

“Assessing Pronunciation Gains”

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the research project was to explore methods of assessing improvement in pronunciation, at the phonemic and prosodic levels, of advanced learners of English as a second language.

Of particular interest to the researcher was the question of whether gains could be observed in the rhythm and intonation of the spoken English of young adult Vietnamese. Further, the project was concerned with the issue of whether learners may have different rates of development at the phonemic and prosodic levels. The hypothesis is that students whose rhythm and intonation more closely approximates that of spoken English will have less difficulty making themselves understood compared to students who make similar errors with individual sounds but whose speech is characterised by staccato rhythm and problems in stress and pitch.

The subjects of the study were twelve senior high school students who had been in Australia for between one to eight years and whose first language is Vietnamese. The students were participating in a Pronunciation Program held at a large comprehensive suburban school for fifteen minutes, four mornings per week.

The research data consists of seven oral assessment tasks which were administered and tape recorded at regular intervals over a nine month period, between February and October in 1993. The assessment included prepared and impromptu speaking, reading, role play and listening tasks as well as a reading test which was administered in March and repeated in October.

The study found that students' performance improved from between 10% - 40% in the assessment tasks. Three of the students were found to rate better in terms of their control of rhythm and intonation than in their pronunciation of phonemes. However, for the majority of the twelve students these two aspects of

spoken English seemed to be developing at a fairly even rate.

The project concludes that aspects of pronunciation such as rhythm and intonation can best be assessed using authentic, interactive tasks as opposed to structured reading activities and prepared talks. The project's method of assessing pronunciation gains using a 5-point scale for the key areas of phonemes, word and sentence stress and tone is recommended for use by teachers, and by students for self-assessment.