Application of Action Research into the Development of English Linking in a College English Classroom

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Abstract. This article reported the introduction of action research into an intensive English class for English major freshmen at a college in China. Sixty-one students (three boys and fifty-eight girls) participated in the study, which investigated the effects of action research on their pronunciation development of linking. Through a recording test and a questionnaire, students’ proficiency in English linking was identified. The test and the questionnaire were administered before the intervention. Based on the analysis results, a refined four-step process of planning, strategies, action and self-reflection was proposed, aiming to develop the students’ proficiency of linking. A three-week teaching action was carried out. With the help of online platform, online videos, timely feedback in class both from the teacher and peers, reflective journals in the process of the instruction and an interview conducted after it showed that action research had a clear positive effect on the development of students’ proficiency in English linking.

Keywords: Corrective Feedback, Action Research, Online Platform, Linking

1. Introduction
Language is unique to humans and it is the most important means of communication. Pronunciation, spelling (shape in Chinese) and meaning are three essential elements of a language. The Father of Modern Western Linguistics Saussure once proposed the importance of pronunciation in his book by saying “Sound Primary”, which indicates its essentiality. It is of great importance for English major students to acquire some basic skills of pronunciation. To achieve English fluency, sound changes like linking, rhythm, intonation and stress should be taught. In connected speech, linking is a common phenomenon. Having a good command of linking could help students improve English fluency as well as listening comprehension. Through classroom observation, it was found that most English major freshmen in the author’s class failed to use linking rules and skills while reading and had difficulties in identifying linking in some listening materials. Some students lacked the awareness to English linking.

Action research originates from daily teaching practice, aiming to solve problems that are affecting teaching and need to be solved. This type of research is described as situation-specific, cyclical, normally consisting of four major steps: planning, action, observation and self-reflection. Based on what they have observed and reflected, teachers (sometimes called practitioners) re-plan in successive cycles for further improvement. Action research has played an important role in the context of foreign
language teaching. Many scholars like Kemmis & McTaggart, Nunan, and Allwright & Balely etc. all emphasize that whether action research can carry out depends on teachers. 985 articles from 2018-2020 were retrieved in the database Web of Science with “action research” as the title, key words by the end of November in 2020. Much of the action research work explored educational research occurred in various contexts [3-10]. In particular, researchers were interested the characteristics of action research, and how it worked in other fields. Since its introduction to China in the early 1980s, the interest in action research has attracted considerable attention, resulting in numerous research studies, reviews, though its limits cannot be ignored. According to the visualized analysis from CNKI (one of the biggest databases in China), over the past three years (2018-2020) there have been a large number of studies exploring the effectiveness of action research on English learning and self-study.

“Corrective feedback is an important pedagogical area for both teachers and research in second language acquisition.”[1] According to some empirical research, explicit feedback is helpful in improving learners’ speech accuracy. The study was spired by a growing number of articles that focused on the effectiveness of action research and how corrective feedback improved speech accuracy. The study particularly focused on the description and analysis of English major freshmen’s command of English linking. Based on class observation, a three-week teaching action was carried out, trying to address how to improve students’ proficiency level of English linking by implementing action research.

2. Application of Action Research on the Development of Linking
Kemmis and McTaggart introduced a detailed four-step loop in 1988. In the first step, some problems are identified according to the teachers’ own observations and perception. Then it was followed by how to solve the problems; implementation of some practical interventions to solve the problems. The third step involves observation. The fourth stage involves reflection. At last, the problems solved, the researcher proceeds to carry out the next round of research. In this study, a refined four-stage action research is outlined based on Kemmis and McTaggart’s study. Firstly, identify the problem, propose a hypothetical analysis of the problem, and then collect data. Secondly, make up appropriate strategies to solve the observed problem. Thirdly, carry out the plan. Fourthly, reflect the whole process and what students have gained.

2.1 Identification, Hypotheses and Data Collection
Identification and Hypotheses
Through classroom observations, it was found that most students in the author’s class had obvious problems with English linking. Some of them had no awareness to linking. Some of them knew some rules and skills of linking but could not use it flexibly. Good pronunciation was an important manifestation of students’ English fluency.

In response to the above problems, the following hypotheses were proposed.
1) Students had never paid the slightest attention to English linking;
2) Students lacked the corresponding knowledge of English linking;
3) Students knew the rules of English linking but could not use them flexibly;
4) Students did not know how to correct errors;
5) Teachers did not explain the usage of English linking and did not give feedback in the course of teaching.

3. Data Collection
In order to verify the above preliminary hypotheses, the teacher conducted a questionnaire based on an online platform and a recording test. Subjects were 61 English major freshmen (3 boys and 58 girls) from School of Foreign Languages at a college in China. Quantitative methods were used, and quantitative data came from questionnaires and the recording test. The recording test materials were retrieved from two textbooks Making Sense Out of English Sounds: Reading Aloud and Retelling
(Tian Zhaoxia) and Better Pronunciation for Communication (Liu Sen), aiming to test whether students had awareness to sound linking and their proficiency. The students’ overall proficiency level of English linking was examined from two aspects: phrases and short sentences. There were altogether 78 words including twenty groups of phrases, a total of 46 words and four short sentences.

The questionnaire survey was conducted just three days after the teacher noticed this kind of problem. The questionnaire was designed through an online questionnaire platform, and 61 questionnaires were distributed through an instant message platform. It took about 30 minutes. A total of 61 questionnaires were received and all of them turned to be valid questionnaires. The recording test was to be recorded within one week after the questionnaire survey. Subjects could choose an appropriate time and place on their own. Before the recording test, they were told to ensure the sound quality and avoid noisy recording environment. 59 valid recording materials were gathered three days from then on. Subsequently, two teachers with linguistic and pedagogical experience scored 59 recordings according to the scoring standards. If the teachers were not quite sure about the results, they re-graded them through negotiation.

The statistics from Questionnaire Star (an online platform) showed that: 1) almost all students had learned English for more than 10 years; 2) 78.69% of the students knew something of sound linking while 21.31% of the students had heard linking sounds but did not know what they were; 3) After they entered the college, their teachers told them some rules and skills of English linking. 81.97% of the students only knew the rules, but rarely used them. Only 6.56% of the students thought they had a good command of it; 4) 85.25% of the students had an awareness to English linking. However, they were more familiar with one type. That is the link between final consonant sounds to initial vowel sounds; 5) 90.16% of the students thought that it was necessary to learn linking. According to the recording test scores, the overall performance of the subjects was not as good as it should be.

3.1 Strategies and Action
“Corrective feedback refers to a CF type whose corrective force is made salient to learners, potentially leading them to notice the nature of their non-target language production.”[1]. There have been a large number of studies exploring corrective feedback which almost exclusively focus on morphology and syntax. What receives less attention to some degree is the relationship between corrective feedback and phonology. Therefore, based on the survey results, the teacher of the class decided to take the following steps: 1) Watch MOOC and online videos, and reorganize the rules of linking. Some students tended to pronounce each word as if it were isolated. Therefore, the explanation of the rules of linking is essential. The most common one is linking the final consonant sound with the initial vowel sound. In fluent speech, if the sentence is not long, one sense group can be linked with the next sense group. For example, please write in Chinese and give it to the host before we start. The second one is r/re linking. The third one is vowel+ vowel. There are two cases. 2) Recognize linking + feedback. Phonetic recognition is the basis of pronunciation, and the practice of phonetic recognition should be strengthened. According to the survey results, students were relatively familiar with the linking types: r/re + V and C+V. They were quite unfamiliar with V+V type, as this one was much more complicated. Some observational research show that noticing has a positive effect on improving the command of linking. The more frequent and prominent linking is in the input, the more it can attract learners’ attention. It is necessary for teachers to find out more materials with linking from the internet. In order to arouse learners’ interests, materials about songs, news, TV shows are much better. Timely feedback is necessary in this step. 3) Underline whether sound linking is used + feedback. When the students could discriminate linking sounds from other sounds, the teacher needs to increase the variety of exercises. Corrective feedback is also important in this step.

Through the collection and analysis of the previous two periods, the teacher formulated a three-week teaching action research plan. In order not to affect the normal teaching content and progress, different pronunciation training plans about linking would be conducted respectively in the following three weeks. During the first week, students need to make a brief summary of rules of linking they’ve ever met. Before that class, students were asked to search what was best suitable for
them from the Internet. The teacher also recommended several websites and teaching videos (Tim’s Pronunciation Workshop, a popular BBC pronunciation program) related to linking. At the same time, in order to help students better perceive the phenomenon of sound linking, extracurricular assignments were distributed to the students’ smartphones through a wisdom teaching tool just the day after the class. The teacher made necessary adjustments to the action plan, as some students emailed the teacher that sometimes it’s hard for them to tell whether they had the right pronunciation. Peer feedback became necessary. The primary role of peer feedback in foreign language learning has widely been acknowledged. In the past ten years in China, there have been a growing number of studies on peer feedback. Activities in the second week include 6 English songs, 10 tongue twisters and some other types of tasks. English songs were chosen because some observational studies have explored the effectiveness of English songs in improving listening ability. Students then were asked to recognize and underline linking sounds in English songs. The chosen songs met students’ preferences and the lyrics were also in line with students’ English proficiency. Although some songs were classic and widespread, they were not selected for the lyrics were too much difficult. The lyrics that did not convey a positive message were avoided. “In contrast to controlled tasks, spontaneous speech tasks are better suited to measure L2 learners’ relatively unconscious and unmonitored use of L2 pronunciation forms”[2]. In these tasks, learners do not have enough time to pay attention simultaneously to the content and the phonological aspect of a language. Based on this, some oral tasks were assigned to the students during the third week. Timely feedback both from the teacher and peers was required. The teacher found that pronunciation errors tended to trigger recasts. Since the research cycle was not long, another recording test was not conducted. Students were asked to record what they said and write reflective journals. It helped the teacher better understand what the students had gained, what challenges they had faced and their suggestions. Interviews were conducted within 2 days after it. It helped the teacher better understand the students’ overall learning effectiveness.

3.2 Reflection

Students’ learning outcomes. Based on the investigation results at the beginning of the research, three aspects are focused on during the process.

1) Rules of linking. Since having a good command of the rules of linking will have a useful effect on listening and speaking. In the initial place, the teacher put focus on mastering the rules of linking. Students needed to find out some materials related to pronunciation from the Internet and summarize the rules on their own. Although students reacted positively at the beginning, the teacher soon discovered that some students could not summarize the rules as expected. The teacher got timely feedback from QQ (an online platform in China developed by Tencent) and found that the main reason was that some students lacked the ability to distinguish between good and bad from the mountainous materials. Hence, the teacher introduced the standard of selection. However, the development of students’ proficiency in linking could not be altogether solved by only mastering the rules. This could be seen from the results of the former recording test. Also, from students’ homework, the teacher found that most of the students could list all the rules of linking but seldom did some oral practice. Therefore, the existing problems still lingered on.

2) Recognize linking+feedback. The famous phonetician A. C. Gimson once pointed out that if one wanted to learn any language, 100% of its pronunciation had to be mastered while 50%-90% of its grammar and 1% of its vocabulary was already enough. Pronunciation performance directly affects students’ self-evaluation and then their academic performance. Results from some articles conducted by some famous Chinese scholars (e.g. Mao Haoran, Wang Chuming) showed that pronunciation self-concept significantly related to the actual pronunciation performance. Correct pronunciation and fluency can stimulate self-confidence in learning and promote language acquisition. On the contrary, students will lack learning motivation and learning results will not be good. In order to encourage students to build confidence to change old habits, the teacher adopted a variety of methods to stimulate students’ interests and realize their full potential. For example, the teacher selected some well-known English songs and some short video clips from movies which were easy to understand and imitate.
First, students were asked to recognize linking sounds and then mark them. One of the chosen songs was Big Big World, a folk song by Emilia Ryberg. The rhythm was slow and easy for students to follow. It was not difficult for students to recognize the linking sounds. For phonetic errors, students might not be aware of their errors. Even though they perceived the errors, they couldn’t make sure if they actually corrected themselves. Therefore, feedback both from the teacher and peers who performed better was indispensable. The teacher normally gave timely explicit feedback. Sometimes the teacher would give delayed feedback through an online platform. If every mistake was corrected at once, the students’ confidence in pronunciation would be affected in some way. Pronunciation errors normally led to recasts. Recasts refer to the rephrasing of a non-target like utterance using a more target-like one.

3) Underline where sound linking is used. The teacher soon made some adjustments to the very first action plan according to students’ performance. In this part, some oral tasks related to the textbooks were assigned to the students, as they were rather familiar with them. For example, imagine you were the author and are now back to New England. Your family members were curious about your encounter with the green banana in a central place of Brazil. You tell them about your recent experience. Only a small proportion of the students showed little awareness to linking while focusing on the content. Then the teacher needed to increase the frequency and let students do more practice.

Through the qualitative analysis of 61 reflective journals by 61 students, and the interview with 10 students who volunteered to accept the interview, the teacher found that students with good pronunciation proficiency showed great interest and requirements for linking practice, and students with low pronunciation proficiency reported that the intensive practice was good to some extent. And they needed to do more practice.

4. Conclusion
The author was both teacher and researcher as she sought to investigate, over three weeks, whether the implementation of action research could help develop the proficiency of English linking for freshmen at a college in China. Through planning, action, feedback, observation, and reflection, it was found that the implementation of action research could help improve students’ sound linking ability to some extent. Recast was the most frequently used form of CF. With the help of an online platform, the teacher could give timely and delayed feedback. In the whole process the teacher not only got effective ways of self-improvement but discovered some practical problems in the research. First, action research originates from practice and in turn serves practice. Second, researchers need to pay attention to several aspects at the same time: the research questions should be focused; the research method should be rich; the research plan should consist with students’ proficiency level.

The effectiveness of the whole action depends on the researcher’s creativity and flexibility to a large extent. At present, computer-assisted language learning system, which makes self-directed learning and cooperative learning possible out of class, has been proved to be rather effective in helping EFL learners practice pronunciation. In the meantime, teachers should enhance their awareness of information literacy and improve information processing ability.

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