Chapter 6

Boosting L2 Listening Comprehension Through Web-Based Listening Activities on Reduced Forms

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ABSTRACT

In the field of second language (L2) perception, there is a common adherence to quantitative methods to examine reduced forms (RFs). This chapter extends the field by reporting on an investigation that analyzed L2 listeners’ perceptions of RFs in English from a qualitative perspective. RFs instruction through web-based activities was delivered to a total of 80 learners of English of varying proficiency for five weeks. Twenty participants reflected on their performance on RFs listening tasks and provided justifications for their perceptions of the target RFs. Qualitative analysis revealed that the RFs that influenced L2 learners’ perceptions of RFs were linking, pause phenomena, and assimilation. The results of using such qualitative methodology highlights the important role that RFs plays in perception judgements in syllable-timed languages such as Turkish, a factor which has not always been given much prominence in previous L2 fluency quantitative research.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, communication with other people across the globe has almost reached its peak level through the integration of intelligent design of multimedia. The integration of technology is inevitable almost in all fields of education as well as the skills in second language (L2) instruction. The use of variety of websites, mobile applications or specifically tailored tutorials may not always meet the needs unless the problem is clearly identified and solution based activities are delivered.

It is obvious that there are some elements that cause learners difficulty in speech perception. Apart from the physical circumstances such as loudness and the setting, rate of speech topic familiarity, size

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of vocabulary, length of sentences including the duration of speech are all important elements in speech perception. There are some features that often cause misunderstanding on the part of the L2 listeners. Those features as called reduced forms, connected speech. This phenomenon is also termed in several ways such as ‘sandhi-variation’ (Henrichen, 1984), modifications in speech or reduced forms (Matsuzawa, 2006). Reduced forms (henceforth abbreviated to RFs) are prevalent in real life speech or in an idea unit of a sentence in particular, making the utterance pronounced altogether. An idea unit, in other words, thought group is defined by Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin (2011) as a distinct chunk of speech that makes a semantically and grammatically cohesive unit of discourse. They further state that an utterance can be separated into an idea unit when a speaker can normally pause in the real time of speech. For example, in a sentence: “I hope you won’t open the window when it’s so cold and snowing” two idea units occur: “you won’t open the window” and “it’s so cold and snowing”. However, in the sentence: “The cat, with which I used to travel, is gone”, the only idea unit can be considered as “I used to travel” because the speaker is supposed to give a logical pause before comma. It is reported that all languages have a range of RFs employed (Rosa, 2002), the reason of which is attributed to the fact that not every word of utterance in natural speech is fully articulated (Aquil, 2012; Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Roach, 2009). Rather, the speech organs articulate sounds together to save time and energy instead of forcing speech organs to take a new position for each sound. Hence, a variety of phonological modifications occur in naturally spoken English, which causes different pronunciation of words from their phonetically pronounced forms (Buck, 1995; Mitterer, Kim & Cho, 2013; Zielinski, 2007).

RFs are difficult for second language (L2) learners to perceive and identify the boundaries between the words, which in turn cause disruption in listening comprehension (Ur 1984; Underwood 2012; Brown, 2006). Listening to the sentences articulated in isolation is markedly different from those articulated in RFs (Aquil, 2012; Toro, Sebastian- Galles & Mattys, 2009). When ESL learners are asked to judge the intelligibility of a native speaker’s (NS) speech through audio, they tend to focus more on global comprehension rather than that of the modifications in real life speech. Because ESL learners can easily perceive content words, they may not be able to determine what RFs impede their perception in the audio. With this in mind, the RFs such as contraction, assimilation, flap, elision and linking could be promoted to raise awareness of perception on the part of ESL learner through explicit instruction. Moreover, the limited training or the lack of the incorporation of technology in listening instruction may result in experiencing misperception and not catching up with the instructor in the class on the part of listener (Seferoğlu & Uzakgören, 2004). Thanks to the recent accessibility of online or offline tools, videos, podcasts or a range innovative mobile applications are increasingly incorporated in second language classes in second language (L2) listening instruction. What is more, course delivery through technology allows learners independent learning, in which they can regulate their learning independently apart from the classroom context (Bayyurt & Karatas 2011; Chang, 2005; Hsu et al., 2013). By doing so, learners can be exposed to hear and see a stream of speech on a video and imitate the native speaker as a part of natural language learning situation (Kuhl et al, 2008).

This may also provide learners follow their own pacing in that they can check themselves over and over again at their own availability. Hence, learners become autonomous and enhance ownership of learning the reduced forms. Learners’ monitoring their own learning through visual entities is specifically important when the input is slightly beyond their linguistic competence (Danan, 2004; Erçetin, 2011). With regard to the present study, this is preserved as the video modality, (yet with no captions) in that it may serve to increase language perception, specifically the RFs, by connecting auditory to visual input. As mentioned before, audiovisual materials through technology are potential tools that are
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