APLNG 588

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Examining the Effectiveness of Practicing to Pronounce Through

Tongue-Twisters via VoiceThread in Foreign Language Learning

**Abstract**

As a web-based application, VoiceThread has drawn the growing interest of researchers and educators due to its multifunctional and easy-to-use features. Due to the prevalence of applying web 2.0 tools in education, an experiment of practicing English pronunciation via VoiceThread would be conducted in this current study. The content of using VoiceThread will be chosen as asking students to practice and record English tongue-twisters since it is an effective and appealing method in learning pronunciation. The aim is to examine (1) the effectiveness of the experiment in learners’ improvement of English pronunciation, (2) to what extent the learners will improve after this experiment, (3) how they will perceive their gains and difficulties in English pronunciation, and also peer comments through the process. The participants of the study will be 40 college English major students from two classes learning English as a foreign language in China. They will take a one-semester English pronunciation class which lasts 18 weeks. The participants in experimental group will be asked to upload their recordings of the assigned tongue-twisters every week and also comment on their classmates’ tongue-twisters on VoiceThread. The evaluation of their improvement will be based on the data collected from pre-/post-test of both experimental and control group, and the participants of experimental group perceived gains and difficulties will be collected through a questionnaire after the class.

**Key words**

Pronunciation, Tongue-Twisters, VoiceThread, Computer-assisted Language Learning, English as a Foreign Language

**Introduction**

VoiceThread is a totally web-based application that allows users to place collections of media like images, videos, documents, and presentations at the center of an asynchronous conversation. VoiceThread allows people to have conversations and to make comments using any mix of text, a microphone, a web cam, a telephone, or uploaded audio file. It is one of the most popular Web 2.0 tools for students with collaborate tasks. It is an interactive online tool which makes teachers and students could contact with each other all the time. Since the in-class time is limited and the instructor might not be able to work on with each student, it is good to use voice thread and make comments to everyone and provide certain instruction. Voice thread is also a great learning tool because it can help both teachers and students to track students’ learning process.

Tongue-twisters are set of phrases designed to be difficult, and they are constructed on similar but distinct phonemes. The purpose of tongue-twisters is to exercise the jaw and the muscles around your mouth to make speaking at ease. Practicing tongue-twisters is a good strategy in language learning especially when the learners are confronting the specific obstacles in pronunciation. Due to the fact that some tongue-twisters produce results which are humorous (or humorously vulgar) when they are mispronounced, it is an interesting and appealing way to learn pronunciation by practicing tongue-twisters. By using VoiceThread to record Tongue-twisters, students could also directly see their learning process and the progress they made by comparing the several draft recordings and the final ones.

Considering the fact that English pronunciation is always disconsidered in Chinese institution and by teachers, and in any EFL context students are lack of opportunity to correct their pronunciation and speak English in and out of classroom. It is necessary and urgent for the students in this study, who majored in English and will probably keep working with English after their graduation, to improve their English pronunciation with above great technology and strategies.

**Literature review**

As an innovative technological tool, VoiceThread has been highly affirmed due to its function to arouse learners’ attention and motivation. “Innovative technological tools, programs, and software can be used to promote student engagement, motivation, and ultimately enhance the quality of the learning experience for all students……. (VoiceThread) can be especially helpful at increasing student engagement and motivation while activating learning” (Brunvand& Byrd, 2011). Other advantages of using VoiceThread in a classroom setting were also discussed in their paper, “This tool is easily accessible, cost-effective, applicable across most subject matter and grade levels, and adaptable to many learning setting…...This computer tool allows students to participate and collaborate in many ways at their own pace.” McCormack (2010) discovered that VoiceThread could be used as a way to elicit more reflective and in-depth responses from learners. Students in the study reported that it heightened their ability to reflect and apply correct terms to assignments provided via VoiceThread. It encouraged them spend more time interpreting and analyzing given problems and be more purposeful of their response. According to McCormack, VoiceThread is a tool that has the potential to enhance student reflections.

Tongue-twisters have been mentioned by a couple of researchers as an effective and attractive tool to aid pronunciation teaching/learning. Cheng (1998) mentions that tongue twisters could increase learners’ motivation in a pronunciation classroom, and motivation is definitely important factor in learning pronunciation. He also states that tongue twisters especially work for the learners who have specific pronunciation problems, and it is a good chance to make them practice again and again. This study fits in the Social cultural Theory since students’ pronunciation learning in this research requires mediation from technology, peers, and also the instructor. Linse (2005) also attests tongue twister activities are a fun way to teach pronunciation to young children in EFL classroom because children love tongue twisters to recognize saying the sounds as a game or challenge. Compared with children, adult learners also have the advantages of being more aware of their mistakes and having the ability to make corrections by themselves. Thus the activity incorporating tongue twisters is applicable for all levels of language proficiency, as well as for students of almost all ages.

**Methodology**

**Research Questions**

This study aims to examine whether the activity of practicing tongue-twisters via voice thread could improve learners’ English pronunciation, especially the segments which they have trouble with due to their first language interference. In addition, it also designs to examine that whether it could improve learners’ pronunciation only at lexical level, or it also helps with learners’ pronunciation in their speech performance. Moreover, the participants perceived gains and difficulties would also be collected at the end of the study.

 Therefore, three research questions are posed in this study:

1. Does this activity of practicing tongue twisters improve experimental group learners’ English pronunciation?
2. How would the participants in experimental group perceive their gains and difficulties in this activity?

 To examine the first question, students in both groups will be given a pre-test and a post-test before and after the whole class. The content of the two tests are quite similar: they are asked to read out loud the same work sheets at the beginning and the end of the course to the instructor, and the content of the work sheets includes lexical items and short sentences which contain pronunciations that the learners inclines to make mistake with, and also a diagnose speech (see appendix 1). For the second question, a questionnaire will be given to participants in experimental group to fill out (see appendix 2).

**Participants**

 The participants of the study will be 40 Chinese college freshmen from two classes who are majored in English. In this study, one class (20 students) will be assigned as experimental group and the other (20 students) as control group. All students are non-native speakers of English and none of them have experience of studying abroad in English-speaking countries. They have learned English for about nine years and they are at intermediate level on the average. Most of them have no experience with VoiceThread. Although pronunciation development begins in the early stages of language learning and it is good to make language learners at the beginning level to practice pronunciation since they perceive the sounds of the target language based on the standard sounds taught by teachers. However, learners at intermediate or even advanced level are more self-conscious so that they are able to notice their shortcomings in the process of language learning. Therefore, with the help of teachers and the well-designed course, it would be helpful for them to figure out their problems of pronunciation and correct them.

**Course Description**

 The participants are studying in a university of foreign language in China. The course they are taking in this study is an English pronunciation course in their first semester in college. It is a required course for all English major students. This one-semester course lasts for 18 weeks and the class meets 90 minutes per week. The instructional focus is pronunciation correction and the articulation of IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet). The goal of the course is to improve learner’s English pronunciation at the basic and lexical level so that they could further develop their English speaking skills in their future academic study and real-life communication.

**Procedures**

* + Explicit in-class Instruction: The instructor will briefly introduce the syllabus of the course to the students in the first class, which includes the articulation of IPA, especially sounds that are difficult for the students to pronounce , mostly due to their first language’s interference. At the same time, the technology which will be used throughout the course--VoiceThread, will be only introduced to the class which is assigned as experimental group, since control group will not use VoiceThread, the introduction of it could be skipped. The instructor will let students know what they could do with it, how to create an account, how to record your voice, how to upload it, how to make comments and etc.
	+ Pre-test: A pre-test also will be finished in the first class for both experimental and control group. The students will be asked to read out a work sheet for the instructor one by one. The worksheet includes two parts: Part one is with lexical items and short sentences and Part two is a diagnose speech. The instructor needs to write down their major problems, especially in the areas of vowels and consonants. This activity could be conducted while other students are practicing the work sheet. The whole process of pre-test would be audio-recorded for the data collection.
	+ Recording Tongue-twisters via VoiceThread: As the assignment of experimental group for each week, the instructor will assign one or two tongue twisters which related to the language points that they have been working on during in-class time, and a standard version which is read by the instructor or a native speaker will be given as the example. Students are asked to practice and upload their final version of recordings of the tongue-twisters.
	+ Commenting on others’ tongue-twisters: The instructor will split students into groups of five, and within each group, students are asked to listen to other group members’ recordings, and then comment on them. They could type their comments or record their voice. This process should also be finished as their assignment at home.
	+ In-class discussion: Before the instruction of new content each week, an in-class discussion should be conducted in the classroom of experimental group. The students will still work with their group members and discuss their comments for each group members’ tongue-twisters. They should evaluate what the strengths and weaknesses are of each tongue-twister, and finally, they need to choose the best one of their group and summarize what problems are found in all their tongue twisters. Right after the discussion, a short presentation will be given by each group, which includes showing the rest of the class their best tongue twister, and a summary of the problems they find in their recordings. As a conclusion of the discussion activity, the instructor will summarize the mistakes which the students raised and then give suggestions of how to correctly articulate the sounds.
	+ For control group: Students in this group should also follow the same instructional content in the syllabus and the activity of practicing tongue-twisters and follow-up in-class discussion will also be conducted without the use of VoiceThread.
	+ Post-test: At the end of the class in the last week, students from both experimental and control groups will be asked to read out loud the same work sheet which is used in the first class for the instructor. The mistakes are examined and a comparison will be conducted between this one and the one used in the first class. This test will also be recorded for data collection.
	+ Filling out questionnaire: experimental group students will be asked to fill out a questionnaire which is about their perceived gains and difficulties in the process of using VoiceThread to record tongue-twisters, and also how they feel about peer comments. The questionnaire will be collected for data analyze.

**Assessment**

 Assessment will be made based on whether the students’ upload their tongue twisters to VoiceThread, their group discussion performance, their progress in the final work sheet reading, and the final exam scores.

**Instruments**

 The study will be conducted throughout the use of VoiceThread , and the student’s performance of reading work sheet at the beginning and the end of the course will be evaluated by the instructor, and basically the focus of evaluation is the pronunciation of specific vowels and consonants. A questionnaire will be collected and analyzed for evaluation of participants’ perception of the experiment.

**Data and analysis**

 For the first question, the following quantitative data needs to be collected for the further discussion:

* How many mispronouncing sounds in experimental group learners’s work sheet reading in the pre-test?
* How many mispronouncing sounds in experimental group learners’s work sheet reading in the post-test?
* How many mispronouncing sounds in control group learners’s work sheet reading in the pre-test?
* How many mispronouncing sounds in control group learners’s work sheet reading in the post-test?

Then the first step is the analyze the progress which each of the two groups made after the whole activity by assessing the decreasing amount, percentage and mean of the mistakes they make in the two tests. Then a comparison of the progress will be conducted between two groups.

For the second research question, the qualitative data will be collected from the questionnaire (see Appendix 2). It includes learners’ perception of the whole activity, VoiceThread, and peer comment.

Reference

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**Appendix 1**

**Part 1**

**Pairs**

 beat | bit hat | hot mean | men lid | led

beg | bag gate | get made | mad cone | cane

head | had mass | mess cup | cap tap | top hide | had I'm | am suck | sock want | won't all | oil wear | where bug | buck leave | live

pace | base ample | amble pry | fry dad | ted

wheel | heel wow | vow very | worry save | safe first | thirst bash | bath thin | sin lack | rack sip | zip bus | buzz jig | zig sue | zoo

**short sentences**

 Please sit in this seat.

 I hate this heat.

The step is steep.

The pill made her pale.

Give the ham to him.

They run in the rain.

Please taste the toast.

A duck is on the deck.

That wine is mine.

The pig is big.

That tree's bark is dark.

My verse is worse.

Those reeds are weeds.

Our fan is in the van.

That fin is thin.

Her hair is fair.

The shrew is through.

Being thin is no sin.

The shoe fits Sue.

I will sue the zoo.

**Part 2 Diagnostic Passage**

Is English your native language? If not, your foreign accent may show people that you come from another country. Why is it difficult to speak a foreign language without an accent? There are a couple of answers to this question. First, age is an important factor in learning to pronounce. We know that young children can learn a second language with perfect pronunciation. We also know that older learners usually have an accent, though some older individuals also have learned to speak without an accent.

Another factor that influences your pronunciation is your first language. English speakers can, for example, recognize people from France by their French accents. They can also identify Spanish or Arabic speakers over the telephone, just by listening carefully to them. Does this mean that accents can’t be changed? Not at all! But you can’t change your pronunciation without a lot of hard work. In the end, improving appears to be a combination of three things: concentrated hard work, a good ear, and a strong ambition to sound like a native speaker.

You also need accurate information about English sounds, effective strategies for practice, lots of exposure to spoken English, and patience. Will you make progress, or will you give up? Only time will tell, I’m afraid. But it’s your decision. You can improve! Good luck, and don’t forget to work hard.

**Appendix 2**

Questionnaire

Please take a few moments of your time to complete this end of course survey.

Thank you for your time. We appreciate your valuable feedback

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly agree | Agree | Uncertain | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
| I think VoiceThread is a good tool for language learning. |  |  |  |  |  |
| I like to use VoiceThread. |  |  |  |  |  |
| I think Tongue-twisters could help learning pronunciation. |  |  |  |  |  |
| I think my pronunciation have improved after this activity. |  |  |  |  |  |
| I think peer comment is useful. |  |  |  |  |  |
| I think this activity is useful for learning pronunciation. |  |  |  |  |  |
| I like this activity very much. |  |  |  |  |  |
| Other comments: |