

The Impact of Performative Language Teaching on Oral Skills in the Classroom of Chinese as a Foreign Language

El impacto de técnicas de enseñanza performativa del lenguaje en las habilidades orales de una clase de chino como lengua extranjera

戏剧化教学法在对外汉语课堂对口语能力的影响

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of Performative Language Teaching (PLT) techniques on speech variables such as fluency, comprehensibility, and accent. 16 learners of Mandarin Chinese (L1: Spanish) from the Official Language School in the city of Vigo in Spain were divided into an experimental group (8 students that in 2018 took part in a four-month PLT-based Chinese course) and a control group (8 students who did not participate in that course). Four different tasks (first-person picture description, third-person picture description, monologue, and improvised role-play dialogue) were used to obtain speech samples from the 16 learners. The two groups were tested before (pre-test) and after (post-test) participation. 75 native Chinese raters evaluated the recorded speech samples and the development of oral skills of both groups was compared. Our findings indicate that fluency, comprehensibility, and accent improved for the treatment group, but not for the comparison group. The improvement in fluency was greater than the improvement in comprehensibility and accent, which had similar degrees of development, although accent had slightly lower improvement scores than comprehensibility.

Key Words: language teaching; applied linguistics; Performative Language Teaching (PLT); Chinese Mandarin; drama.

Resumen: Este estudio investiga el impacto de las técnicas de enseñanza performativa del lenguaje (PLT) en las variables orales de fluidez, comprensibilidad y acento. 16 estudiantes de chino mandarín (L1: español) de la Escuela Oficial de Idiomas en la ciudad de Vigo en España fueron divididos en un grupo experimental (8 estudiantes que participaron en 2018 un curso de clases de chino basado en PLT de cuatro meses) y en un grupo de control (otros 8 estudiantes que no recibieron dicho curso). Se emplearon cuatro tareas diferentes (descripción de imágenes en primera persona, descripción de imágenes en tercera persona, monólogo y diálogo improvisado) para obtener muestras de habla de estos 16 estudiantes. Los dos grupos fueron evaluados antes (pre-test) y después (post-test) de su participación. 75 evaluadores chinos nativos analizaron las muestras de habla obtenidas y se compararon el desarrollo de las habilidades orales de ambos grupos. Los resultados indican que la fluidez, la comprensión y el acento mejoraron para el grupo experimental, pero no para el grupo de control. La mejora en la fluidez fue mayor que la mejora en la comprensión y el acento, que tuvieron grados de desarrollo similares, aunque el acento tuvo una mejora ligeramente menor que la comprensibilidad.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de idiomas; lingüística aplicada; enseñanza performativa de idiomas; chino mandarín; teatro.

摘要: 本研究探讨戏剧化教学法(PLT)对学生口语流利度、可理解性和口音等变量的影响。文本以西班牙维戈官方语言学校母语为西班牙语的16名汉语学习者(8名实验组, 8名对照组)为研究对象, 将他们的口语样本(8名实验组于2018年在同一所学校参加了为期四个月的戏剧化教学法汉语课程)和对照组(另外8名学生未参加过该课程)的口语样本进行比较。通过四项口语任务(以第一人称描述图片、第三人称描述图片、独白和即兴对话)得到这16名学生的语音样本。在两组学生参与项目之前和结束之后, 由75名以中文为母语的评委对语音样本进行评估, 并比较两组学生口语能力的提高程度。研究表明, 实验组学生口语的流利度、可理解性和口音有所改善, 而对照组在这些项目上则没有发生改变。同时, 流利程度的改善大于可理解性和口音的改善, 后两者的提高程度类似, 口音的改善略低于可理解性的改善。

[关键词] 语言教学; 应用语言学; 戏剧化教学法; 普通话; 戏剧

1. Introduction

The rise of China as a superpower has led to a global increase in the number of learners of Chinese at all educational levels and ages. Not only Confucius Institutes but also universities, public and private schools, and institutions around the world have started to offer Chinese courses in response to the increasing demand to learn about Chinese language and culture. The same happens in Spain. However, there are several problems related to the quality of Chinese language teaching, such as the lack of trained teachers and adequate engaging materials. One of the main issues is the teaching pedagogy and methodology. Traditional Chinese teaching methods rely heavily on memorization and repetition, lacking communicative value. Most of the time, the materials used are not suitable for the learning styles of other countries. There is, therefore, a need to develop a modern and more effective methodology for Chinese language teaching and learning. Specifically, students of Chinese need a more collaborative and engaging approach to help them improve their oral proficiency skills. The main aim of this paper is to show how performative language teaching might be a good alternative.

2. Performative Language Teaching (PLT)

Bentley (1968) claimed that theater and drama are different, the first focusing on the product and the latter on the process. In order to overcome the drama/theater divide, Schewe (2013) introduced a new concept called Performative Language Teaching (PLT). Fleming (2016) also considered PLT to be a suitable substitute for the self-created dichotomies between drama and theater, product and process, and spectator and participant. More recently, Piazzoli (2018: 40) summarized the concept of PLT as an “embodied approach to teaching second languages”. Therefore, we can argue that PLT is an “umbrella term” for all different activities related to theater and drama including a vast range of dramatic forms that can be used for education and language teaching.

PLT fosters interaction. Within the field of second language acquisition (SLA), two main approaches have highlighted the importance of interaction. The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) stated that interaction among learners facilitates second language (L2) learning. When interacting and collaborating, learners negotiate for meaning and form. Interaction provides learners with opportunities to receive input, produce output, and receive corrective feedback from their interlocutors, all of which have been shown to facilitate L2 acquisition (García Mayo & Alcón Soler, 2013). Moreover,

interaction triggers cognitive mechanisms such as noticing (Schmidt, 1990), which have been claimed to be a key starting point for L2 acquisition.

In addition, Sociocultural Theory (SCT) (Vygotsky, 1978) states that the development of language learning and other cognitive capacities is socially co-constructed. Improvement occurs in the interaction between experts and apprentices, where the expert (e.g., parents, teachers, more knowledgeable peers) provides appropriate assistance to the novice. A range of tools mediates the provision of assistance. These tools can be material artifacts (e.g., computers, toys) or symbolic (e.g., gestures, language). The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the difference between what a student can do on their own and what the learner can accomplish with the help of others. The carefully adjusted assistance has also frequently been referred to in the literature as *scaffolding* (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

PLT is aligned with Vygotsky's SCT because PLT is carried out collaboratively, and participants must work together to decide how to interact using the target language in a communicative way. PLT's team building reflects Vygotsky's ZPD since students can learn not only from the teachers but also from classmates when participating in a PLT activity. Some of those peers might have a more developed target language competence than others. When they interact, they will practice more by using the target language in a context, thus, improving their language skills and reach their full potential.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Experimental Research on the Use of PLT in the Language Classroom

While numerous studies have been previously conducted to examine the benefits of PLT in language learning and teaching, this topic is far from being exhausted as a research area. Stern (1980), Kao (1994), Podlozny (2000), Catterall (2002), Stinson and Freebody (2006), and the DICE Consortium (2010) confirm that there is overwhelming evidence indicating that PLT fosters language learning. PLT also facilitates student interaction and collaboration and helps learners learn the culture along with the target language in a meaningful and enjoyable context. In addition, the students and the teacher collaboratively co-create new content using the target language.

Unlike previous research, Derwing, Rossiter, Munro, and Thomson (2004) measured the variable of fluency together with comprehensibility and accent. The participants of their study were twenty high-beginner

Mandarin-speaking English as a second language (ESL) students (age range: 26-38 years, $m = 33.4$ years) who had been living in Canada for more than six months and were all taking full-time English courses. They completed three tasks: a picture narrative, a 2-minute monologue and a dialogue.

The raters were twenty-eight native speakers (age range 21-52, $m = 28.6$), all undergraduate students in an ESL course at the Faculty of Education of the University of Alberta. The rating procedure consisted of several steps. The raters judged fluency, comprehensibility, and accent using the 9-point Likert scale from previous studies (Derwing & Munro, 1997; Munro & Derwing, 1999). The findings showed that the participants performed worst in the picture description, while they had better scores in the monological and dialogical tasks. Results for fluency ratings confirmed cross-task variation in the perception of L2 speakers' fluency. The raters assigned lower fluency scores to the learners' production in the picture-description task while the ratings for the monologue or the dialogue were significantly higher. One possible explanation was that the picture narrative was more constrained than the other two tasks because the participants had to describe the story that appeared in the cartoons. They had less freedom to use familiar vocabulary or structures. However, in the monologue and dialogue, students had more control of the content, and they could rely on previous experience and the other speaker for the conversation. Results of the study confirmed that "comprehensibility and fluency ratings were highly correlated; fluency was more strongly related to comprehensibility than to accent" (Derwing et al., 2004: 656).

Galante and Thomson (2017) carried out a study in Brazil with 24 English as a foreign language (EFL) learner (L1: Portuguese, L2: English). This study was groundbreaking in the field because it used quantitative data and native raters to assess the influence of PLT on the participant's oral performance. There were two groups, a treatment, and a control group. The treatment group took part in a PLT English language program while the control group received a traditional EFL course. The researchers measured the oral skills of fluency, comprehensibility, and accent by using five different tasks: two picture narrations (in one the students had to use the first-person, and in the other the third-person), a video narration, a role-play, and a monologue. The tasks were administered before the beginning of the intervention and after the completion of the program (after four months). Speech samples were recorded and presented to thirty raters. The raters were 30 untrained native English speakers from Canada (3 m, 27 f), who listened to the samples from the participants and assigned numerical values to them. Results of the study show that PLT instruction

could “lead to significantly larger gains in L2 English oral fluency relative to more traditional communicative EFL instruction” (Galante & Thomson, 2017: 1).

The vast majority of research on the use of PLT in the classroom has been carried out with English as the target language and there are few documented research studies and experiences with PLT in Chinese language classrooms (Corderi Novoa, 2015, 2019; Meng 孟柱亿 & Wan 万玉波, 2013; Wang 王永阳, 2009; Wen, 2015; Zhang 张连跃, 2013). However, most of them lacked reliable and well-designed research instrument and their results were merely based on subjective answers from simple questionnaires. No study to date has used quantitative research methods to investigate the impact of performative language teaching (PLT) in the Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) classroom.

Consequently, there is a need for studies with more rigorous experimental designs so that a link can be established between PLT instruction in the Chinese classroom and learners’ L2 development. The current paper tries to fill that research gap by carrying out a quantitative study on the impact of PLT on the oral skills (fluency, comprehensibility, and accent) of a group of Spanish learners of CFL.

3.2 Oral Skills in an L2: Main Constructs

Speaking is one of the most challenging skills language learners have to face and also the one ability that urgently needs to be improved (Bueno, Madrid & McLaren, 2006; Segura Alonso, 2013). In many countries, such as China and Spain, learners spend many years learning English as an L2. Still, most of them will not achieve oral fluency by the time they graduate from high school or university. Several possible reasons exist, one of them being the type of instruction. Because grammar has a long-written tradition, teachers must spend their classroom time teaching their students how to write and read in an L2. This teaching style focuses on memorization and repetition. Teachers often speak most of the time while students listen without having the opportunity to use the target language while at school. In addition, in a foreign language setting there usually a lack of quality input and few opportunities to use the L2 outside the classroom. Moreover, a lack of motivation and other factors can contribute to the low level of L2 speaking skills many students have.

When assessing oral skills, three main constructs are usually assessed, namely, fluency, comprehensibility and accent. There are several definitions of the construct fluency in the literature. Some authors defined it as “the capacity to use language in real-time, to emphasize meanings” (Skehan &