class was the experimental group and the other the control group. The experimental group was taught using three communicative activities—interviewing, problem-solving, and role-playing—while the control group was taught using traditional methods. The findings showed that the experimental group scored higher than the control group.

Unfortunately, in Mali, the area of action research in pronunciation is wide open to research. Unfortunately, because even though the area is ripe for research, not a single study has been done in this domain. This project aims, then, to investigate the effectiveness of teaching stress through communicative activities. The work sought answers to the following question:

- Do communicative activities improve pronunciation and increase confidence of learners?

It is hoped that teachers will learn from the study about the importance of the communicative approach in pronunciation instruction and change their view of

teaching. Given the students' poor pronunciation skills, it will be judicious to reconsider the teaching practices and use strategies to meet their learning needs.

1. Methodology

This study is an action research aimed at enhancing the participants' English pronunciation skills by using communicative activities. The students' poor pronunciation skills caused the researcher to examine his teaching practices closely and to teach stress communicatively. The project began after completion of phonetic courses during which the students had done some intensive work on stress **(See Appendix).**

1.1. Research Materials

The materials used for this project included a series of commonly used words and phrases. The students were required to read those words and phrases aloud. Reading aloud is commonly used as a technique in published textbooks (e.g., L. Grant, 2001; J. Smith, C. Meyers & A. Burkhalter, 1992) to diagnose pronunciation accuracy, and a host of reading passages have been constructed to efficiently provide full coverage of many phonological targets at the same time. For example, C. Prator and B. W. Robinett (1985) provide a diagnostic passage of 166 words that is designed to provide coverage of six areas related to stress and rhythm. This kind of diagnostic reading passage can be used to elicit tress targets and the stress of various multisyllabic words.

In addition to reading aloud, the participants were asked to engage in a free-speaking activity that targeted focus words vs content words in a role-play activity. Simple role-plays can be excellent ways to engage in communicative practice according to M. Celce-Murcia, D. M. Brinton, J. M Goodwin, and B. Griner (2010).

1.2. Research settings and participants

The participants were 38 first year students majoring in English at the University of Bamako. The actions were conducted as an additional learning activity

to the researcher's phonetic class. The actions were implemented in the last four weeks of the second semester. There were four hours of instructional time each week, broken up over two days. The time frame for the study was August 13, through September 3, 2020.

1.3. Research procedure

The students' progress was evaluated qualitatively. They were first listened to introducing themselves, having a five-minute conversation about given topics, and reading a list of commonly used words and phrases. They were also listened to doing the same activities by the end of the project. The researcher also kept conversing with the students and some notes were taken immediately afterwards. This allowed to notice whether they were easy or difficult to understand. The impressionistic method was, then, used. Through this method, determination of intelligibility and comprehensibility are made on the basis of how judges rate the speech of nonnative speakers (T. Derwing & M. Munro, 2008). In their 2008 study, Derwing and Munro listened to speech samples provided by nonnative speakers (Mandarin and Slavic). The authors relied solely on the perception of selected judges to rate the intelligibility and comprehensibility of spoken tokens. There is nothing inherently pejorative about this methodology. P. Ladefoged (2003, p30) confirms the usefulness of this methodology by saying that "Phoneticians did wonderful works relying simply on their ears".

For this study, each of the students was numbered, and then they were engaged in the following activities:

-Use these topics to introduce yourself to the class: *name, spelling of name, birthplace, reason for coming here, activities in free time, comments on living here (they could add as much as they wanted).*

-In pairs, create an imaginary conversation during encounters in a shop, a public transport, on the telephone, or at the market.

-Read these commonly used words and phrases aloud.

To assess their performance, smiley faces were used: ☺ okay/ 😣 need some work/ 😞 need much work. This system allows for easy, quick, and objective assessment (V. Schaefer & L. Abe, 2020). Performance was defined in terms of intelligibility rather than in terms of non-attainment of a perfect model.

Table1: Evaluation of students' use of stress

	☺	😣	😞	Comments
Word stress (vowel length, schwa, placement				
Content vs function words				
Focus words				
Intelligibility				

2. Actions Taken

2.1. Week 1: August 13-14

Metalinguistic Communication-Communication between the researcher and learners about pronunciation itself.

Work on pronunciation

The students worked on everyday phrases and sentences that they really have to use in their everyday life outside class (e.g. Greetings, place names, phone numbers, encounters in shops or public transport). The aim was to get a pronunciation of the phrase as a whole that is comprehensible to the teachers and an ordinary native speaker.

Drilling

The students practiced and repeated useful phrases. Of course, some forms of drilling are at best a waste of time, and can even be a hindrance to learning; however, drilling of real, useful phrases which can actually be used outside the classroom as advocated by H. Fraser (2000) is highly advantageous to learners.

jazz chants (C. Graham 1978) to practice stress and stress timing.

Jazz Chants are Carolyn Graham's snappy, upbeat chants and poems that use jazz rhythms to illustrate the natural stress and intonation patterns of conversational English.

2.2. Week 2: August 20-21   Metalinguistic communication

Critical listening

The students listened to their own pronunciation, as opposed to native speakers', and learnt to judge whether the pronunciation is 'acceptable' or not (The standard that is appropriate was given to them). Learners were recorded saying the same things several times, and then listened back to see if they could pick the versions that are correct or incorrect. Sometimes, the researcher played pre-recorded tapes of his own speech and let the students analyze his pronunciation. It was important to give students a feeling of confidence and optimism, so any improvement, was praised.

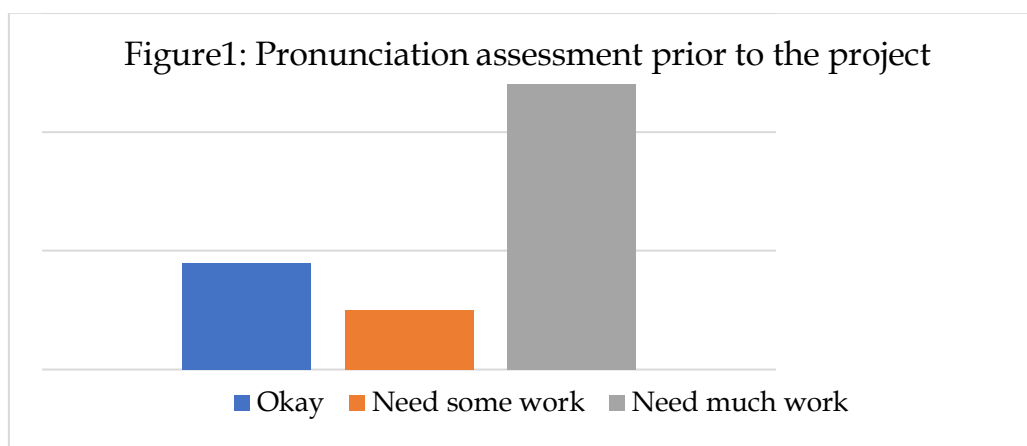### 2.3. Week 3: August 27-28   Metalinguistic communication

Critical listening
The students practiced key phrases in a game of telephone

2.4. Week 4 September 3   jazz chants

3. Results and discussion

The results are presented in diagrams 1 and 2.

Figure1: Pronunciation assessment prior to the project

This study attempted to determine how teaching stress through the communicative approach improves students' pronunciation. Data was collected by listening to the students performing different activities. Interestingly, nine students already had a fairly good spoken English before the project begins, particularly student24. Those students did not receive any particular training and did not travel to any English speaking country. Perhaps it is their natural talent which helped them in outstanding the others.

On the other hand, due to misplaced stress or failure to make the stressed syllables or words louder, the rest of the class (76%) were not easy to understand. Four students had a particularly low level of confidence. When they were addressed to, they responded in French or sometimes by nodding or smiling.

Figure2: Pronunciation assessment after the project

■Okay ■Need some work ■Need much work
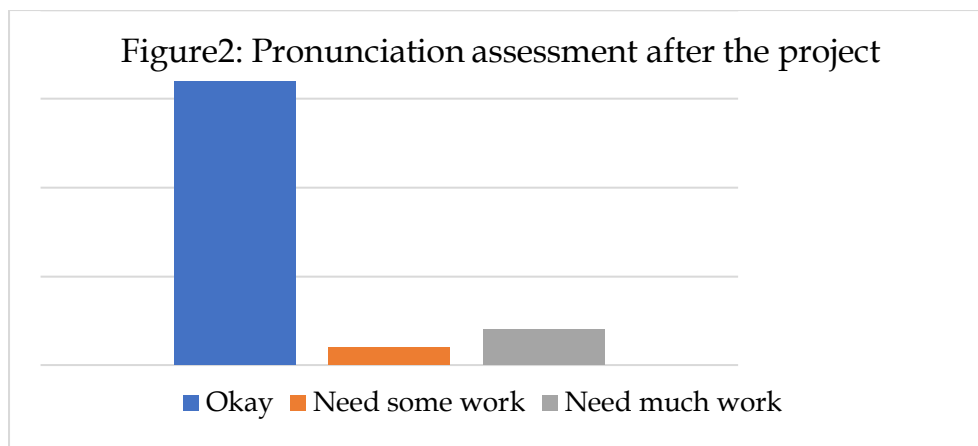
After these four weeks (18 hours) of teaching stress the students have improved their pronunciation to some extent. After they were given enough speaking and listening opportunities, 84% of the class were able to speak in a clearer English. Their improvement was to the extent of comfortable intelligibility. Through the activities, they showed that they understood what the researcher was saying to them; however, four of them still need special attention. Besides, the students enjoyed the activities and practice. 61% of the students showed that their confidence has increased and they helped others in class. With regular practice, all students will improve their performance and feel confident.

Malian students are generally shy, and most of them avoid speaking in class. Communicative language learning offers more practice opportunities for students and encourage them to overcome their shyness and increase their confidence. By improving students' speaking ability, many opportunities will be created for them. Students will have opportunities to perform speaking activities in contexts such as ceremonies, job interviews, and activities for job training (S. Osborn et al., 2008). Moreover, speaking and communicative competence have become very important to acquire because they are part of new employment standards (Zaremba, 2006 as summarized in A. Shorouq and H. A. Anas, 2019). Therefore, if students hope to find job opportunities in the future, they need to better their oral production and communication skills in English through taking part in communicative activities both inside and outside the classroom.

Conclusion

Through this project, the students repeated every day words and sentences until they were comfortable using them. They listened to their own speech to self-correct and were engaged in jazz chants to help them practice stress and stress timing. The data obtained from listening to the students while performing these activities indicated that the study has improved their pronunciation and increased overall their self-confidence in speaking English. However, this study has some limitations regarding the short period of time the researcher had at his disposal to complete the project. Given the fact that the traditional approaches to pronunciation instruction proved ineffective, teachers should pay more attention to learners' development and focus on a more effective and successful method.

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Appendix

Framework for teaching stress (adapted from H. Fraser, 2001)

Word stress

1. Start with two syllable words, and try to choose words with simple
   phonemes (before I was requiring too much intellectual effort from my
   students, and that was undermining their confidence).

2. Ask learners to identify the stressed syllable from my pronunciation of the
   word. Make sure they are not using higher level knowledge based on the

spelling of the word. If I see that this is happening, I use some nonsense words, for example bababa, bububu…

3. Write the words on the board, and ask learners to copy them into their copybooks, then say the word several times and ask them to underline the stressed syllable.

4. Underline the stressed syllable on the board and check their answers.

5. Discuss any errors, and then ask the learners, all together then one at a time, to repeat the words back to me. In judging their production, focus on stress pattern rather than phonemes, but correct any glaring phoneme errors.

6. Comment throughout on the fact that one of the syllables of each word is louder than the other. It is true that stressed syllables are also usually longer and at higher pitch than other syllables.

7. When I find they are doing well, I give some more tricky exercises, such as saying some words with stress on the wrong syllable and asking them to judge if I have said them correctly or incorrectly. If I feel they are up to it, I get them to say the stress on the wrong syllable.

8. When all this is mastered well, move on to words of three syllables and more. When learners are performing well with these, give more complex exercises such as asking them to group words into stress pattern families.

Sentence stress

Sentence stress is variable, and controlled by the speaker as part of the meaning of the sentence. There are no hard and fast rules about sentence stress to match rules like 'The word monster is stressed on the first syllable'