

The Acquisition of English Intonational Features by German Secondary School Learners

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Being able to speak foreign languages is a key component of a good qualification today. Therefore, one of the most important goals secondary schools have to achieve is to provide young learners with good to excellent language skills. As regards phonological competencies, pupils are supposed to learn the segmentals and suprasegmentals of a foreign language in order to eventually develop an authentic and clear pronunciation, according to the CEFR and national curricula. However, only a cursory examination of learners' phonological competencies reveals that this indeed rather ambitious goal raises serious doubts about its attainability. It turns out that phonological competencies – and in particular suprasegmental ones, which are notoriously difficult to acquire – often lag behind quite good skills in syntax and vocabulary.

But why is that? Firstly, except for Meyer (2012) (as found in Thaler (2012), there have recently only been few – if any – didactic and methodological concepts to effectively teach suprasegmental aspects (e.g. intonation, sentence stress, pitch range) to L2 learners which can be (and indeed are) implemented successfully in secondary schools. Secondly, pronunciation is rarely covered in teacher training courses, but – as the author's personal experience has shown – not mentioned at all. Instead, due to time constraints, a “They will pick it up somehow”-attitude seems to prevail among teacher trainers and (experienced) teachers alike. Not least because of this attitude, a lack of research findings, and effective teaching approaches, pronunciation in general has, thirdly, been deemed not to be important by curriculum designers, but it has given way to the four core skills reading, listening, writing, and speaking, and other language areas such as grammar.

As the L2 acquisition of suprasegmental features is still a relatively new research area, the number of studies investigating secondary school learners and their acquisition of L2 suprasegmentals in a classroom setting, is virtually non-existent. Hence, this production study researches the teaching of suprasegmentals to German secondary school learners. In particular, it focuses on intonation contours, pitch range, and continuation intonation, as these features have been shown to betray German learners of English (cf. e.g. Chen (2007), (2002); Chen, Gussenhoven, & Rietveld (2004), (2002); Grabe (1998); Jilka (2000); Mennen, Schaeffler, & Dickie (forthcoming); Mennen, Schaeffler, & Docherty (2012)). In doing so, it bridges the gap between recent intonation research, which, unfortunately, has as yet not been didactically oriented, and practical application with school learners. The following research questions guide the study: 1) Can foreign language suprasegmental features (e.g. intonation, sentence stress, pitch range) be successfully acquired in a school context 2) Do learners sound more native-like after the treatment? 3) Does focussing on the aforementioned features lead to an improvement of phonological competencies in general?

In December 2015, a pilot study was carried out with 7th graders (N=26) who are in their third year of learning English as a Foreign Language. It was designed as a quasi-experiment with a pre- and posttest. A two-week treatment (i.e. nine sequences of about 10-15 minutes each) was administered which consisted of an awareness raising and a production part, as Cruz-Ferreira (1989) and Derwing & Munro (2015) suggested. Data were collected by recording subjects (N=7) during a reading task and through a questionnaire on subjects' language background. Pupils responded quite positively to the awareness raising activities. However, it became clear in the production part that they would have needed more time to achieve sustain-

able learning outcomes, although the few features (e.g. a falling intonation contours with question intonation) they did produce can be regarded as a promising start. The revised study is going to be implemented in June 2016 over a four-week period with a different class. In my talk, I will present (preliminary) results of the study and some from the pilot study.

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