Online Communities of Practice and Second Language Phonological Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

Second language (L2) researchers have long recognized the potential benefits of incorporating pronunciation instruction in language curricula (e.g., Arteaga, 2000; Castino, 1996; Elliott, 1995, 1997; González-Bueno, 1997; Lord, 2005; Major, 1998; Moyer, 1999; Terrell, 1989; among others), and have investigated a variety of training types both in and out of the classroom, meeting with mixed successes. Likewise, technological advances provide educators with new tools that foster collaboration among learners and encourage the crucial processes of input, interaction and output (Long, 1996; Pica, 1994; Swain, 1985) beyond the walls of the classroom. The present study examines the potential of one such tool – podcasting – to create a community of practice for language learners to improve their second language phonological production (following Lord, 2008; see also Ducate & Lomicka, 2009). Although the results offer inconsistent evidence in favor of specific acoustic and articulatory improvements, the benefits of podcasting for such purposes are discussed.

Keywords: Community of Practice, Phonetics, Phonology, Podcast, Pronunciation, Spanish

INTRODUCTION

In the most general sense of the term, communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2006). The existence of a community of practice is not dependent on a formal apprenticeship system, nor is the level of the learner restricted to beginners; on the contrary, a true community of practice is one in which all members are actively and dynamically involved. While originally conceived to designate apprenticeship as a learning model, communities of practice have been shown to exist all around us, and education is no exception.

This paper describes a study that was designed to investigate the effectiveness of online communities of practice that were formed with the specific goal of furthering second language (L2) pronunciation gains among English-speaking learners of Spanish. The next section describes the main assumptions underlying the

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investigation and reviews relevant research. The methodology and data analysis are subsequently described and, finally, tentative conclusions regarding the role of communities of practice in language education are offered.

MAIN PREMISES AND PREVIOUS WORK

As a basic assumption we maintain that the process of L2 acquisition depends on ample input, opportunities for interaction and the push to produce output (Long, 1996; Pica, 1994; Swain, 1985). At the same time, it has also been shown through the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990, 1993, 1995; Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Swain & Lapkin, 1995) that learners must notice certain features in the input in order for those features to be acquired. In other words, input alone is insufficient to assume acquisition; only input that is consciously noticed can become intake for acquisition. Whereas Schmidt’s hypothesis maintains that noticing is a required condition for L2 acquisition, other researchers favor a weaker version of the hypothesis that claims that noticing is helpful but perhaps not always necessary (see, for example, Schmidt, 2010; Truscott, 1998; Schmidt, 2010).

While Schmidt and colleagues referred primarily to morphosyntactic features of language in this hypothesis, we maintain here that the acquisition of L2 sound systems is another area in which noticing is, if not necessary, at the very least beneficial. As will be seen below, for learners to acquire sounds that are different from the sounds in their first language (L1) or that do not exist in their L1, they must first be aware that such sounds exist and become conscious of their occurrence in speech.

Acquisition of Second Language Sound Systems

L2 researchers have long recognized the potential benefits of incorporating pronunciation instruction in language curricula, largely because of the ability of such instruction to encourage conscious noticing. Investigators have explored a variety of instruction and training types both in and out of the classroom, with mixed outcomes. A growing body of work provides increasing evidence in favor of such pronunciation instruction (e.g., Arteaga, 2000; Castino, 1992, 1996; Elliott, 1995, 1997; González-Bueno, 1997; Lord, 2005; Major, 1998; Moyer, 1999; Terrell, 1989; among others).

Although studies of this sort have occurred at all proficiency levels, one might suppose that courses beyond the introductory level could offer greater research opportunities since advanced students would have more attentional resources at their disposal (e.g., Skehan, 1998) and consequently be better able to focus on pronunciation. Unfortunately, only a small number of studies have provided data on the effects of phonetic instruction at such levels. Castino (1992) examined 40 students enrolled in a Spanish phonetics course offering traditional instruction regarding point, place and manner of articulation and found that students did indeed improve their pronunciation over the course of the semester. Likewise, Zampini (1998) examined students in a similar class, and found that students made significant gains in specific sounds over the course of the semester. In 2005, Lord examined the benefits of targeted instructional techniques in a phonetics course, focusing on specific sounds as assessed through a reading task at the beginning and end of the course. The instruction in the phonetics class was traditional in its presentation and description of Spanish phones, but was supplemented with student self-analysis and consciousness-raising techniques using voice analysis software. Her results revealed significant improvements on almost all sounds, although due to the lack of a control group, it is impossible to say whether these benefits were a result of instruction in general or of the specific consciousness-raising tasks and techniques.

Ausín and Sutton (2010) took a different approach to their investigation of the Spanish phonetics class. Although their treatment consisted of the standard approaches for such classes, they assessed learners’ ability to rate target sounds (which were recorded in both
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