

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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Title: *Improving Pronunciation in Target Language*
Year: 2012-2013
School/Grade: Byram Hills High School – Grades 9-12

SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE ACTION RESEARCH* PROJECT

Context:

As teachers of world languages at Byram Hills High School (BHHS), Mr. DiMartino teaches Italian and Mr. Eagle teaches Spanish. We both have a total of over 35 years of teaching experience in world languages, including upper level and Advanced Placement courses.

As a result of having taught all levels of Italian and Spanish, we both realized the necessity to improve overall pronunciation for both beginners (9th and 10th graders) and advanced language learners (11th and 12th graders). Since the BHHS world language curriculum emphasizes high level proficiency in speaking, we sought to implement a feedback strategy on pronunciation.

Since many of our students struggle to pronounce words correctly in Spanish, we were motivated to investigate and implement feedback strategies with students regarding their speaking skills.

Action Plan:

Our original research question was: *How will we improve feedback on pronunciation through the use of workstations in the world language classroom?* We soon realized that establishing workstations would not allow us to provide the individualized feedback that we had originally strived to achieve. As a result, we decided to refocus our question on this type of feedback. Therefore, our revised research question became: *Will providing individual feedback improve pronunciation in the target language?*

To support our research question, we reviewed two articles focusing on providing feedback for student learning. One article looked at making feedback clear and manageable in direct assessment as well as commonly used sample rubrics. The other article summarized the definition of good feedback, communicating with your students about feedback, ways to give feedback and manage your workload, and examples of assessment rubrics. Both articles noted the importance of providing students with meaningful feedback.

In order to assess our individual feedback, we developed a student survey. The survey questioned students on the effectiveness of feedback to improve their pronunciation in the target language. Some of the questions posed to students included:

- 1) In what ways did the one-on-one meeting help you?
- 2) In what ways did your teacher help you identify weaknesses in your pronunciation and grammar?

- 3) In what ways did your teacher help you identify strengths in your pronunciation and grammar?
- 4) As a result of the one-on-one meeting, in what ways do you feel that your pronunciation has improved in the target language?
- 5) What was your overall impression of the feedback method?

The survey was administered to both beginning and upper level language learners immediately after they had completed personal recordings in the target language. This enabled us to collect a wide variety of data to determine the effectiveness of individualized feedback.

Results:

As a result of the data, we learned that quality feedback is a necessary component in order to develop high level proficiency in pronunciation of the target language. Furthermore, the student survey assured us that individualized student feedback was highly valued. The comments on the survey were key to identify the need to further provide individualized feedback. Some of the comments we received included:

- 1) "This meeting helped me understand what problems I was having with pronunciation at that time..."
- 2) "The meeting made me more conscience of the mistakes I was making."
- 3) "I didn't even realize that I was saying it incorrectly."
- 4) "It was more instructive and helped pinpoint mistakes I made."
- 5) "I enjoyed getting feedback...wish we did it for all projects."
- 6) "The one-on-one meeting helped me because it gave me confidence to speak more."
- 7) "I thought the meeting was personal and honest."
- 8) "I feel that I now pay closer attention to pronunciation and accents and the way things sound."
- 9) "Not only were my mistakes pointed out, but my teacher acknowledged when my pronunciation was on target."
- 10) "I felt awkward at first, but when I realized my pronunciation had improved, I felt proud and amazed at how far I had come in my language studies."

Another interesting finding unrelated to our research was that the upper level students were less inclined than the lower level students to hear their own voices. The upper level students were also less receptive to feedback than the lower level students. This finding intrigued us because it was counterintuitive and it led us to further question why such behavior occurred. As a result, we began to wonder if this counterintuitive behavior could lead to further investigation.

Implications:

Our findings indicated that one-on-one individualized feedback improved pronunciation in second language students. The student surveys showed that this feedback was valued more than tests handed back with red marks and comments. As a result, it is our goal in the future to implement more speaking assessments using individualized feedback in the future. In addition, we will monitor students for their improvement in pronunciation in the target language.