

An Experimental Study on Using Instructional Pronunciation Video to Improve Students' Pronunciation

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Abstract— Technology has been used in many ways to enhance language learning. Professional literature and research have shown that using video technology in the teaching and learning of pronunciation in the English language classroom has been useful. This study was conducted to assess the effectiveness of an Instructional Pronunciation Video (IPV) in helping students with low oral proficiency to improve their English pronunciation. The one group pre-test post-test experimental research design is employed in determining whether the use of the IPV will lead to improvement in the students' pronunciation. The data of this quantitative study were generated from the audio recordings of the pre and post reading aloud tests of 20 university students for identifying students' pronunciation errors. The numbers of pronunciation errors from the pre and post reading aloud tests were then compared, in order to determine if there is any difference in students' achievement after the IPV intervention. It was found that students improved significantly in their post reading aloud test as they made less pronunciation errors in the post reading aloud test by 48.7%. Therefore, it is recommended that instructors utilise IPV to support English pronunciation learning.

Keywords: *instructional pronunciation video; pronunciation; reading test*

I. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is one of the components in oral communication. Hedge [1] emphasises that the ability to produce sounds intelligible to other speakers is part of the competency of speaking English. On the other hand, pronunciation has often been viewed as a skill in second language learning that is most resistant to improvement, which leads to English pronunciation and intonation being the skills that are hard to master. It is considered as one of the most difficult skills for students of English as a Second Language (ESL) to learn, for example students in Malaysia, whose native language is not English. The students will likely show different problems in learning English pronunciation. It may thus come as no surprise that pronunciation is the aspect of language that receives little attention in the classrooms due to the diversity of these problems.

On top of that, teachers too may pay little attention in teaching pronunciation [10] due to uncertainty as to how best to teach pronunciation, lack of training, absence of pronunciation teaching aids, to name a few. However, nowadays, technology has been applied in many ways to improve English language learning in both spoken and written language, which also include pronunciation. There are powerful tools available for speech analysis that reflects significant result in the studies which used technologies in teaching pronunciation. Having visual displays can help to show students the specific sounds and the patterns of prosody, since they often have difficult time hearing their own pronunciation mistakes and judging the native likeness of their speech [2,3,4,5,6].

Unquestionably, oral skills and pronunciation can be challenging to develop, yet they are essential and fundamental in being a successful language learner. Many ESL students are required to do oral presentations in their classes on a regular basis, especially in university, which can be a terrifying experience for a beginner-level language learner. Besides that, having poor pronunciation can mask otherwise good language skills, thus condemning learners to less than their deserved social, academic and work advancement. For that reason, this study aimed to broaden existing research on Instructional Pronunciation Video (IPV) by assessing the effectiveness of it, in improving pronunciation of university students with low oral proficiency.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Teaching of Pronunciation in Malaysia

The role of English in Malaysia is quite important as it is in many other developing countries. In the Malaysian education system, the English language curriculum provides an avenue for teaching pronunciation skills in the classroom, in which it reflects the notion that having and using "good" pronunciation is important in language learning [7]. According to Rajadurai [8], "without adequate pronunciation skills, a person's communicative skills may be severely hampered, and this in turn may give rise to speech that lacks intelligibility, leading to

glitches in conversation and to strain on the part of the listener” (p.42).

Gilakjani [7] had also stated that the majority of ESL learners do have “major difficulties” with English pronunciation even after years of learning the language. This scenario is evident among the ESL speakers in Malaysia as it often results in them facing difficulties in areas such as conversing in English during interviews even though they have learnt English for 11 years in their formal education.

A study on teachers’ and students’ perceptions on the pronunciation teaching and learning was conducted by Jayapalan and Pillai [10] in a secondary school in Malaysia. They distributed questionnaires to a total of 150 students from Forms 1, 3 and 5 (50 students from each group) and interviewed two of these students’ teachers. Questionnaire data indicated that students sometimes learn pronunciation, and this was commonly done through reading aloud activities. Additionally, emphasis was given to exam-focused components which are writing, grammar and literature because teachers wanted their students to excel in their exams and hence the pronunciation component was not taught regularly in class [10]. Through the interview, the teachers themselves expressed that they preferred using reading aloud activities to teach pronunciation as they were able to observe students’ pronunciation errors and correct those problems immediately. Another finding of the study that may contribute to the lack of emphasis in pronunciation teaching could be that the teachers felt that they were not ready to teach the Standard British English as they are non-native speakers [10].

In another study, Wahid and Sulong [11] set out to investigate pronunciation teaching practices in Malaysia. Using a mixed-method design, they collected data from survey, observations and semi-structured interviews of 27 ESL teachers teaching students of diploma and degree levels. The teachers taught English for Academic Purposes and English for Occupational Purposes courses based on the communicative curriculum. In Wahid and Sulong’s [11] survey, all teachers indicated that they teach pronunciation on a regular basis in their classes. However, their observation data revealed that teaching of pronunciation was very minimal and incidental, which often restricted to correction of error [11]. This seems to suggest that the teaching of pronunciation is most likely by chance rather than intentional. Such occurrence is not unexpected as overt teaching of pronunciation is not mandated in many communicative classrooms, where the ability to communicate ideas and convey meanings are viewed as more important.

Consequently, ESL learners need additional language support in assisting them to master English language other than just taking part in classroom practices and activities. They need to practise listening, reading, speaking, and writing the target language in order to develop their experience and skills [12]. Therefore, to do all those above, they are in need of various supportive language learning tools which can help them to improve their language easily and effectively.

Gilakjani [13] reviewed literature on pronunciation learning in the ESL and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, and summarised that among the serious difficulties faced by

ESL/EFL learners are: “lack of motivation, lack of exposure to target language, not having good attitude towards pronunciation, lack of emphasis on pronunciation by teachers, lack of necessary tools to teach pronunciation by teachers...” (p.10). As such, making pronunciation teaching tools available to assist language teachers needs to be emphasised.

B. Using Video Technology in Teaching Pronunciation

Teaching language in a class specific to pronunciation, phonology, or phonetics may seem more feasible than in a typical language classroom. While some teachers feel there is often not enough class time to practise pronunciation, including intonation or prosody [14,5], others may not enjoy nor know how to teach pronunciation, or they may believe that students simply find it boring [15]. Furthermore, some teachers may be reluctant to teach pronunciation due to lack of training in phonetics [16].

According to Pope and Golub [17], it is essential for English language educators to model effective practices of teaching with technology. As students perform diverse tasks with the computer, they broaden their repertoire of metacognitive, cognitive and effective learning. As for Kajder [18], he stated in his book that focus has to be placed on learning with the technology rather than learning from or about the technology.

Therefore, a comprehensive literature analysis on the integration of video technology in second language learning supports the idea that evolutionary approaches in using video is evolving in classroom practice. Today digital-video technology has been deemed as a pedagogically beneficial mode for engaging students and promoting learning [19,20,21,22]. Video materials can be used for simple viewing and listening to the foreign language content to elicit discussions or communication in the classroom. Fundamentally, listening and watching videos have made it possible for students to hear accurate pronunciation of words and sentences spoken by native English speakers.

III. METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study, which applied the one group pre-test post-test experimental research design (Fig. 1), was conducted to observe whether any change in the students’ reading aloud performance has occurred with the use of IPV as the intervention.

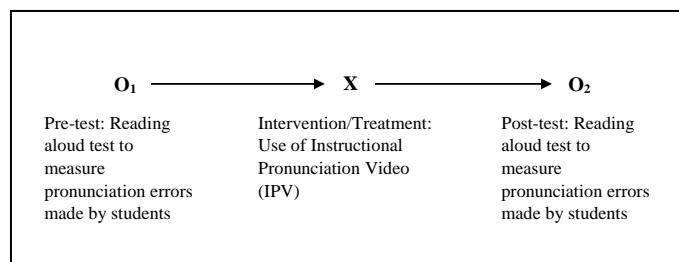


Figure 1. Experimental research design of the study

A. Participants

The sample of this study consists of 20 first-year university students taking an English proficiency course who were selected via purposive sampling. The participants were chosen based on the result of their Malaysian University English Test (MUET) achievement and interaction experience with their instructors in the classroom. They were then invited by the researchers and have given their consent to take part in this study. Prior to entering university, students are required to sit for MUET as it is an assessment tool which has been implemented in Malaysia since 2000 to evaluate pre-university students' English language skills [23]. With MUET scores classified into six bands i.e. from Band 1 as the lowest band (extremely limited user of English) to Band 6 as the highest band (very good user of English), the sample can be described as limited users of English for scoring Bands 1 and 2 in their MUET. In other words, they can be considered as students with low English proficiency.

B. Instrument

The instrument of this study is a reading aloud test that was used as the pre-test and post-test in the study. The reading aloud test adopted the text, *The North Wind and the Sun*, from the Handbook of the International Phonetic Association (IPA) (International Phonetic Association, 1999). This text is selected as the instrument of this study because this text is a compact text that allows one to compare pronunciation, and it has been extensively used for phonetic research as justified by Deterding [24]. Transcriptions for many English accents, and phonetic versions in different languages and dialects of *The North Wind and the Sun* have also been rendered by the IPA since 1912 [24]. Therefore, making it one of the most frequently used texts in pronunciation research.

C. Intervention

An Instructional Pronunciation Video (IPV) served as an intervention applied to the sample of this study. The intervention appeared in a CD form and the IPV is known as the *Say It Right* (SIR) Module. The content of the SIR Module is created based on a funded research carried out by Shak, Chang & Stephen [25] which has identified some Malaysian students' common problematic sounds in the English sound system. The IPV comprises videos of a native speaker pronouncing the correct sounds and words (incorporating the problematic sounds identified in Shak, Chang and Stephen's [25] research: plosives, fricatives, affricates, diphthongs, and pure long and short vowels) with visual displays of the articulatory movements in pairs, and the tongue placement diagrams of the different sounds. Chang, Shak and Gregory [26] highlighted that the word pairing is one of the unique features of the IPV as it allows students to learn to identify and differentiate two similar or confusing sounds.

D. Data Collection Procedure

After the participants were identified, they were asked to fill in a consent form as well as a demographic data form. Next, the participants proceeded with a reading aloud test, which is the pre-test. As explained in the instrument section earlier, the *The North Wind and the Sun* reading text is used in this study.

The reading aloud test is carried out individually and audio-recorded on digital recording devices.

After the individual recording sessions were completed, the participants were invited to join in a one-day workshop, the "Say It Right Workshop" in which they were introduced to the IPV. The IPV is utilised for pronunciation practices throughout the one-day workshop. For their individualized practice, the participants were provided with customized sounds/pronunciation errors identified from the pre-test and they worked on the specific sounds that they have problems with. As the participants work on their pronunciation exercises, they were supported by facilitators made up of researchers of this study. At the end of the workshop, the participants sat for the post-test by doing another read-aloud of the same text used in the pre-test. The post-tests were audio-recorded as well. In both pre-test and post-test, the participants were required to read aloud twice.

E. Data Analysis

All audio-recorded data were then analysed by comparing the number of pronunciation errors made by the participants in the pre-test and the errors made in their post-test. The comparison served to find out whether there is improvement in the post-test through the decrease in their pronunciation errors. Fig. 2 displays the data collection procedures of this research.

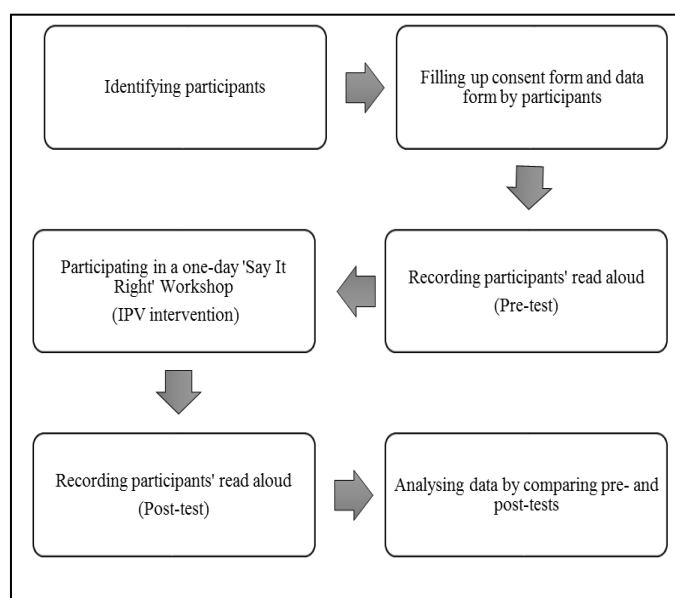


Figure 2. Data collection procedures

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to determine whether the use of IPV has led to any change in the students' reading aloud performance, the number of pronunciation errors made in both the pre-test and post-test were counted and then compared. Descriptive statistics were employed in analysing the data and the findings are reported in Tables I, II and III.

In Table I, the results of the study revealed that the participants' post-test performance was significantly different from their pre-test performance. Although there is one participant (S13) who was not able to achieve any improvement, the rest of the participants produced 48.7% lesser errors in the post-test than the errors they made in the pre-test. In other words, the participants have improved significantly in their reading aloud test after using the IPV. This indicates that the intervention of IPV helped to improve the participants' pronunciation in English. The success rate in reducing pronunciation errors is considered high (that is 48.7%) because the participants focused on specific sounds/errors which they have problems with; rather than all the sounds/words in the IPV. Similar positive result was obtained in a study done by Chavangklang [27], held in Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University, Thailand, who found that the final consonants from the pre- and post-tests mean scores were statistically significant at a level of 0.05 and that the use of e-learning (embedded with instructional videos and other tools) had improved the 35 first-year students' pronunciation skill.

TABLE I. PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS IN PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST

Participant	No. of Errors made in Pre-test	No. of Errors made in Post-test	Difference	
			f	%
S01	13	4	-9	-69.2%
S02	7	1	-6	-85.7%
S03	14	8	-6	-42.9%
S04	13	1	-12	-92.3%
S05	15	6	-9	-60.0%
S06	13	2	-11	-84.6%
S07	15	8	-7	-46.7%
S08	12	7	-5	-41.7%
S09	16	5	-11	-68.8%
S10	11	8	-3	-27.3%
S11	10	6	-4	-40.0%
S12	9	6	-3	-33.3%
S13	12	12	0	0.0%
S14	9	7	-2	-22.2%
S15	9	6	-3	-33.3%
S16	10	5	-5	-50.0%
S17	10	9	-1	-10.0%
S18	12	4	-8	-66.7%
S19	12	9	-3	-25.0%
S20	12	6	-6	-50.0%
TOTAL	234	120	-114	-48.7%

Table II shows that pronunciation errors on silent consonant of /t/ were 100% corrected, and followed by fricative consonant (71.8%) and then plosive consonant

(56.3%). Although pure long vowel errors were not rectified via the intervention of the IPV, there was a fall in errors made on diphthongs (that is 50% less errors in the post-test) and pure short vowels (with a decrease of 20%).

Apart from the pronunciation errors made in Table II, the sample of the study also improved significantly in saying the -ed form of words and unfamiliar words/sounds. As presented in Table III, the greatest improvement is seen on the /ɪd/ sound in the word 'succeeded' with 88.9%, while the word 'obliged' is the least improved. This may be due to the reason that the word 'obliged' is not commonly used by the participants. For unfamiliar words/sounds, 'immediately' and 'succeed' were both equally corrected with 63.6% but more than half of the participants were seen to be still unable to pronounce the word "confess" accurately.

TABLE II. NUMBER OF PRONUNCIATION ERRORS MADE IN THE NORTH WIND AND THE SUN

Pronunciation Errors (PE)	Pre-test		Post-test		Difference in PE Made	
	f	Types of errors	f	Types of errors	f	%
Fricative Consonant	85	/ð/,/θ/,/z/,/h/	24	/θ/	-61	-71.8%
Plosive Consonant	32	/d/, /g/, /t/	14	/d/, /t/	-18	-56.3%
Silent Consonant	8	/t/	0	N/A	-8	-100.0%
Pure Short Vowel	40	/ɪ/,/ʊ/,/ə/	32	/ɪ/,/ʊ/,/ə/,/æ/	-8	-20.0%
Pure Long Vowel	31	/u:/, /ɔ:/, /i:/, /ɑ:/	31	/ɔ:/, /u:/	0	0.0%
Diphthong	38	/eɪ/, /əʊ/	19	/eɪ/	-19	-50.0%

TABLE III. PRONUNCIATION ERRORS MADE IN THE -ED FORM AND OF UNFAMILIAR WORDS/SOUNDS

Pronunciation Errors	Pre-test	Post-test	Difference	
	f	f	f	%
/ɪd ^a (succeeded)	18	2	-16	-88.9%
/d ^a (considered/shined/ agreed)	20	6	-14	-70.0%
/t ^a (wrapped)	20	10	-10	-50.0%
obliged /əblɪdʒd/	20	14	-6	-30.0%
succeed /səkɪsɪd/	11	4	-7	-63.6%
confess /kənfes/	12	9	-3	-25.0%
immediately /ɪmi:diətli/	11	4	-7	-63.6%
attempt /ətempt/	6	4	-2	-33.3%
traveller /trævələ(r)/	5	2	-3	-60.0%
other /ʌðə(r)/	1	0	-1	-100.0%

a. Three different sounds of the -ed form.

In conclusion, the results in Tables I, II and III depict that video-based pronunciation support like the IPV is successful in reducing pronunciation errors in general. This notion is parallel to Chang, Shak and Gregory's [26] research findings as the

respondents stated that the IPV helps to improve learners' pronunciation because it provides visuals for users to imitate lip and mouth movements, and produce sounds for unlimited times as it can be played repeatedly, at a one-on-one individualized pace which users are comfortable with. Another study related to the use of videos and the brain done by Berk [28] also supports and provides explanation for the findings of this study. He highlighted the "picture superiority effect", which explains that concepts or ideas are more likely to be remembered if they are presented as pictures rather than words.

In addition, the positive improvement in the sample's pronunciation performance shown in this study is able to counter-argue the notion on second language pronunciation proposed by Gilakjani [7]. In his study, he mentioned that:

Second language pronunciation is a cognitive skill for which some people may have more natural aptitude and/or interest and motivation than others, but which everyone can learn to a certain degree if given appropriate opportunities. He also suggested that the main problem second language learners have with pronunciation has to do with their need to change a conceptual pattern appropriate for their first language that they have internalized in childhood. It is not the case that learners are best helped if they are able to 'see' speech, whether in articulate or acoustic form. Learners need help in categorizing or conceptualizing sounds in a way appropriate to English. (p.75)

But as seen from the result above, by modelling and imitating the sound articulated in the IPV, participants were able to rectify their mispronunciation. This process is also necessary as it helps learners to identify, categorize and conceptualize English sounds. It is evident that when students are actively engaged in their learning of pronunciation through overt observation of articulatory movements, they will be able to better understand how English sounds are made and learn to produce them correctly.

Besides that, results of this study reflected how it is pedagogically beneficial to use video technology in the second language learning classroom; as Karppinen [20] stated:

It is evident that videos viewed either through television or computer can be seen as tools for learning. However, videos are just one component in the complexity of a classroom activity system. The learning outcomes depend largely on the way videos are used as part of the overall learning environment, for example, how viewing or producing videos is integrated into other learning resources and tasks. (p.246)

Overall, although small in scope, this study has produced some interesting results which are hoped would make a contribution towards developing future educational technologies in aiding English teachers to achieve the best pronunciation teaching and learning practice.

V. CONCLUSION

Phonetics, both in theory and practice, constitute the basis of speaking above all other aspects of language, and pronunciation is the foundation of speaking. Good

pronunciation can make communication easier, more relaxed and more meaningful. Undoubtedly, pronunciation can be one of the most difficult parts for language learners to master, thus, needing the ESL teachers to focus on the students' needs, levels and abilities, when incorporating pronunciation into their oral skills in classroom practices and activities. In many instances of ESL classroom, the teacher corrected students' pronunciation or gave them information about the pronunciation of words. However, as shown in this study, the IPV used can be characterised as being learner-centred to a great extent as it encourages learner autonomy, as compared to the traditional teaching of pronunciation which does not correlate well with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). As stated by Seidlhofer [29], CLT directs the learners' attention to communication and away from form, but a certain formal aspect, such as pronunciation, can be difficult to learn unless one pays attention to it. Thus, such objective can be accomplished by integrating the use of video technology, such as the "Say It Right" IPV. As proven in this study, students' pronunciation errors can be successfully corrected and reduced by focusing on how the target sounds are made, and providing the opportunity for students to practise those sounds. For future research, a longitudinal study is recommended to examine how the IPV's effectiveness on the rectification of students' pronunciation errors could last.

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