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About the Journal

Founded in 2013, the Journal of Teacher Action Research (ISSN: 2332-2233) is a peer-reviewed online journal indexed with EBSCO that seeks practical research that can be implemented in Pre-Kindergarten through Post-Secondary classrooms. The primary function of this journal is to provide classroom teachers and researchers a means for sharing classroom practices.

The journal accepts articles for peer-review that describe classroom practice which positively impacts student learning. We define teacher action research as teachers (at all levels) studying their practice and/or their students' learning in a methodical way in order to inform classroom practice. Articles submitted to the journal should demonstrate an action research focus with intent to improve the author's practice.

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IMPROVING PRONUNCIATION SKILLS OF GRADE 6 PUPILS THROUGH ORAL DRILLS

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Abstract This study explored the use of oral drills to improve the pronunciation skills of Grade 6 pupils. Word lists were used for oral drills and a semi-structured interview to capture their experiences. The drills focused on the least pronounced consonant and vowel sounds, which lasted for ten weeks. The data revealed that the learner's pronunciation skills were Satisfactory in the pretest and Very Satisfactory in the post-test. The t-test result suggested the drills positively influenced pronunciation illustrated with increased scores on the post-test. Data suggests that learner pronunciation skills significantly improved with the implementation of oral drill strategies.

Keywords: teacher action research, consonant sounds, oral drills, pronunciation skills, vowel sounds

Introduction

When the researcher taught in the Department of Education, learners exhibited difficulty with proper English pronunciation. They were unable to express ideas, both written and orally. Communication involves three steps: thought, encoding, and decoding; many pupils remained at the initial step. They had the intellect but were unable to encode and decode it. Teaching them how to speak English fluently has been a complicated process, considering the three areas of knowledge: mechanics, functions, and social and cultural rules and norms. Thus, the researcher focused on mechanics, which involves pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. However, mechanics seems complicated; knowing the students' pre-existing knowledge-base, developing simultaneously all three may require much effort and more extended time; hence, this research focused on pronunciation.

This study assessed the pronunciation skills and introduced oral drills to the Grade 6-Earth pupils for SY: 2018-2019 of Aloran Central School, Aloran District in the Division of Misamis Occidental, Northern Mindanao, Philippines. The specific objectives were to:

1. Identify the level of the learner's pronunciation skills in the pretest;
2. Identify the level of the learner's pronunciation skills in the post-test; and
3. Determine the significant difference between the level of the learner's pronunciation skills in the pretest and post-test.

Literature Review

Pronunciation is the manner of correctly speaking a word. Some English words are not spoken the way they are written, and more than one combination of letters represented some sounds (Nordquist, 2016). The first step in understanding the proper pronunciation of English is to concentrate on individual sounds, called phonemes. Every word is made up of many phonemes (Beare, 2017).

At the beginning level, English learners should focus on the basics of pronunciation. Rote learning is best for this level. Teaching the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is a challenge at this stage, as learners are already overwhelmed by the complexities of learning a language (Nordquist, 2017). Learning another alphabet for pronunciation is challenging for most beginning-level English learners.

In improving English pronunciation, it is essential to understand some terms and concepts, according to Beare (2017): (1) Phoneme. It is a unit of sound. These are expressed as phonetic symbols in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). (2) Letter. The English alphabet has twenty-six letters. Depending on letter combinations, letter pronunciations differ. (3) Consonants. These are the sounds that interrupt vowel sounds. These are combined with vowels to form a syllable. (4) Vowels. These are open sounds caused by the vibration of vocal sounds but without obstruction. (5) Consonants interrupt vowels to form syllables. All vowels are produced using the vocal cord, hence considered as voiced. (6) Voiced. A voiced consonant is formed using the vocal cords. A better way to tell if a consonant is voiced is to touch one's fingers to the throat. If the consonant is voiced, one will feel a vibration. A voiceless consonant is produced without the help of the vocal cords. Place one's fingers on the throat when speaking a voiceless consonant, and one will only feel a rush of air through the throat. (7) Syllable. It is formed when consonant and vowel sounds are combined. Words can have one or several syllables. To test the number of syllables, put a hand under the chin and speak the word. Each time the jaw moves, indicate another syllable.

When one learns a foreign language in early childhood, there is a likelihood that one learns to speak it fluently and often without any noticeable local accent. As one grows older, the chance becomes so slim and, to a large extent, impossible to acquire a native-like accent (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). At first glance, it seems that learning a second language pronunciation should be easy, a simple matter of imitating native speakers' pronunciation. However, the reality is quite different. A learner's native language affects second language pronunciation learning when the native language's sound system is different from the target language's sound system. A learner's pronunciation errors may be affected if a particular sound does not exist in the native language. The learners cannot form it; they try to substitute the nearest equivalence they know. It may also be affected if a sound exists in the native language, but not as a separate phoneme, and learners do not perceive it as a distinct sound; thus, they fail to pronounce it correctly (Long, 2011).

Adults are unlikely to attain a native-like accent, while both empirical and anecdotal findings attest that children can acquire a target-like proficiency in pronunciation. The cut-off age

ending this period in pronunciation acquisition was formerly believed to be around 13. However, recent studies substantiate that even after the age of 6, the learner's accent is discernible to be non-native, albeit with slight discrepancy (Smith & Candlin, 2014). The impact of age on pronunciation learning has suggested that it is brought about by progressive decline rather than a substantial drop-off after puberty. The positive thing is that these neurological variations between adults and children tend to be the product of a transition rather than a decline. In the way that sounds are processed in a foreign language, training will help adults develop their ability to differentiate against new sounds and create new phonetic boundaries (Long, 2011).

Understanding and teaching pronunciation has been controversial in second language acquisition for many years. Teachers drilled learners until they had the appropriate accent. To be understood meant capturing one of the established accents. There is now an emphasis on the comprehensibility of what they say. According to Gilakjani (2012), one of the critical requirements for language proficiency is to secure understandable pronunciation for language learners. Teachers must act as pronunciation coaches, and learners must be proactive learners taking the initiative to learn.

One of the goals of teaching pronunciation in any course is intelligible pronunciation, not perfect pronunciation. Being able to attain perfect pronunciation should no longer be the objective. However, more realistic goals should be reasonable, applicable, and suitable for the learner's communication needs. The learner needs to develop: functional intelligibility, which is the ability to make oneself easily understood; functional communicability, the ability to meet the communication needs one has to face; improved self-confidence; and the ability to monitor and modify speech. Therefore, students learning English for international communication must learn to speak it intelligibly and comprehensibly, not necessarily like natives but well enough to be understood (Gilakjani, 2012).

Drilling is listening to a model and repeating what the model said. It is a repetition drill, which many teachers still use when introducing new language items to students. The teacher speaks the word, and the students repeat it (Derwing & Munro, 2015). It is not a new or fashionable classroom technique, but it can be of great value to the learners if used appropriately in the classroom. Avoid over-drilling and keep the stages alive. Respond to the needs of the learners and drill if it will help them pronounce or memorize words or language chunks. To help students remember the language, vary how drills are conducted (Sewell, 2016).

There are drilling activities a teacher can use to improve language acquisition. The most common is Repetition drills. Learners listen to the model and then repeat what the model said. Words should be clear, natural-sounding, and consistent. The drill varied concerning who repeats-whole class, half the class, boys only, girls only, and individuals (Sewell, 2016; Agudo, 2014; Derwing & Munro, 2015).

Theoretical Framework. This study anchored on the Behaviorist theory that learning to speak a foreign language was a matter of correct habit formation. It was thought that the

correct repetition of phrases often would lead to the mastery of the language. One of the tenets of Behaviorist theory is the habit formation of language teaching and learning. Language learning is not problem-solving but the information and performance of habits (Johnson, 2017). Language learning is a mechanical system that leads learners to develop patterns, the fundamental scheme of a conditioned reflex. *L*anguage learning and its development is a matter of conditioning through imitation, practice, reinforcement, and habituation, which constitute the paces of language acquisition (Moeller & Catalano, 2015).

This study also adhered to the Skill Acquisition Theory. It is a learning theory that ranges from cognitive to psychomotor skills. This theory claimed that learners commence learning something through mainly explicit processes and proceed to implicit methods through subsequent sufficient practice and exposure. Second-language acquisition is learned in the same way as any other skill, such as driving a car or playing the piano. They see the practice as the vital ingredient of language acquisition (VanPatten & Williams, 2008).

Methodology

Research Design. This study used an action research design. Action research is a participatory, democratic process that seeks together action and reflection, theory and practice, participation with others to pursue practical solutions to pressing concern issues to people (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The researcher determined the learners' pronunciation skills; and identified oral drills as an appropriate intervention to improve the skill. After ten cycles of oral drills, a post-test was done to check if the said skills improved.

Research Setting. The research was conducted in Aloran Central School, located in Aloran, Misamis Occidental, Northern Mindanao, Philippines. The school has 36 teachers from Kindergarten to Grade 6. Each grade level has an average of 3 sections, and each section has an average of 35 learners. Since it is the central school of Aloran, it caters to the villages' learners in the town center area.

Participants. The research involved the Grade 6-Earth pupils of Aloran Central School for SY 2018-2019. There were 34 participants, 20 males, and 14 females. The researcher selected the participants through convenience sampling because they were all in the researcher's advisory class.

Research Instruments. These were the research instruments used in the study:

A. Pronunciation Skills Checklist (Pretest/ Posttest)
During the conduct of The Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (PHIL IRI) at the onset of the school year, the researcher identified the most common sounds that the learners have difficulty pronouncing. The top 10 consonant sounds were /f/, /hw/, /v/, /sh/, /th/, /th/, /nt/, /z/, /k/, and /zh/. The top 10 vowel sounds were /a/, /ô/, /ou/, /ā/, /i/, /e/, /oi/, /ô/, /ō/, and /o͞o/. The pretest used ten words for the consonant sounds category and another ten words for the vowel sounds category. The posttest utilized another set of words.

In determining the learner's level of pronunciation skills during the pretest and post-test, the researcher used the following scale:

9-10	Excellent
7-8	Very Satisfactory
5-6	Satisfactory
3-4	Less Satisfactory
0-2	Unsatisfactory

B. Oral Drills Word List

The researcher gathered words per sound and was used in phrases and sentences. These sounds were the focus of the oral drills done in 10 weeks. The focus of the drill was one consonant and one vowel sounds per week.

C. Interview Questions

This study utilized interview guide questions which contained six items. The first two questions focused on the learner's assessment of one's pronunciation skills. The second two questions emphasized the learner's personal views of the oral drills. Furthermore, the last two items stressed the learner's assessment of pronunciation skills after undergoing oral drills.

Data Collection. At the school year's onset, the researcher identified the least pronounced sounds based on the PHIL IRI materials; ten consonant sounds and ten vowel sounds. The pupils were given a list of words in determining their pretest performance. Two English teachers served as co-raters who helped establish the pronunciation skills. After the pretest, the oral drills followed. The oral drills focused on the 20 sounds that the learners have problems pronouncing. The researcher read the words first, then the pupils repeated them. The drills transitioned from words to phrases and sentences, which lasted for ten weeks. It focused on one consonant and one vowel sounds per week. It utilized the reading period of the class, which lasted for 30 minutes. Day 1 focused on a consonant sound, and the whole class repeated the words. Then individual learners repeated the same words on the second day. On the third day, the drill transitioned to a vowel sound as a whole class and individually on the fourth day. Moreover, on the fifth day, individual learners pronounced ten words covered in the week. The drilling lasted for ten weeks covering all 20 sounds. After completing the last cycle, the researcher conducted a post-test using a different set of words to determine if the pupils retained and could produce specific sounds correctly. The same two English teachers who served as co-raters during the pretest helped assess the pupils' post-test performance.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the participants. Each interview was done in the vernacular to ensure that the participants understand the questions and answer them. The conversation ranged in length from approximately 10 to 20 minutes and was recorded using a tape recorder. After the interview, the answers were transcribed verbatim, analyzed, defined, and coded. The researcher followed the protocol in an interview during the conduct of the in-depth interview.

Data Analysis. After the pretest and post-test, the number of correctly pronounced words were counted, and scores were categorized as Excellent: 9-10, Very Satisfactory: 7-8, Satisfactory: 5-6, Less Satisfactory: 3-4, and Unsatisfactory: 0-2. The frequency determined the number of participants in a particular category. The percentage determined the proportion of the participants in the distribution based on their performance. The mean was determined after combining all participants' scores for the pretest and post-test, and the standard deviation was the value showing deviation from the mean. T-test was used to test the significant difference in the learner's pronunciation skills in the pretest and post-test. The transcripts of the interview were analyzed through thematic analysis.

Results and Discussion

Level of Learner's Pronunciation Skills in the Pretest. Table 1 shows a summary of the level of learner's pronunciation skills in the pretest. In pronouncing consonant sounds, 53% of the learners got satisfactory, while 29% got very satisfactory. In pronouncing vowel sounds, 44% of the learners got satisfactory while 50% got very satisfactory. The majority of the learners got scores of 5 and 6 in pronouncing consonant sounds. While most of them got scores of 7 and 8 in pronouncing vowel sounds, this indicated that while they pronounced most of the sounds, they still struggled to pronounce some sounds.

Table 1: Summary of Learners' Pretest Performance

Sounds	Performance	Frequency	Percentage
Consonants	Excellent	-	-
	Very Satisfactory	10	29.00
	Satisfactory	18	53.00
	Less Satisfactory	5	15.00
	Unsatisfactory	1	3.00
	Total	34	100.00
Vowels	Excellent	-	-
	Very Satisfactory	17	50.00
	Satisfactory	15	44.00
	Less Satisfactory	2	6.00
	Unsatisfactory	-	-
	Total	34	100.00

More learners can pronounce vowel sounds correctly than consonant sounds. The majority of students had difficulty pronouncing consonant sounds. They had problems pronouncing the “th” sound. It is one of the most challenging consonant sounds to pronounce. It can be pronounced in three different ways: as a “d” as in this, that, these, those, they or them; as the voiceless in three, thing, thought; or as a /t/ as in Thai or Thames. The voiceless t is especially tricky for some students, often saying tree instead of three (Pesce, 2017).

Some learners also struggled in pronouncing vowel sounds. Vowels have five letters, which are a, e, i, o, u. They map to 13 different sounds; for instance, several sounds of the letter o in words: boat, boot, out, and hot. Pronouncing vowels is one of the problems that Asian adult learners encountered in pronunciation subjects. They have difficulty with the /a/ sound because hearing and pronouncing the sound is difficult. They cannot differentiate between the long sound /a/ and the sound /e/. They also have problems distinguishing between the long /e/ and the short /i/ (Long, 2011).

The results of the thematic analysis of the interviews have validated learners’ inability to pronounce some sounds. Based on the findings of the interview, the participants exhibited apprehension. They were apprehensive because their classmates would laugh at them if they could not pronounce the words correctly.

The researcher’s notes also validated this. Based on the notes, the learners had difficulty pronouncing the words because they did not know how these words were pronounced. They were also afraid that others would laugh at them if unable to pronounce the words. This anxious feeling can be considered performance anxiety that belongs to social anxiety (Whiting et al., 2015). It involved an individual’s fear and worry of being perceived and evaluated negatively by others. External cues and situational demands that include concerns about other’s evaluations of one’s behavior triggered this. Performance anxiety had contexts in which individuals were exposed to possible external negative evaluation by others. Second language learning is an example of performance anxiety. In the second language acquisition context, teacher’s and peers’ assessment of second language learners made them feel apprehensive. Communication apprehension is observed in oral communication contexts and is defined as the level of anxiety of a person brought about by either real or anticipated communication with others (Spinner & Gass, 2014).
The learners were apprehensive because they did not know the phonemes of the words. Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and operate the sounds in spoken words and understand that speech sounds comprise spoken words and syllables. It is essential to learning to read in an alphabetic writing system because letters represent sounds or phonemes.

Another struggle was that some of these words were new to them. They might have encountered these before, but they did not know how they are pronounced correctly. Since they did not know how to pronounce them, they did it based on the spelling. Some learners read a word as it was spelled. It was often hard to know how to pronounce a word by its spelling. Sounds are the basis of English pronunciation, not spelling. Error in these areas can

make it difficult to be understood by native English speakers. The spelling and their pronunciation lack correspondence.

There are several ways to pronounce a particular spelling pattern, but it certainly helps to know the variations. Many words in the English language have silent letters, but these words are unknowingly pronounced, making these words mispronounced. There are numerous letters and combinations of letters which produce various sounds at different places (Nawaz, 2011).

In the class, both consonant and vowel sounds should be emphasized because both sounds are essential. Teachers should provide an environment that does not add anxiety to the learners. If learners cannot pronounce some words, they should be corrected in a positive tone to have a positive attitude towards language learning. Other learners should be discouraged from making fun of someone's mistakes because it is normal to commit errors.

Level of Learner's Pronunciation Skills in the Posttest. Table 2 shows a summary of the level of learner's pronunciation skills in the post-test. In pronouncing consonant sounds, 74% of the learners got very satisfactory, while 24% got excellent. In pronouncing vowel sounds, 71% of the learners got very satisfactory, while 29% got excellent. The majority of the learners got scores of 7 and 8 in pronouncing both sounds. There was an increase in the number of learners who got an excellent score. Their level of pronunciation skills increased from satisfactory to very satisfactory. Their performance in the post-test improved from the pretest after ten cycles of oral drills.

Table 2: Summary of Learners' Posttest Performance

Sounds	Performance	Frequency	Percentage
Consonants	Excellent	8	24.00
	Very Satisfactory	25	74.00
	Satisfactory	1	3.00
	Less Satisfactory	-	-
	Unsatisfactory	-	-
	Total	34	100.00
Vowels	Excellent	10	29
	Very Satisfactory	24	71
	Satisfactory	-	-
	Less Satisfactory	-	-

Unsatisfactory	-	-
Total	34	100.00

The sounds covered in the oral drills were given two days of practice to provide enough time for the learners to master the said sound. It gave the learners enough time to listen and practice as a group and individually. While improving pronunciation might seem unattainable, helping students improve their pronunciation one sound at a time is much more doable. Instead of taking up most class time practicing pronunciation, practice a different phoneme every day or every week (Pesce, 2017).

The thematic analysis of the interview validated the learner's improvement from pretest to post-test. Based on the findings, the participants found the oral drills useful in improving their pronunciation skills. Second-language acquisition is learned in the same way as any other skill. The practice is the vital ingredient of language acquisition (VanPatten & Williams, 2008). They were inspired to practice more because they liked doing it. It helped them pronounce words correctly. It gave them time to exercise their mouth and tongue. They were able to pronounce words more precisely because they knew how. It was their only venue to practice pronouncing words because this skill was not given enough time in the English subject. The English curriculum is content based; there is no emphasis on pronunciation. Their English teacher taught them pronunciation, but it was not the focus of the lesson. The content of the English subject in the 6th grade is no longer focused on pronunciation. The researcher is not an English teacher; he is a science teacher. However, he has a background in English because he used to be a call center trainer. The oral drills were done during the remedial period; the participants were given enough time to learn the pronunciation and practice how to do it.

The researcher's notes also validated this. Based on the notes, the learners were participative during the drilling. They liked doing it. There was a struggle in the first few cycles, but they have eventually improved in succeeding ones. They looked forward to doing the oral drills. They even practiced pronouncing the words even after the allotted time. Drilling helped learners memorize language through the teacher's control, where students' mistakes can be corrected and encouraged to fix difficulties simultaneously. For the learners, drills provided a safe environment to experiment with producing the language. It may help build confidence. It helped students notice the correct form or pronunciation of a word or phrase. Consciousness-raising of language is an important stage in developing language competence. Teachers should give learners immediate feedback on their accuracy concerning. Many learners want to be corrected. It helped memorize and automate common language patterns and language chunks (Sewell, 2016; Agudo, 2014; Derwing & Munro, 2015).

In the class, learners eventually learn if given enough time to practice. They will be able to pronounce words correctly if given time to do it. Teachers at the lower grade levels should provide ample time for teaching pronunciation. However, there are many skills one should learn; pronunciation is just one of them.

Test of Significant Difference between the Level of the Learners' Pronunciation Skills in the Pretest and Posttest. In determining the significant difference in the level of learners' pronunciation skills between the pretest and post-test, the researcher used t-tests, mean and standard deviation. Table 3 presents the data.
Table 3 presents the summary of the pretest and post-test of the consonant and vowel sounds. The learners' mean score in the pretest for consonant sounds is 5.6, while the post-test is 7.9. The mean of the pretest for the vowel sounds is 6.3, while the post-test is 8.2.

Table 3: Test of Significant Difference in the Level of the Learner's Pronunciation Skills in the Pretest and Posttest

Variables	Mean	SD	Computed T-test	Critical Value ($\alpha = 0.05$)	Remarks
Consonants					
Pretest	5.6	1.328	-8.16007	.00001	There is a significant difference.
Posttest	7.9	0.995			
Vowels					
Pretest	6.3	1.069	-7.4368	.00001	There is a significant difference.
Posttest	8.2	1.016			

For the learners' performance in the pronunciation of consonant sounds, the significant difference test yielded the t-value of -8.16007, which is less than the critical value of .00001 at a .05 percent level of probability. There is an indication that the learners' performance on the post-test is significantly different from the pretest. For the learners' performance in the pronunciation of vowel sounds, the significant difference test yielded the t-value of -7.4368, which is less than the critical value of .00001 at a .05 percent level of probability. There is an indication that the learners' performance in the post-test is significantly different from the pretest.

The oral drills done in 10 cycles brought these improvements in the learners' pronunciation of consonant and vowel sounds. The constant drilling helped them master the sounds.

For the learners, drills provided an emphasis on accuracy. Increased accuracy, fluency, and complexity improve the learner's language. There is a need to emphasize accuracy at certain stages of the lesson or during certain task types. It provided learners with intensive practice in hearing and saying particular words or phrases. It helped learners get their tongues around difficult sounds or imitate intonation that may be slightly different from their first language (Sewell, 2016; Agudo, 2014; Derwing & Munro, 2015).

The thematic analysis of the interview validated the learner's improvement from pretest to post-test. Based on the findings, the participants thought that having good pronunciation skills would make them feel good. People look up to them, and they would not laugh at them because they can pronounce English correctly.

The researcher's notes also validated this. Based on the notes, the learners believed that pronouncing words will make them feel better. It gave them a sense of fulfillment because no one would laugh at them. It was a typical experience that every time they mispronounced a word, their classmates laughed at them. When they moved to higher grade levels or even college, they could pronounce words correctly. Moreover, when they worked, they would perform their job well because they communicate in English fluently. According to Linge (2014), we all know that we should not judge a book by its covers, but we still do, unconsciously, most of the time. People tend to underestimate people who have lousy pronunciation and overestimate people who have the proper pronunciation. For instance, think about immigrants in a foreign country who speak a broken version of the native language. Even though we do not want to, it is easy to think that foreigners with good pronunciation are "better" than those with poor pronunciation. Pronunciation, unlike the other skills, strikes the listener directly in the face. How good one's pronunciation is, in general, can be judged very quickly, and an opinion is formed automatically by anyone who hears the person. Students achieve better results by being aware of the importance of pronunciation and motivation for practicing it. The student's disposition to pronunciation was the key predictor in the learning of native or near-native pronunciation. The more concerned they were, the better was their quality.

We live in a world where English is an international lingua franca, where many job positions presently require excellent English knowledge. If students do not acquire proper pronunciation, they will face difficulties finding employment (Gilakjani, 2012).
In the class, learners think that they need to be skillful in English to have better future job opportunities. If they do not acquire proper pronunciation, they will face difficulties in finding employment. With the Philippines' BPO industry boom, some learners look forward to working in this English-speaking job.

Conclusion

The learners' pronunciation skills significantly improved from the pretest to the post-test after oral drills for ten cycles. The oral drills introduced to the learners improved their pronunciation skills from Satisfactory to Very Satisfactory. The constant drilling worked. It

helped them develop the pronunciation of the least pronounced consonant and vowel sounds.

The researcher recommends that this intervention be adopted in the lower grade levels, focusing on all sounds so that learners are already familiar with the phonemes when they move to higher grade levels. The researcher also recommends that another action research is done to improve comprehension skills.

About the Author

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