

Prosodic Realization of Focus in the Public Speeches Delivered by Spanish Learners of English and English Native Speakers

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Abstract : Native (L1) speakers can mark prosodically one part of an utterance and make it more relevant as opposed to the rest of the constituents. Conversely, non-native (L2) speakers encounter problems when it comes to marking prosodically information structure in English. In fact, the L2 speaker's choice for the prosodic realization of focus is not so clear and often obscures the intended pragmatic meaning and the communicative value in general. This paper reports some of the findings obtained in an L2 prosodic training course for Spanish learners of English within the context of public speaking. More specifically, it analyses the effects of the course experiment in relation to the non-native production of the tonic syllable to mark focus and compares it with the public speeches delivered by native English speakers. The whole experimental training was executed throughout eighteen input sessions (1,440 minutes total time) and all the sessions took place in the classroom. In particular, the first part of the course provided explicit instruction on the recognition and production of the tonic syllable and how the tonic syllable is used to express focus. The non-native and native oral presentations were acoustically analyzed using Praat software for speech analysis (7,356 words in total). The investigation adopted mixed and embedded methodologies. Quantitative information is needed when measuring acoustically the phonetic realization of focus. Qualitative data such as questionnaires, interviews, and observations were also used to interpret the quantitative data. The embedded experiment design was implemented through the analysis of the public speeches before and after the intervention. Results indicate that, even after the L2 prosodic training course, Spanish learners of English still show some major inconsistencies in marking focus effectively. Although there was occasional improvement regarding the choice for location and word classes, Spanish learners were, in general, far from achieving similar results to the ones obtained by the English native speakers in the two types of focus. The prosodic realization of focus seems to be one of the hardest areas of the English prosodic system to be mastered by Spanish learners. A funded research project is in the process of moving the present classroom-based experiment to an online environment (mobile app) and determining whether there is a more effective focus usage through CAPT (Computer-Assisted Pronunciation) tools.

Keywords : focus, prosody, public speaking, Spanish learners of English

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