

PERCEPTION TRAINING WITH INDEXICAL FEATURES OF FOREIGN ACCENT

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Perceptual sensitivity to non-native contrasts is normally reduced when the perceptual space of native phonetic categories overlaps with those of the non-native system. This phenomenon has been analysed by current models in terms of equivalence classification (Flege 1995), perceptual assimilation (Best 1995), or perceptual interference (Iverson et al. 2003). When a non-native category falls within the perceptual scope of a native language (L1) category, it is likely that no new second language (L2) category will be formed for that sound, with the L1 category assimilating onto itself the similar L2 sound. As a case in point, most English consonants fall within the Spanish perceptual space, so that the formation of separate English consonant categories by Spanish learners is often blocked or hindered. However, it has been shown that training can improve the perception of non-native categories (Pisoni & Lively 1995). The current paper analyses the development of correct perceptual representations for English consonants by Spanish L1 learners. Three types of exposure designed to promote such development are compared. Besides conventional exposure and phonetic training, we study the effect of sensitization to foreign-accented (FA) pronunciations vs. native-accented (NA) exemplars. 78 school children were tested on the perception of English consonants in a foreign language setting with Spanish as an L1, via a pre/post exposure experimental design. Children received one of three exposure types: (a) native English teacher non-focused exposure during English lessons, (b) computer-based training solely on the English consonant system or (c) computer-based training on English consonants and on native vs. foreign accented consonant realizations. Results indicate that (i) all students improved their perception of English phonemic consonantal contrasts, (ii) students receiving intensive English consonant training improved significantly more than the others and (iii) there were no significant differences amongst the three groups in their ability to distinguish acceptable pronunciations from foreign-accented ones. Our results have interesting pedagogical implications for foreign-language settings in which teaching is often carried out by non-native instructors, and where exposure to native sound exemplars is limited.

References

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