A Study of an Activity-based Approach to Improve Student's Pronunciation at the Tourism Cultural Yunnan University, China

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Abstract. *The purposes of this study are: (1) to explore if and how an activity-based approach effectively improves English pronunciation difficulties for students at the Tourism Cultural Yunnan University; and (2) to investigate students' attitudes to the activity-based approach. The 44 samples were randomly selected first year students majoring in English at the Tourism Cultural Yunnan University of China. This research was a one-group design with mixed methods research. For the quantitative stage, before and after the learning activity-based approach, pre and post-tests were given to the students by reading 28 words. For the qualitative stage, a semi-structured interview was created and used to investigate the students' attitudes about the activity-based approach from eight informants. The quantitative findings show that every student improved their pronunciation. Moreover, the results from the interviews show the students' attitudes relating to an activity-based approach which were generally positive. All the students felt the approach was interesting and helpful. The students also stated that they were motivated to practice pronouncing words and more confident after learning the activity-based approach.*

Keywords: Pronunciation teaching, Activity-based approach, Chinese students

Introduction

Pronunciation is an ability that uses language to express one's mind and communicate in words. English pronunciation is a compulsory and essential course for all English majors. In China's traditional teaching, teachers focus on explaining how to pronounce and write the rules on the blackboard. Students only take notes but have no chance to practice. However, students are silent in pronunciation class, for the students this approach can be highly demotivating.

As a result, the teaching goals for the students' English oral ability cannot be achieved. Most high school English learners have poor pronunciation because they do not have a chance to practice in class (Liu, Qiao & Liu, 2006). Even though students have had at least six years of English class in high school, their pronunciation is restricted because high school education in China is teacher-centered teaching (Zeng, 2008).

Unlike the traditional approach, the activity-based approach mentioned in this research is much more student-centered. The teacher's main role is to help learning to happen, which includes involving students in what is going on by "enabling them to work at their own speed, by not giving long explanations, by encouraging them to participate, talk, interact, do things, etc." (Scrivener, 2005, p18).

In the activity-based approach class, guided by Liu, Qiao and Liu (2006) the principle of "learning by doing", the teacher leaves more space for students to learn to use the language by themselves. Thus, students can be actively involved in the lesson rather than listen passively. All

language practice is organized as much as possible around topics of interest to the students. So, students are motivated by the topic and eagerly take part in the activities.

Moreover, students are encouraged to be independent of the teacher and autonomous in making their own choices. The interaction is not only between "teacher-student" but also "student-student" and "student-topic". Pair work and group work give the class a variety of activities. The students have a lot of opportunities to negotiate meaning during the meaningful interaction, and they learn to work with others.

Statement of the Problem

Because the Chinese language influences Chinese students learning English it is difficult for them to produce certain English sounds that do not exist in Chinese. Thus, this study focuses on using an activity-based way of teaching to help students overcome pronunciation difficulties.

To teach pronunciation, it is not enough that the teachers play the main role and explain every pronunciation point while the students just take notes without any chance to practice. It is necessary to practice pronunciation in class (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992). This study demonstrates that the activity-based approach can effectively improve undergraduate students' pronunciation.

Research Questions

Is an activity-based approach effective in teaching English pronunciation, and how is it effective?

What are the students' attitudes towards the activity-based approach and the differences in their performance?

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the improvement of a student English pronunciation segmental level using an activity-based approach. Samples are first year Chinese students who attended the English pronunciation course in 2013 at the Tourism Cultural Yunnan University in Lijiang, China.

Literature Review

Theories and approach about teaching pronunciation

Pronunciation is recognized as a fundamental skill in which students should acquire before speaking (Brown, 1992). When teaching English pronunciation, teachers need to bear in mind that pronunciation in comparison to the other aspects of learning will always be marked with personal attitudes towards English, and the learner's abilities; therefore, there can never be a one-to-one relationship between what is taught and what is learnt (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994). Because of the above mentioned fact, we should pay certain attention to teach ability-learn and ability-expression, aspects of pronunciation that are teachable, e.g., individual sounds and segments, and others, such as intonation that are bound to certain circumstances and therefore extremely problematic to teach.

Teaching sounds involves several steps: 1) identify your students' problem areas, 2) find a meaningful context for the problem sounds, and then develop communicative or relevant tasks that incorporate the sound, 3) develop at least three or four exercises so that students can keep practicing target sounds in new contexts (Clece-Murcia, 1987).

Vowel and final consonants are commonly found difficult for most Chinese students. Teachers can show effective and interesting teaching methods; some new teaching tools can help, like rubber bands. Students like to have the chance to experience how sounds can be produced through operating a rubber band. In addition, mirrors are a strong self-correction tool for students to modify or imitate

sounds. Teachers can ask students to take out mirrors to do peer-correction or self-correction while practicing some problematic sounds.

The Chinese students' attitude towards English Pronunciation

Pennington (1996) presented that work on pronunciation should be tied in with the individual's value set and attitudes. Sometimes, motivation for learning can accelerate the Chinese learners' attitude formation. Attitude for learning can either support or hinder pronunciation skills development.

Attitudes toward the target language learning can influence achievement in pronunciation. It is not common to find that quite a number of students resist coordination with teachers in phonetics classes. Sometimes while some other students pronounced separate phoneme incorrectly, these students laughed at them. Students need a correct attitude to learn English pronunciation (Zhang &Yin, 2009).

Interference of Chinese on English

Zhao (1995) presented some vowel and consonant errors which will likely be made by Chinese speakers' redundancy. Zhao believed that Chinese speakers will substitute target sounds in English which are absent from Mandarin Chinese phonology with near equivalent sounds in Mandarin Chinese.

Segmental features

According to Seferoglu (2005), segmental aspects of the sound system include individual vowels and consonants. Because segmental phonology is relatively more easily explained and taught than the supra-segmental features (Coniam, 2002), Some studies focus on studying segmental phonology in preference to supra-segmental features (Syafei, 1988; Phoon, 2010). Segmental features relate to sounds at the micro-level. They include specific sounds within words. The sound systems of consonants, vowels or their combinations are called phonemes. Phonemes are sounds that, when pronounced incorrectly, can change the meaning of the word (Burns & Claire, 2003). Regarding the problematic English consonant and vowel sounds for Chinese learners, Gao (2005), concluded that English sounds which are considered problem sounds for Chinese students are divided into three groups.

Table1. Chinese students' problem sounds (Gao, 2005)

	Vowel	Consonants
Sounds that do not occur Chinese	[aː] [iː] [ɜː] [ɔː] [uː] [ʌ] [ə] [I] [e] [ʊ]	[ð], [v]
Sounds that do not occur at the final position		[d], [t], [s], [z]
Sound that are phonetically different from Chinese		[ʃ], [tʃ], [f], [r], [l],

Although English sounds are quite complicated, most of them are, somehow, universal, and therefore do not need to be taught. The important point is that teachers should find out which sounds cause difficulties and need to be taught. Thus, this research is aimed at pronunciation teaching and primarily at correcting the three groups of Chinese students' problem sounds as mentioned.

Traditional approach vs Activity-based approach

For many years, the traditional teaching style or specifically, teacher-centered instruction has been the dominant in higher education. In a traditional classroom, students become passive learners, or rather just recipients of teachers' knowledge and wisdom. They have no control over their own

learning. Teachers make all the decisions concerning the curriculum, teaching methods, and the different forms of assessment. Eleanor (2009) asserted that teacher-centered learning actually prevents students' educational growth.

In contrast, activity-based teaching as defined by Prince (2004) is a teaching method in which students are engaged in the learning processes. Churchill (2003) stated that an engaging activity with activity-based teaching helps learners to construct mental models that allow for higher-order performance, such as applied problem solving and the transfer of information and skills. The activity-based approach is in a learner-centered classroom, students are actively learning and they have greater input into what they learn, how they learn it, and when they learn it. This means that students take responsibility of their own learning and are directly involved in the learning process. Learner-centered teaching style focuses on how students learn instead of how teachers teach (Weimer, 2002).

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research employed both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, started with a quantitative method followed by a qualitative method.

Samples of the Study

Acorrding to Kejcie and Morgan(1970) about sample size, 44 subjects were randomly selected from first year English majors at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Tourism Cultural Yunnan University in China.

Activity-based Approach

In order to choose the tools for the research, the researcher adapted materials used at the University of Foreign Studies in Guangdong but were not used at the university in Lijiang. The practice book *English Pronunciation in Use* (Hancock, 2003) was a great success at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (Wang, 2007).

Intelligible Pronunciation Test

In order to see how the students were able to improve in learning intelligible pronunciation, the researcher tested students reading. The test was constructed to have 14 pairs of words from *English Pronunciation in Use*. The intelligible pronunciation tests were applied before and after the learning activity-based approach.

Samples and Informants for Interviews

Six students were selected after the data from 44 sample pronunciation tests were gathered and analyzed according to the tests and the students' improvement by different levels (2=most improved; 2=medium improved; 2=least improved). Two more students, the most active and the least active in the class were chosen from the researcher's observations.

Observation

During the activity-based teaching, the researcher observed the students learning reaction. After teaching and the post-test, the researcher chose the most active student and the least active student to do interviews.

Semi-structured Interview

To elicit students' attitudes about learning the activity-based approach, a semi-structured interview was conducted after the post-test. Two students from the most improved, two from medium

improved, two from the least improved, one from the most active and one from the least active for a total of 8 students were selected from the observations.

Data Collection

Quantitative Data Collection

The tests were recorded by a tape recorder. The students' scores of the intelligible pronunciation tests were graded by a native English teacher to find out the improvement between the two tests. The pre-test and post-test used for gathering the data for this study is an achievement test. The researcher measured the pronunciation scores before they received treatment. The criteria of scoring pronunciation achievement is that mark pronunciation can be based on the close similarity of the students' pronunciation with that of the native speaker (Eckstein, 2007). From this suggestion, the researcher analyzed the students' pronunciation on a scale of 2 to 0. If the students' pronunciation was intelligible to whom it means, that the students made good pronunciation and could get 2 points. If the students' pronunciation could be acceptable (do not change meaning), it means that the students could get 1 point. On the other hand, unintelligible pronunciation would get 0, because the evaluator could not understand the words or there was a change in meaning.

Qualitative Data Collection

The qualitative data was from the interviews. Each interview lasted between ten to fifteen minutes, and a tape recorder was used to ensure that all the information was gathered. In order to eliminate possible misunderstandings the interviews were conducted in Chinese.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative data analysis was carried out with the data obtained from the pronunciation tests. Statistical analysis used the mean and t-test for this stage.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Data for the observations were transcribed, coded and grouped. The recorded data from the interview were translated, transcribed and categorized (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results and Discussion

Research question one: "Is an activity-based approach effective in teaching pronunciation and how is it effective?"

This research question was answered through descriptive statistics.

Table 2. Statistical results of the pre/post pronunciation tests

Test	No.	Sum	(Mean)	S.D (Standard Deviation)	t (Values of t-distribution)	Sig. (Significance)
Pre-test	44	568	12.91	6.629	18.821	P<0.01
Post-test	44	1560	35.45	10.124		

*p (probability) < 0.01

Table 2 shows that the sum of the post-test is much higher than the pre-test. The average pre-test pronunciation scores before the activity-based approach training is 12.91(S.D= 6.629), but 35.45

(S.D= 10.124) after the training. The t-test analysis of the differences between means yielded 18.821. The results of the independent sample t-test evaluation reveal that the average score in the post-test pronunciation is significantly higher than that of the pre-test pronunciation at the statistically significant level of 0.01.

Improvement of Each Word

There were 11 words from 28 that students could not get two points of intelligible pronunciation (2 points) in the pre-test as follows.

Table3. The number of students with intelligible pronunciation of each word

Words	No. of students with intelligible pronunciation 2 points	
Test	Pre	Post
Hurt	0	17
Heart	0	15
Woman	0	24
Work	0	17
Walk	0	16
Closed	0	2
Clothed	0	0
Breeding	0	1
Breathing	0	0
Prize	0	13
Surprise	0	16

Before the training there were 11 words that none of 44 students could get 2 points for intelligible pronunciation. . However, the number of students with intelligible pronunciation significantly increased after training, except for two words. They are '*clothed'* and '*breathing'*.

On the contrary, the number of students with unintelligible pronunciation in the post-test also decreased. The most improved words are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. The most improved words of unintelligible pronunciation.

Words	No. of students with unintelligible pronunciation 0 points	
Test	Pre	Post
Woman	21	0
Look	10	0
Shoot	22	0
Die	12	0

On the unintelligible pronunciation (0 Points), Table 4 shows that the number of students on the post-test decreased which means their pronunciation has been improved after training especially for the words '*woman', 'look', 'shoot'* and *die'*. None of the students got zero points on those words (Table 4).

According to the results of the study, it could be seen that all of the students' pronunciation has significantly improved after the activity-based approach training. This result confirms the belief that the activity-based approach can help students improve their pronunciation. In addition, this result corresponds with other studies concerning the effects of an activity-based approach in language classrooms, which found that an activity-based approach had positive effects on English pronunciation improvement of students in Chinese University (Tapanjeh, 2008).

After the activity-based approach training, the pronunciation of 26 words greatly improved, the post-test showed every student had improvement in their pronunciation.

However, the words *clothed* and *breathing* were still poorly pronounced and the participants made the least progress on. L1 interference is an important reason of Chinese students' English pronunciation (Wu, 2008). Moreover, another reason might be fossilized to some extent. Therefore the students could improve their pronunciation abilities, if they have more time to practice, and their awareness in the fore mentioned aspect in properly raised.

Research question two: "What are the students' attitudes towards the activity-based approach and the differences in their performance?"

The findings of the students' attitudes on the use of the activity-based approach for improving intelligible pronunciation of English from the semi-structured interviews are interesting, helpful, confident, motivational and difficult.

Interesting Observations

When the students were asked how they felt about the activity-based approach and if they enjoyed using the approach to improve their pronunciation, most students liked it. Examples of the students' reactions are:

> *"This activity-based approach is fun. A lot of the activities made me always focus on the class."*
>
> > *(Student A)*

> *"I like it; I enjoy the pronunciation with a video tape."*
>
> > *(Student C)*

Every student's attitude showed that they enjoyed learning with the activity-based approach more than teacher-centered classes. All of participants in the different levels liked the activities in the class. They like them because the activity-based approach is more active and they had fun, and they could always focus on the class, so that they could learn more. Some of them are also said the exercises and sounds practice could help learning sounds. In addition, it contained video tapes which were related to sounds. The video tapes helped them understand how to pronounce the sounds and made it easy to imitate.

Helpful Observations

When the students were asked how the activity-based approach helps them, students said:

> *"When I learn long and short vowel sounds, the rubber bands practice helps me a lot."*
>
> > *(Student E)*

> *"I like the mirror practice. Some English sounds that are phonetically different from Chinese always confuse me. I can correct these sounds when I look at mirror and imitate the native teacher's pronunciation*
>
> > *(Student B)*

Students said using rubber bands to practice long and short vowel sounds helps their pronunciation to be correct during the learning process.

Some students had problems with the sounds that occur in both English and Chinese but have different pronunciation. The mirror practice could help them understand the differences and correct their English pronunciation.

Confident Observations

Another positive effect of learning via the activity-based approach discovered in this study is a greater sense of confidence. When the students were asked if they felt their pronunciation had improved and how the activity-based approach had help them improve it, they answered:

> *"When I can correctly pronounce two similar sounds after the native teacher, I felt more confidence when I talk."*
>
> *(Student D)*

> *"I feel more confidence with my oral English."*
>
> *(Student F)*

The students thought their English pronunciation was better than before. They were more confident and trusted that their pronunciation was more accurate from video tapes. They also pronounced words differently, when comparing the pre-test and post-test. Even the less active students who are always afraid to speak were brave and talked with the native teacher.

Motivational Observations

From the interviews, it was found that the activity-based approach attracted students to use the activity-based approach for a long time. For example:

> *"Always keep busy could learn more."*
>
> *(Student A)*

> *"The teacher's funny talk is easy for me to focus on learning."*
>
> *(Student E)*

It shows learning via the activity-based approach became more motivating and interesting to the students. The activity-based approach could help them learn more in class. They had more motivation to improve their pronunciation, and it helped them focus on learning. So, they were more enthusiastic when practicing problematic words.

Difficulty Observations

The degree of difficulty could cause some effects on pronunciation improvement.

> *"I have learned a lot from the native English speaker and the approach is easy to learn."*
>
> *(Student F)*

> *"This approach is useful but I want the teacher's help in case I could not read some words."*
>
> *(Student G)*

The content of the class to the students with a high English ability was easier to understand and correct the problem sounds.

But it was hard for some lower level students to finish the exercises alone. That was because the word level was difficult for them. Thus, various words in different levels should be prepared and given for more opportunities for them to practice.

Comments for improvement

Three out of the eight students pointed out some aspects of learning via activity-based approach, they said:

> *"I like this approach but if there were more words to practice and some group work after class it would be better to help learn."*
>
> *(Student D)*

> *"This approach is good but some exercises are hard for me."*
>
> *(Student E)*

> *"This approach is useful but I want the teacher's help in case I could not read some words."*
>
> *(Student G)*

It shows that students need more words, exercises and activities to practice in this approach to help them learn. Some of them mentioned that group work after class should be added so they could review the sounds and correct each other's pronunciation to help learning. The low level students pointed out that learning with a native speaker was difficult because they couldn't clearly understand, so they suggested that a Chinese teacher in class for support and clarification would be very helpful.

The data from the interviews show all the students had fun and felt interested. Each class always had some activities and the native teacher was very humorous that make the activity-based approach more entertaining. The useful practice also can help students learning. Rubber bands and mirror practice can show the sounds produced and self-correction (Gillbert, 1993).

This result was congruent with the findings of the studies of Liu, Qiao and Liu (2006) and Tapanjeh (2008). Most of the students were proud of their achievements and improved performance. They had fun with learning by the activity-based approach.

Another positive effect of pronunciation by the activity-based approach training is confidence. Confidence is an important and effective factor for learning pronunciation successfully (Gallego, 1990). It can be concluded that the activity-based approach can increase students' confidence in pronouncing difficult and problematic words as well as controlling their learning.

Moreover, motivation could also be a factor affecting students' pronunciation improvement. The new way of learning pronunciation attracted students' concentration on the learning process, because of funny activities and the native English teacher. They had more motivation to improve their pronunciation, so that they were more enthusiastic in practicing and correcting problematic words. Ellis & Widdowson (1997) mentioned that motivation was dynamic in nature; it was not something that had a learner had or did not have but rather something that varied from one moment to the next depending on the learning context or task. Hence, motivation could be an important factor in pronunciation.

However, some students who were interviewed gave some drawbacks which should be taken into consideration for further activity-based approach construction. For example, various words in different levels, more exercises, and some group work out of class. A Chinese assistant teacher also suggested helping the low level students in teacher learning process, in case students study with a native English teacher.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, there were drawbacks that need to be considered for further activity-based approach design and implementation

Recommendations for Implication

As this activity-based approach was quite interesting and helped create a relaxed in the classroom, students improved their pronunciation ability. Therefore, teachers should be encouraged to use an activity-based approach when teaching pronunciation.

There should be a teacher assistant to help low level students read English or give some explanations in case students study with a native English teacher.

When the teacher adapts the activity-based approach, the teacher can add more words to be practiced in class and to do group work after class. Many exercises with different levels of difficulty are needed to encourage students to learn with fun and enthusiasm. Moreover, a challenging activity-based approach will motivate and encourage students to practice their pronunciation for a longer time.

Recommendations for Further Study

There should be a comparison between learning by an activity-based approach and traditional English teaching methods. So, the differences between the two groups of students more clearly.

Further research should be conducted for primary school students who start learning English pronunciation using the activity-based approach from the beginning can avoid the fossilized pronunciation problem.

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