Chapter 3
The Effect of Feedback in Teaching Thai as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to explore the effect of providing multiple sources of feedback through a language teaching approach called the Somatically-enhanced Approach (SEA) (Zhang, 2006) in the teaching of Thai language to foreigners. Teaching innovations include: the use of relaxation techniques to relax students; the use of humming, clapping, mouthing, and physical gestures to emphasize the rhythm of the Thai language; the use of a Speech comparison tool (Sptool) for providing biofeedback; and the provision of all learning materials on CDs. Two groups of students were involved in the study. An experimental group (EG) consisted of 24 international students who enrolled in the Thai Language for Foreigners course at Khon Kaen University, Thailand. These students came from People’s Republic of China, Vietnam, and Laos. They were taught using SEA. The control group (CG) consisted of 22 Chinese students who studied Thai language at Guangxi University for Nationalities, China, taught with the traditional method. The results of this study revealed that after 24 face-to-face contact hours over 8 weeks, international students who undertook a course in SEA spoke more fluently than the control group who studied Thai for 44 hours over 11 weeks. The differences in the quality and quantity of speech were statistically significant. The results of the study, both quantitative and qualitative, will be reported. The improved gains in students’ performance in EG can be attributed to the multiple sources of feedback afforded by SEA.

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INTRODUCTION

Receiving good quality feedback is an essential aspect of language learning especially at the beginning stages of learning a foreign language. Feedback is important because it is essential for teaching to be turned into learning and can play a significant role in students’ development by providing the knowledge required for improvement (Hinett, 1998; Hyland, 2000). However, in order for the feedback to be effective, two objectives must be met: (1) to enable students to make sense of the feedback; and (2) to establish a common understanding of how this feedback may be implemented or acted upon by students (Fraser, 2001; Zhang, 2006).

In a language learning classroom error correction, body language, non-verbal behavior, facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice are all used in communicating feedback. Such feedback is usually instantaneous, involuntary (from the feedback provider), episodic and disappears very quickly from the memory of everyone involved. The feedback we have just described ignores the learners’ involvement in the feedback process. As far back as Morley (1994) stressed that new instructional design in teaching pronunciation should not only take into account of language forms and functions but also issues of learner involvement and learner strategy training. While this objective was achieved by asking students to reflect on their learning experiences in Vitanova and Miller’s study (2002), this study adopts a different technique. We designed a learning environment for learning Thai as a second/foreign language in which students were actively involved in utilizing a range of strategies in their process of learning. In this way, students not only learned through receiving feedback from the teacher, they also learned to attune to their own bodies and listened to feedback from their own body. Another source of feedback was the use of a speech analysis tool (Sptool) (Zhang & Newman, 2003) for offering audio and visual feedback and course data CD-Rom. This speech tool allows the incorporation of a visual representation of a student’s production to be easily compared to the speech of a native speaker. We contend that the multiple sources of feedback obtained through the combination of various feature of SEA, Sptool and the dataCDrom will make the process of understanding and acting upon feedback easier and more accessible to students.

This chapter consists of the following sections: (1) a discussion of the theoretical framework that informs the study; (2) a discussion of the teaching context and method offering various forms of feedback; (3) a detailed description of the various features of the speech tool; and (4) results of a study involving a group of beginning foreign students learning Thai in a Thai and a Chinese university.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING OF THE STUDY

What happens to a beginner’s perceptual system when one first starts to learn a foreign language? In the context of learning a foreign language, a person with normal hearing in his/her mother tongue will behave as though he/she were hard of hearing (Lian, 1980). Acoustically, each language sound carries all frequencies from about 50 Hz to about 16,000 Hz (albeit at various intensities). Theoretically, at any rate, each sound can be heard in many different ways. The ear seems to have a ‘choice’ as to what to hear in practice depending on the way the ear has been trained. L2 students tend to make ‘choices’ in the target language based on what they are familiar with in their mother tongue. Trubetzkoy (1939) refers to this as the mother tongue ‘sieve’. For instance, a vowel is physically made up of a complex set of many frequencies produced simultaneously. When a vowel is heard, everything it contains is heard. However, when listening to a sound, it is not necessary to catch all the elements in order to recognize it as recognition only requires some of
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