The Impacts of Pronunciation in Language Learning

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In the spirit of inquiry, I have decided to explore a case I witnessed and participated in during my three-week practicum. For privacy reasons, all names have been changed. This case will explore a grade two student who is English language learning and struggles with school appropriate behaviour. The goal of my inquiry is to use this case study to explore how pronunciation impacts language learning and beyond.

Case Study:

Our student of focus for this study is Cody, an Indigenous student in Ms. Arnold’s grade two class at a Venturing school in Prince George. Cody’s first language, and primary language spoken at home, is his local communities Indigenous language. Cody has been learning English since his first year of school in Kindergarten. The mouth formations necessary to pronounce English words are the largest struggle for Cody. This struggle has lead Cody to begin working closely with a speech pathologist in addition to his English Language Learning (ELL) teacher during my time in his classroom.

I first met Cody when I began Monday observational visits to my practicum classroom prior to officially beginning the practicum. Over my first three visits, Cody was considered to be a barometer student in his classroom. A barometer student is a student whose actions can determine the course of the day for all other students in the classroom (Boushey & Moser, 2014). In my practicum notes over the course of these observational visits, I recorded multiple behavioural outbursts. These outbursts could include yelling or screaming, crying, banging fists or objects on his desk, throwing his body onto the ground, and most often refusal to participate or listen to Ms. Arnolds instruction.

Ms. Arnold had strategies for dealing with this behaviour with as little disruption to Cody’s classmates as possible. The most effective strategy was to give Cody scheduled time in the Aboriginal Support room, though Ms. Arnold was working towards having Cody’s Aboriginal Support Worker, Mr. Fawkes, join Cody in learning with the rest of his peers in the classroom. I appreciate that Ms. Arnold included Mr. Fawkes in this plan, because of the important connection that Mr. Fawkes has to Cody’s heritage. Research by Hutchinson and Specht (2020) explains how having a link to a student’s cultural background can create a much more positive atmosphere for minority students in the classroom. Mr. Fawkes and Cody’s ELL teacher, Ms. Allan were the only other teachers included in Cody’s informal adapted learning plan at this point.

I did not see Cody or his classmates for almost a month following these observational days, before I began my three-week practicum in the classroom. When I returned to Cody’s class, I saw a changed student! Cody was much more eager to interact with his teacher and his peers, and the outbursts were much less often than I had previously observed. I expressed my observations to Ms. Arnold and asked her what the change in behaviour could be explained by. Ms. Arnold described the progress that Cody had been experiencing through his work with his speech pathologist. She described that Cody’s team of teachers had started to believe that Cody’s behaviour was directly linked to his speech. Cody’s challenges in pronouncing English words had lead him to have trouble with others understanding his speech and what he was attempting to say. Once he began noticing the impacts of his speech therapy, he felt that his speech was being understood, finally. His teachers believed that his previous outbursts were caused by his emotions in not feeling understood by his teachers and his classmates when he spoke.

Speech therapy was not a one-stop solution for Cody’s outbursts, but now that his teachers understood the reason behind them, they were much easier to anticipate and work through, for both the teachers and for Cody. As I entered Cody’s life with this prior knowledge, it was very important for me to try to build a strong relationship with him and speak to him as often as I could so that I could get used to the mannerisms of his speech. I had to be extremely patient and careful in my conversations with him, but it paid off. Cody trusted me and could appreciate the effort that I put in with him.

Analysis:

Cody’s case was particularly interesting to me because I think that the mouth muscles used in speaking different languages can often be an overlooked aspect of second language learning. In Cody’s English language learning journey, he had a very high vocabulary, he had grammar conventions similar to his age group of English speaking peers, but he did not possess the muscle memory necessary to communicate the way he wanted to. In reflecting on Cody’s experiences in second language learning and on my own experiences in working with him, I would like to explore the following topics.

1. Is there really a link between language and student behaviour?
2. How much of language learning is oral pronunciation compared to other aspects such as vocabulary and grammar conventions?
3. Knowing the above, how can we better support students who are English language learners, and how should we change the way that we teach language learning?

Is there really a link between language and student behaviour?

Though I had experienced a strong connection between language and behaviour, I wanted to explore science that could back up my anecdotal experience. In my research, I found a study that looked at sociable behaviours in students from ages 5-8 with and without language impairment. I was drawn to this study because my student, Cody, fits both of these criteria. The study had teachers rate multiple measures on a scale called the Teacher Behavioural Rating Scale. It was concluded that students with language impairment scored significantly below their peers in measures such as prosocial behaviour and impulse control, though it did not conclude that language impairment is the sole factor in behavioural problems for children who are learning their language (Fujiki, Brinton, Morgan & Hart, 1999). Though this study took place many years ago, these researchers have continued their research in this field and even conducted a similar study in 2019 that rated students with language developmental disorders against factors such as shyness and unsociability (Fujiki, Brinton, Hart, Olsen, & Coombs, 2019). I chose to explore the 1999 data as the behaviours studied aligned more closely with the behaviours exhibited by my student.

How important is pronunciation in language learning compared to other aspects such as vocabulary and grammar conventions?

In researching this question, I uncovered the idea that pronunciation is actually a cognitive skill rather than a physical skill (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). To relate this back to Cody, his mouth did have the ability to form the words that he could not pronounce, but he didn’t have the conceptualization of what the actions necessary for his mouth to perform were.

Although pronunciation is largely neglected in language learning, researchers have found that pronunciation is actually the fault that most severely impacts the communication process for those speaking in a foreign language. These impacts are generally more severe for adults than children learning a foreign language, ranging from simply being more often misunderstood, to enduring limited employment opportunities due to discrimination (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). Fraser (2000) explains how if language speakers have pronunciation skills, other skills such as vocabulary and grammar can be overlooked without listener comprehension being impacted. The opposite is less true. If a speaker has wide vocabulary and perfect grammar, but low abilities in pronunciation, comprehension will be very difficult. These reasons outline the importance of teachers focusing on pronunciation in their foreign language teachings to their elementary and secondary students.

How can we better support students who are English language learners and how should we change the way that we teach language learning?

The first way we can encourage correct pronunciation in language learners, is promoting high levels of motivation in our students. Research has shown that student motivation is especially significant in the acquisition of correct pronunciation skills (Gilakjani, 2011). Students must have the attitude of a desire to learn the language and a desire to reach fluency.

Exposure is important through all aspects of learning a new language, and it remains true in teaching pronunciation. Students must practice their language verbally quite often and if possible, have prolonged exposure to another person with the accent of the language. Exposure to a person with the proper accent even extends further from phonetic pronunciation and extends to idioms, gestures, and cultural pragmatics (Gilakjani, 2011).

Both motivation and exposure can be difficult to control as a teacher, so what teachers should focus the majority of their energy on is their instruction. Teachers should associate pronunciation with conversational fluency, rather than linguistics, and have it be a focus whenever oral language is being practiced. Gilakjani (2011), has many suggestions for language teachers wishing to improve their students pronunciation. Gilakjani suggests setting 5-10 minutes on either side of a language lesson to focus strictly on pronunciation and the exploration of how pronunciation influences meaning. He also outlines the aspects of pronunciation that can be focused on for their own lessons: Stress, intonation, prominence, and rhythm. Integrating pronunciation throughout lessons, creating short and long term class goals, and even simply allowing time for students to explore the ways that their mouth can make different sounds are all examples of strategies that teachers can adopt to improve pronunciation and therefore language altogether in their students.

My exploration of pronunciation research has lead me to a broader understanding of the frustrations that Cody must have felt with his inability to adequately communicate with his teachers and peers in his classroom. The experience of working with Cody and Ms. Arnold gave me incredible insight into a language learning scenario that I otherwise would not have had the opportunity to be exposed to. I have developed an interest in the importance of pronunciation, but also in the connection between the ability to express oneself and subsequent behavioural patterns. I will continue to learn in this direction and I look forward to exploring techniques in which teachers can teach pronunciation to promote the highest level of language learning.

References

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Rationale:

My artifact of the Second Language Case Study is relevant to Standard 3 because it delves into the process of growth and development in the formation of language in young children. This paper describes the relationship between behaviour and communication in the context of English Language Learning. This research is increasingly important because it includes interactions with the student’s cultural background as the basis for the study.

Extended Rationale:

This artifact demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of Standard 3 – Educators understand and apply knowledge of student growth and development. By delving deeply into the development of Cody’s speech and subsequent behaviour, I was able to uncover how childhood development can be linked to behavioural problems in classrooms, and subsequently the classroom environment and quality of learning for all. In considering Cody’s physical and mental development, myself and the rest of Cody’s team of teachers and support were able to provide the adequate care for him. Without our discoveries into Cody’s individual growth and development, he would have fallen behind his classmates, his behaviour would have continued to disrupt both his learning and the learning of his classmates, and his health could have been further negatively impacted.

I believe it is important to note, that had intervention not occurred, Cody’s growth and development may have been impacted further. Research by Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) described the adverse effects that individuals who struggle with language learning face. Most important to note is the emotional and mental impact that an inability to communicate with peers has. As youth can often struggle with feelings of being misunderstood without enduring a language barrier, students who must cope with language barriers between themselves and their peers face higher emotional and mental distress. In short, social development, mental health and emotional wellbeing are all impacted by an inability to communicate effectively with peers result in a feeling of isolation.

Furthermore, Cody’s mental health, which was suffering due to his feelings of isolation, could have negatively contributed to his physical health. In males in particular, poor mental health has been linked to adverse physical health, and even a higher risk of mortality (Ohrnberger, Fichera, & Sutton, 2017).

It is clear that Cody’s journey in language learning has a direct correlation to his physical, mental, emotional, and social growth and development. Through thorough interactions, assessments, and observations of Cody, his growth and development was tracked through a lens of pronunciation and language learning. As such, this artifact is a proficient exemplar for Standard 3 – Educators understand and apply knowledge of student growth and development.

References

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